

# Papalism Ancient and Modern (II)

by Eric John

I should like now to turn to a particular example and a particular pontificate, that of Gregory VIII. Gregory is, of course, the triumphalist's hero: what history text-book is there that hasn't its section on the Gregorian reforms? It seems to be scarcely noticed that these 'reforms'—the division of the Church into two castes, a clerical caste with a duty to rule the laity, whose function it was to fight in causes the clergy considered worthy—are very largely what has come under attack at Vatican II and since. Nothing is more striking, I think, than the present Pope's repudiation of one of the more notorious of Gregory's friends, Cardinal Humbert, and his Constantinople ex-communications in 1054. Now the fact that certain policies could be reforms in the late eleventh century, yet be abuses nine hundred years later, is not in itself surprising. But in the case of Gregory there are important lessons to be learnt and important questions to be asked.

But there is the question of means too, and there is a limit to the degree to which valuable consequences can excuse bad thinking and evil actions. Gregory, it seems to me, was guilty of both. The sickening frequency with which in his correspondence the quotation 'cursed be the hand that abstains from blood' is found cannot be excused with a reference to troubled times. Plenty of men of goodwill were just as shocked at the time. Again Gregory's attempts to make the Sardinians and Corsicans acknowledge that they belonged to the patrimony of Peter and must pay the pope a tax are not in themselves very important. But the letters the Pope sent them in the course of his case can only be called disgraceful. Gregory resorted to blackmail. He threatened them not only with spiritual penalties but also with a kind of crusade of soldiers eager to take over their lands and hold them in proper subjection to the Roman Church. On another occasion he had occasion to remark to a pagan African ruler that he is startled to find that his country is part of the *mundus* and has no bishops. There is a certain element of 'get them or else' about the letter, but not, unfortunately, the slightest sign that the Pope thought of sending missionaries. There was, too, a good deal of Roman (in the municipal sense) pride about this pope. He boasted to the king of Denmark that the *imperium* of Christ exceeded that of Augustus, pardonably enough except that one wouldn't expect the king of *Denmark* to be very much moved. When he died, his famous last words, 'I have loved righteousness and hated iniquity and there-

fore I die in exile', are very revealing. Christians we are told have no abiding city but Gregory had, Rome, and death away from it was exile. Did he think that St Peter, when he died there, thought he was dying at home? It is possible, of course, that these, like other famous last words, are not authentic. But even so they were thought by his admirers to be characteristic and they chime in with the sentiments he expressed frequently enough in his lifetime.

I must repeat there is an important side to Gregory, much more admirable than the one I have touched on here, but this is beside the point. What matters is the kind of mistake he made and the consequences for the triumphalist papalism he did much to create. What I mean by this is succinctly contained in two of Gregory's famous *Dictatus Papae*, now generally agreed to be a set of chapter-headings for a collection of canons relating to those aspects of papal authority that seemed most worth stressing to him. DP 22 says that the Roman Church has never erred nor can it ever err and DP 23 adds that the Roman *pontifex*, if canonically elected, is *indubitanter sanctus*. What did Gregory mean?

The point he was getting at is made clear by considering DP 23 first. Most scholars, though not all, have taken Gregory to mean that a properly elected pope is *ex officio* a saint. This must be correct. This is what the word commonly meant in his day and what contemporaries took him to mean. So even if the Pope didn't mean to be taken this way, this is what he said. There is, however, little doubt that this is just what he did mean. In a letter dated 15.3.1081, Gregory wrote that scarcely seven secular rulers had any reputation for sanctity but amongst the bishops of Rome almost one hundred were counted amongst the saints. Counting up cults we cannot get more than 54 popes reckoned as saints out of the first 77. Gregory must be applying DP 23 here, and elsewhere he shows he reckons his immediate predecessors, Nicholas II and Alexander II, as saints and confessors although there is no evidence of any cult, either then or now. What Gregory means is that all his predecessors are saints excepting those of the generations preceding the synod Sutri who were not canonically elected because they were simoniacs. Thus Gregory is saying that the Roman Church (again in the municipal sense) and its bishops are inerrant morally—because *sanctus*—as well as intellectually.

