

The Fall of the Princes of the Church. A Decline of the Authority of the Papacy at the Dawn of the Reformation

Émile Durkheim, in his work *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* [1912], observed that “the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred” (2008: 40). That rule of the mutual exclusion of the sacred and the profane appeared to be the motto of the pontificates of such renowned Popes of the Middle Ages as Gregory the Great (590-604), Nicholas I (858-867), Gregory VII (1073-1085), and Innocent III (1198-1216). They reasserted the primacy and universality of the Papacy which they perceived as a duty based on humility and service, and remained truly devoted to the idea of preaching genuine faith by suppressing heresy and eliminating bribery and corruption from the Church. However, at the end of the 13th century, the Popes began to misconceive the actual significance of their office which, in their view, no longer served purely spiritual ends but became a mere means of the realization of their political and economic ambitions.

The first serious signs of the decadence of the papal prestige emerged during the pontificate of Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303). He earned the reputation of a proud, unscrupulous, pretentious, implacable man, overcome by worldliness and the lust for power. Despite his spiritual leadership, he engaged in a war against Frederic of Sicily, conducted a personal vendetta against the Colonna family and enriched his relatives, particularly his nephew Peter, son of the Count of Caserta, at the expense of the Church. His announcement of the Holy Year in 1300, which granted a plenary indulgence to all pilgrims to Rome, initiated a series of jubilees that became the source of immense profit and unprecedented scandal to the Church.¹ However, one of the darkest sides of his pontificate was the conflict with Philip IV of France (1285-1314) over the right to the Church property. In 1296, Philip IV levied a tax upon the French clergy in order to cover the expenses of his war against England. The Pope’s reaction was immediate; he issued a bull “Clericis Laicos,” in which he strictly prohibited the clergy to pay taxes to the laity:

the prelates and ecclesiastical persons [...] we strictly command, in virtue of their obedience, and on pain of deposition, that they in no wise acquiesce in such things without express leave of the said see, and that they pay nothing under pretext of any obligation, promise, and acknowledgement whatsoever [...], and that the seculars aforesaid do not in any wise receive it; and if the clergy do pay, or the laymen receive, let them fall under sentence of excommunication by the very deed. (in: Bettenson, ed., 1943: 159)

¹ In view of the high profitability of the jubilees, the subsequent Popes resolved that they should be celebrated more frequently. The next jubilee was announced by Clement VI (1342-1352) in 1350, Urban VI (1378-1389) declared that it would be repeated every 33 years, and Paul II (1464-1471) fixed its recurrence every 25 years (see Schaff 1997: vol. 6, chap. 1) <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>.

The bull had little impact on Philip IV who not only continued to tax the French clergy but also banned the export of gold and silver from France, thus depriving Rome of its French contributions.

In response to Philip IV's unwillingness to submit to the papal authority, Boniface VIII, in 1302, issued another bull, "Unam Sanctam," which marked its place in the history of the Church as the unparalleled expression of the papal claims to the spiritual and temporal supremacy. The bull pointed to the existence of "one holy, catholic and apostolic church" (in: Janz, ed., 1999: 14), outside of which neither salvation nor the remission of sins were possible. The Church had "one body and one head" (14), that is Christ who acted through the Pope. Consequently, the subjection to the Pope was the precondition to be saved. Whoever opposed the Pope, opposed God. As the bull declared, there were two swords of power: the spiritual, held by the Church, and the temporal, officially possessed by the secular rulers but, in fact, subordinated to the Pope. While the temporal power was wielded for the Church, the spiritual power was exercised by the Church. The spiritual power, although exerted by man, derived from God, therefore, it was not subject to any human tribunal but could be judged only by God. However, the divine sources of the spiritual power entitled it to institute the secular authority and correct its transgressions (14). In 1303, Boniface VIII issued a bull that excommunicated Philip IV, but before it was publicly announced, the Pope was imprisoned at his palace at Anagni by his French and Italian enemies who attempted to force him to resign. Although quickly rescued and delivered back to Rome, Boniface died a month later in disgrace and humiliation. All the pretensions to the papal supremacy over the secular power perished with him.

