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1

THE LATE MEDIEVAL CRISIS, 1348–1517

During the four centuries covered in this study, Europeans lived under the murderous shadow of the plague. Between 1347 and 1350, an epidemic, later known as the Black Death, swept through Europe and killed perhaps one-third of its population. Imagine the effects of the frightening and unexplainable deaths of nearly two billion people in the course of two summers. The pervasiveness and scope of misery left the fourteenth-century chroniclers seeking moral explanations in human sinfulness and divine retribution. Long processions of penitent flagellants passed from community to community whipping themselves in hope of appeasing God's wrath and warding off plague through their expiation. Townsfolk blamed resident Jews for poisoning wells, even though they too were dying. Christian mobs murdered entire Jewish communities and burned their homes, yet the plague continued to rage. One could imagine, along with John of Winterthur, a Swiss Franciscan, that the Apocalypse promised in the Bible had begun.¹

The European world didn't end in 1350, but it changed dramatically. Plague is a complex disease whose dissemination requires the presence of bacteria, fleas, and rodents. Endemic forms of plague exist in reservoirs among rodent populations throughout the world. Occasionally an epizootic disease among the rodents forces the plague-carrying fleas to find other hosts, including humans. Once plague has entered the human population, it spreads inexorably in great pandemics, series of cyclical epidemics covering vast areas, that can last several centuries.² In Christendom the Black Death began in the ports of southern Italy and spread like a slow but relentless brush fire across Europe. News of the calamity preceded the outbreak of the illness itself, and religious officials called for special services to ward off the catastrophe. Yet inevitably the disease

came, for as the Florentine humanist Boccaccio noted, “all the wisdom and ingenuity of man were unavailing” to prevent it.³ The initial outbreak struck rich and poor, clergy and laity, townsfolk and peasants. The epidemic’s pathology left the survivors in shock yet relieved that God had relented in his punishment; but the disease, which was now endemic among the rat and flea populations in Europe, reappeared in the early 1360s. This second deadly assault of plague had a profound psychological and cultural impact whose effects were as devastating as the Black Death.⁴ With the plague as a recurrent nightmare that would haunt Europe until 1721, late fourteenth-century Christendom faced a crisis marked by demographic stagnation, economic depression, endemic warfare, and schism within the Catholic Church itself.

The Late Medieval Crisis

Scholars have traced the roots of the late medieval crisis to conditions prior to the plague, when Europe was overpopulated, malnourished, and under-employed. Between 1000 and 1300 CE, the population had grown rapidly, and by the fourteenth century, perhaps 75 to 80 million people inhabited the continent. Given available agricultural technologies, Europe was “full”, and many regions sheltered more inhabitants than they would at any time prior to the nineteenth century.⁵ In the early Middle Ages, Europeans had lived in isolated settlements surrounded by dense and often intractable forests. Beginning in the eleventh century, the growing population cleared forests and drained marshlands, bringing new land under cultivation. By 1300, from nearly any steeple top in Western Europe, an observer could see church towers in all directions, each marking a settlement. The forests remained, but as grazing lands for domesticated pigs and as sources of lumber and firewood.

Most Europeans lived in villages and worked the land. As we have seen, when the Carolingian Empire disintegrated, the elites, both those who prayed and those who fought, asserted rights over the land, which they divided into manors.⁶ Under the manorial system, the peasants (serfs) owed labour obligations on the lord’s demesne in return for the physical and spiritual protection which the warriors and monks provided. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries many lay and ecclesiastical lords moved away from direct management of their estates and leased out farms to peasant tenants. The former serfs commuted their labour duties to fixed payments in coin or kind and so gained some autonomy;

however, the emerging system of codified laws reinforced seignorial legal rights over the supposedly “free” peasants. Lords now collected fees for the use of manorial mills and ovens, for authorizing marriages, or for permitting a son to inherit a tenancy from his father. This new, more flexible form of feudal lordship allowed lords to ratchet up demands in response to changing market conditions.

The system was exploitative, but the peasants were not simply hapless and passive victims. They treated the fields they worked as their own land, and the law awarded them some rights as tenants. Possession of a plough and team of oxen or horses elevated wealthier peasant householders to positions as village leaders, and in some villages all principal householders purchased citizenship and exercised communal rights.⁷ Over much of Europe, peasant communes evolved as political agents in local life. Peasants also participated in market activities. As the population grew, grain prices rose, and many tenants benefitted from the increased value of their yields in relation to contractually fixed quit-rent owed on their lands. As a result, peasant communities became increasingly stratified with their own internal social and economic tensions, yet the fundamental social gulf remained the distance between those who worked and those who, under the guise of lordship including ecclesiastical officials, benefitted from the fruits of the working peasantry.⁸

In the wake of increased population and prosperity, some villages and market centres evolved into towns, which received charters and privileges from the king or regional prince. Towns existed everywhere in Europe, but they especially clustered in dense commercial networks in northern Italy and the Low Countries (modern-day Belgium and the Netherlands).⁹ Traditionally scholars have juxtaposed the freer air of medieval towns against the servile rural world that encompassed them. According to this model, the peasants lived out their days constrained by limited technology and clouded by ignorance, while the walls that separated medieval towns from rural backwardness enclosed a free and politically active populace engaged in manufacturing and trade. Recent research, however, has shown that this dichotomy between town and country simply distorts historical conditions. Medieval towns emerged primarily to accumulate and distribute agricultural surpluses. Gradually these “peasant markets” erected walls and became permanent centres of both trade and handicraft production in household workshops. Most central markets exchanged food and manufactures in limited regional networks. Some cities, such as Florence or Augsburg, however, sheltered thousands of workers devoted to cloth production, and a merchant elite with agents

in distant cities and customers who included royalty; yet even these manufacturing centres retained their ties to the regional agricultural economy. Town walls never circumscribed economic zones, for as many as one-fifth of urban residents engaged in part-time agricultural work, while rural craft production probably contributed as much to the volume of manufactured goods as urban workshops.

