

THE HIGH MIDDLE AGES

The Age of Christendom - 1000 - 1200AD

This period in Church history is called the High Middle Ages because of the strength of the papacy, the impact of several new religious orders on the life of the Church, the creation of great new centers of learning with great theologians like Thomas Aquinas, and the construction of hundreds of Gothic-style churches. In this article, we will look at:

- Rise of the medieval papacy
- Crusades
- Inquisition
- Mendicant friars
- Cathedrals and universities

Rise of the medieval papacy

The High Middle Ages is marked by the reign of several formidable popes. Many of these popes are monks and part of the Cluniac reform which helps tremendously to bring spiritual reform to the Church and free it from lay investiture. Let us now look at some of these reformer popes.

St. Leo IX (1049-1054). Leo, a simple monk, travels widely fighting the abuses of lay investiture, simony and clerical concubinage.

Pope Nicholas II (1058-1061). For centuries, popes are elected by the people of Rome, although too frequently the elections are controlled by kings, emperors or competing noble Roman families. To protect the papacy from corrupt influences and state control, Nicholas creates a group of cardinal-bishops who would act as the pope's representatives in various parts of the empire. He also decrees that, henceforth, only the College of Cardinals can elect a pope by a two-thirds majority vote. Despite this new law, secular rulers continue to interfere with the papal elections. Sometimes even church leaders fail to follow this new rule.

Gregory VII (1073-1085). Gregory, a monk from Cluny, is acclaimed pope *during* the funeral Mass of his predecessor. He tries to back out since the cardinals are not following the decree of Nicholas which states that only cardinal-bishops can elect a pope. Despite his reluctance, Gregory is practically dragged to the Church of St. Peter-in-Chains and installed as pope. Previous to being pope, he was

very involved in four previous papacies, giving advice on every political and religious move.

Gregory's papacy is one of the most powerful in the history of the Church. He not only brings spiritual reform to the Church, but also gains for the Church unparalleled status and power in Europe for the next two hundred years.

Gregory's first action is to declare that all clergy, including bishops, who obtained orders by simony (practice of buying or selling a holy office or position), are to be removed from their parishes and dioceses immediately under pain of excommunication. He also insists on clerical celibacy which in most places is not being observed.

Gregory also fights against lay investiture, the practice by which a high ranking layperson (such as the emperor or king, count or lord) can appoint bishops or abbots, "investing" them with power and requiring their loyalty.

When the German emperor, Henry IV, pushes back against Gregory's reforms, he excommunicates the emperor and tells his subjects that they do not need to obey him any longer. Frightened by this, Henry, dressed in penitential garb, crosses the Alps for the Castle at Canossa, Italy. After receiving the Pope's forgiveness, he quickly returns to Germany and reestablishes his power there. There he gathers his armies, marches on Rome, exiles Gregory and replaces him with an anti-pope. Shortly after, Gregory dies proclaiming: "*I have loved justice and hated iniquity; therefore, I die in exile.*"

Concordat of Worms. In 1122, the controversy over lay investiture is resolved with the Concordat of Worms (Worms, Germany) whereby the emperor agrees that secular rulers will no longer have the right to appoint bishops: all bishops will be elected and consecrated by Church authority.

Innocent III (1160-1216). It is generally agreed that papal power in the past 2,000 years reaches its high point during the papacy of Innocent III, elected pope in 1198 at the age of thirty-seven. Unlike some of his strong predecessors who are monks, Innocent is a canon lawyer and an expert in Church governance. Having an exalted image of the papacy, Innocent sees

himself as the “Vicar (representative) of Christ,” who is set above man to govern not only the universal Church but the whole world.

In dealing with secular rulers, Innocent’s great spiritual weapons are *excommunication* and *interdict*. He imposes *excommunication* against individuals, including kings and emperors who cross him, and *interdict* on nations (ban on administering sacraments, except Baptism, in a country). Innocent places England under interdict when King John refuses to accept the pope’s candidate as archbishop of Canterbury. When the leading nobles of England side with the pope, the king is made to repent and to submit to becoming Innocent’s vassal, requiring him to pay a sizable feudal tax to the pope. When the German emperor invades Sicily, Innocent excommunicates him. Under the threat of excommunication, Innocent forces the king of France to return to his wife. When a group of heretics in France refuses to repent, he launches a crusade against them. We can see why many would accuse Innocent of trying to convert the papacy into a *theocracy* (form of government in which all civil power is in the hands of religious authorities).

