



When Christianity Ruled

By the end of the 12th century, Rome had emerged as the center of universal power in Christendom. The Pope had absolute power within the church hierarchy, but bishops, at least theoretically, held absolute power of their own within a much smaller sphere. For good or for bad, for better or for worse, reasonable or unreasonable, just or unjust, the church commanded absolute obedience. There was no higher power to which a Christian could appeal, including God himself.

How had the church gained this enviable power? It had no army. But it had something even more powerful – the power over life and death. The church had become accepted as the only patron of eternal life. Its weapon of mass persuasion was the threat of excommunication, which very few were strong enough to even contemplate.

It was only fitting and proper that the institution which commanded the fate of mankind should have the appropriate machinery for administering to the needs of its believers. It should also have the appropriate facilities for reflecting its holy responsibilities and privileges. Churches could not be too elaborate or extravagant. Bishops were not to be seen getting their hands dirty. They and the pope made policy; they had humble parish priests to enforce Church rules.

The priests had their own powerful weapon – confession. And, although they were at the bottom of the church hierarchy, they were still elevated well above common people. They were positioned to hear the innermost thoughts and emotions of commons who could then be easily guided through fear and guilt to conform to the wishes and demands of the church. Meanwhile, priests had another powerful weapon. While members of their flock were obliged to conform to doctrine and dogma, the priests themselves were not. They were also immune from secular prosecution for any crime. They were subject only to the rules and regulations of their own order, and any judgment at that level could be appealed to Rome, which was predisposed to confer immunity.

The gulf between priest and common was widened when, after a bitter struggle, the canon of celibacy was revived and once again enforced in the middle of the 11th century. The primary goal of the church, however, was not to display the piety and dedication of its priests. It was to protect church property, which had come to cover vast portions of the most fertile lands of Europe. Successive generations of believers had conferred land to the church, and it was well protected against secular claims. It would not have been protected, however, from successive generations of priests who passed such land to their heirs. Celibacy solved that potential problem.

It also assured that priests devoted their entire energy and attention to matters of the church. No family responsibilities to compete with their priestly duties. No distractions, and fewer temptations. The church was jealous. So it took steps to assure that a priest was no longer a citizen. The church was his home, his country, his assurance of life's necessities, relieving him of the seductions and distractions of common life. At least, that was the theory. But not all men were inclined to be relieved of such seductions and distractions. What would tempt some men to make such a sacrifice? Certainly among the reasons would be a known lack of opportunities for seduction and distraction outside the church, which meant that many who were drawn to the priesthood weren't giving up anything, while they were gaining a lot. Power, stature within the community, respect, authority. A man had very little chance of advancement in the

sharply-defined class structure of the feudal system. The church, however, accepted recruits from all ranks. Family connection may help a man get accepted into the priesthood, but once there, it was his own devotion and performance that determined his success.

Once there, priests formed a well-trained, highly disciplined, supremely motivated, unquestionably loyal and dedicated army of onward Christian soldiers, commanded by church leaders whose every utterance was received by priests as the very word of God himself. There was very little that could not be achieved by this army at the hands of a skilled commander. At least that was the image they tried to project.

Although such power guaranteed abuse, it was of no little comfort to the common man that even king and noble were subject to the supreme authority of the church. No one was above the law, except the church itself. On the other hand, it was perhaps of no little discomfort to said king and noble that they must obey the law of the church, even if commanded by a cleric of the lowest rank and ignoble reputation.

Such power had not come cheap to the church. What had it sacrificed? Christian virtues such as humility, charity, and self-denial had, for the most part, evaporated. The masses no longer looked to the church with awe, affection, and admiration. Fear and force had replaced a natural attraction to the loveliness and grace of the church. It had degenerated into little more than a dispassionate business transaction. The church sold the promise of salvation and eternal life. The price was unquestioned faith in the church, and unwavering obedience to it. The ultimate penalty for breach of contract by the laity was the threat of excommunication.