Towns were in fact embedded in “feudal” society. Urban ecclesiastical institutions, lay elites, and even the civic government itself held rights of lordship over neighbouring villages and peasants. Powerful extended families with ties to the regional nobility and expertise in long-distance commerce formed the urban elite.¹⁰ Beneath them tradesmen and labourers organized themselves into guilds to regulate production, exchange, and wages. This urban middle class divided itself along strata of wealth and professional prestige. By modern standards European towns were small with only Paris sheltering in excess of 100,000 residents. On the whole, perhaps 10 percent of the population lived in towns, yet the concentration of wealth, political power, and education in urban settings gave towns much greater significance than their demographic weight warranted.¹¹

By the end of the thirteenth century, Europe’s growing population had reached a demographic ceiling. Despite improvements in agricultural technologies, in particular the shift from a two- to a three-field system, which increased the percentage of cropland under cultivation, the land could no longer feed everyone. Rural parents found it difficult to provide a livable legacy for their children. Forms of inheritance which favoured one child, such as primogeniture for the eldest son, or ultimogeniture for the youngest, left other siblings with few resources beyond their labour. Divisible inheritance turned livable holdings of fifteen to twenty acres into micro-plots which could not support families. The surplus of labour reduced wages, while grain shortages produced steadily rising prices. As the climate grew cooler and wetter after 1300, frosts and heavy rains triggered famine in much of north-western Europe between 1315 and 1317, which may have carried off 10 to 15 per cent of the population. The ensuing generation filled in the gaps, but dearth and hunger had become the norm for the vast majority of Europeans.¹²

When plague struck in 1348, it reduced the human pressure on resources, but it also strained familial, social, economic, and political relations. Soon institutional structures, inheritance patterns, systems of trade, and even the lord’s ability to control the peasantry, came under stress because, in Western Europe at least, feudal social foundations assumed a large population and limited resources. The initial redistribution

of wealth profited peasants, whose rents for tenancies fell, and skilled artisans, whose wages rose, as the late fourteenth century formed something of a “golden age” for commoners with more disposable income, available land, and political leverage than their ancestors or descendants. The initial social and economic burden of depopulation fell on lay and ecclesiastical lords, who responded by freezing wages at pre-plague levels and preventing tenants from moving to estates with better lease rates for land, but these measures failed.¹³ As time passed, however, conditions for peasants began to deteriorate. Depopulation had altered traditional patterns of demand for market-oriented agriculture. Ironically, a series of good harvests in the last quarter of the fourteenth century triggered a prolonged slump in prices, which temporarily enriched the purchasing power of wage labourers but ruined those drawing income from farming. Peasants abandoned their fields and homes, while marginal soils reverted to pasture and woodland. In the German-speaking lands, perhaps a quarter of all villages ceased to exist.¹⁴ In northern France and other turbulent regions, marauding armies drove the peasants out, but war and plague alone cannot adequately explain these abandonments.¹⁵ Farming had grown unprofitable for many, and people quit to find better work.

The economic strains affected more than the poor alone. Ecclesiastical and lay landlords continued to feel the pinch as rent revenues from their tenancies shrivelled up, for the tenant farmers could not afford the old rates. Historians have argued that this crisis in revenues drove some lords to banditry and helps explain the endemic civil wars in fifteenth-century England, France, and elsewhere. Some impecunious lords mortgaged their holdings and rights, handing them over to civic governments or wealthy individual townsmen. The ploughmen, who had formerly been the social and economic backbone of the peasantry, also fell into debt to urban moneylenders and Jews. Peasants continued to work small to medium-sized plots of land, but the towns assumed increasing control over rural production and peasant labour, which exacerbated town–country antagonisms.¹⁶ None the less, growing urban economic clout did not necessarily spell prosperity for all town dwellers. In many European cities, artisan householders lost their economic cushion and merged into the growing ranks of working poor, while wealthy guildsmen who had profited in the decades of crisis distanced themselves from their poorer neighbours and intermarried with older elite families. Civic governance became the prerogative of a small circle of oligarchs who saw themselves as rulers maintaining good order among their “subjects”.

Good order and public peace were at a premium all over Europe in the fifteenth century. The kings of England and France had warred with one another for most of the Middle Ages, primarily over the English monarch's extensive territorial holdings in France. In 1337 rival claims over Gascony, Aquitaine, and Flanders initiated conflict between the French Valois monarchs and Edward III of England which plunged France into a devastating century of bloodshed. As the Hundred Years War drew to a close, frustration among English nobles over losses in France and the ineptitude of Henry VI touched off a power struggle in 1455, known as the War of the Roses, which divided the nobility and weakened the once proud English monarchy. In fifteenth-century Italy most of the great city republics fell into the hands of noble despots or ambitious mercenary captains, whose legacy of violence and duplicity would inspire Machiavelli's model of a successful prince. In the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire, dynastic struggles among the dukes of Bavaria, Luxembourg, and Austria over the Imperial throne combined with the expansionist policies of the dukes of Burgundy in the Rhine valley to disrupt peace and trade. Stronger states would eventually emerge from these struggles, but the wars' immediate impact was to weaken established authorities and undermine traditional loyalties.

Late medieval states functioned through networks of aristocratic families bound together by personal ties rather than through institutional structures. Royal councils, central and regional law courts, and fiscal chambers provided the skeleton of a state, but the human muscle that moved it responded to other stimuli than modern bureaucrats. Politics entailed a welding of private interest onto royal service. Officials treated their posts as personal property, allocated to them as members of a distinct and privileged class. They governed through a distribution of favours, both personal and official, and by calling in debts and obligations from clients. Devotion to a superior and generosity to subordinates were honourable and ethical traits. The members of this power elite envisioned themselves as the community of the realm, and they jealously defended the "public" interest, which meant their collective private rights. By the late fourteenth century nearly all leading ecclesiastical officials belonged to the ruling class by birth or ambition, and ties of blood, patronage, and class interest remained strong. Clerical education was a traditional pathway to governmental service, except in Italy where a new cohort of university-trained laymen, who modelled their political behaviour on ancient pagan statesmen such as Cicero, had emerged.

Over time, lay officials would gradually replace churchmen in royal councils everywhere.¹⁷

Throughout the Middle Ages, two theories justified political legitimacy. The first, hierarchical and rooted in Roman imperial law, saw authority descending from God through the pope, emperor, or king downward. The second, communal and rooted in Germanic conventions, grounded authority in mutual oaths sworn among relative equals. Both models spelled out a code of conduct for their adherents, though neither accurately depicted political reality. Communal assemblies generated hierarchies, and royal charters called on the community of the realm as often as on divine authority. The papacy, as self-conscious heir to imperial Rome, had nurtured the hierarchical model throughout the Middle Ages, but communal values legitimated the activities of many religious groups such as monasteries, parishes, and confraternities. Since the Gregorian reforms, lay rulers had struggled with popes and with the clerical elite within their territories over jurisdictional and property rights, with both king and pope asserting direct authority from God. As we have seen, in building the medieval papal monarchy, the popes had fashioned a centralized judicial and fiscal system that claimed authority over Europe's entire clerical population. As lay monarchical states grew and began to define their legitimacy on the basis of "national" myths, clerical leaders all over Europe faced difficult choices over whom they should serve. This clash of patronage, private interests, and loyalties would come to a head in the fourteenth century.

