Chapter 5

The Medieval Synthesis

If Augustine dominated the strictly theological thinking of the western Church through the whole medieval period and after, the great figure of Ambrose is the starting-point for the development of its thought on the relations between the Church and the state and between the Christian society and the world. On a famous day in A.D. 390, so men believed, when the Emperor Theodosius, fresh from commanding a massacre of his subjects in Thessalonica, presented himself at the doors of the cathedral in Milan, Ambrose withstood him to the face, refused to admit him to the Church or to Communion, and demanded that he should make by penance such restitution as was within his power.[1] The event was never forgotten. It was not an isolated instance of courageous resistance to worldly authority. Ambrose was taking his stand on a consistent and clearly held view of the relation between the authority of the powers that be, and that of the Church as the bearer of the word of God. There is no area of life, and no power on earth, not even that of government, which can be withdrawn from the judgment of God. It is only as authority submits itself to the ordinances of God that it can be restrained in its inveterate tendency to

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[1] This is the event, as it took shape in popular imagination, and as it is set forth in the pages of Theodoret (V, 18) what men believe to have happened is often as important in history as "the undoctored incident that actually occurred," and I have therefore allowed the statements of Theodoret to stand in my text. A more sober account is to be found in the writings of Ambrose himself (Ep. LI and *De Ob. Theod.* 34). It is clear both that Ambrose firmly took the Emperor to task for his sin, and that Theodosius shewed very plainly the sincerity of his repentance, and his recognition of the right of his spiritual father to deal with him as Ambrose had done.

arbitrariness and caprice. But it is only the Church that can declare with authority that word of God, to which the earthly powers are to be subject. In such affirmations, as Hans Lietzmann points out, the medieval idea of government and of the relation between Church and state is in its broad outlines already fully present.[2]

As we have seen, the weakness of the Church in the west and the dominance of strong rulers drove this concept of the relationship of the secular and the ecclesiastical for a long period underground. It was never entirely forgotten. But it could not again become effective, until it was united with another movement of thought, the tendency to find in the Bishop of Rome the living centre of western Christendom, and to ascribe to him an authority with which that of no other bishop in the Christian world could be compared. Such authority was claimed by the bishops of Rome from early times. Gregory the Great, in the circumstances of his time and through his own unique personal qualities, was able to extend the power of the Papacy, and to make it a reality over a large part of the west. But after his time, the Papacy fell again on evil times, and, whatever the theoretical claims may have been, the Popes were utterly unable to check the increasing disruption of the western Church through the power of the lay lords in the Frankish kingdoms.

The first strongly marked movement in the opposite direction came from an unexpected source. England, at least in its southern parts, had owed its Christianity to Rome, and to the direct interest of Gregory the Great.

[2.] See H. Lietzmann, *History of the Ancient Church* (French Tr.), Vol. IV. (Paris, 1949), pp. 73–5 and 85–6; and also Hendrik Berkhof, *Kirche and Kaiser* (Zurich, 1947: the German translation of a work written in Dutch in 1942), p. 12 Dr. Berkhof works out in great detail the development of the theocratic concept of the Church. He quotes also from Palanque, *St. Ambroise et l'Empire Romain*, p. 403, the statement: "For a long period, he exercised an influence of decisive importance. The thought of Ambrose has left its stamp on the thinkers and Popes of the Middle Ages, from his contemporary Augustine up to Gregory the Great and Gregory VII."

More than any other part of Christendom it felt itself bound to the Roman See by affection and loyalty. Consequently, when Anglo-Saxon, as distinct from Irish and Scottish, Christianity, became a strong missionary force on the continent of Europe, it brought with it this tradition, and the conviction that there can be no real Christianity except in communion with the bishop of Rome.[3]

The greatest of the English missionaries was Wynfrith of Credition, better known under his ecclesiastical name of Boniface (680–754). The outstanding qualities of Boniface as a missionary have remained fairly well known to his fellow countrymen; his singular importance at a turning point in the history of the Church seems to have been less fully realised. When Boniface went to Rome in 722 to be consecrated bishop, he took an oath of allegiance to the Pope similar to that taken by bishops of the Roman province; by so doing, he set himself and his future work in Germany directly under the direction of the Pope. From 739, he worked as the Pope's legate and representative in the Frankish kingdoms. Many new sees were created; in every case, the bishop took a similar oath of direct obedience and loyalty to the Pope. A new or revived idea of centralisation and unification in the see of Peter was being brought in, to counteract the fissiparous tendencies of the Frankish system. Dr. Watson goes so far as to say that "he thus prepared the downfall of the Frankish system, which came as soon as the Empire grew weak and the Pope

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[3.]   See W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century* (O.U.P., 1946), pp. 70–94: and especially p. 73: "The Roman origin of the English Church began to exert an influence overseas through the ideas of ecclesiastical unity which the English missionaries disseminated."