The gulf between priest and laity meant that the church had become divided. It was no longer just a matter of the entire body of believers against the forces of evil. The church now consisted of two distinct classes: the shepherds and the sheep. The sheep came to understand that they were there simply for the shearing. And the church attracted men who were motivated by worldly rather than spiritual goals. They were drawn to the priesthood

primarily by the enormous wealth of the church, and by its promise of immunities and privileges. They were not there to save souls.

The church had crafted for itself an absolute spiritual despotism. How did they make use of such enormous power? Had the church hierarchy consisted of wise, noble, devout men of pure motive, guided, as one might expect, by the Holy Spirit, they could have and should have elevated the moral, spiritual, and material milieu of medieval Europe. Such was not to be. Instead, these selfish and depraved souls became the ineluctable force of oppression and despair.

Priests, of course, aspired to become bishops, where the real power and wealth resided. And how did one manage to make this giant step up on the church ladder? Theoretically, the clergy elected the bishop, who was then subject to the approval of the members of the diocese. But more often than not, it was simply a matter of church power politics. Of course, the mightiest power broker in the church was the pope, to whom disappointed candidates were increasingly prone to appeal, gradually accruing to the Holy See a virtual power of appointment.

Each cardinal (for the select bishops who make it that far) who is called on to enter an enclave for the purpose of electing a new pope, is required to take this oath: **I call God to witness that I choose him whom I judge according to God ought to be chosen.** If it was intended to assure the election of only the most worthy and capable representative of God, it was most inefficacious. Which is hardly surprising in view of the fact that the entire church hierarchy, from top to bottom, was populated with worldly, licentious men. Simony was almost universal. The best the cardinals could hope for was to select the least worthless candidate available.

The Council of Rouen, in 1050, lamented the pernicious practice by ambitious men of obtaining gifts, using whatever means they deemed necessary, which would be used to gain the favor of the prince and his courtiers, which, it was hoped, could be parlayed into obtaining a bishopric. They were primarily concerned with that custom in France, but their king (Henry I) was a notorious

bishoprics vendor, and the council could not come up with a solution to the problem. It became a well-entrenched system throughout the church, debasing the conduct and character of the church, whether the consideration paid was in the form of money or some other commodity.

When an honorable, sincerely devout man did occasionally enter the clergy, his efforts to enforce a higher standard of conduct were easily brushed aside. The meek did not inherit the church hierarchy. It was no place for the humble. It was dominated and ruled by those who were adept in the arts of intrigue and haggling. And by those whose martial skills promised to come in handy to enforce the will of the church. It was an apothegm among the pious that no bishop could ever enter heaven.

Flagrant crimes, violence, and immorality by the clergy of that era are well documented. They were answerable only to Rome, and that was hardly a deterrent. Only the most desperate dared air their complaints to Rome, because it was well known that it was extremely difficult to prove charges; the proceedings were long, drawn-out ordeals; and the chances were great that, in the end, the defendant would escape punishment. Even under such incorruptible popes as Innocent III, who heard many cases, final condemnation was elusive and rare, and even the most wicked and defiant offenders had no fear of punishment.

Accepted into the clergy were boys whose motive was escaping the demands of their teachers. They naturally were motivated by potential opportunities to exploit their subjects, not by a desire to minister to the flock. It was from those corrupt ranks that bishops were appointed, and it was from that evil pool that popes were elected. It was because of that ecclesiastical cesspool that popes and bishops came to terrorize Christian churches.

Feudal lords were strictly territorial, and the judicial functions of bishops extended only to their own diocese. So a system was in place which provided every man a fairly good idea of to whom he was responsible. But that changed due to the popes' inability to resist ample opportunity for abuse. The pope, the supreme judge with universal jurisdiction, could delegate any portion of his power to any one

at any time. His emissaries had the full force and effect of the pope himself. He unleashed his unscrupulous representatives to exercise judicial functions, and their ultimate method of enforcement was the threat of excommunication. Such threats were backed up by letters from the pope, who freely sold such documents to anyone who could afford to buy them.