The Late Medieval Church

The image of Christendom, first articulated during the Carolingian era, informed religious and political discourse into the fourteenth century. In 1350 most Europeans recognized one spiritual leader, the pope, and this must be seen as the greatest achievement of the medieval Church. Only a few European regions lay outside of Christendom. In the south-east, the Balkan territories of the Byzantine Empire followed the Greek Orthodox Christian Church, whose spiritual and political leaders refused to recognize papal authority. In eastern Europe, Muscovite Russia also honoured Orthodox Christianity. In 1386 the conversion of the Grand Prince of Lithuania and his subjects to Catholic Christianity stretched the eastern frontier of Christendom to Kiev, where it would remain. Finally, in southern Spain, Granada formed the last remnant of the once

great Moslem emirate of al-Andalus. Otherwise Catholic Christianity predominated, though pocket Jewish communities persevered under the shadow of extortionate protection fees demanded by political authorities and threats of collective violence from Christian neighbours.

In the broadest sense the late medieval Church encompassed all baptized Christians who recognized the pope as their earthly head, but for our purposes we will focus on the visible institutional structure, outside of which, according to Pope Boniface VIII, there was “no salvation or remission of sins”.¹⁸ Salvation for the Christian came first from baptism, a sacrament or ritual act involving water, oil, and prayers, which in Augustine of Hippo’s imagery washed away original sin. Following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, once a Christian reached spiritual adulthood, canon law required at least an annual confession of sins to a priest, followed by reception of the Eucharist – bread, consecrated through rituals performed by a priest, that miraculously became the body of Christ. These two sacraments sustained a Christian in grace, literally a spiritual “gift” from God brought on by the salvation of Jesus Christ, which allowed a Christian full communion with God in heaven after death. Finally, the sacrament of extreme unction offered a last confession of sins, with prayers and anointing, which prepared the shriven soul of the dying Christian for judgement before God.¹⁹ These sacerdotal (grace-giving) acts were essential for salvation, and all of them, except baptism on rare life-threatening occasions, required a man sacramentally anointed into the priesthood to perform them. Among its members the late medieval clergy counted nuns, monks, hermits, administrators, and schoolboys; but the fundamental cleric was a priest responsible for the cure (care) of souls, who performed sacerdotal rituals. Most Christians received the crucial sacraments as members of a parish community, from their parish curate.

The parish (*parochia*) system had slowly evolved since its Carolingian foundation, and as with so many other medieval institutions it had acquired multiple functions. At its core was a “mother” church with full rights to baptize all parishioners. Since 1215 every Christian belonged to a parish, and the invisible lines of parish boundaries portioned out the landscape of Christendom. Not all churches had parochial status, and many parishes, particularly in England and Italy, included filial churches, with some sacramental rights, along with chapels, chantries, or other sacral sites. The medieval demographic growth had resulted in the foundation of frontier parishes and the subdivision of older parochial units, but the process was never systematic, so tensions among parishioners

between the rights of the mother church and newer sacral centres, reinforced by communal disputes over other resources, often soured parochial relations.

The parish church itself normally comprised a choir or sanctuary, where the priest performed his sacerdotal functions, and the nave, where the faithful gathered to observe and hear the priest. Though local lords, as patrons, might claim the right to attend religious services in the sanctuary and often to be buried there, a railing or screen topped by a crucifix (rood) divided the church's two parts, visibly distinguishing clerical space from that allocated to the laity. Painted or carved images of Christ, Mary, and the saints covered the nave walls as teaching devices. Some churches sheltered side altars, called chantries, for endowed commemorative Masses for the dead. The bells in the tower attached to the church were rung to summon parishioners to services, sound the hours of the ritual day, honour the dead, warn the community of fires and threats, and ward off storms. Finally the walled yard around the church sheltered the cemetery, offered defensive protection for the living in border regions, and sometimes provided space for plays, celebrations, and church ales. Ecclesiastical law required all parishioners to attend parish services on Sundays and feast days. The people also came to receive the sacraments and to be buried. Religious sites covered the landscape, but the parish church was the nerve centre for collective spiritual life.

To maintain the building and the ritual objects associated with the sacraments and to sustain the curate with food and lodging, the community paid annual tithes, normally assessed at one-tenth of their crops. Parishioners sometimes delivered the grain, fruits, and eggs to the parsonage for storage in its barn or larder, but normally officials representing the tithe-holders collected the fruits directly at harvest. As with so many other aspects of feudal administration, tithe revenues, known as "temporalities", actually belonged to the patron, who reserved the right to appoint a priest as curate. Patrons were often church officials or monastic houses, but lay men and women sometimes held the right of patronage as descendants of the original parish founder or by acquisition of the rights through mortgage or sale. The system could become quite complex, with patronage rights and tithe revenues belonging to separate individuals or in some cases shareholders. Those who pocketed tithe revenues had responsibility for maintaining the sanctuary and sustaining the priest, but the alienation of tithe collecting from religious service opened the door for all sorts of irregularities as many patrons treated

their rights as a source of revenue and were less than conscientious about making repairs or choosing priests. Patrons would grant their benefice to a clerical relative or promising university student, who in turn would use part of the income to hire a “mass-priest” as vicar. Absenteeism among benefice-holders was not uncommon, and pluralism (the holding of more than one benefice) was also widespread.

Lay interest and demand favoured resident priests, who could effectively perform the sacraments and other religious services (called “sacramentals”) such as blessing crops and livestock, and despite absenteeism and pluralism most parishes had resident beneficed clergy. To cover for revenues skimmed off by patrons, parish priests often charged fees for services, to the frustration of their tithe-paying parishioners. Communities with chapels or filial churches paid tithes to the mother church, whose curate was supposed to visit the outlying sites for bi-weekly or monthly services and, most importantly, to attend the sick and dying to prepare their souls for the next world. Distance, age, and temperament sometimes resulted in irregular contact between the curate and these outlying communities. Village officials routinely petitioned to elevate their chapel or filial church to parochial status. Meanwhile a proletariat of unbeneficed priests celebrated commemorative Masses for the souls of dead parishioners at chapels and chantries financed by their surviving kin.²⁰ Overall the extractive nature of the tithe system created tension between supply and demand for religious services, and the misappropriation of revenues made many under-compensated clergymen fee conscious. The laity responded by criticizing the tithe system and by seeking to gain greater control over parochial revenues. Over the centuries, community members had provided additional gifts to support parochial activities, and the accumulated capital formed the church fabric. In the later Middle Ages local lay parish members known as church wardens assumed responsibility for the fabric.