"Through the Anglo-Saxon Mission, a factor of the utmost importance was introduced into the Christianity of the Continent. The great regard for the Roman Church, which had characterised the Anglo-Saxon Church from its foundation on, and its conviction that Christianity can subsist only in fellowship with the Roman bishop, laid the foundation for the position of the Pope in the Middle Ages … The connection with Rome gave this mission … its great world-encompassing, character." Ficker and Hermelink, *Das Mittelatier* (Tübingen, Mohr, 1923), pp. 12–13.

advanced a theory and established a system which displaced the Carolingian."[4]

The work of Boniface was rather a prophecy of things to come, than the actual achievement of a unified Christian society of the west under the direct rule and guidance of the Pope. That unification, as it developed, was to find its theoretical basis in some of the most remarkable forgeries that have ever influenced the history of human thought and of the Church. The Donation of Constantine, that strange legend, according to which the first Christian Emperor, having been cured of leprosy by Pope Sylvester, decided to found his new capital in the east, and to leave undisputed sovereignty in the west to the Pope, to whom all bishops were made subject as all magistrates are subject to the emperor, seems to have had its origin in the Papal chancery at some time towards the end of the Eighth Century. It is probable that the document itself incorporates older legend; the legal form in which it is drawn up impressed an uncritical age, and the authenticity of the Donation seems never to have been doubted until the beginning of the Renaissance period.[5]

This was followed by the emergence of the more extensive collection of the False Decretals. This body of documents, purporting to include the decisions of the Popes from the earliest times, was almost certainly brought into existence in France in the second half of the Ninth Century.[6] Its primary aim was not so much to glorify the Pope as to protect bishops from the aggressions of their metropolitans

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[4.] See *Camb. Med. Hist.*, Vol. VI, p. 543.
[5.] It was first exposed as a forgery by Laurentius Valla in 1440. His work, printed by Ulrich von Hutten in 1517, had a profound effect on the mind of Luther.
[6.] A Villien, in *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* (Paris, 1924), Vol. IV, col 214, gives 21st April 847 and 1st Nov 852 as the dates between which the appearance of these collections might lie. The most famous discussion of the forgeries is that published at Geneva in 1620 by the Protestant David Blondel, under the elegant title *Paeudo-Isidorus et Thorianus Vapulantes.*

or of covetous lay lords. But once completed and accepted as authentic, it put into the hands of the Popes a weapon of enormous power. The first Pope who can be shown to have made use of the collection was Nicholas I (858–67), the greatest champion of the authority of the Papacy after the days of Gregory the Great. Whether Nicholas himself knew the documents to be a forgery is a matter of debate. His successors at least accepted them in good faith, and used them unquestioningly for their own purposes. Here was set forth once more the Ambrosian concept. The whole Christian society is to be unified under one visible spiritual head, endowed with all the authority of the prince of the apostles, supreme lawgiver and ruler of the Church, entitled to proclaim the law of God with authority even to princes and to demand their submission.

So great a revolution in thought and practice could not be put through in a day. It awaited the man and the occasion. But from the moment that the False Decretals came to be accepted as the basis of Canon Law, the change was on its way. The first step was a change in the position of the clergy. The Church began to organise itself as a, spiritual society within the world, and to detach itself from that subordination to the authority of the layman that had so gravely threatened its unity and its spiritual independence. "The clergy tended to become a closed corporation, the constitution of which inevitably became feudal. The relation of the beneficed clergy to the bishop resembled that of the bishop to the king. No longer is the parish priest the man of the lord who appointed him; he becomes the bishop's man … The security of tenure was actually increased by the obligation laid upon the bishop of maintaining the rights of his man."[7] The clerical revolution was already launched. The Church was coming to self-conscious existence as a power independent of the state. The clergy were coming to form a body within the

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[7.]   E.W. Watson in *Camb. Med. Hist.*, (C.U.P.) Vol. VI, p. 546.

Church, with interests of their own, separate from and sometimes opposed to those of the laity.

On April 22, 1073, Hildebrand, Archdeacon of Rome, was elected bishop and took the name of Gregory VII.[8] The man had appeared, who was not merely to renew the Ambrosian concept of the duty of the spokesman of the Church in relation to the civil power, but for a time to make his purposes remarkably effective in the affairs of men.

The ideas of Hildebrand were simple and readily expressed. His life was dominated by a passion for righteousness. He saw the western world divided by ceaseless strife, and at the mercy of monarchs who for the most part recognised no rule except self-interest and no limit to their rapacity except that of their power to make the possessions of others their own. He saw a clergy weakened by the still lingering corruptions of the Dark Ages, and therefore ineffective in proclaiming the will of God for the world. In contrast with this, he saw in vision a world united under the rule of God and subject to His law. But since the law of God must be proclaimed in order to be obeyed, and since the world can be unified only if there is one authority by which that law is proclaimed, he saw in the throne of St. Peter the one centre to which all must turn, the one supreme authority, through the recognition of which alone men could find the remedy for the grievous ills of a violent age.

The arrogance of Gregory's pronouncements was compatible with a very real personal humility. For himself he seeks nothing. He has inherited the plenitude of power promised by Christ to Peter. It is only in the name of Peter that he will act. Disobedience to him is direct disobedience to Christ in the person of his representative and therefore an act of rebellion against God Himself. His weapons are only spiritual. He has the dread power of excommunication, and is confident that what he has bound on earth is also bound

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8. Hildebrand was born in 1020 and died in 1085. The date of his great triumph over the Emperor Henry IV was 25–28 January, 1077.

in heaven. From his sentence there is no appeal. No human creature is exempt from his authority.[9] If kings transgress, they too must be made to submit to the yoke of God, since it is only from God that they derive their authority, and there is one on earth who stands above them in the interpretation and expression of the authority of God. To William I of England he writes "As I have to answer for you at the awful judgment, in the interests of your own salvation, ought you, can you avoid immediate obedience to me?" If the king is recalcitrant and refuses obedience, he is no longer a king appointed by God; he is a rebel and an adversary. The Biblical precedent for action is clear; apostate Saul was deposed by Samuel, and his place taken by David the man of God's own choice. The Pope, representative of the risen and victorious Christ, has an authority greater and more extensive than that of an Old Testament prophet; can he hesitate to use his power to excommunicate and depose a disobedient king, and to release his subjects from all their duties towards him?