So it was that men, without hesitation or remorse, spread throughout Europe with legal license to exploit and oppress the masses. Bishops couldn't resist getting in on the action. They delegated their more restricted judicial authority to their own emissaries, for a price, of course. So common were these vile creatures that many enterprising criminals realized they didn't need a document from the pope or a bishop. All they had to do was claim they had such a document, and no one dared challenge them. When Innocent III ascended the throne he found a forgery factory in Rome, busily churning out fake letters. Even his relatively pure intent couldn't compete with the enormous profits, and the industry was not confined to Rome. It was a matter of much concern to the pope and bishops, who were being denied their fair share of the plunder, but victims were hardly concerned with whether the letters were genuine or forged. The results for them were the same.

According to Hildebert of le Mans, these church officials were: **stone as to understanding, wood as to rendering judgment, fire as to wrath, iron as to forgiveness, foxes in deceit, bulls in pride, and minotaurs in consuming everything.**

The clergy had plenty of other schemes and tricks for fleecing their flock. They charged a fee for all official acts. They blackmailed fellow priests when caught with their concubine; guilty priests were forced to pay the price demanded in order to keep their concubine in peace. The courts were also sources of wealth, as offenders were heavily fined, and penalties were strictly enforced. If a convict failed to comply, he was excommunicated, after which he had to pay for reconciliation in addition to the original assessment. Marriages were easily made and unmade, with the clergy profiting handsomely at both ends.

It was during this period that the construction of magnificent churches and abbeys came into fashion. Stained glass had been introduced into architecture, sparking a desire for ever more luxurious ornamentation. While they are in small measure a reflection of faith, opulent churches are primarily manifestations of the pride of the prelates who had them built. Today these relics, with their towering spires, long-arched naves, and ornate windows, inspire reverential awe. Lost is the hidden cost to suffering serfs and peasants, who bore the brunt of the burden, either through their own sweat and blood, or exactions derived from usury, lies, and deceit.

With priests being preoccupied with the pursuit of power and wealth, their parishes were devoid of preaching. That skill was not even part of their training, and no one else was authorized to pick up the slack for them. This continued until the spread of heresy aroused the church from its slumber. When the Preaching Friars attempted to fill the void, they were thwarted at every turn. Not by the parishioners, but by the negligent priests.

Although canon law was full of regulations regarding the fitness of prelates for office, they were ignored. No attention was paid to a candidate's abilities or qualifications. Instead, benefices were sold to the highest bidder or traded for favors. Rome had no interest in oversight or reform. Far from it. The curia itself was enjoying the benefits of such corruption. They were always searching for opportunities to advance their own careers, and they were constantly writing to bishops demanding positions for their friends.

It was common practice for prelates to hold more than one position, thus greatly enhancing their influence and income. Pluralities were a clear violation of canon law, but the Roman curia was loathe to enforce the law when they profited so handsomely from corruption. Learned doctors of theology stood in defense of such practices, declaring them lawful. Moralists' cries for reform fell on deaf ears.

When a man purchased a benefice, it was strictly a business contract. He expected to do everything in his power to maximize the return on his investment. A neophyte priest was required to swear an oath to

take full advantage of every possible opportunity to exploit his parishioners. Running a business left no time for tending to his pastoral duties.

His primary source of revenue was the tithe, which was enforced with all the enthusiasm and ruthlessness of our modern IRS. The established formula for distribution of such revenue was this: the priest, the bishop, the church, and the poor would each receive one-fourth. But in practice, the church received very little, and the poor received nothing at all.

People in some places decided they had had enough of oppressive exactions, and they refused to pay. Priest was pitted against parishioner, and it was not uncommon for more than one claimant to pursue the debtor. The church countered by declaring non-payment of tithes heresy. It has been estimated (perhaps an exaggeration) that there were some 60,000 tithe cases pending before the courts at the start of the French Revolution.

However, even in more compliant communities, tithes were rarely sufficient to support the priest in the manner to which he had become (or wanted to become) accustomed. Some enterprising priests recognized that profit was to be gained from the confessional, which was now becoming mandatory for the faithful. They would grant absolution for any sin in exchange for a chicken or a pint of wine. Other priests demanded money to perform multiple masses for the soul of a confessor, deemed necessary for real or contrived infractions. Fees had to be paid in advance before the priest would perform wedding or funeral ceremonies. An oblation must be offered before a believer could receive communion. No priestly function was ignored as a source of revenue.