The reasons why Gregory took this line are easy to see and important to understand. Gregory was heir to a great campaign against simony. When he was a boy in Rome almost every benefice in the Church from the papacy downwards was in the gift of some lay patron. This patronage was largely exercised in the interests of the family, or for cash, and not for the welfare of the Church. Ever since the foundation of Cluny in the early tenth century, a monk-based party had agitated against this and sought, with some success, to make monasteries genuinely communal and subject to an

authoritarian abbot chosen by merit from amongst the community. In turn these monasteries had produced men ready and able to become bishops where princes could be persuaded to appoint them and run their diocese free of any taint of simony or family influence. After 1046 these monks, or men like Leo IX very much influenced by them, took over the papacy and set about extirpating the old order by as much force as was necessary. Before 1046 reform-minded men had largely had to face the fact that reform had triumphed in the monasteries but that a monk, however good, is helpless faced with a bishop however bad. They had reacted understandably. First they took up the old opinion that simony was a heresy, then by the time they seized the papacy they had largely persuaded themselves that heretical orders were invalid. The exponent of this proto-Lutheran doctrine in Rome was Cardinal Humbert who did his best, with more success than ought to have been possible, to persuade a line of popes to commit the Church to this hopelessly un-Catholic doctrine. Only Leo IX, so far as we know, actually re-ordained a simoniac but Gregory VII went so far as to order laymen to use force to prevent married or simoniac priests and bishops from saying Mass.

We are now in a position to understand why Gregory took the step of canonizing himself and making himself immune from qualms of conscience. He thought nothing of the generality of the bishops and priests whom he ruled over. He proposed to purge them and his early synods record the deposition of bishops by the dozen. I am speaking quite literally. At the Lenten synod of 1076, for example, all the Lombard bishops were deposed. Gregory doesn't even bother to name them. Five more bishops are likewise dismissed, as well as an abbot, some counts and the Emperor-designate. The consequence of this was that since Gregory couldn't find the Church in her hierarchy, the one point he had left on which authority could rest was the succession of Peter. So, on the one hand, he despised excessively the permanence and sacredness of episcopal office, whilst on the other he compensated by appealing to a conception of papacy above moral or intellectual error.

The results of this are instructive. Because of DP 22 and 23 Gregory could accept no criticism and therefore had no advisers but yes-men. He felt obliged to make prophecies. Two witnesses, one very pro-Gregorian, one very hostile, say that when the Pope ex-communicated Henry IV for the second time in 1080, he prophesied that if Henry did not repent he would be dead or deposed within the year or Gregory was no true pope. It is not possible to evade this testimony, especially as Gregory said something very similar in the official protocol of Henry's ex-communication. It is clear then how very personal, how little Churchlike, Gregory's notion of papal infallibility was, how very different from that of Vatican I. Not surprisingly in the later Middle Ages canonists and papal flatterers build on this foundation the notion that a pope is not only *sanctus* but

*deus*. They play with the idea that a pope can bind God. They are at loss to find things a pope can't do, and come up with the limitation that he can't make black white. They are ingenious about what he can do, such as commit fornication as a man and forgive himself as pope. In a word, Gregory completed the edifice of triumphalist papalism, leaving only the more absurd consequences to be worked out by his successors.

What is wrong with this is basically its arrogant pretentiousness. To use the word *sanctus* in such a way that the criteria for deciding its appropriateness lies in a man's credentials as an office-holder is to devalue language. To call a man a *deus* when he has no visible power denied to any other man is silly, and in this case worse, it is blasphemous. Nor can an appeal to the pope's invisible power help. What greater supernatural power can a man have than that exercised by any priest when he says Mass? What greater power than the ordinary laymen when he receives communion? If the pope is God, we are all Gods. It seems to me that medieval papalism from Gregory VII onwards is really a *reductio ad absurdum* of a certain view of papal authority: but a view which still affects our ideas of authority in the Church and the place of Rome. Where, then, did Gregory and his followers go wrong?

The answer seems to me because they saw the papacy as apart from and above the apostolic structure of the Church. By apostolic structure I mean that the Church is articulated over both time and space in a network of sees and parishes so that we have a visible pattern of human relationships transcending the barriers between human groups and the generations. Now this is obvious enough, but is it perhaps one of those important things so commonplace we just forget what they look like? I say this because when one reads learned theologians discussing what distinguishes the Christian religion from any other 'great' religion (by 'great' I mean a religion which extends over more than one social class or status group), the answers are usually in terms of doctrine. But one point worth making is that what certainly distinguishes Christianity is its very peculiar social structure, what I have called above the apostolic structure.

