

How the Pope Got His Political Muscle

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simony

the buying or selling of ecclesiastical privileges, for example pardons or benefices

lay investiture

the appointment of church officials by feudal lords and vassals

perfidious

deceitful and untrustworthy

Americans are understandably fond of bragging about the world-transforming politics our founders perfected and then held up for imitation by a freedom-deprived world. Among these is the peaceful separation of church (and mosque and synagogue and so on) and state, accomplished in such a way as to enable both institutions to thrive.

Catholics with a sense of their long history know what a tremendous feat that has been. Neither church nor state cedes much territory to the other when it comes to making claims on the individual and the family. From bitter experience in Europe, the inventors of the United States of America knew all too well that both of these “totalizing institutions” were inclined to demand nothing less than absolute allegiance.

Accordingly, the Constitution's framers set out to protect “this new man, the American” from unjust encroachments, whether at the hands of cleric or congressman. They were keenly aware that both religion and politics are concerned with power, and that the competition between them, if not contained, could unleash wars, civil strife, and other disruptions of public order. Such possibilities offended the framers' pocketbooks as well as their souls.

For an object lesson, they might have pointed to the follies of the Holy Roman Empire - neither Roman, nor holy, nor an empire for much of its existence - and to “the medieval crisis of church and state.”

The crisis arose between the two great powers that emerged from the anarchy of the Dark Ages - the Roman church and the German empire. It began with a dispute between two cardinals over simony, the practice of buying spiritual “services.” During the early Middle Ages, simony frequently took the form of a man paying money to obtain the (lucrative) office of bishop.

Cardinal Humbert, historian Brian Tierney writes, was “coldly intellectual, a man more concerned with justice than charity.” Humbert argued that a bishop who had purchased his office was not, despite his consecration, a true bishop - and any priest he ordained was not a valid priest. Cardinal Peter Damian, a more flexible soul, admitted that a simonist was a bad bishop, but a bishop nonetheless. Thus, the men he ordained were valid priests. Humbert's argument, Tierney notes, would have disqualified “half the priests in Europe - a conclusion that the cardinal seems to have envisaged with total equanimity.”

The debate inevitably turned on the practice of lay investiture, according to which an emperor or king filled a vacant episcopal see with a candidate of his choice. He did so by investing the candidate with a pastoral staff and a ring; during the ceremony the grateful new bishop received the title to a complex of lavish feudal estates, did homage to the ruler, and thereby signified that he was a vassal of the king as well as a prelate of the church.

The idea of a person inheriting great wealth at his accession to the episcopacy troubled neither Humbert nor Damian; the indissoluble union of church (spiritual authority and office) and state (land, money, and other temporal goods) was taken for granted. The dispute was over the practice of buying one's promotion, so to speak, by paying money to the king. Defenders of lay investiture deemed it a purchase of land; opponents thought it to be a scandalous mongering of spiritual goods.

Humbert denounced lay investiture, Tierney explains, as a usurpation of sacramental functions by an (unqualified) lay ruler; he was moving conceptually in the direction of demanding a kind of institutionalized differentiation between the spiritual and the temporal (earthly) realms. No doubt extrapolating from his own highly developed sense of personal status, Humbert argued that no bishop should subordinate himself to a king, for “just as the soul excels the body, so the priestly dignity excels the royal.” Later popes would take that maxim to their power-grabbing hearts.

As Humbert's views gained ascendancy in the church, certain reforms followed. In 1059 Pope Nicholas II decreed that the pope should henceforth be elected by "the cardinal bishops," rather than be chosen by the imperial power and the factions of Roman nobility that had manipulated "popular elections" of the pope in the past.

In the spirit of Nicholas' decree, a synod of bishops held in Rome passed the first official prohibition against lay investiture. Although the prohibition was on the books, no one had the power - or the spine - to enforce it.

But then along came Hildebrand, a young cardinal intellectually in the line of Humbert. The irony of Hildebrand's rise to the papacy was that the people demanded that he become pope immediately upon the death of Pope Alexander II in 1073, and they rushed him to the apostolic palace before his fellow cardinals could nod their collective assent (which they readily did). The man who would become Gregory VII - by all accounts, one of the greatest popes in history - did more than any other pontiff to ensure that the laity, and especially lay rulers of the state, would have little or nothing to do with choosing popes or bishops for nearly a millennium (and still counting).

Gregory VII was the kind of leader who needed an opponent to provide him the opportunity to reveal his greatness. King Henry IV of Germany obliged. In his zeal to see the decree against lay investiture enforced, Gregory became Henry's archenemy. The king refused to stop appointing bishops, for they were the key to uniting his kingdom. Shrewdly, the pope appealed to the German princes, who were willing to acknowledge the papacy's spiritual rights in exchange for a little relief from the would-be emperor's oppressive policies.

Bolstered by the political momentum swinging his way, Pope Gregory in 1075 promulgated the *Dictatus Papae*, a collection of canons, one of which claimed that a pope has the power to depose an emperor. But Henry continued appointing his own bishops and summoned a council of German bishops that denounced Gregory as an immoral, perfidious abuser of papal power. Gregory did not shrink from firing his new canon: He pronounced the king deposed and excommunicated him for good measure.

Henry, to say the least, was not pleased. He claimed that he was king by divine right, called Gregory "not [the] pope, but a false monk," and tried to rally his bishops for a counterattack. But Henry miscalculated. While not completely surprised that the German princes backed the pope - they were happy to trade one powerful, centralized monarchy, located in their backyard, for a remote one - the king was stunned when the German bishops deserted him to seek the pope's pardon.

Finding himself confronted by a mighty coalition of bishops and nobles, Henry was forced to accept humiliating terms of surrender. Cleverly, however, he preempted a trial, to be presided over by the pope, by journeying in January 1077 to the castle of Canossa, on the Italian side of the Alps, where Gregory was resting en route. The king presented himself as a barefoot penitent, kneeling in the snow outside the pope's castle doors, begging for forgiveness. For three days Gregory let him sweat - or rather, shiver - it out. Then, reluctantly - perhaps he sensed that the repentance was politically motivated (can you imagine?) - Gregory granted the king absolution and lifted the sentence of excommunication, but did not restore his kingship.

Why did Henry lose? Most people, even the high and mighty, believed the church controlled the keys to the heavenly kingdom. Excommunication from the church therefore ensured rejection at the pearly gates. Moreover, Gregory's moral authority, based in no small part on his own integrity and holiness, was beyond reproach.

The claim that Gregory made stick, at least for a moment - that the power of the church is comprehensive of the political as well as the spiritual, meaning that the pope is, in effect, the head of the state as well as the church - would never play in the modern world and certainly not in America. We are far too enamored of the modern idea that political power flows from the people rather than directly from Christ to his vicar.

Indeed, the last time a pope toppled an emperor, he did not try so high-handed a stunt as forcing him to his knees in the snow. Then again, he didn't need to. So great was Pope John Paul II's self-evident spiritual and moral authority over Soviet-era state socialism that all he had to do was wave a scolding finger at General Wojciech Jaruzelski, the Polish communist ruler. The poor general shook so hard (before an international television audience) that he probably longed for the good old days of Canossa.