While the countryside might be poorly served by priests, towns tended to be infested with clergy. Most cities had more than one parish whose religious and administrative structure resembled rural churches, but in urban centres personal piety and concentrated wealth resulted in significant numbers of endowed chantry altars, chapels, and commemorative Masses. Towns also housed religious communities such as monasteries and convents, as well as clerical administrators, especially in the cathedral towns which served as diocesan sees (capitals) for a bishop. Finally, urban educational institutions from grammar schools to universities were ecclesiastical bodies, whose administrators, teachers, and

students claimed clerical status. While villages were lucky to have their own priest, in some urban communities one-tenth of the residents claimed clerical status.

After around 1100 all parishes belonged to a diocese under the spiritual guidance of a bishop. Episcopal sees varied in size, from immense dioceses such as Lincoln and Constance to the tiny bishopric of Ravello in Sicily, that stretched two miles at its widest.²¹ In 1400 there were 263 bishoprics on the Italian peninsula but only 131 in much larger France. England, Scotland, and Wales combined had only thirty-three dioceses, one less than neighbouring Ireland.²² The bishop was the “ordinary” who held all spiritual jurisdiction, though in most of Europe, except Italy where the dioceses were too small, the bishop exercised control over his see through archdeacons, archpriests, or rural deans, who presided over clusters of parishes in the bishop’s name. In some areas deanery boundaries demarcated the original parish of the mother church.

The bishop’s chief task was to be the liturgical head of his church. He should perform all of the sacerdotal rites required of a priest, along with the sacraments of confirmation for all Christians and holy orders to ordain the priests needed to meet the spiritual responsibilities of parish ministry in his diocese. As a result of the Investiture Controversy, clerics attached to the episcopal cathedral, known as canons, held the exclusive right to elect the bishop, yet everyone knew that powerful laymen would influence elections, and by the fourteenth century many bishoprics had become permanently associated with princely and noble dynasties. Canons of cathedral chapters were themselves normally members of elite families. Outside of the tiny Italian bishoprics, it was extremely rare for a parish priest to become a canon, much less a bishop. Day-to-day supervision and instruction of the diocesan clergy had never been an episcopal duty, and bishops had limited control over parochial appointments and normally accepted the candidates nominated by the various patrons.

Bishoprics were significant political institutions, and as with parish benefices, some men held more than one episcopal office. Within the Holy Roman Empire many bishops were territorial lords as well as ecclesiastical officials. In Italy urban oligarchic families dominated important episcopal offices, though here the bishops had less influence. In England, the kings granted diocesan sees to valued clerical advisors, and once appointed, English bishops often continued in royal service. In France, the monarch’s supervision of episcopal elections was recognized by law.

Throughout Christendom bishops were seldom appointed for their religious merit, and many, saddled with governmental or familial responsibilities, resided far from their diocese. Thus co-adjutors or suffragans, bishops whose “dioceses” were located in former Christian towns under Moslem rule, performed the day-to-day judicial, liturgical, and administrative responsibilities of absentee bishops, such as ordinations, confirmation, and parish visitations.

Some bishoprics, such as the see of Toledo in Spain, held the distinction of primacy over others within an ecclesiastical province, and their incumbents were referred to as “archbishops”. An archbishop had prestige and might exert leadership in his province, but the office was never designed to include specific authority over bishops. Archiepiscopal courts did play a role in adjudicating disputes between dioceses within the province or as a step in an appeals process to Rome. The traditional archiepiscopal synods of provincial clergy rarely occurred in the later Middle Ages, and bishops basically functioned independently within their diocese. The quality of orderly religious life depended on firm and sensitive episcopal administration, and effective governance varied from diocese to diocese and, within the diocese, from bishop to bishop. The more conscientious sought to reduce lay exploitation of benefices, absenteeism, clerical immorality, and concubinage. Nevertheless, given existing rights of appointment, bishops recruited only a fraction of their own parish ministry, while the vested interests of local elites in ecclesiastical affairs often mitigated efforts to discipline beneficed clergy and thwarted reform programmes. Moreover, monastic communities and religious orders involved in education and preaching operated throughout the diocese but outside of episcopal jurisdiction.

Since late antiquity, religious communities of men or women had cloistered themselves away from the world and worshipped together after making a profession to live under the guidance of a rule (*regula*). These monastic orders of “regular” clergy distinguished themselves from “secular” clergy, who lived in the world having neither professed nor entered a cloister. The oldest monastic order in Christendom, the Benedictines, traced their origins to the sixth-century rule of Benedict of Nursia. Benedictine rule required obedience to a patriarchal abbot and a routine schedule of prayer, chant, and work for the cloistered monks. In many communities the monks’ central labour was copying and illuminating manuscripts, which did much to preserve classical Christian and pagan writings. Carolingian patronage and later pious donations resulted in many abbeys acquiring extensive tracts of land, so that as landlords

with feudal rights, monastic communities were often at odds with their peasant tenants. The Benedictines had no centralized governance system, and the level of discipline in the houses varied. In earlier centuries frustration with lax discipline had spawned reform movements among communities, such as the Cistercians and Carthusians, calling for greater austerity and more centralized governance, but on the whole, houses maintained their independence. Originally founded in the countryside away from settled communities, many houses later attracted settlements during the medieval demographic expansion. In all, given the autonomy of houses, it is difficult to generalize about religious behaviour, social power, and political influence among Benedictines and their reformed branches.

Some regular clergy focused their ministry in towns, where they served as preachers and teachers. Among these orders, communities of mendicant (begging) friars took a vow of poverty requiring that they beg for alms to support their ministry. Among the mendicant orders the three most famous were the Dominicans, the Augustinians, and the Franciscans. Founded by Dominic of Calereuga in the early thirteenth century, the Dominicans practised corporate poverty until 1475, holding only their churches and friaries. Having begun as a movement to combat heresies, the Dominicans pursued education at emerging universities, wrote on theology, preached and administered confession, and served as prosecutors and judges for the Papal Inquisition. Representatives of the various houses met yearly at provincial chapters, which in turn sent representatives to the General Chapter at Rome. The Dominicans consistently supported papal authority in ecclesiastical policy and acted as arbiters of orthodoxy. Modelling themselves along the lines of the Dominicans, the Augustinian Hermits originated in Italy and received papal sanction in 1256. The Augustinians were closely associated with universities and urban preaching. Finally the Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi in 1209, competed with the Dominicans as educators, preachers, and confessors, and the rivalry between these orders often soured urban religious life. The Franciscans' commitment to the austere poverty of their founder was their strength and weakness, as disputes over the possession of churches and houses and even the quality of their habit (standard clothing) divided Franciscans. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, attacks on clerical wealth associated with radical Franciscans nearly led to the order's dissolution.