The importance of this is shown by the controversy amongst social anthropologists as to whether a knowledge of Hindu scripture and traditions is relevant to the study of modern Hindu society. Professor Evans-Pritchard thinks such a study is relevant. I think he is right, but it is interesting that his reasons are in fact an appeal to the scholarly values. It is not easy to convince a social anthropologist who doesn't admire what Mr Evans-Pritchard calls scholarly values that it is anything but a waste of time expecting Sanskrit studies to throw light on problems of modern caste-behaviour and so on. How different when we turn back to the structure of the Christian Church.

All we need to do is to study the graffiti in any Belfast public convenience. The elaborately obscene but quite theological dis-

cussions that cover the walls show well enough that whatever one thinks of Christian doctrines, their nature and disputes about their interpretation cannot be ignored by any student of the behaviour of Christian groups, however humble. Disputes like the ones about Hinduism could not arise over the social study of these groups. The reason is plainly the apostolic structure of the Christian Church. This provides an imperfect, sometimes inefficient, but very real means of communication between the people who think and teach Christian ideology and the ordinary Christian, who like the adherents of every other religion, participates mainly at the level of basic ritual. Nothing is more striking than the apparently common-place fact that the Church can vary its basic rituals, but no-one who has read any anthropological literature can fail to be astonished at the ease and comparative frequency with which this is done. In most men's experience outside the Church, basic ritual is changed only by social catastrophes: in many societies such change is unimaginable. This remarkable power—and when we find social anthropologists brought up in non-Christian and non-European communities getting to work I think they will have a great deal more to say about this astonishing social structure—is entirely due to the Church's basic structure.

If we look at this structure not only synchronically as sociologists do (I mean by this as a structure extended in space but not in time) but diachronically (extended in time), we shall see something further about the crucial role of the bishop in this structure. Because the Church's doctrines are based on certain things said and demonstrated by a particular individual, claiming a particular authority but located at a given time and place, then this doctrine must take the form of personal teaching communicated person to person, face to face, over the generations. This communication must be in living language, partly expressed in propositions, partly in meaningful ritual behaviour. This means that the criteria for detecting decay or perversion of the matter communicated are absolutely basic to the maintenance of the whole elaborate pattern of relationships. How else could this be done but by a fraternity, limited in number because they must be capable of getting together in council from time to time and representing the whole Church at a given time and place, all with the duty to check each other if anything goes wrong, and supremely with the task of preparing the next generation to take up the system and hand it on? This requires that, although their number must be manageable—to fit into a council—they must also be numerous enough to be able to discharge an essentially personal, face-to-face, job of communicating.

The point of this rather odd way of talking about the Church, as though it were a political party or a tribal group, is to make us see some of these obvious things with fresh eyes. Look again at Gregory VII's triumphalism. It has been pointed out recently that Gregory

found the need for a concept of Christendom to supplement that of the Church. It has been suggested that for him—I am sure this is right—Christendom was a great parish with the pope as parish priest. The lay princes were like the leaders of Catholic Action in a modern parish or churchwardens in the Anglican communion. Now apart from the fact that a doctrine of society which cannot see any more to the role of secular authority than this is not likely to get far, it betrays a corruption of the basic structure of the Church. One man, *sanctus, deus*, or whatever, cannot discharge such a task. A parish and a diocese have certain limits, no doubt variable ones, but limits just the same, in size. They cannot be made indefinitely smaller or larger without changing their character. I am here applying the notion of social space to the Church, but commonplace as it may seem it does mean that the very nature of human groups precludes a conception of either Christendom or papalism at all like Gregory VII's.

The tragedy of the Gregorian reform was that it pushed the pope outside and above this structure. Because the structure itself was not working as it should one man gathered to himself the direct rule of the whole Church without realizing that this would impair her basic shape in the long run. But the Church, in its basic structure, was reformed by quite different means from those employed by Gregory VII. In fact Gregory had little if any direct success in his aims. He spent half his pontificate trying to make Henry IV submit his political policies to papal scrutiny by promoting rebellion and making alliances, and reform seems to have slipped back in Germany. Where it made progress, as in England, it owed nothing to Gregory personally.