Beginning in 1309, the Popes chose Avignon in France as their residence. The era of the Avignon Popes, also known as the era of the Babylonian Captivity of the Church, which lasted for almost seventy years, further undermined the spiritual authority of the Papacy and shook the foundations of Christendom by cutting it off from its roots. The Papacy became virtually the French institution as not only all the Popes elected at that time, but also a vast majority of the cardinals and curial officials were of the French origin. The Popes functioned as puppets in the hand of the French monarch whose political interests they duly served.² The subservience to the French crown was by no means the only fault of the Avignon Papacy. It was also infamous for its notorious morals and opulence. With its splendor and wealth, the papal court hardly differed from the royal residence, and the lives of its members resembled the lives of princes

² The papal weakness in the face of the royal pressure was particularly visible on the example of the pontificate of the first of the Avignon Popes, Clement V (1305-1314). In order to gain Philip IV's favor, he granted him a five-year payment of the Church tithe and recalled all the punishments and suspensions, imposed on him by Boniface VIII. He also exonerated Boniface VIII's assailants and canonized Pope Celestine V who, following his resignation from the Apostolic See in 1294, died as Boniface VIII's prisoner. However, the most pronounced manifestation of Clement V's subjection to the French crown was his dissolution of the Order of Knights Templar on Philip IV's demand and against the decision of the Council of Vienne (1311-1312), which refused to condemn it. Founded in 1119 with the aim of protecting the pilgrims to Jerusalem and defending the Holy Land against Moslems, the Templars were charged with heresy, necromancy and indecent conduct. In fact, they became the victims of Philip IV's insatiable greed that pressed him to take over their wealthy possessions. Their trial, which involved the use of tortures to force confessions, was the scandal of injustice that marked another dark page in the history of the Papacy. According to Philip Schaff and Eamon Duffy, Clement V sacrificed the Templars in order to save the memory of Boniface VIII from the official condemnation on which Philip IV relentlessly insisted and which would exert a devastating impact on the authority of the Apostolic See (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 1; also Duffy 2006: 164-165).

rather than clergymen. The appointment of a Pope, like the election of a monarch, was followed by his coronation and enthronement, and was celebrated with pomp and ostentation, with the participation of the lower and higher clergy, the nobility and civil authorities. The Popes' worldliness was also visible in their political engagement. They hired mercenary armies in order to defend their Italian dominions, and they intervened in each major conflict in Europe, including the war between England and France.

The luxurious lifestyle and the pursuit of the political interests of the Avignon Papacy were possible because of the systematization and centralization of their financial and administrative system. During the Avignon era, the financial exploitation of Christendom by the Apostolic See reached its height. The Papacy became a commercial institution which flourished through a well-developed machinery of taxation, extended throughout Europe. The main source of the papal income derived from the freewill offerings: the annates, visitations and servitia, which were turned into obligatory charges during the Avignon era.³ Other taxes, known as the census, included the so-called Peter's Pence,⁴ the annual tributes of feudal fiefs, such as Naples, Sicily, Corsica, Sardinia, and England, and the payments made by the convents and churches that were under a special protection of the Papacy. The crusades against the Saracens and the war to reclaim the papal territories in Italy provided an additional pretext for increasing the papal treasury. The Papacy also drew enormous revenues from its legal prerogatives. No case was too trivial to be settled at Avignon on condition that a due sum was paid for the trial. Furthermore, taxes were levied on vacant benefices and fees were charged for a variety of dispensations and concessions.⁵ The contributions obtained from bishoprics, convents, churches, and even hospitals were made not only in cash but also in the form of such goods as vegetables, animals, fish, grain, wine or wood. Countless officials, employed in the curia, extracted fees for each possible service, from marital dispensations to the act of writing a document, according to the assumption that each favor had its due equivalent in money. Those fees were frequently out of proportion to the actual cost and value of the service performed.

Another abuse of the Avignon Papacy was the expansion of its right of provisions for ecclesiastical benefices. In the system of papal appointments, money not the spiritual and administrative qualities of the candidates, played the key role. Simony, bribery and nepotism had already become legalized practices. Foreigners were frequently nominated to the sees in the countries whose language they hardly knew. The practice of papal provisions was particularly unpopular in England. In attempt to prevent it, in 1351, the "Statute of Provisors" was passed; it granted the freedom of ecclesiastical elections as follows:

³ The annates were a payment of a part of the first year's income after obtaining a benefice, the servitia were fees made by archbishops, bishops, abbots and lower clerics at the confirmation of their office, and the visitations were paid by prelates on their visits to the Apostolic See (see Schaff: vol. 5, chap. 15).

⁴ Peter's Pence was an annual tax of a penny imposed on each household, particularly in England and Poland (see Duffy: 134).