Innocent sets out to reform the Church. He reduces the luxury of the papal court and involves bishops more actively in the administration of the Church. He presides over the *Fourth Lateran Council* (1215) attended by some 1,200 bishops, abbots and other church leaders. The Council examines every aspect of the Church’s life and regulates it by decree. Amongst its many decrees, the Council fixes the number of sacraments at seven, defines the doctrine of transubstantiation, declares the reception of Confession and Eucharist obligatory at least once a year (usually during the Easter season). Innocent is the pope who approves two religious orders that bring great spiritual life to the Church: the Franciscans and the Dominicans. He also reconciles many heretics and schismatics to the Church.

Christendom. Historians generally agree that Innocent III established the thirteenth century as the height of Christendom (not to be confused with Christianity). Christianity is the religion of the followers of Jesus Christ. Christendom refers to the cultural world that came into existence during the High Middle Ages in Europe. This was a period in which nearly everyone was Catholic and Catholicism influenced every aspect of people’s lives.

The Crusades (1095-1291)

During the High Middle Ages, the Muslim religion becomes a big threat to Christianity. It takes over the part of the world most sacred to Christians—Palestine—what will later be known as the Holy Land. The Muslims seem poised to overrun Constantinople, the See of the Eastern Church. Turkish Muslims start to attack Christians who are travelling to the Holy Land. In response to the Muslim threat, the popes and Christian rulers conceive the idea of the Crusades as a way to free the Holy Land from the Muslims and to prevent them from making more inroads into Christian territories. Initially, the Crusades are seen as an act of faith, as a holy war against infidels. In exchange for participation, Crusaders are promised special graces. If they die in battle, they will be regarded as martyrs. Economic and political factors are also involved in the crusading spirit as landless peasants and lords hope to gain land from the Muslims.

With the blessing of Pope Urban II, the **First Crusade** (1095-1099) sets out to assist the Byzantine church which is being oppressed with the ascendancy of the Muslim Turks, and to free Jerusalem from Muslim control.

The Crusade is a success in that it recaptures Jerusalem. However, it also is a terrible failure and scandal because of the slaughter of thousands of men, women and children—Muslims and Jews alike who are both seen as infidels. A few decades later, the Muslims will win back control of Jerusalem.

The **Second Crusade** (1147-1149) is preached by St. Bernard of Clairvaux (which tells us how holy men in those days saw the Crusades as a holy cause). Even though this crusade is led by a German Emperor and a French King, it is a big failure.

The **Fourth Crusade** launched by Pope Innocent III is intended to win back control of Jerusalem from the Muslims. On their way, the Crusaders stop off at Constantinople to get supplies for their ships. When they see how beautiful the city is, they ransack it. They break into churches and destroy or steal precious shrines. Worse still, they replace the Greek Patriarch and its liturgy with a Western and Latin bishop, imposing on the Eastern Church for about fifty years the Roman way of running the church.

When Pope Innocent hears how the Crusaders looted Constantinople, he becomes furious. However, he approves the replacement of the Eastern Church patriarch with a Western bishop hoping this would bring together the Eastern and Western churches. While such a move temporarily reunites the Christian Church, the long term effect is a deepening of the division and bitterness between the Eastern and Western Christians. The Eastern Catholics will not forget for a long time what the Crusaders did to them and their city.

The so-called *Children's Crusade* (1212) is the most notable of the misguided efforts. The call to march to Jerusalem and reclaim the city in God's name is answered by many children. In 1212, they set out but are soon destroyed by disease, starvation, and the climate. The children who survive are sold into slavery to the Turks. The other Crusades also fail to achieve their intended goals.

Commenting on the Crusades, Fr. Alfred McBride writes: "*Historically, the Crusades mark a bloody page in the story of a violent time. They remind us that holy war is a perversion of God's will and a disgrace to Christian moral behavior. The Crusades should teach us that holy wars have no place in Christianity; they are anti-Christian in theory, practice and outcome*" (The Story of the Church, p.121).

Yet, the Crusades have some, perhaps unintended, positive results.