This leads us to another feature of the Church's apostolic structure Gregory's kind of papalism was mistaken about. This is quite simply that pope's have almost never taken initiatives towards the reform and extension of the Church. No pope created the episcopate of the priesthood—not even St Peter. The canon of the Bible was never determined by any pope. The canon of the mass owed almost nothing to any pope either. The great creeds owe a little but not very much to the popes of their day. Even the codification of canon-law was largely done by private enterprise: popes had to be shown just how effectively the judicial authority they claimed could be deployed in practice. Some things, like the addition of *filioque* to the Nicene Creed, were done in the teeth of papal opposition. Missions, the development of theological studies, the creation of religious orders, everywhere we turn we see private initiative, a scattering of the gifts of the Holy Spirit random enough to satisfy the most extreme Pentecostal sect. In the so-called Gregorian reform it was devoted monks, men of great family and consequent expectations, who turned their backs on their families and their expectation often at the expense of physical manhandling or martyrdom, and created a conscience against the abuses of the family benefice. A conscience

that formed the capital Gregory inherited when he became pope and which he neither understood nor encouraged but rather divided and weakened. The structure of the Church is such that alterations can only be made by consent. I do not mean in the legal sense, nor am I appealing to a kind of religious social contract. I speak in terms of power. Unless individuals at key points in the structure—and I do not mean necessarily in positions of authority—are persuaded, unless their consciences are pricked, no one can change things. Look at Adrian VI who was prepared to put all the plenitude of papal power behind reasonable reforms in the granting of indulgences and in taking greater care in the use of dispensations. Those with a conscience in these matters largely preferred Luther. The cardinals and bishops for the most part greeted the papal commands with respectful contempt. Nothing at all was done.

One of the most evil consequences of triumphalism is the atmosphere it creates in which Catholics expect the pope to take all the initiatives. But the structure of the Church requires the greater part of the initiatives to come from below, above, anywhere but in Rome. In the end, too, triumphalism exalts the pope's authority at the expense of his power. It inhibits the growth of the Church by first discouraging all except papal initiatives and then by encouraging the pope to make the running. But in case after case all that happens is that the pope speaks and that is that. Take a modern example, the controversy about what Pius XII should or should have not done about the persecution of the Jews. On the propriety or otherwise of the Pope's actions I know too little to comment, but what seems to me to matter is that reproof is scarcely warranted because it is directed to the wrong quarter. The persecution of the Jews was not something that could have been coped with by any papal pronouncement in the way sometimes assumed. It was the duty and the failure of the ordinary Catholic at the level of parish and diocese, that we ought to look to. If the Pope could have stood at the head of the Church of his day and spoken out of a context of intense apostolic action at the level the persecutions were taking place in the parish, the diocese; then we should have seen what papal authority can mean. He had no such backing, and nothing could be, as nothing was, achieved, except by individuals.

The pope is then not there to initiate anything. This is the part of private enterprise prompted by the Holy Spirit. A young smartie like Augustine, a layabout like Francis, a barmy peasant like Joan of Arc, an ambitious lawyer like Thomas More, a neurotic nun like Thérèse of Lisieux: these are the people the Spirit chooses, whose initial apparent dottiness gets covered over with the aura of sanctity; the generations who never knew them in the flesh try to smother their charisma. When men and women like these take initiatives they tread on corns, and being enthusiastic they sometimes go too far. This is where papal authority is absolutely necessary. Let me be

clear. I am not saying that a papal authority attested by Scripture and tradition can be made useful here. I am saying something far more radical. If we look at the basic structure of the Church, whatever Scripture and Tradition say or do not say, it won't work without a pope. Precisely because there must be scope for new initiatives, there must be a source of legitimation. Somebody must have the power to authorize or condemn, and that somebody must be a single man if the structure is to remain intact. But by the same necessity, this single power—I say power and not authority advisedly—must not itself as a rule take the initiatives in the same way that referees do not take part in the game.