⁵ A dispensation had to be paid, for example, by a priest that had been born out of wedlock, ordained beyond the canonical age, or had entered the benefice without basic qualifications (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 1).

our lord the king [...] with the assent of all the great men and the commons of the said realm, to the honour of God, and profit of the said Church of England, and of all his realm, has ordered and established: that the free elections of archbishops, bishops, and all other dignities and benefices elective in England, shall continue from henceforth in the manner as they were granted by the king's progenitors, and the ancestors of other lords, founders. (in: Bettenson, ed.: 236)

The "Statute" also provided the lawful owners of advowsons with the right of free collation and presentment. If the Roman See continued appointing its nominees for the ecclesiastical dignities in England, the right of collation would be reverted to the King. Furthermore, it was decreed that the person who would accept the benefice against the "Statute," "shall abide exiled and banished out of the realm for ever, and his lands and tenements, goods and chattels shall be forfeited to the king" (238). Nevertheless, the "Statute" recognized the lifelong right to the benefice of those who had obtained it from the Pope before 1351. The papal influence on the Church in England was further diminished two years later by the enactment of the "Statute of Praemunire." It struck against the papal jurisdiction in England by declaring that the exclusive right to settle disputes over patronages "pertains only to the king's court by the old right of his crown, used and approved in the time of all of his progenitors kings of England" (239). Those who would pursue justice in the court of Rome against the above-mentioned resolution "shall be put out of the king's protection" (242), and their property would be taken over by the King. The "Statute of Praemunire" definitely rejected the idea of the royal submission to the Pope on the grounds that "the crown of England [...] has been in no earthly subjection, but immediately subject to God" (240).

The era of the Avignon Popes came to an end in 1377 only to deepen the crisis within the Church. Faced with the danger of losing the papal dominions in consequence of the revolt in northern and central Italy, and influenced by the mystic visions of St. Catherine of Sienna, Pope Gregory XI (1370-1378) resolved to return to Rome. After his death a year later, an Italian, Urban VI (1378-1389) was elected Pope under the pressure of the Roman crowds. However, his attempts to clean the papal curia of its lavishness made him extremely unpopular among the cardinals; they declared his election invalid and chose the Cardinal Bishop Robert of Geneva as Pope Clement VII (1378-1394) who settled at Avignon. The dual election, known as the Great Schism, constituted one of the gravest crises in the history of Christianity. The Western Church became divided into two camps: one centered in Rome, the other based in Avignon as both Urban VI and Clement VII claimed the right of the apostolic succession. Urban VI maintained the allegiance of the Roman Empire, northern and central Italy, Scandinavia, England, Germany, Hungary, Poland and Lithuania, while Clement VII received the recognition of France, Naples, Scotland, Savoy, Burgundy and the kingdom of Castile. Both Popes excommunicated each other and placed each other's supporters under an interdict; they also created their own college of cardinals and appointed rival candidates to the same ecclesiastical dignities, which caused an enormous chaos in the administration of the Church and raised doubts among the believers as to which obedience, if any, was right. The authority of the college of cardinals, who had elected the Pope only to depose him soon afterwards, was seriously questioned. The schism also increased the financial burden of Christendom because not only one, but two luxurious curia had to be supported (Wallace 2004: 44-45; Duffy 2006: 168-169).

As the confusion continued throughout the Church, the increasing number of ecclesiastical and intellectual leaders appealed for the convocation of the general council that would put an end to the schism. However, their first attempt to restore unity deteriorated, instead of curing, the wrecked condition of the Church. The Council at Pisa, summoned in 1409 by the representatives of both curia, deposed the Popes at Rome and Avignon, and appointed the Archbishop of Milan as Pope Alexander V (1409-1410). Nevertheless, the deposed Popes refused to surrender their legal and administrative powers, in consequence of which Christendom became divided into three obediences. Not discouraged by that failure, the proponents of reforms continued their pro-conciliar propaganda. At their instigation and under the pressure from Emperor Sigismund (1410-1437), the Council of Constance (1414-1418) was convoked; it brought the division within the Church to an end by deposing Benedict XIII (1394-1417), the Avignon Pope, and John XXIII (1410-1415), the Pisan Pope, and by accepting the voluntary resignation of Gregory XII (1406-1415), the Roman Pope. In their place, Odo Colonna was elected as Pope Martin V (1417-1431). However, the newly restored unity appeared to be short-termed. The Council of Basel, gathered in 1431 in order to continue the reforms of the Council of Constance, entered into a conflict with Pope Eugene IV (1431-1447) who, subsequently, dissolved it and convoked his own Council of Ferrara-Florence. The Council of Basel refused to disband, declared Eugene IV deposed and elected an anti-Pope Felix (1439-49). However, deprived of the secular support, Felix was forced to resign ten years later, and the Council of Basel dissolved itself after having officially recognized the pontificate of Nicholas V (1447-1455), Eugene IV's successor (Wallace: 48-49).