- Economically, the Crusades open up trade with the East. The crusaders bring back all kinds of good and inventions.
- Through contact with Muslim scholars, the crusaders learn of advances in architecture, astronomy, mathematics and science.
- The crusaders acquire Arabic commentaries on Aristotle which significantly contribute to the revival of Catholic philosophy and theology. All of the above discoveries would lead to a period in Western history called the Renaissance.

The Inquisition

The Inquisition is established to serve as a legal inquiry into possible heretical teaching that threatens the truth and integrity of Catholic faith. To place the

Inquisition in its historical context, it should be noted that European Christians of the Middle Ages—from peasant farmers to kings—consider heresy a great evil which could lead to one's eternal damnation. Heresy is also seen as a threat not only to the Church but also to society, and could tear civilization apart. Hence, not only church leaders but also state authorities want to protect both Church *and* society from the evil of heresy.

It is the *Albigensian* heresy (named after the town of Albi in South France where the heresy is most prominent) that led to the creation of the Inquisition. Many of the Christian clergy and monks in monasteries in southern France are living a lavish lifestyle while neglecting to preach and live the Gospel. This scandal leads many Christians to turn to a simple lifestyle. Unfortunately, the Albigensians tend to take a good impulse to the extreme. For instance, they teach that marriage, as well as the body, are evil. Throughout Christian history, heresies have often begun as correctives for church practices that needed to be challenged. This is certainly the case with the Albigensian heresy. However, a legitimate challenge to church practice or belief sometimes turns into an over-reaction. It becomes a heresy when some essential aspect of the faith—in this case, the goodness of creation and the sacredness of human life—is denied.

Pope Innocent III tries to convert the Albigensians by sending them a new kind of monk, one who embraces a simple lifestyle. When the Albigensians assassinate a representative of the pope, Innocent calls for a military Crusade against them. While the Crusade slaughters large numbers of Albigensians, it fails to root them out completely. In desperation, Innocent's successor, Gregory IX, initiates the Papal Inquisition in 1232.

The purpose of the Papal Inquisition is, first of all, to identify the heretics, and second, to persuade them to give up their heresy. If the heretic confesses and repents, he is given a penance. If the heretic refuses to renounce his false belief, the punishment is severe, such as life in prison or death by burning at the stake.

At least with the Papal Inquisition, a person is brought before a jury and has a chance to prove his innocence. This is not the case with most civil trials, in which a king or lord could condemn a person to death for a rather trivial offense. In his book *A Popular History of the Catholic Church*, Carl Koch

states: “*One famous papal inquisitor known for his severity turned over for punishment just 5 percent of those who were brought to trial*” (p.151).

While the Inquisition succeeds in putting fear in the hearts of men and women, many see it as a necessary evil. Like the Crusades, the Inquisition shows us how easily religious zeal and good intentions can be turned into great mistakes with tragic outcomes.

The Mendicant Friars

In his introduction to the role the Mendicant friars played at this period in the Church’s history, Carl Koch writes:

As mentioned earlier, the Albigensians set themselves against the materialism and corruption they found in the clergy and the monasteries, and they carried that stand to extremes. But others in the Church who were not heretical also saw the need to renew the Gospel spirit of poverty and simplicity, and they responded in creative, prophetic ways to the needs of the Church. In particular, the mendicant orders stand out: the Order of Preachers and the Order of Friars Minor (friars minor means “little brothers”). These two religious groups were different from the earlier orders whose members usually lived in large country monasteries. These friars stayed on the move, teaching and preaching mostly in the growing towns, and they lived a simple life, dependent primarily on what people gave them for their efforts. Because they were, in effect, beggars, they came to be known as mendicant orders. (The word mendicant means “beggar.”) They had no farms for food or large monasteries for housing, at least not originally. (Ibid, p.151)

Dominic de Guzman (1170-1221), a Spanish priest, founded the **Dominicans** (Order of Preachers). Dominic opposes a Crusade against heretics with the motto: “*Logic and persuasion, not force.*” He also states: “*The heretics are to be converted by an example of humility and other virtues far more readily than by any external display or verbal battles... So let us arm ourselves with devout prayers and set off showing signs of genuine humility and barefooted to combat Goliath.*”

Gradually, the Dominicans begin to also focus on the intellectual life of the Church. They believe that through scholarship, they will be better equipped to illustrate the truth of the Gospels and the wisdom of

Church tradition. Many of the great university teachers of the Middle Ages are Dominicans, the best known being Thomas Aquinas.