Most religious orders had female houses, whose members also followed the rules set down by the founders. Down to the Gregorian reform era, Benedictine abbesses exerted significant authority over their houses and

as landlords. By 1100, however, most found themselves yoked to a male monastery and under the supervision of its abbot. Some cloistered communities of women, such as the Poor Clares, sought to follow stricter rules of poverty along the lines of the friars, but gender biases prohibited them from engaging in public ministry such as preaching, associated with the mendicant orders. Convents provided families with a means to settle a younger daughter without a costly dowry, and some houses accepted novices only from elite families. Convents also offered their professed residents an opportunity to read and write, and the evidence from late medieval manuscripts suggests that many houses fostered sincere and profound spirituality. The male-dominated society outside the cloister, however, remained suspicious of women living without male supervision, and in their dealings with the outside world, nuns required male interlocutors.²³

The bishop of Rome, as pope, served as titular head of this elaborate collection of ecclesiastical communities, jurisdictions, and institutions. The pope was also ruler of the Papal States, a significant territorial block in central Italy. This double role as religious leader and territorial prince created tensions in papal policy and bifurcated the interests of the several hundred officials who staffed the “curia” and handled papal governance, from issues affecting the spiritual commonwealth of Christendom to the mundane duties of tax collection, justice, and defence for the Papal States. The three branches of papal administration were the Apostolic Chamber, the Chancery, and the *Sacra Rota*. The Apostolic Chamber (*camera*) served as the papal treasury for Church revenues, but the Chamberlain (*camerlengo*) also supervised the appointments of all officials in the Papal States. The account books of the Apostolic Chamber recorded both “spiritual” and “temporal” income, and the treasurer maintained accounts for exchange of monies, for investments, and for credit with banking houses in Florence, Genoa, and elsewhere. The Chancery, meanwhile, handled papal correspondence on nearly all issues except those directly involving financial affairs. It also issued decrees under the papal seal, known as “bulls”, from the Latin term *bullā* (seal). Papal bulls applied to all members of the Church and, under the principle of papal spiritual sovereignty, were inscribed as canon laws of the Church. The bulk of Chancery business involved individual cases, requests, forms or letters that did not become canon law. To interpret canon law the *Sacra Rota* served as the supreme court for all ecclesiastical cases that were appealed to Rome and as the sovereign law court for the Papal States. Canon lawyers and theologians staffed the *Sacra Rota*, and

as with most tribunals in the fourteenth century, pursuing justice there proved an expensive and time-consuming endeavour. A fourth component of the papal court was the chapel whose members handled the liturgical duties connected with the pope's priestly, episcopal, and pontifical responsibilities.

Since the era of the Gregorian reforms, the College of Cardinals had assisted the pope: liturgically as Rome's benefited civic clergy, administratively as curial officials, or diplomatically as representatives or legates to the leading courts throughout Europe. Those cardinals resident at Rome formed the consistory, which met two or three times a week to advise the pope on various issues. When a pope died, the cardinals assembled within ten days at the site of the death, as a conclave to elect a successor, who was more often than not a cardinal himself. A pope could ignore the consistory's advice as well as whatever promises he had made to the conclave to secure his election. Thus the role cardinals might play in papal governance varied dramatically, depending on the personality of the pope and loyalties among the cardinals. Nepotism was common as popes tended to trust their own kinsmen, and the consistory itself was often rife with familial factions among the cardinals' large households of retainers. Neither personal piety nor ordination to the priesthood were prerequisites to wear the red cardinal's cap.

The mix of worldly and spiritual interests which characterized ecclesiastical life from the parish to the papal court was not inherently problematic, provided that the clergy emphasized their spiritual ministry, particularly at the parochial level. For most Christians the pope and even the bishop were distant and vague figures who impinged on their lives only when local disputes brought parochial affairs to the attention of higher authorities. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, however, a crisis at the top forced ecclesiastical officials to reconsider the unbridled power of the papal monarchy and the destructive effect of worldly interests on the Church's spiritual life. Proposed solutions to the crisis could have reformed and renewed the medieval Church. Their failure to do so, set the stage for the much more dramatic and divisive changes of the sixteenth century.

The Avignese Papacy

In 1300 thousands of Christians poured into Rome hoping to receive a plenary indulgence which offered complete remission of temporal



Map 1 European political frontiers in 1350
Note: Heavier line marks the boundary of the Holy Roman Empire.

punishment in Purgatory for all confessed sins. Rumours had promised such a grant, and popular thirst for it had attracted the pilgrims. Pope Boniface VIII (*1294–1303) eventually declared a Jubilee Year and offered the indulgences. The papacy appeared to be at the height of its spiritual power. Three years later on 7 September 1303, as he was preparing to excommunicate the French king, Philip IV, a body of French knights, joined by Boniface's Italian enemies, stormed the papal palace at Anagni in central Italy and imprisoned the ageing pontiff. The local militia soon rescued him, but he would die a short time later at Rome. The assault at Anagni culminated a protracted dispute between Boniface and Philip over royal power to appoint, tax, and judge the French clergy; and it exposed the papacy's basic weakness in a test of political wills.

The guiding principle of the Gregorian reforms had been to separate the clergy from lay influence, and under papal monarchy, all clerical men and women, though they lived within territories ruled by lay men or women, were to submit first to papal authority. Like other monarchs, the pope taxed his subjects, demanded that they bring their legal disputes to his courts, and asserted ultimate say through "papal provision" over all significant administrative appointments. Tensions existed between royal and papal demands on ecclesiastical officials, and the fact that the popes themselves were territorial lords in central Italy further muddied the situation. Most of the thirteenth-century popes had been Italians, who depended on bonds of familial and personal loyalty to govern their spiritual commonwealth and secular domains.²⁴ In principle, authority within the Church derived from the office rather than the incumbent's familial or social connections, for every bishop, prioress, abbot, and priest was theoretically dead to the world. Many ecclesiastical officials, however, held some feudal rights or personal property distinct from their benefice, and many Central European bishops were also territorial lords. The inherent tension between religious and secular concerns triggered sporadic conflicts between the popes and various monarchs; and papal involvement in Italian politics often compromised the popes' spiritual office. None the less, prior to Boniface's reign the Church had held its own.²⁵

In arguing his case against Philip, Boniface VIII spelled out papal theocracy in a bull, *Unam Sanctam*, promulgated in November 1302. In it he asserted that there was only one Church, outside of which no salvation was possible; with only one head, who was Christ acting through his vicar, Peter, and Peter's successors, the popes. Two swords of power existed on earth, the temporal and the spiritual. The Church wielded the more important, spiritual sword; but even when brandishing the

temporal sword, any king had to follow the guidance of the Church. Boniface reminded his audience that spiritual power exceeded temporal power in dignity and could institute temporal power and judge its transgressions. God alone judged the pope, and whoever opposed the spiritual power invested in the pope opposed God. The theocratic assumptions of *Unam Sanctam* reflected over two centuries of canon law, but Boniface could not enforce his words with military might.²⁶ The assault at Anagni ushered in a century and a half of crisis.