During the Renaissance Papacy of the fifteenth century, the spiritual and moral depravity of the Apostolic See reached its height. Instead of providing for the spiritual welfare of Christendom, the Papacy became infamous for its secularization, political intrigues, military involvements, bad morals and lust for power. The Renaissance Popes scrupulously continued the policy of nepotism, initiated by their Avignon predecessors, by creating the system of cardinal-nephews.⁶ Dominated by the Italian majority, the conclaves turned into the battleground between the most prominent Italian dynasties: the della Roveres, the Medicis and the Borgias, for whom the election of the Pope was entirely subordinated to the family interests and political motives. Bribery and plotting were frequently resorted to as a means of achieving the required two-third majority during the conclave.⁷ Apart from the traditional forms of taxation, the Papacy drew its revenues from the fees extracted for the passage of bulls, from loans from banking houses and from the increase in the number and price of dispensations which were granted, for instance, for the legitimization of children born out of wedlock and for the trade with the infidels. However, one of the most efficient means of compensating for the losses in the papal treasury was the extension of the practice of selling Church offices. Even the highest ecclesiastical positions were for sale. In consequence of the unrestricted simony, the number of Church offices rapidly multiplied, and a large class of Church officials emerged at the papal court. One of the new offices created at that time was the datary. Its

⁶ Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) was particularly generous for his relatives: he promoted six of his nephews to the cardinalate and provided them with benefices whose value equaled the income of princes (see Duffy: 191).

⁷ For example, Pope Alexander VI (1492-1503), the most corrupt Pope of the Renaissance, openly distributed dozens of benefices and other offerings among the cardinals in order to secure their support for his candidacy (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 6).

responsibilities involved the passage of supplications for graces and the collection of fees obtained from dispensations (Thompson 1980: 86-87).

The Popes also derived enormous profit from the sale of indulgences which was taken to extremes during the Renaissance. In 1476, Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484), in his bull "Salvator Noster," extended the efficacy of indulgences to the souls in Purgatory, which led to the distribution of pardons on an unprecedented scale. The bull read:

if any parents, friends or other Christians are moved by obligations of piety towards these very souls who are exposed to the fire of purgatory for the expiation of punishments which by divine justice are their due: let them during the stated period of ten years give a fixed amount or value of money, as laid down by its dean and chapter or by our own collector, for the repair of the church of saints, paying either in person at the Church or by duly accredited messengers: it is then our will that plenary remission should avail by intercession for the said souls in purgatory, to win them relief from their punishments (In: Janz, ed.: 52-53).

The increase in the demand for indulgences led to countless abuses on the part of the professional pardoners whose teaching on their effectiveness went far beyond the Catholic dogma. False documents that granted forgiveness for all sort of sins were distributed among the faithful; many of them even specified the number of years by which the torments of the souls in Purgatory would be shortened. Pardons were granted not only for the sins committed in the past but also for those that would be committed in the future. The greatest scandal associated with indulgences occurred under the pontificate of Leo X (1513-1521). In 1517, he offered the remission of sins to anyone who would contribute to the reconstruction of St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. The Dominican monks, to whom the distribution of indulgences was commissioned, were reported to sell them in the streets, markets and taverns like ordinary commodities (Seebohm 1938: 263).