When a man approached death, weary, wary of impending judgment, especially after a life of wickedness or cruelty, the priest took full advantage of the opportunity. A generous contribution of land to the church for future pious uses was suggested as an appropriate atonement. Having no further use for it himself, and eager to escape harsh eternal judgment, it was usually an easy sell. It is well known that a large portion of the church's enormous wealth was derived from this tactic. That the disinherited heirs were left to a life of poverty

and crime was of, at most, only tangential concern to the church. That preying on the simple and unlearned in their care was conduct unbecoming a member of the clergy never occurred to most prelates, and the few who did speak up were largely ignored.

Squabbles frequently arose over the jurisdiction of a corpse. No priest wanted to miss his opportunity to collect generous sums for atonement, or oblations at the funeral, or fees for saying mortuary masses for the deceased soul.

During this time, most countries owing obedience to the Latin Church had accepted celibacy in the priesthood. That, however, had not translated into chastity in the priesthood. If a priest could not have a wife, he had a concubine, or worse, a series of lovers. When the priest confessed his carnal transgressions, he was prohibited from giving the name of his partner. That was to prevent the confessing or confessor priest from blackmailing the female partner. It was also to prevent exposure of the scandal. The few scandals that did become common knowledge provoked intense antagonism.

Female virtue was not a matter of great concern, generally, for that time, but the idea of a priest, claiming ascetic purity, yet guilty of sexual impropriety was sure to stir public outcry. So, priests could do pretty much whatever they wanted to do without fear of punishment, as long as they kept up appearances, and, of course, as long as they didn't marry. Sexual crimes were frequent, including in monasteries, where females were strictly forbidden. Probably the most profound and lasting damage to the church resulted from the false standard of morality imposed on the priesthood.

Immunity from prosecution in secular courts, plus the church's well-known leniency, caused a great deal of hostility between the clergy and the laity. It also led to a demoralized clergy. It attracted to the clergy a class of men who were worthless and irresponsible, to the great detriment of all who came in contact with them. They had no empathy for commons who were subject to the terrors of the legal system. They had no regard for the teachings of Jesus, or the morals and values usually

associated with Christianity. They enthusiastically used their position to prey upon the community.

One of the methods they employed was the practice of buying doubtful claims from laymen. Since a cleric, whether plaintiff or defendant, had the right to refer civil cases to spiritual courts, which were strongly biased in his favor, he was assured a favorable verdict, and he was then free to collect the debt, no doubt with substantial interest. The threat of excommunication and eternal damnation was a far more effective motivation than broken knee caps. The church's compliance in such schemes was strictly forbidden, of course, but that never stopped the clergy when a profit was to be made.

More enterprising priests arranged to have the victim called to several spiritual jurisdictions simultaneously. It was of no concern to the spiritual authorities that compliance was physically impossible, or whether the defendant had even been properly served. Excommunication was the sentence, forcing the victim to pay for reconciliation as well as the original fine(s). Bear in mind that these victims were easy targets, because they were illiterate, very simple people, who were utterly defenseless. Excommunication was their greatest fear, considered a fate worse than death.

Abbeys became centers of corruption. Nunneries became houses of prostitution. Monasteries became feudal castles where monks partied hearty and waged war on their neighbors. Notable exceptions were extremely rare. The vast majority of abbeys were sources of evil rather than good. Criminals often evaded punishment by agreeing to enter a monastery, resulting in monasteries serving as penal settlements or prisons. Each monk had a locked cupboard in the refectory to protect his cup, spoon, dish, and napkin from theft. Anti-theft measures were also necessary in the dormitory, if the monk could afford it. There were constant complaints about the thievish inclinations of fellow monks. There was a pattern of earnest reform efforts, inevitably followed by a return to indulgence and lack of monastic discipline.