This theocratic concept of the Christian society can be made effective only if the one head of the Church has at his disposal an obedient and thoroughly disciplined spiritual army.

On the ecclesiastical side, Gregory asserted the fullest control over all the bishops of the Church. It is his sole right to appoint them (whatever concessions must be made at times to the claims of secular riders to nominate to sees within their realms), to excommunicate or to remove them, to learn of the details of their doings, to reprove, rebuke, exhort on every occasion. He is the judge in all important causes in Christendom, but he himself cannot be judged of any, since he stands directly under God with no intermediary.

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9. This claim was made in the most literal sense of the words. Innocent IV (1243–54), a great Canonist who became Pope, declared: "Credimus quod papa qui est Christi vicarius, potestatem habet non tantum super Christianos, sed etiam super omnes *infideles*, cum enim Christus habuerit super omnes potestatem." Quoted by W. Ullmann, *Medieval Papalism* (London, Methuen, 1949), p. 49.

In relation to the other clergy, Gregory tried to put into force in all their stringency the decrees against the marriage of the clergy. The ascetic tendency in the Church had from an early date led to disapproval of the clergy continuing in the married state. Whereas the East gradually withdrew from this position, and permitted, as it does till the present day, the marriage of all its parochial clergy, the west had maintained the ideal of clerical celibacy, and had fitfully tried to bring about its observance. But success had never been more than partial, and the true celibate, outside the cloister, had been a rarity. It was the aim of Gregory to separate the clergy from the cares and perplexities of life in the world, and to enforce on them a far higher standard of devotion to duty than was either expected or enforced in less strenuous times. The application of the rules was strenuously contested by the clergy in many places, and was never more than superficially successful. It did, however, represent a step forward in the clericalisation of the Church in the west, to which there is no exact parallel in the life of the Christian society in the east.

Gregory felt himself strong enough to try conclusions with the one great rival power in the world, the Holy Roman Empire, and to launch his sentence of excommunication against the Emperor Henry IV. Four centuries and more were to pass before a German monk successfully defied the sentence of excommunication issued by another Pope. Henry IV did not dare so to resist. The world looked on in astonishment, as the heir of Augustus and Charlemagne crossed the Alps in the depth of winter, and stood for three bitter days as a penitent in the courtyard of the castle of Canossa, pleading for restoration and absolution. It may be that the inner reality of the scene was a little different from the outward appearance. Henry's abject approach as a penitent may have been the astutest stroke that he could have made to win men's sympathy to himself and away from his proud assailant. Gregory's delay of three days may have been

due to embarrassment and uncertainty rather than to heartlessness. Nevertheless the event was never forgotten; it lingered on in men's minds as a manifestation of the supremacy of the spiritual over every other power on earth.

There was little that later Popes could add to the Hildebrandine concept of the Christian society, theocratically organised under its visible head, guarded against all possibility of error by the presence of Peter perpetually present in his successor. Innocent III[10] might assert the same claims with even greater vigour, and as in the case of England with even greater temporary success. He might adopt the title Vicar of Christ, not apparently used by his predecessors. Boniface VIII[11] might express the claim that both the swords, the temporal and the spiritual, were at the disposal of the Pope to use as he might see fit, and that it was altogether necessary to the salvation of every human soul that it should be subject to the Roman pontiff. In essence, these add nothing to the claims already made by Hildebrand. In essence, they are the same as the claims put forward by the Bishop of Rome today.

It must not be supposed that this idea of the Christian society met with immediate or universal acceptance. Marsilius of Padua, in the *Defensor Pacis*, (1324), worked out a wholly different idea of the Christian society, as the organised fellowship of the faithful, within which the specific functions of the priestly element are to be carried on as an organ of the whole body, but under the direction of the state, in which the authority of the whole body finds expression. Dante, in the *De Monarchia*, worked out his own theory of Church and Empire as independent spheres of man's existence, each appointed by God, the one with a view to man's temporal, the other to

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[10.] Innocent III was born in 1160, became Pope in 1198 at the age of 37, and reigned till 1216. He was one of the strongest of the long series of Popes, and is reckoned, next to Alexander III, the greatest lawyer who has sat on the Papal throne.

[11.] Boniface VIII, Pope 1295–1303. His famous Bull *Unam Sanctam* was promulgated on 18 Nov., 1302.

his eternal beatitude, each with its own sphere of autonomy, within which any aggression by the other would involve rebellion against the ordinance of God.[12] Occam,[13] more anti-papal, seems to hold that the fellowship of all Christians under Christ is the supreme authority over Pope, bishop and Council, and that the Papacy finds its proper place as the culmination of authority in society, only through its rigid restriction to the spiritual spheres of *lectio, oratio, praedicatio, cultus dei.* Opponents of the Papacy were many. Gregory VII did in fact die a defeated man in exile at Salerno, saying with his last breath, if tradition is to be trusted, "I have loved righteousness and hated iniquity, therefore I die in exile." And Boniface VIII lived to see the overthrow of all his plans, and to die in the misery of impotent frustration.

