

CHAPTER 10 : THE FRANKISH KINGDOM AND THE PAPACY

The first of the Gothic princes to enter the Roman communion was Clovis, King of the Franks. In fulfillment of a vow which he had made on the field of Tolbiac, where he vanquished the Allemanni, Clovis was baptized in the Cathedral of Rheims (496), with every circumstance of solemnity which could impress a sense of the awfulness of the rite on the minds of its rude proselytes. Three thousand of his warlike subjects were baptized along with him. The Pope styled him "the eldest son of the Church," a title which was regularly adopted by all the subsequent Kings of France. When Clovis ascended from the baptismal font he was the only as well as the eldest son of the Church, for he alone, of all the new chiefs that now governed the West, had as yet submitted to the baptismal rite.

The threshold once crossed, others were not slow to follow. In the next century, the sixth, the Burgundians of Southern Gaul, the Visigoths of Spain, the Suevi of Portugal, and the Anglo-Saxons of Britain entered the pale of Rome. In the seventh century the disposition was still growing among the princes of Western Europe to submit themselves and refer their disputes to the Pontiff as their spiritual father. National assemblies were held twice a year, under the sanction of the bishops. The prelates made use of these gatherings to procure enactments favorable to the propagation of the faith as held by Rome. These assemblies were first encouraged, then enjoined by the Pope, who came in this way to be regarded as a sort of Father or protector of the states of the West. Accordingly we find Sigismund, King of Burgundy, ordering (554) that all assemblies should be held for the future on the 6th of September every year, "at which time the ecclesiastics are not so much engrossed with the worldly cares of husbandry." The ecclesiastical conquest of Germany was in this century completed, and thus the spiritual dominions of the Pope were still farther extended.

In the eighth century there came a moment of supreme peril to Rome. At almost one and the same time she was menaced by two dangers, which threatened to sweep her out of existence, but which, in their issue, contributed to strengthen her dominion. On the west the victorious Saracens (or Muslims), having crossed the Pyrenees and overrun the south of France, were watering their steeds at the Loire, and threatening to descend upon Italy and plant the Crescent in the room of the Cross. On the north, the Lombards – who, under Alboin, had established themselves in Central Italy two centuries before – had burst the barrier of the Apennines, and were brandishing their swords at the gates of Rome. They were on the point of replacing Catholic orthodoxy with the creed of Arianism. Having taken advantage of the iconoclast disputes to throw off the imperial yoke, the Pope could expect no aid from the Emperor of Constantinople. He turned his eyes to France. The prompt and powerful interposition of the Frankish arms saved the Papal chair, now in extreme jeopardy. The intrepid Charles Martel drove back the Saracens (732), and Pepin, the Mayor of the palace, son of Charles Martel, who had just seized the throne, and needed the Papal sanction to color his usurpation, with equal promptitude hastened to the Pope's help (Stephen II) against the Lombards (754). Having vanquished them, he placed the keys of their towns upon the altar of St. Peter, and so laid the first foundation of the Pope's temporal sovereignty.

The yet more illustrious son of Pepin, Charlemagne, had to repeat this service in the Pope's behalf. The Lombards becoming again troublesome, Charlemagne- king of the Franks- subdued them a second time. After his campaign he visited Rome (774). The youth of the city, bearing olive and palm branches, met him at the gates, the Pope and the clergy received him in the vestibule of St. Peter's, and entering "into the sepulcher where the bones of the apostles lie," he finally ceded to the pontiff the territories of the conquered tribes. It was in this way that Peter obtained his "patrimony," the Church her dowry, and the Pope his triple crown.

The Pope had now attained two of the three grades of power that constitute his stupendous dignity. He had made himself a bishop of bishops, head of the Church, and he had become a crowned monarch. Did this content him? No! He said, "I will ascend the sides of the mount; I will plant my throne above the stars; I will be as God." Not content with being a bishop of bishops, and so governing the whole spiritual affairs of Christendom, he aimed at becoming a king of kings, and so of governing the whole temporal affairs of the world. He aspired to supremacy, sole, absolute, and unlimited. This alone was wanting to complete that colossal fabric of power, the Popedom, and towards this the pontiff now began to strive.

Some of the arts the Papacy had recourse to in order to grasp the coveted dignity were of an extraordinary kind. An astounding document, purporting to have been written in the fourth century, although unheard of till now, was in the year 776 brought out of the darkness in which it had been so long suffered to remain. It was the "Donation" or Testament of the Emperor Constantine. Constantine, says the legend, found Sylvester in one of the monasteries on Mount Soracte, and having mounted him on a mule, he took hold of his bridle rein, and walking all the way on foot, the emperor conducted Sylvester to Rome, and placed him upon the Papal throne. But this was as nothing compared with the vast and splendid inheritance which Constantine conferred on him, as the following quotation from the deed of gift to which we have referred will show: – "We attribute to the See of Peter all the dignity, all the glory, all the authority of the imperial power. Furthermore, we give to Sylvester and to his successors our palace of the Lateran, which is incontestably the finest palace on the earth; we give him our crown, our miter, our diadem, and all our imperial vestments; we transfer to him the imperial dignity. We bestow on the holy Pontiff in free gift the city of Rome, and all the western cities of Italy. To cede precedence to him, we divest ourselves of our authority over all those provinces, and we withdraw from Rome, transferring the seat of our empire to Byzantium; inasmuch as it is not proper that an earthly emperor should preserve the least authority, where God hath established the head of his religion."