Now the really important limitations on papal power (again I mean power and not authority) can be pointed out. The pope has power where his legitimating authority is recognized. If he acts in such way as to weaken the credibility of his power of legitimation then he will *ipso facto* move men away from the Church. I suppose something like this is meant by those famous appeals to the fear of scandalizing the 'ordinary Catholic'. They never seem to be directed where they are really relevant. The trouble is that the man who really has the power to create a corrosive scandal of this kind is the pope alone. The odd individual can always be dealt with, the pope cannot. Sometimes the pope must give scandal. He must act when legitimation needs to be given or denied. Sometimes some men will be lost whatever he decides. If he does it right, this doesn't matter except to the lost. Decide he must, but how? The content of the decision is not what I am concerned with here. If it is a matter of doctrine, requiring definition etc., the form will be decided on from Scripture and Tradition. What is involved in this has been amply debated elsewhere and is quite beyond my competence.

What I want to draw attention to is different kinds of criteria, namely when to speak, when to yield, to compromise or when to say Here we stand and that is that. Surely the answer is decided by looking at the very structure of the Church and what is happening to it at that moment. In nearly every case, as the social anthropologists have taught us, religious beliefs have the most intimate connexion with status and class. If the structure of the Church has an obvious feature it is that it demands an allegiance beyond that of family, class, or status, can never therefore be identified with these. When questions of legitimation arise, then, should we not look to the context? What were the friars fussing about? They wanted the Church structure adapted to the needs of the increasing number of people whose social experience was urban, not rural. Clearly this is a genuine case of extension of the Church, and then comes the pope's part, the right way to legitimate it. If we remember Innocent III's part in this, how he took the line that these mad zealots who went round castigating the hierarchy for living as a special, high status group within the top land-owning class were alright—this is

not what they said but I think it is a fair interpretation of what they meant—we shall see papal authority working as it should. When a high prelate wrote an indignant letter to the Pope complaining that some odd lot he had legitimated were preaching nasty things about the prelates' expensive style of life in his own diocese, the Pope replied: 'So long as they don't preach heresy it doesn't matter'.

It is easy enough to appreciate the life and work of a great saint who founded a great Order with the insight of hindsight: but what must the traditionalists have thought of a man who thought he could persuade these obstinate urban heretics where the children of the Great Bernard had ignominiously failed? Much the same I suppose as the 'traditionalists' of our own day thought of the attempt to extend the Church's structure to the working class. What I am saying may be put another way. Innocent III is the true great pope in action here, not when initiating Crusades under the mistaken idea he could control what he had started. He made the mistakes but the inhabitants of Constantinople and Albi suffered the consequences.

I should like to labour a little more this point about the importance of considering social structure. Whatever may be the case today, and so far we have done little better than our separated brethren in extending the Church to the industrial worker, it is relevant to look at the social results of schism since the Reformation. The result of that schism was everywhere to identify the separated groups more closely with particular status-groups than the Church had ever been before. Those groups who rejected episcopacy altogether tied themselves the most closely to the status-group who formed them in the first place. It is not without point that whatever may be said about the post-Tridentine Church in terms of the social groups it included within the apostolic structure, whether grouped by source of income, social standing, or even colour, it was much the most comprehensive. This seems to me a reasonable addition to Newman's notes of the Church, and one which needs some consideration in oecumenical discussions if the communion of saints is not to be confused with a holy sherry party.

Let me now try to locate more precisely the place of papal power within the Church's structure. The pope does not initiate because he has only authority; whereas he has only seldom, and never *ex officio*, charisma. What the pope does is come in to secure the routinization of what the charismatic initiative started off. To use Max Weber's more graphic term the pope is the man who presides over the *Veralltäglichung* of what charisma creates. The debt I owe to Max Weber's truly great discussion of the sociology of religion will be obvious throughout this paper, down to the jargon and ham-handed style necessary when one is trying to do a clumsy analysis of what is very delicate. In spite of this, let me point out in the light of this jargon another startling feature of the nature of the Church the triumphalist obscures.

Max Weber, it is well known, first noticed a pattern in the history of religions that he thought, with considerable justification, was a true regularity of social life. First comes the *charisma*, in the shape of an inspired leader of some kind, then the *Veralltäglicung*, the routinization of the new thing. In personal terms first come 'the titans of the holy curse' then the tidy-minded bureaucrats. This pattern is remarkably wide-spread, but there is a very important exception, the Church. Although there are times when it degenerates into something like this pattern—the Gregorian reform is an obvious example—no one can look at the Church diachronically without seeing that this is where the papacy makes a difference. Charisma is a perpetually occurring thing in the Church to be routinized *ambulando*. This is the way the apostolic structure of the Church at once reaches back to the Apostles and forward to every succeeding generation.

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