Nevertheless, intolerable though the Papal claims may have appeared in certain respects, the great Popes stood for two principles which to the Christian are incontestable – that in the affairs of men, the spiritual has the primacy over the secular, and that the families of men can be gathered into one only in Christ and in obedience to the law of God.

The medieval synthesis was imperfect. But during that brief and splendid epoch of the high Middle Age, Europe again became conscious of itself as a unity, far beyond the precarious and variable limits of the Holy Roman Empire, and the Church attained a level of power and influence over the lives of men, for the most part used beneficently, such as has never been known before or since.

No precise date can be fixed for the end of the Dark Ages any more than for its beginning. But as the first point at which it began to be apparent that the darkness was beginning to pass away, though some of the worst degradations both of the Papacy and of civilisation came at a

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12. This is the doctrine of Dante, as worked out by M. Etienne Gilson in his outstanding book, *Dante the Philosopher* (London, 1948, trans. David Moore), pp. 162–225.
13. William of Occam, *doctor invincibilis* (c. 1300–49) was a student of Merton College, Oxford. His principal controversial works were written between 1330 and 1342.

later date, it may be useful to suggest the foundation of the great monastery of Cluny in A.D. 906. Cluny was fortunate in having only six abbots in the first two hundred years of its existence, all outstanding men. All subsequent monastic reforms can be traced back directly or indirectly to the Cluniac spirit. As monasteries spread, they carried with them into remote and barren regions not only the faith, but also the spirit of an active and progressive civilisation. Recent research has shown the great part taken by the monks in the development of high farming, without which an agrarian economy can never escape from the perennial poverty and recurrent famines which are the accompaniments of primitive methods and primitive organisation. Men like John of Taunton and Henry of Eastry (Prior of Christ Church, Canterbury, 1285–1331), may be reckoned among the great creators of European civilisation in the Middle Ages.[14]

As Europe grew out of its disintegration into a new consciousness of its unity, that unity, and with it a new capacity for self-assertion, found remarkable expression in the adventure of the Crusades. Already in Spain the Christian forces had begun very slowly to press back those of Islam. By the end of the Eleventh Century, Christendom was ready to maintain that the future of civilisation and of religion was not to remain in Islamic hands, but that the centre of the life of the world was to shift again to the western Mediterranean and to the lands bordering the Atlantic Ocean. It is easy to criticise the Crusades, both in their general conception and in detail. They permanently embittered the relations between Christians and Moslems, and left a legacy of hatred and suspicion which no subsequent centuries have availed wholly to exorcise. Yet to fail to recognise in the Crusades the stirring of a spiritual ideal would be gravely to miscon-

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14. For an excellent account of this development, see Dom David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England* (Cambridge, 1948), pp 32–55 and 64–78.

ceive the spirit of the times. There were base and shameful elements – bickering between Christian leaders, massacres of captives, treacheries, sheer lust of gain. But these were not the whole story. To the man of the times the Crusades "are a 'holy war' – a war, which, in the theory of the canonists, is not only 'just', but also attains the full measure of consecration; a war which is *res Christiana,* and unites the Christian commonwealth in common hostilities against the arch-enemy of the Christian faith."[15] The participation in the Crusades of such pure and noble spirits as Godfrey of Bouillon, the first Christian *princeps* of Jerusalem,[16] and at a later date, of St. Louis of France (1214–1270), indicates that here we are dealing with something more than the aggressiveness of a military caste. One part of the Christian society has found itself again, and is able to act as a unity in a common cause.

From the east came light. As the darkness of ignorance passed away, men began to recover again the treasures of ancient learning. Aristotle was brought in to teach Christian scholars to think and to re-express the whole compass of the Christian faith. Among the most characteristic features of medieval Christendom was the growth of the medieval university. It was of immense advantage, for the unity of the Christian society, that educated men every-where in the west thought and spoke in the same language. From Iceland to the furthest outpost of the Crusader kingdoms, Latin was the medium of communication. Not only so, men of education everywhere underwent much the same discipline of thought. The modern university suffers from the fragmentation of knowledge. It is almost impossible for those brought up under the humane disciplines and those who have been fed solely on the strong meat of science, to understand one another and to engage in the fruitful interchange of thought. The medieval scholars

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[15.] Ernest Barker in *The Legacy of Islam* (O.U.P., 1931), p. 44
[16.] More precisely *Advocatus Sancti Sepulchri*. See S. Runciman, *A History of the Crusades*, Vol. I (C.U.P., 1951), pp. 289–314.

laboured under no such difficulty. Every man passed through the discipline of the *trivium* and the *quadrivium*. All had mastered much the same technique for the handling of any problems that might come their way. There might be great differences of opinion. There was in fact much greater variety in scholastic thought than a later age, dazzled by the supreme achievement of St. Thomas Aquinas, has always been ready to recognise.[17] But there was a common world of discourse. The beginnings of new investigation of nature and of the world in which man lives and with it the enormous extension of modern knowledge, were still in the future.[18] There was an established body of fact, almost the whole of which could be mastered by a single student in a lifetime. It was possible, therefore, to reach a synthesis of all available knowledge, such as, with the development of modern scientific investigation, has become an ever-receding dream. And this knowledge was all subject to theology, the queen of the sciences. It was within a Christian society that the scholar thought and moved; he saw all things in relation to the Christian revelation, and like Aquinas, found the end of speculation in contemplation, and, if such grace were given, in the mystical vision of God.