Francis of Assisi (1183-1226) founds the Order of Friar Minors (O.F.M.), popularly known as the **Franciscans**. He is probably the best known and most loved of all saints, not only by Catholics but also by other Christians and even non-Christians. No wonder Assisi is the place where Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI gathered for interfaith services with both Christian and non-Christian religious leaders from around the world.

At the time of his conversion, Francis, the son of a well-to-do cloth merchant, takes off all his clothes in the village square as a sign of his desire to shed worldly possessions. Henceforth, Francis weds himself to “Lady Poverty.” He dresses himself in a rough simple garment, goes about the countryside preaching the Gospel, begging from the rich so he can help the poor. When many young men start to follow him, Francis realizes that God is calling him to start a new religious order. This means writing a Rule of Life for his brothers and seeking approval from Rome.

The pope at the time, Innocent III, is not impressed with Francis when he appears before him dressed like a beggar. Francis is dismissed and left waiting in Rome for months. When the pope and the cardinals discuss how they should respond to Francis, it seems that they are moving against the approval of a new religious order. But the night before Innocent meets with Francis, he has a strange and fearful dream in which he sees St. John’s Lateran Basilica shaking and about to fall. Suddenly, the pope sees a small man dressed in peasant garb and barefoot, holding up the basilica. This led Innocent to believe that Francis is to play a special role in renewing and building up the Church. So the next day, he gives Francis permission to begin a new religious order. Through the centuries, Francis has become the spiritual father of more than 30 male religious communities and over 300 provinces of female religious communities—the first being that founded by his friend Clare of Assisi in 1212. Because of his intense love of creation expressed in his poem “Canticle of the Sun,” Francis becomes known as the patron saint of ecology.

Concerning the meeting between Innocent III and Francis, Michael Pennock writes:

The meeting of the Pope and poor preacher represents a marriage between the stature and influence the Church achieved during the Middle Ages and her core roots of discipleship and dependence on God's providence. On the one hand, Pope Innocent III typifies the heights of the medieval papacy and the splendor the Church achieved in the age of Christendom, the ideal of a unified society guided by Christian beliefs, piety, and values. On the other hand, St. Francis of Assisi represents the Gospel lived in all of its radical beauty and stark simplicity. Francis is one of history's true originals – a lover of nature, which he saw as a reflection of the Beauty of the Creator. Unlike the monks of his day, Francis did not withdraw from the world. Rather, he engaged the world by ministering directly to the poor in the growing cities of medieval society. His witness to the Gospel is timeless. And words attributed to him speak to the hearts of Christians as much today as they did centuries ago: "Preach the Gospel always, and if necessary, use words." (This is our Church, p.101)

Bernard of Clairvaux (1091-1153). Many historians would vote for Bernard as "the man of the twelfth century." At the age of twenty, he leaves home to join the monastic community of Citeaux, from which a new order of monks, the ***Cistercians***, received their name. Shortly after, Bernard and some of his brothers found a new monastery in Clairvaux (1115), the Valley of Light. This new monastery becomes a light for the whole Church. Gradually, Bernard's reputation and brilliance become so widely known that popes and kings seek his advice. He is a Scripture scholar, theologian and eloquent preacher. In a letter to Pope Eugenius, Bernard speaks truth to power when he writes:

That you have been raised to the pinnacle of power is an undeniable fact. But for what purpose have you been elevated? . . . It is not I suppose that you may enjoy the glory of lordship . . . Therefore that you might not think too highly of yourself, bear always in mind that a duty of service has been imposed upon you, and not a dominion conferred. . . . Do you think St. Peter loved to surround himself with pomp and display? In all things that belong to earthly magnificence, you have succeeded not Peter but Constantine.... (Quoted in The Story of the Church, Alfred McBride, p.90)

Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179). If Bernard of Clairvaux is "the man of the twelfth century," Hildegard of Bingen is surely "the woman of the

twelfth century." Born in 1098 in the Rhineland part of Germany, she is the tenth and last child of noble parents. At the age of eight, in gratitude for God's blessings on the rest of the family, Hildegard is given to a Benedictine Monastery, not an unusual practice at the time. Despite poor health for most of her life, Hildegard lives to the age of 81.