Much of the power and wealth of the church derived from its doctrine of justification by works. Absolution was easily obtained by a specified (by

the priest) number of Pater Nosters or Ave Marias. If the penitent was unable or disinclined to pay the penalty himself, he might impose on family or friends to bear his burden for him, which deed magically transferred merit to the sinner, as though among God's characteristics was that of Supreme Juggler. In preparation for Easter, the congregation was absolved as a whole (or in squads or batches by some careless priests), giving the impression to ignorant parishioners that it was a ceremony of magic. Salvation became more a matter of mechanical formula or magical incantation than repentance, a pure heart, and earnest struggle for a higher life through Christ. Uneducated, illiterate, and therefore easily manipulated and indoctrinated, those simple folks knew no better, and had no reason to challenge the practices of the clergy.

Christianity had been deprived of its spiritual vitality, which had been replaced by meaningless routine and dry formalism. The internal condition of the soul was of no concern to the clergy. It was to the laity, but only to the extent that they were able to avoid, by whatever means necessary, eternal damnation. Incapable of higher abstract reasoning, they were content going along with the formulas established by the clergy. And so it was that they were suckers for another master scam – indulgences.

It was an ancient and well-entrenched doctrine that sin could be absolved through confession, repentance, and penance. A natural appurtenance was the doctrine that penance could be achieved through service to the church. The church was regarded as the Ft Knox of the treasure of salvation, deposited by means of the Crucifixion and the saints. The pope, as God's supreme vicar, was also God's banker plenipotentiary, the final authority on who would be allowed to partake of this holy bounty, and under what conditions. At first, penance for a specified time was suspended in exchange for pious works, pilgrimages to shrines, contributions toward church construction or bridges, etc.

The pope himself was not the only one who could transform spiritual punishment into mundane sacrifices. He could delegate that authority and responsibility to anyone he wanted. And there was

no shortage of applicants, as it conferred upon them tremendous power and potential wealth.

From there, it was a very short step to the principle of entire forgiveness for all sins through an *indulgence*. The Crusades provided the catalyst for the next step in the evolution of indulgences. If Mohammed promised his young warrior martyrs immediate bliss for their service and ultimate sacrifice to Allah, Christians had to compete effectively. They countered with an offer of eternal mercy for all their penitent Crusaders. It was so popular that the offer was extended throughout all the church's holy wars. Its attraction derived in part because it was well understood that even if a crusader survived the perils of battle, he would most likely return a broke and broken bandit.

As the initial thrill and excitement of crusading wore off, the church needed to sweeten the deal to attract warriors. They decided to extend the offer of full remission of all sins to anyone who would pay the expenses of a crusader, and to anyone who would join a crusade at the expense of another. That left those earlier crusaders who had volunteered their services at their own expense with an acute case of remission envy. To assuage their sense of betrayal, the church promised that they would receive more salvation than the others. No one in the church could offer a coherent explanation of exactly how that was possible, but fortunately for them, they were not dealing with great minds. The church's marketing department also enticed new recruits with the offer of pardon even for forgotten sins, as well as those which were remembered, confessed, and repented.

But their crowning achievement was this gem: crusaders were to be placed in the same class as clergy as regards both earthly and heavenly justice. In other words, crusaders got the same get-out-of-jail-free card that clerics had been enjoying. It goes without saying that the crusades were not staffed with the best class of men. Which goes a long way toward explaining much of the conduct of crusaders and the final outcome of their efforts.

A profitable device was invented which offered a reprieve to crusaders who, for whatever reason, found themselves unable or unwilling to complete their mission. All they had to do was pay whatever

they could afford, and they were off the hook. A great deal of revenue flowed into the church coffers through this program. But it proved a bit cumbersome, and not quite up to the pope's standards. So the pope arranged for funds to flow directly to him – revenue badly needed to finance his private wars. He ordered prelates everywhere to establish special coffers for this purpose. They, obviously, were not happy to be cut out of the deal, but there was nothing they could do about it.

The next step in the evolution of indulgences was taken by churches and hospitals, who sent out pardoners, armed with papal or episcopal letters, cautiously framed, ambiguous enough to allow pardoners to promise, for only a few small coins, salvation for the living and liberation of the damned from hell. Needy bishops and popes were constantly selling such letters, spawning a new profession – that of professional pardoner. The most ruthless and shameless were also the most successful. As always, complaints fell on deaf ears (at least until Martin Luther). In the church, profit trumped God. Profit, in fact, was God.