Of this great period of Christian thought, Dante (1265–1321) is at the same time the greatest representative, the climax, and the prophet of doom. It seems that he had read almost every book written before his time and available in Latin. His speculation has been refrigerated by an active experience of political life in the intense and turbulent cities of the Italy of his day. And in his work medieval man is seen in the round, in the totality of his being. Here is the perspective of eternity that lends dignity to the meanest life,

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17. See Dom David Knowles, *op. cit.*, pp. 205–16 and 233–52.
18. The blindness of men to the world around them and their apparent incapacity for accurate observation, already fully apparent in the Eighth Century and unchanged till the Fifteenth, are among the most curious of all the phenomena of history. As Dr. Raven correctly notes, when the change did come, it began rather among the artists than among the scientists *de métier* See C.E. Raven: *English Naturalists from Neckam to Ray* (Cambridge, 1947), pp. 31–32.

the sense of the eternal significance of human action, the judgment and the mercy of God, under which at every moment man stands, the pity and the terror, the pathos and the splendour of human existence. But when Dante, in prose and poetry, turned his back on Latin and produced in Italian the first great Christian classic since the writing of Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* nine hundred years before, he pointed the way both to a new birth of the human spirit, and to the breakdown of that unity of the Christian society to which, at its culminating point, he had himself given the noblest and most lasting expression.

It is easy to delineate the outward factors that determined the life of the Christian society in the Middle Age, much less easy to discern how life within that society presented itself to the ordinary man who was a member of it.

Of one thing he was well aware – that the Church was an institution of immense power, holding him in its hand both in life and in death. It has been reckoned that by the end of the Middle Ages one third of the whole land surface was in the possession of the Church. The ordinary round of daily life was determined by the Church's year. The only relief from endless toil was in the recurrent Holy Days, which meant also holidays, strictly enforced as days on which no work might be done, sometimes to the irritation of the farmer, more concerned with getting in his hay than with the strict observance of the Church's law. To the criminal, or to the man falsely accused, the Church, with its places and rights of sanctuary, so sacred that only in rare cases did lay lords dare to violate them, offered a hope of protection and security. Such was the power of the ecclesiastical arm that the villager might see his own lord put to a painful and humiliating penance in church before the eyes of the congregation. Even kings like Henry II of England, or nobles like Raymond of Provence, could not claim exemption from what the Church saw fit to impose.

Even after the Hildebrandine reforms, the ordinary

church-goer saw little of the chief shepherds to whom his welfare had been committed. Bishops continued to be great magnates, largely concerned with the affairs of the court, and only at rare intervals at leisure to concern themselves with the spiritual needs of the flock. Not all were so continuously absent from their sees as the Italian bishops of Worcester at the end of the Middle Age, not one of whom ever crossed the sea to visit his northern diocese. There were the great exceptions, Grosseeste, Richard of Chichester, and others, who won the reputation of sanctity by their pastoral care for the poor and needy. But for the most part the bishop was a distant figure. With the development of Canon Law, a gradual change had taken place in the nature of the functions that he was expected to fulfil in the Church. He was less a lord of the manor than he had been in earlier times, and more specifically a judge. "The highest officers of the Church exercised powers which were pre-eminently judicial; their pastoral care was discharged, not in evangelical exhortation and pious encouragement, but in bringing their subjects to book for defaults against the spiritual code, and even their acts of grace were executed with a strictly legal propriety. In the eyes of those subjects they were first and foremost judges ordinary – they might and habitually did perform that office by delegation or deputy, but their powers in any case were corrective and were enforced by pains and penalties."[19]

The association of the office of a father in God with juridical authority is found at an early date in the history of the Church;[20] it was an association from which the episcopate found it most difficult to free itself. The idea of the bishop as primarily a judge and not a pastor survived the Reformation. It is surprising to find that most unprelatical of

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[19]. A Hamilton Thompson: *The English Clergy* (O.U.P., 1947), pp. 6–7.
[20]. A law of Theodosius, passed in A.D. 412 (Cod Theod. xvi 2 41), exempted all ministers of the Church from trial except in the ecclesiastical courts. Even earlier, the Emperor Constantine had recognised the right of bishops to hear civil cases in which Christians were concerned.

bishops, Hooper of Gloucester (c. 1500–1555), spending at times almost half of his days in bearing cases in his own court. When the churches of the Reformation rejected, as many of them did, the episcopal order, what they were repudiating was a sad travesty of the office as it bad existed in the primitive and apostolic days of the Church.

In the Middle Ages, as at all other times, the real life of the Church depended more on the ordinary working parson of the village than on any other single factor. It is hard to determine what the average standard may have been. Chaucer's poor parson was probably to some extent an idealisation; but the picture would have been unreal unless Chaucer could count on most of his readers recognising it as one with which they were already to some extent familiar in individuals whom they had known.