As Hildegard grows to young adulthood, she receives mystical visions which she starts to write down at the urging of her spiritual directors, one of whom is Bernard of Clairvaux. Concerning these visions, she says: "*The visions which I saw I did not perceive in dreams nor when asleep nor in a delirium nor with the eyes or ears of the body. I received them when I was awake and looking around with a clear mind, with the inner eyes and ears, in open places according to the will of God.*"

When her writings become known, many young women come knocking at the door of her monastery wanting to join. Because of this, and due also to the male dominated monastery of St. Disibodenberg, Hildegard founds her own monastery in Bingen.

Hildegard goes on to write books on a wide variety of topics, such as medicine, natural history, dietary prescriptions, music, poetry, theology. She advocates regular warm baths and installs plumbing in her monastery, both of which are unheard of in Europe in the Middle Ages. As a preacher, she draws enormous crowds and does not hesitate to challenge the pope and emperor in her day. To Pope Anastasius she writes:

"Why do you not cut out the roots of the evil which chokes out the good, useful, fine-tasting, sweet-smelling plants? You are neglecting justice...."

"You who sit on the papal throne, you despise God when you don't hurl from yourself the evil but, even worse, embrace it and kiss it by silently tolerating corrupt men. ... And you, O Rome, are like one in the throes of death."

Even though Hildegard's canonization process is begun 44 years after her death, it will take the Church almost a thousand years after her birth to raise her to the status of sainthood. In October 2012, Pope Benedict XVI declares Hildegard a doctor of the Church, i.e., a person whose writings are so profound that he/she can be helpful to Christians in every age. Such men and women are especially known for their

depth of understanding and the orthodoxy of their theological and spiritual writings.

Cathedrals

A unique feature of the medieval church is its magnificent cathedrals and abbey churches built between the tenth and fourteenth centuries. They symbolize the grandeur and spirit of this period. Each cathedral contains the bishop's chair, symbolizing his teaching authority and power. Thus, the bishop's Church is the center of worship and a symbol of unity for the people of a given diocese. Commenting on the magnificent Gothic cathedrals of the medieval era, Bruce Shelley writes:

For eight centuries Gothic cathedrals throughout Europe have inspired worshipers and awed tourists. The medieval masters of Gothic style tried to portray in stone and glass man's central religious quest. They wanted to depict a tension. On the one hand was man aspiring to reach the heights of heaven; on the other hand was God condescending to address the least of men.

The movement of the Gothic, therefore, is two-way. The pillars, arches, and steeples – aligned like rows of rockets ready to ascend to heaven – point skyward. But through colorful windows of leaded glass the light of God descends to meet the lowly. It is an architect's version of human reason and divine revelation. (Church History in Plain Language – Third Edition, p.194)

The medieval cathedrals stand as a living memorial to the countless anonymous ancestors in the faith of today's Christians. Their hard work is part of an unprecedented institutional effort to praise God in stone.

Universities

Another achievement of the Middle Ages is the rise of universities. Universities grow out of cathedral schools which have been created by bishops to train priests and to offer education to the sons of nobles. Concerning the university life, medieval-style, Carl Koch writes:

A lecturer at a university would announce a series of classes on a particular subject. Then students would come or not. If they came, they paid a fee to the lecturer; if no students wanted to listen to the lecturer, he was out of a job. Books were rare and

expensive, as each one had to be copied by hand. Teachers lectured, and students listened, taking a few notes but depending mostly on their memory (paper was expensive too). Examinations were taken orally, each student being expected to give reasons for accepting or rejecting the teachers' statements about the subjects studied. (Ibid, p.140)

The medieval universities gradually develop a way to advance learning known as *scholasticism* which tries to reconcile the newly rediscovered philosophy of Aristotle with the truths of the Church. The greatest theologian and philosopher of this period and perhaps in the history of the Church is *Thomas Aquinas* (1225-1274). He, more than anyone, sought to reconcile faith and reason. He is able to show how divine revelation is not contrary to reason, that in fact we can know some truths about God by using our minds. On December 6, 1273, Thomas has a mystical experience which leads him to conclude: "Everything I have written seems like straw compared to what I have seen and what has been revealed to me." After this experience, Thomas stops teaching and writing. He dies three months later.

Reflection questions

1. What spoke to you most in this article?
2. What is the most Christian way to deal with theologians whose writings are in conflict with the magisterium, the official teaching authority of the Church?
3. Which of the people mentioned in this article appeals to you the most? Why?