Ten days after the pope's death, the available cardinals gathered to elect a successor; but their initial choice, Benedict XI (*1303–4), died a few months later. At the ensuing conclave, factional wrangling split the cardinals and denied any candidate the required two-thirds majority. Months of stalemate followed until the electors turned to an outsider, Bertrand of Got, a Frenchman and archbishop of the English-controlled city of Bordeaux, who became Clement V (*1305–14). Following his coronation at Lyons, Clement paused on his journey to Rome at Avignon in Provence. Earlier popes had lived outside of Rome, and Clement often discussed completing his journey to the papal city. He and his successors, however, would remain at Avignon until 1377.²⁷

For the Italians and particularly the Romans, the Avignese popes suffered as French puppets, and Clement's pontificate established the template. Among the first cardinals he elevated were nine Frenchmen, including four nephews, which produced a French majority in the College. Many of the new cohort had spent part of their career in Philip IV's service, and the king's influence over the curia was strong. Clement convoked an ecumenical council at Vienne in southern France in 1311, which effectively completed Philip's victory over Boniface by exonerating the pope's assailants and expunging papal judgements against the French king. Moreover, despite their absence from Rome, Clement and his successors actively pursued aggressive policies in the Papal States.

At the heart of the political turmoil in Italy lay the rivalry between Angevin (French) and Aragonese (Spanish) claims to the southern Italian kingdoms of Naples and Sicily, and papal affiliation with France immediately created allies and enemies on the peninsula. To defend the Papal States the Avignese popes hired mercenary captains (*condottieri*), whose troops battled Aragonese forces in central and southern Italy. John XXII (*1316–34) even called for a "crusade" against his political rivals, the Visconti dukes of Milan. The curia sought to intervene in every major political conflict in Europe, from the ongoing wars between England and France to the disputes among the German princes over the

Imperial throne, and in all these arenas the Avignese popes moved in sync with French objectives. The papacy had been highly politicized for more than a century, but in operating on the border of the most powerful monarchy in western Europe, the curia appeared to lack autonomy, which weakened its influence as an “honest” power broker. All seven Avignese popes were native Frenchmen, and of the 110 cardinals they elevated, 90 were French. Despite routine promises to return to Rome, they assembled a complete curia at Avignon, where the papal household alone counted 500 members with each cardinal supporting his own retinue. Eventually, in 1348, Clement VI (*1342–52) purchased lordship over Avignon and the neighbouring county of Venaissin, and he and his successors transformed the former episcopal residence into a beautiful palace.

To support themselves papal officials charged fees on everything from marital dispensations to confirmation of a document. None of this was new, but the Avignese curia pursued fiscal resources with a ruthlessness that tainted all its activities with venal intent. For example, claiming “fullness of power” (*plenitudo potestatis*) the curia asserted rights of papal provision over all benefices within the Church, though in practice such authority could never supplant the rights of local patrons nor the tradition of episcopal elections. In the past, papal provision had only entailed confirmation of a properly elected candidate, who secured his post by paying for the official forms. The Avignese popes applied the new practice of “reservation” to episcopal and abbatial appointments, by which the popes “reserved” occupied benefices for particular candidates, who then moved into the post on the death of the incumbents. Office seekers had to petition the curia, usually in person, for posts and paid fees to secure an anticipated benefice. Papal reservations disrupted local systems of ecclesiastical appointment throughout Christendom, antagonized traditional patrons, and created tensions between benefice-holders and their vulturine successors.

The Apostolic Chamber at Avignon also collected a variety of traditional taxes, all of which had begun as gifts but in time had become obligations. Once a year the curia could assess *servitia*, which equalled one-third of the first year’s income for any benefice. In 1306 Clement V created a new tax called “papal annates”, by demanding the first year’s income from all vacant benefices in the British Isles. In time these fees, along with the charges for reservations and provisions, created the impression that high ecclesiastical offices were for sale, and the cost of appointment meant that benefice-holders, once in place, needed to

exploit the resources of their coveted positions to recoup their investment. Papal officials also collected forced donations called “subsides” from clergy in various regions of Christendom to finance military ventures in the Papal States. Except for annates, the Avignese popes did not create these taxes, but they made them obligatory, systemized their collection, and spent them on activities far removed from pastoral care. The Avignese papacy’s average annual income hovered around 200,000 gold florins, a level which was far less than that of the leading contemporary lay monarchs; but for those who visited Avignon, the papal court seemed avaricious and opulent. Gradually a reservoir of animosity built up against the efficient curial bureaucrats.

The Great Schism and the Council of Constance

The Avignese popes often promised to resettle in Rome, and Urban V (*1362–70) spent three years in Italy attempting to secure peace, only to return to Avignon disillusioned. His successor, Gregory XI (*1370–8), died at Rome while visiting the Papal States. Following canon law a conclave of sixteen cardinals (11 Frenchmen, 4 Italians, and 1 Spaniard) assembled at Rome to elect Gregory’s successor. Civic leaders petitioned them to choose a Roman, as crowds surrounded the chambers. In the charged atmosphere the electors settled on a compromise candidate, the archbishop of Bari, who was an Italian with ties to the French rulers in southern Italy. Though an outsider, Urban VI (*1378–89) had some experience at Avignon, and the cardinals felt they could manage him. Urban, however, imagined himself a reformer, and his attacks on the cardinals’ lavish lifestyles and their retinues quickly soured relations within the curia. The bulk of the papal court fled to Anagni, repudiated the “forced” election of Urban, and chose Robert of Geneva as Pope Clement VII (*1378–94).