The first thing that strikes a student is the large numbers of the clergy in medieval as contrasted with modern times. In the absence of reliable statistics of population, an exact figure cannot be given; but it seems probable that one person in every hundred in a country like England was in some sense a clerk, as having been admitted to at least one of the minor orders, and that about one in every hundred of the adult male population was a priest. Even today, there are hundreds of parishes in England with a population of under four hundred; in earlier days, the number must have been much larger, and each of these cures was at least in theory supplied with the whole-time services of a man. The villager might sometimes resent the demands of the priest upon him for tithe and other dues,[21] and his descent upon

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21. According to M.R.C. Fowler, *Secular Aid for Excommunication* (*Trans. Royal Hist. Soc.*, Third Series VIII, 1914, pp. 113–17), about ten thousand writs of *Significavit* or de *excommunicato capiendo*, issued by the civil powers for the apprehension of excommunicated persons who were contumacious, have been preserved in England, dating from the reign of Henry III to that of George III. In the vast majority of cases where the offence is specified, it is non-payment of tithe. We may remember that Chaucer's poor parson
>   "Ful looth were hym to cursen for his tithes,
>   But rather wolde he yeven, out of doute,
>   Unto his povre parisshens aboute
>   Of his offryng and eek of his substaunce."

the house of mourning to claim his heriot from the possessions of the dead man.[22] He could not at any moment be unaware of the presence of the Church in the nearest neighbourhood to himself.

The Middle Ages were a great time of church-building. In many old parish churches, it is possible to trace the stages from the small dark Saxon structure up to the splendour of Early English and Decorated styles. But it was only by the gradual progress of centuries that Europe was covered with the parish churches that remain the noblest monument of the age of faith. For the most part, we are to think of small buildings, sometimes of impermanent materials, bitterly cold in winter, dark even in summer, with no seats except for the rich and well-to-do. Visitation records frequently give a picture of chancels in ruins and letting in the rain, because the rector (who might be a monastery, or the canons of a collegiate church) would not pay the cost of repairs; of churches equipped only with ragged vestments and imperfect service books. There were few regular places for the training of the clergy; many of them, doubtless, were almost illiterate, and able only to stumble through the half-unfamiliar words of the Mass.[23] And yet the service of the Church went forward. Every day, the bell would sound out over the village and the fields. Every Sunday at least (and foreigners were impressed by the willingness of the lay people in England to come even

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22. Dr. G.G. Coulton draws attention to the importance of this system, in *Life in the Middle Ages*, Vol III (C.U P., 1929), pp. 123–7, where actual texts are given. "On a peasant's death, the lord of the manor had frequently a claim on his best beast or other possession as mortuary or heriot. Side by side with this grew up a similar claim from the parish priest. It was presumed that the dead man must have failed to some extent in due payment of tithes during his life-time, and that a gift of his second best possession to the Church would therefore be most salutary to his soul This claim had admittedly no foundation in law, but was maintained already in 1305 as a custom which, being pious and reasonable, must therefore have the binding force of law."

23. Describing the state of the clergy in Cornwall at the end of the Reformation, A.L. Rowse writes of the poor village parsons who "lived poorly beside the peasant, sharing his life and in death mingling their dust into his, leaving nothing by which we may remember them *Tudor Cornwall* (London, 1941), p. 155.

to weekday services), the villager would find himself in Church, subject to the perennial reminder in the Mass of the mysteries of the faith. The words he could not understand; something of the meaning of what was happening would leave its traces on levels of consciousness deeper than those of intellectual process.

Much controversy has raged over the question whether the medieval Church permitted or encouraged the reading of the Scriptures by ordinary people, and divergent views are held by the experts. To the ordinary man it did not matter either way. Being illiterate, he could not read, even if reading was permitted. His situation in relation to the Word of God was probably not very different from that ascribed by a high authority to his successors in a much later age: "To this day, so far as English-speaking Catholics are concerned, the Bible consists of a handful of fragments read out in Church, two psalms, a remembered phrase here and there in the liturgy, and a few dozen dogmatic texts."[24]

But this was not the whole range of his information. Increasingly, the histories of Scripture looked down at him from glorious stained glass windows, such as the great series in the church of Fairford in Gloucestershire. The walls of his church were adorned with frescoes, perhaps crude in workmanship and colouring, but for that reason all the more able to speak to him of eternal truth. And he was not altogether deprived of the ministry of preaching. It is probable that the local clergy rarely if ever preached; they were at best ill qualified to do so. But from the Thirteenth Century and the rise of the Friars onwards, preaching became increasingly a normal part of the life of the medieval Church.[25] The whole aim of Francis, in his Christlike simplicity, had been to bring the Gospel to the poor and to bring back joy into the lives of the oppressed and joyless.

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24. Mgr. R.A. Knox, *On Englishing the Bible* (London, 1949), p. 48.
25. The fullest studies of this subject in England are G.R. Owst, *Preaching in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1926), and *Literature and Pulpit in Medieval England* (Cambridge, 1933).

"Francis was always clear in his declaration that it was their vocation as a body to preach to all men, faithful and heathen alike, both by the example of a life of service lived among men, and by direct, formal, widespread evangelisation."[26] The preaching of the Dominicans was less evangelical, more explicitly directed to the extirpation of heresy and the establishment of the faith; but it also helped to bring the spoken word of the Gospel to those who had long lacked it. It may be that the low pitched roofs of some later medieval Churches are to be accounted for by the need to make a preacher audible, whereas at an earlier date, when the purpose of the structure was more exclusively liturgical, the tendency of the builder had been to give added splendour to his building by making it as lofty as the nature of his materials would stand.