A rare piece of modesty this on the part of the Popes, to keep this invaluable document beside them for 400 years, and never say a word about it; and equally admirable the policy of selecting the darkness of the eighth century as the fittest time for its publication. To quote it is to refute it. It was probably forged a little before A.D. 754. It was composed to repel the Longobards on the one side, and the Greeks on the other, and to influence the mind of Pepin. In it, Constantine is made to speak in the Latin of the eighth century, and to address Bishop Sylvester as Prince of the Apostles, Vicar of Christ, and as

having authority over the four great thrones, not yet set up, of Antioch, Alexandria, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. It was probably written by a priest of the Lateran Church, and it gained its object – that is, it led Pepin to bestow on the Pope the Exarchate of Ravenna, with twenty towns to furnish oil for the lamps in the Roman churches.

During more than 600 years Rome impressively cited this deed of gift, inserted it in her codes, permitted none to question its genuineness, and burned those who refused to believe in it. The first dawn of light in the sixteenth century sufficed to discover the cheat.

In the following century another document of a like extraordinary character was given to the world. We refer to the "Decretals of Isidore." These were concocted about the year 845. They professed to be a collection of the letters, rescripts, and bulls of the early pastors of the Church of Rome – Anacletus, Clement, and others, down to Sylvester – the very men to whom the terms "rescript" and "bull" were unknown. The burden of this compilation was the pontifical supremacy, which it affirmed had existed from the first age. It was the clumsiest, but the most successful, of all the forgeries which have emanated from what the Greeks have reproachfully termed "the native home of inventions and falsifications of documents." The writer, who professed to be living in the first century, painted the Church of Rome in the magnificence which she attained only in the ninth; and made the pastors of the first age speak in the pompous words of the Popes of the Middle Ages. Abounding in absurdities, contradictions, and anachronisms, it affords a measure of the intelligence of the age that accepted it as authentic. It was eagerly laid hold of by Nicholas I to prop up and extend the fabric of his power. His successors made it the arsenal from which they drew their weapons of attack against both bishops and kings. It became the foundation of the canon law, and continues to be so, although there is not now a Popish writer who does not acknowledge it to be a piece of imposture. "Never," says Father de Rignon, "was there seen a forgery so audacious, so extensive, so solemn, so persevering." Yet the discovery of the fraud has not shaken the system. The learned Dupin supposes that these decretals were fabricated by Benedict, a deacon of Mainz, who was the first to publish them, and that, to give them greater currency, he prefixed to them the name of Isidore, a bishop who flourished in Seville in the seventh century. "Without the pseudo-Isidore," says Janus, "there could have been no Gregory VII. The Isidorian forgeries were the broad foundation which the Gregorians built upon."

All the while the Papacy was working on another line for the emancipation of its chief from interference and control, whether on the side of the people or on the side of the kings. In early times the bishops were elected by the clergy, with consent of the people; but gradually the people were excluded from all share in the matter, first in the Eastern Church, and then in the Western, although traces of popular election are found at Milan so late as the eleventh century. The election of the Bishop of Rome in early times was in no way different from that of other bishops. Next, the consent of the emperor came to be necessary. Then, the emperor alone elected the Pope. Next, the cardinals claimed a voice in the matter; they elected and presented the object of their choice to the emperor for confirmation. Last of all, the cardinals took the business entirely into their own hands.

Thus gradually was the way paved for the full emancipation and absolute supremacy of the Popedom.

So, though it would have seemed that the great rush of heathen savages must have stifled the Christian faith, it came working up through them, until at last it moulded their whole state and guided their laws; but this was long in coming to pass, and for many centuries they were very savage and fierce. Gregory the Great was one of the very best of the Popes, very self-denying, and earnestly pious, and doing his utmost to train the Romans in self-discipline, and to soften the Teutons. He put together a book of seven services, to be used by devout people in the course of each day; and he arranged the chants which are still called by his name, though both they and the services are much older. A little before his time, Benedict had made rules for the persons who wished to serve God, and to live apart from the world. They lived in buildings named monasteries, or convents; the men, who were called monks, under the rule of an abbot, the women, nuns, under an abbess. They took a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience; lived and worked as hard as possible, and spent much time in prayer and doing good, teaching the young, giving medicine to the sick, and feeding the poor. They would fix their home in a waste land, and bring it into good order, and they went out preaching and converting the heathen nearby; and in the worst times, they were left unhurt; their lands were not robbed, and in those savage days, little that was gentle or good would have been safe but for the honor paid to the Church.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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This second volume in a two-part series on church history is primarily an edited version of the following works on church history and Biblical interpretation:

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Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church* (Logos Research Systems, Inc.: Oak Harbor, WA, 1997). (see electronic version at <http://www.ccel.org/s/schaff/history/About.htm>)

J. Parnell McCarter, *Sabbath Bible Survey Tests and Assignments* (PHSC: Grand Rapids, MI, 2003). (see electronic version at <http://www.puritans.net/curriculum/>)

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The on-line resources of Historicism Research Foundation at <http://www.historicism.net/> also proved invaluable for my understanding of Biblical prophecy. Biblical prophecy concerning Christian church history, especially as revealed in the book of Revelation, serves as the foundation upon which all church histories should be based.