Disputed conclaves, anti-popes, and schisms had occurred in the past, but the dual elections in 1378 ushered in an unprecedented crisis in Church governance – the Great Schism (1378–1417). Urban VI at Rome and Clement VII at Avignon both claimed apostolic succession, fullness of powers, jurisdictional and administrative rights, and the symbolic “keys” to salvation. Christendom fractured into two “obediences”. Urban retained the allegiance of the Emperor and much of the Holy Roman Empire, northern and central Italy, England, Scandinavia, and the eastern monarchies of Hungary, Poland, and Lithuania when it embraced

Roman Catholic Christianity in 1386. The Avignese curia drew obedience from France, Naples, Scotland, the duchy of Savoy, and later the kingdom of Castile. Some states, such as Aragon, remained neutral, with royal officials administering the kingdom's churches in the interim. Though insisting on the heretical nature of his opponent's status, each pope cautiously limited his administrative reach to the regions under his obedience, except for border territories such as Austria and south-western Germany, where multiple candidates to benefices often held rival papal provisions and reservations. Nevertheless, the schism threatened the legitimacy of all ecclesiastical business. For example, when the city of Erfurt sought to combine its mendicant schools into a university, officials hedged their bets and expended the time and money to secure provisions from both curia.²⁸ A unified Church formed the cornerstone of Christendom, and the Great Schism prompted repercussions within every diocese, cathedral chapter, monastic community, and important family in Europe.

Christian leaders hoped for reunification with the death of each pope, but the contending cardinals feared losing their status and power and so elected successors, Boniface IX (*1389–1404) for Urban at Rome and Benedict XIII (*1394–1417) for Clement at Avignon, thwarting expectations that one or the other party would back down. As the crisis dragged on, representatives from the rival curia attempted to negotiate a settlement requiring the resignations of the popes and the consolidation of the two colleges in conclave for a new election. Under canon law, however, the cardinals were powerless without papal approval, and the rival popes refused to resign or to call a general council which might have produced a settlement.²⁹ By 1400, more and more intellectuals and ecclesiastical leaders were calling for a general council with or without papal approval to resolve the schism and reform administrative abuses. These "conciliarists" asserted that under normal circumstances the pope governed the visible Church but under special circumstances the universal Church, as the body of Christ, could act in its self-interest and convene a council against papal wishes. The schism, conciliarists argued, had produced a crisis "in head and members" that required extraordinary measures to preserve the universal Church. In 1409, cardinals from both curia summoned a general council at Pisa with widespread support from lay rulers, especially the Emperor Sigismund, attracting several hundred prominent ecclesiastical leaders. Hoping to bring unity, the participants deposed the popes at Avignon and Rome and elected the archbishop of Milan as Alexander V (*1409–10). The deposed papal

claimants, however, refused to relinquish their rights, so now there were three curia, three sets of cardinals, and three obediences. Traditional papal claims of moral and spiritual leadership sounded false and shrill throughout divided Christendom, as papal authority reached its nadir.

The conciliarists continued to advocate an assembly of ecclesiastical leaders to resolve the schism but recognized that they needed a pope to summon it. Finally, in 1414, the Pisan successor to Alexander V, John XXIII (*1410–15), a mercenary and lifelong libertine, convoked a council at Constance (1414–18). The Emperor Sigismund had prodded John to assemble the council after his efforts to reconquer the Papal States ended in disaster. The choice of the southern German town weakened the Italian influence at the council's sessions, and political considerations remained paramount throughout the assembly. The conciliarists argued that the Church was a *res publica* (republic), and the reformers drew on the civil law traditions which were growing in prominence in the Italian states, along with the communal model of sovereignty in which authority rested in the people and was conferred to their elected leader.³⁰ Such views directly threatened papal monarchy, and the possibility of extensive institutional reforms seemed imminent. Thousands of ecclesiastical and lay leaders converged at Constance in search of institutional unity, reforms of abuses, and a resolution of debates over faith.

Unity first required an end to schism through the deposition of the three popes and the election of a new, single leader. Realizing that he couldn't control the council and hoping to discredit it, John XXIII fled Constance in late February only to be escorted back as a prisoner. In April 1415, to secure its right to act, the council issued the decree *Haec Sancta*, which stated that the assembly had "authority immediately from Christ; and that all men of whatever rank or position, including the pope himself are bound to obey [the council] in matters concerning the faith, the abolition of the schism, and the reformation of the Church of God in its head [the papacy] and members".³¹ The following month the council tried John XXIII for simony and deposed him. He accepted the judgement and ended his days as a cardinal. The Roman pope, Gregory XII (*1406–15), finding himself without political allies, approached the council with a request that, if the assembly allowed him to convene it and accepted the decrees of his pontificate, he would resign. On 4 July 1415, Gregory stepped down and also donned a cardinal's hat.³² The recalcitrant Avignese pope, Benedict XIII, never recognized the council which eventually deposed him in 1417. His lay supporters having abandoned him, Benedict was held under protective custody in a Spanish castle.

Following Benedict's deposition a special conclave of cardinals and representatives of the "nations" (regional churches) among the clergy assembled at Constance, elected a Roman aristocrat, Oddo Colonna, as Pope Martin V (*1417–31). The cardinal-deacon was promptly ordained a priest, consecrated as a bishop, then crowned pope. The schism had ended, and reform could begin.

With unity secured, the council turned to disputes over faith, in particular the frequency and form of the laity's reception of the Eucharist. A growing devotion to the consecrated body of Christ and a desire among many lay folk to receive the sacrament regularly in both forms, as consecrated bread and wine, challenged the earlier, thirteenth-century trend of infrequent lay communion limited to bread alone. Desire to receive communion under both "species" (bread as body and wine as blood), known as Utraquism, had inspired a radical reform movement among the Czech-speaking Bohemians led by Jan Hus. The Hussite movement, centred at Prague, deeply troubled Emperor Sigismund, who hoped for a reconciliation between Hus and ecclesiastical authorities and had offered Hus, and his colleague Jerome of Prague, safe passage to the council. At Constance negotiations with Hus quickly broke down, and the Czech reformers were condemned and executed as heretics. Their "martyrdom" triggered a revolt in Bohemia, which we will explore in the next chapter, but the council believed it had defended true faith against undisciplined dissenters and that Hus had chosen heresy rather than submission. The Council supported other lay reform movements, such as the Brethren of the Common Life, in part because these movements accepted established authority and offered no direct threat to religious unity.