Medieval man could not doubt for a moment that the Church was about his path and about his bed. He might be violent, lustful, unscrupulous. But when he sinned, unless he was one of the rare sceptics, like the emperor Frederick II (1194–1500), *stupor mundi,* he did not sin as those without law; he knew that a time would come when these things must be reckoned with. If, improbably, he should wake long before dawn from sleep in Elysium, he would hear the bell of the monastery calling the monks to prayer, with its reminder that every man lives under judgment, that in the end all earthly gain must turn to loss, and that in truth a man has no lasting possession other than his participation in an eternal inheritance.

The medieval Church was the Christian society at perhaps its highest point of integration and power. But to idealise it is to distort history. The west was not the whole Christian society; and even within its own limits, it was not successful in keeping all Christians within the unity of a single family.

The west had never ceased to be aware of the existence

[26.] Dom David Knowles, *op cit.*, p 120.

of the Church of the east. Even after the decisive separation had taken place in 1054,[27] the hope of union had perhaps never been finally given up. But few greater disasters have ever befallen the Christian society than the attempt made by the Crusaders, in the fourth Crusade, to restore the broken unity by the capture and sack of Byzantium. Just how it came about that a Crusade directed towards Palestine was turned aside to the destruction of the greatest Christian city in the world remains uncertain; it seems clear that the heaviest part of the blame must be carried by the ingenious and commercially-minded Venetians. However that may be, on 9 April, 1204, Byzantium, so long at bay against Muslim enemies, was assaulted by Christian enemies; on 12 April, it was captured. Even after its long agony, it was a city of splendour that nothing in the west could match. "You may well know that those who had never seen Constantinople before looked well on it; for they could not imagine that there could be in all the world so mighty a city, when they saw those lofty walls and rich towers by which it was closely encircled all about, and those rich palaces and lofty churches, so many that a man could not believe them to be so many, if he had not seen them with his own eyes, and the length and the breadth of the city, that was the sovereign over all other cities of the world."[28] So wrote Villehardouin. The great city was spared no single horror of the brutality of war. Even Innocent III who on the whole approved the setting up of a Latin Empire in Byzantium wrote in stern condemnation: "These defenders of Christ, who ought to have turned their swords only against the infidels, have bathed in Christian blood.

[27.] In that year, the emissaries of Pope Leo IX laid on the altar of Santa Sophia in Constantinople the Bull of Excommunication against the Patriarch Michael Cerularius. George Every, in *The Byzantine Patriarchate*, 451–1204 (London, S.P.C.K. 1947) supports the view that "recent research has reduced the significance of both these crises, and prolonged the period of transition between unity and schism far on into the central period of the Middle Ages," (p. viii, and 153 203).

[28.] Villehardouin, *History* §128, cited by Charles Diehl in *Histoire Générale* Vol. IX (Paris, Presses Universitaires de France 1945), p 130.

They have spared neither religion, age nor sex. They have committed before the open heaven adulteries, fornications and incests … They have been seen to snatch from the altars ornaments of silver, to break them in pieces, and to fight over them, to violate the sanctuaries, to carry off sacred pictures, crosses and relics."[29]

The tragic episode of the Latin Empire in Byzantium was not of long duration. In the early morning of 25 July, 1261, the city was recaptured by the troops of Michael VIII Palaeologus, "exactly fifty-seven years, three months, and thirteen days after the Greeks had been driven out of it." But recovery was only partial. Byzantium had been driven by Christian hands a long way down the slope that led to the final disaster of 1453. The west was to pay in many strange ways for what may be judged by some to be the most conspicuous crime of recorded history. It is one of the wriest ironies of time that the presence of the Turks in Byzantium and their alliance with Francis I of France made possible the survival of Protestantism in Germany, at a time when it seemed certain that it would be destroyed by the power of the Emperor Charles V.

In Western Europe, every individual, except for the tolerated and spasmodically persecuted Jews, and the decreasing Muslim remnants in Spain and elsewhere, was baptized and therefore a member of the holy, catholic, apostolic and Roman Church. But the Church has never at any time been successful in preventing rifts and tensions within its membership.

The definition of heresy is a difficult task. At times, heresy has involved such denial of essential doctrine as would, if successful, have made the Christian Church un-recognisable as the heir of its own past. Sometimes what was called heresy appears to have been no more than le-gitimate criticism of a Church that had lost its own first love. And heresy has existed in every possible combia-

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29. Letter 133, in Migne, P.L. 215, col. 712.

tion of these two tendencies, and at every point between these two opposing poles. The stricter the orthodoxy demanded from above and the more totalitarian the system of the Church, the more probable it is that every movement towards independence will be stifled and that every divergence from established ways will be stigmatised and persecuted as heretical. It is startling but not unnatural to find that, just at the moment when the Christian society in the west was reaching its most perfect and effective organisation under the one visible head, it was racked by such inner tensions as threatened, in some of its fairest and most prosperous regions, to subvert it altogether.