Another manifestation of the secularization of the Renaissance Papacy was the increase of its preoccupation with politics. During the Renaissance, the Popes became the most important secular rulers of Italy; they waged wars, signed treaties, formed coalitions and arbitrated disputes between the colonial powers. The Popes' subordination of the spiritual to the political aims was also visible in the abandonment of the crusading ideal in favor of the alliance with the Sultan.⁸ Since a vast majority of the papal income depended on the taxes and feudal dues derived from the Papal States, the determination of the Roman curia to maintain and enlarge them was enormous. It was particularly visible in the Popes' active involvement in the French-Spanish struggle for hegemony in the south of the Italian peninsula and in Sicily as well as in their personal participation in warfare, as in the case of Pope Julius II. Known as the 'Warrior Pope,' Julius II successfully realized the chief goal of his pontificate, that is the restoration of the papal territories, reduced under his predecessors. In 1508, military troops headed by him subjugated Perugia and Bologna. Four years later, aided by Spain, Switzerland, Venice and Naples, they drove the French out of northern Italy, and conquered Parma and Piacenza. If not through the bloodshed, the Popes' political ambitions were fulfilled by resorting to opportunism and double dealing in diplomatic relations, in which Julius II's successor,

⁸ Popes Innocent VIII (1484-1492) and Alexander VI (1492-1503) were paid enormous sums by the Sultan Bayezit in return for keeping his rival brother, Cem, in custody (see Duffy: 196).

Leo X was a master. He pursued the policy of duplicity with regard to both allies and enemies, and was always prepared to declare himself on the winning side.⁹

Like their Avignon predecessors, the Renaissance Popes were infamous for their extravagant lifestyle, idleness and ostentation to which they were accustomed because of their aristocratic background. The Vatican, once the heart of piety, became the most opulent court in Europe, filled with countless servants and expensive furnishings. Enormous sums were also spent by the Papacy on the pursuit of entertainment in which Pope Leo X particularly excelled. Poets, musicians, actors and buffoons, employed at the papal court, were always at his disposal, and chase and gaming belonged to his favorite pastimes. Another feature of the Renaissance Papacy was its declining morality. Innocent VIII (1484-1492) openly admitted having an illegitimate family,¹⁰ Alexander VI (1492-1503) unscrupulously maintained mistresses in the Vatican,¹¹ Julius II had fathered three daughters before his election. The Popes' offspring were provided for at the expense of the Church and the highest European houses were sought for them in marriage. Obscene comedies performed in the Vatican chambers, nuptial celebrations and banquets to which women of ill-repute were invited, struck a final blow at the spiritual prestige that the Apostolic See had once enjoyed. The moral depravity of the men who were supposed to represent Christ on earth could not go any further.

The Late Middle Ages and the Renaissance witnessed a gradual but consistent process of moral and spiritual degeneration of the Papacy as an institution. The main cause of the collapse of the papal authority was its secularization which sprang from the Popes' aspirations to exercise limitless control over both religious and lay spheres and which, subsequently, led to their loss of interest in the matters of Christendom. As might be expected, the corruption of the Apostolic See was followed by the lower ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, which exerted a devastating impact on lay religiosity. Deprived of its spiritual leader, the 16th-century Church was in a desperate need of reform.

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⁹ For example, Leo X officially recognized the claims of Louis XII of France to northern Italy but secretly attempted to prevent him from the occupation of Venice and Milan. He also allied with Ferdinand II of Aragon but, at the same time, he carried out the negotiations with France to drive the Spanish out of Italy (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 6).

¹⁰ Innocent VIII was believed to have 16 children, all of them by married women (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 6).

¹¹ One of Alexander VI's concubines was Julia Farnese, famous for her beauty, whose legal husband was placated by the gift of castles. Alexander VI's children, the best known of whom were Caesar and Lucretia Borgia, were notorious for their impiety, insolence and crimes. Caesar was promoted to the cardinalate at the age of 18 but resigned from that position to become Duke of Valentinois in 1498. Lucretia Borgia's marital vicissitudes were part of Alexander VI's political machinations (see Schaff: vol. 6, chap. 6).

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STRESZCZENIE

Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie stopniowego procesu degeneracji instytucji papieżstwa, które następowało od końca XIII w. do Reformacji w XVI w. Pierwsze istotne oznaki tej degeneracji pojawiły się podczas pontyfikatu Bonifacego VIII (1294-1303), którego teoria absolutyzmu papieskiego, sformułowana w bulli „Unam Sanctam,” doprowadziła do konfliktu z władzą świecką. Szczegółowej analizie poddany został okres niewoli awiniońskiej papieża, zakończony w 1378 r. tzw. Schizmą Zachodnią, a także omówiona została era papieża renesansu, podczas której kryzys kościoła katolickiego osiągnął apogeum. Artykuł przedstawia krytykę politycznego i militarnego zaangażowania papieża, korupcję, sprzedaż odpustów oraz zamilowanie tych „książąt kościoła” do przepychu i komfortu.