On the subject of the Albigenses, or the Cathari, as they are more correctly called, in southern and western Europe, the historian must express himself cautiously and must qualify all his statements. To Protestant hagiography the Albigenses have appeared as innocent victims of wicked authority and forerunners of the Protestant martyrs of the Reformation.[30] To their enemies, and most of our information about them, as about all heretics, is derived from the persecutors, they seemed to be monsters of iniquity, deserving of no consideration or pity. The evidence is so perplexed and contradictory that their history cannot yet be written with any certainty.[31]

Whenever the Church waxes high and prosperous, the memory of the evangelical principles of poverty and re-

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[30] The English reader can most readily find this type of presentation in Foxe's *Book of Martyrs.*

[31] A great deal of light has recently been thrown on the origin of the Cathari and on their connections with eastern Manicheanism by two books that appeared almost simultaneously, Steven Runciman's *The Medieval Manichee* (C.U.P, 1947), and Dmitri Obolensky's *The Bogomils* (C.U.P, 1948) But on many matters these two books point out the need for further study. As Prince Obolensky puts it: "The problem of the influence of Bogomilism on the development of dualistic heresy in western Europe still awaits a definitive study. Western medievalists for the most part have not investigated the Slavonic Bogomil sources, while Slavonic historians have generally taken the filiation of the Cathars and Patarenes from the Bogomils for granted, but have not attempted a detailed study of Western dualism from the point of view of its connection with Bogomilism." *Op. cit.,* p. 286.

nunciation of the world calls out a puritan reaction. One such reaction was the early Franciscan movement; this the Church, though with some difficulty in adjustment, succeeded in retaining within itself. The movement of the Cathari may have started in just this way. A doctrine of purity, of renunciation and of asceticism was proclaimed. The existing Church was condemned as unfaithful to the Gospel which it professed to teach. As early as 1030, there was an organised community of Cathari in Monteforte.

The movement spread and gained adherents. At the beginning of the Thirteenth Century, the authorities of the Church were horrified to find whole areas honeycombed with heresy that persecutions and burnings had failed to suppress. Two features rendered the heresy particularly dangerous. Whatever its origin, it had before long incorporated dualistic elements, partly perhaps through memories of Manichean doctrine surviving even in the west, partly through the dualistic doctrines that came in from the Bogomil communities in Bosnia and other parts of the east; and the prevalence of such doctrines tends always towards a policy of race suicide. In the second place, the movement secured the support of the lay lords of the south of France. It is not to be supposed that these laymen were in every case actuated by spiritual motives. They found in the opposition of the Cathari to the established Church something that was, on other grounds, highly convenient to themselves. "It provided the Southern barons not only with an excuse to rob a Church of which they were desperately jealous, but also with a nationalist creed with which to oppose the Capetians, the Plantagenets and the internationally-minded prelates of Italy."[32]

The west was already familiar with the idea of a Crusade, and with the special privileges and indulgences granted to those who took up the Cross in defence of the Christian world. It was left to Innocent III to declare a Crusade

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[32.] Runciman, *op. cit*., p. 147.

within the Christian world itself. All other measures having failed, in 1207 Innocent addressed himself to the chief nobles of the north of France, telling them that, as heretics had proved incorrigible by any spiritual methods, the secular arm must be called in to suppress them, and the miseries of war used to bring them back to the truth. The usual privileges accorded to Crusaders were to be granted to those taking up the Cross against the heretics.[33] The result was repeated devastations of the most fertile provinces of the South of France, with an interminable series of burnings of those identified as heretics. Even so, more than a century was to elapse before the final disappearance of the Cathari as an organised Church. New persecutions were needed between 1304 and 1312. It was not till 1330 that the authorities of the Church were able to rest in peace in the assurance that their work of purification had reached a satisfactory conclusion.

These events, and others like them from other epochs and countries, raise deep and anxious questions in the mind.

What is the nature of the unity of the Christian society? Is it to be identified with precise acceptance of detailed formulae of doctrine? If any departure from these formulae is at once regarded as heresy, to be extirpated if necessary by the most violent means, what possibility is there of theological progress in the understanding of the Gospel? What possibility is there of reform from within the body, without the necessity, sooner or later, of revolution? The medieval answer to all these questions was quite clear. Heresy was the worst of diseases, within the body politic as well as within the body of the Church. To expel it was the primary duty of the ecclesiastic. To aid him in this task was the responsibility of the civil ruler; if he shewed himself lukewarm in carrying out this responsibility, he might be deposed from his rule, and dispossessed by other

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33. Epistle 229 in Migne P.L., 215, col. 1545.

more faithful, servants of the Lord. This was the fate actually endured by Raymond of Toulouse.

The argument is logical and irrefutable, on its own premises and within its own sphere. But if the conclusion of an argument is intolerable, it may be doubted whether the premises are self-evidencing and certain. The Christian is called to judge of, the nature of the Christian society from what he learns of Christ and His purpose in the Gospels. Confronted with the spectacle of the official head of the Christian society in the west deliberately giving up whole provinces of fire and slaughter, and proclaiming a crusade in which it was certain that thousands of victims would lose their lives, some of them at least not guilty of the greyest crimes against God and humanity, the question cannot but be raised whether that Christian society, for all the splendour of its achievement in many directions, had not in some way strayed at the central point from the allegiance of Christ, and become so unfaithful to His rule of gentleness and grace as to make inevitable sooner or later such a signal judgment of God upon man as was denounced by the prophets of old against unfaithful Israel.