With the consolidation of the three curia, the conciliar reformers sought to bring order to papal fiscal practices, to reform blatant abuses, and to restore a spiritual aura to papal policies.³³ The council attacked a broad range of oppressive dues, taxes, and fees whose use had grown as the papacy experienced a decline in traditional revenues at the expense of the growing fiscal appetites of the monarchical states. Despite strongly worded legislation against these "simoniacal" practices, the council failed to reform most abuses. In an effort to bring order to the college of cardinals, curial policies and papal conclaves, reformers at Constance reduced the number of cardinals to between eighteen and twenty-four with an absolute maximum of thirty. In addition, to prevent the domination of the college by French or Italian prelates as had occurred earlier, the reformers called for broader distribution of

“national” origins so that no nation had a two-thirds majority for a conclave, and proposed alternating “national” origins for the popes. In one of the most significant conciliar decrees, *Frequens* (1417), the council attempted to put constraints on the head of the Church by requiring the regular convocation of ecumenical councils. The next was to occur in five years, then seven, and then every ten years. Finally, to ensure that future popes complied with the reforms, the council called for papal capitulations – a set of promises sworn as a kind of contract between the newly elected pope and his electoral conclave. Martin V accepted these constraints. The conciliarists hoped that future popes would honour their promises and, if not, that conclaves would have the legal means to force compliance.

Renaissance Papacy and the Failure of Conciliarism

Over the next century Martin V and his successors re-established papal autonomy under the shadow of conciliar constraint. By the 1450s the popes had circumvented the requirement for regular councils and delayed or ignored promises made at their electoral capitulations. Once again they began to stock the college of cardinals with Italian relatives. In contrast, the papacy found its control over the selecting and supervising of clergy north of the Alps sharply curtailed, and with this shrinking influence came a continued reduction in revenues. The papacy’s fiscal base increasingly depended on feudal dues and taxes in the Papal States, and thus papal officials focused attention on their worldly resources and worldly affairs. This increased entanglement in Italian secular affairs demoralized the Renaissance papacy for many.

The drift away from conciliar reform occurred gradually. Martin V (*1417–31) initially honoured the demand for frequent councils and convoked an assembly at Pavia in 1423. Political tensions in Italy, however, forced the council’s transfer to Siena and prevented Martin’s attendance. The assembly soon dissolved. Reform still seemed possible, and Martin followed *Frequens* again when he convened a new council at Basel in 1431 shortly before his death. It would be the only council after Constance to meet outside Italy, and it would prove the most troublesome. Problems began with the election of Martin’s successor, Eugene IV (*1431–47), who had no desire to cooperate with the conciliarists. Though the council formally opened on 23 July 1431 with high expectations, Eugene IV soon dissolved it and summoned his own assembly at

Florence. The confrontation between pope and council divided the college of cardinals, where only six of twenty-one favoured Eugene's actions, and most secular leaders endorsed the council at Basel, which refused to disband and carried on its business. The pope and the council sent rival embassies to Constantinople with the aim of negotiating a rapprochement with the Greek Orthodox Church. The Hussites from Bohemia sent a negotiating team to Basel to hammer out a settlement, which Eugene's curia would not authorize. The conciliarists attempted to complete the administrative reforms begun at Constance, outlawing the practice of papal reservations of benefices and abolishing annates, but these reforms would only have effect where the council's competence was recognized. Meanwhile Eugene's anti-council migrated from Bologna, to Ferrara, to Florence, and eventually to the Lateran palace, where it dissolved in 1443 having failed to secure a binding agreement with the Greek Church or to supersede its rival at Basel. Ultimately the conciliarists at Basel deposed Eugene in 1439 and elected their own pope, Felix (*1439–49), positing that a duly convened council was superior to the pope and that Eugene had no power to transfer it. Schism had returned, but few had the stomach for it. When Eugene IV died in 1447, his successor Nicholas V (*1447–55) negotiated settlements with the council's political patrons, particularly France. In 1449, having lost the leverage of secular support, the council's anti-pope resigned, and the council dissolved itself after formally electing Nicholas. The short-term crisis had ended.

Henceforth, Renaissance popes ignored further requests to convene regular councils. Pius II (*1458–64) reclaimed sovereignty with his bull *Execrabilis* (1460), which asserted papal superiority over any council. *Frequens* ceased to carry force, and no council would meet until 1511 when several renegade cardinals gathered at Pisa to attempt to depose Julius II (*1503–13). Julius's successor, Leo X (*1513–21), would call his own council at the Lateran palace, and in 1516 this Fifth Lateran Council asserted in the decree *Pastor aeternus* that the popes had authority over all councils, including the right to convoke, transfer, and dissolve them. *Pastor aeternus* effectively ended the conciliar reform movement. The conciliar model of Church governance would survive as a spectral alternative to papal autocracy, and reformers, including Martin Luther, would advocate a general council to bring about reform. When such a council finally convened at Trent in 1545, however, its members faced a radically different religious and political environment in which a unified ecumenical consensus on issues of reform and faith was no longer possible.

The councils had failed to reform the papacy in part because they remained irregular bodies dependent on papal convocation. The reformers at Constance had sought to strengthen the college of cardinals so that its members could use their role in regular curial administration, and their potential leverage at electoral conclaves, as a more permanent counterweight. Unfortunately the vision of a potent body of cardinals drawn from among Europe's leading churchmen failed to materialize as the college soon became a profoundly Italian body in which familial political interests played a key role. As early as the pontificate of Calixtus III (*1455–8), the majority of new cardinals were Italian, with French and Spanish churchmen, whose monarchs had a deep interest in Italian politics, comprising the next largest contingents. Decrees at Constance sought to limit papal nepotism, and the first six popes following Constance appointed “only” eleven relatives. Beginning with Sixtus IV (*1471–84), however, the next five popes elevated twenty-four kinsmen.³⁴ Family interests and dynastic politics became paramount, as epitomized in the career of one “nephew”, Cesare Borgia, the natural son of Alexander VI (*1492–1503), who was elevated to the college in 1493 then released from clerical status in 1498 in order to fashion a hereditary duchy in the Romagna. In all, five nephews became popes with two powerful Italian dynasties, the della Roveres from Siena and the de' Medici of Florence, arrayed in opposition against the Catalonian Borgias.

In this factional atmosphere the death of a pope triggered power struggles within the conclave, among rival candidates, in which family feuds and regional interests played the dominant part. At the conclave of 1471, among the eighteen electors only three were non-Italians, and in 1484 only four of twenty-five. To avert potential deadlock, candidates offered bribes to secure the needed two-thirds majority. Each new pope publicly submitted a formal capitulation, promising to initiate crusades, to work in harmony with the consistory, and to further reforms, but between 1417 and 1517 none delivered on these promises. The cardinals, who benefitted personally from the status quo, found it difficult if not impossible to force changes. So through negotiation, deception, and bribery, the Renaissance popes defused the conciliar movement, secured their authority over the curia, and held off substantive reforms.

Over the course of the fifteenth century the papal curia increasingly came to resemble an Italian princely court. In part this was due to papal weakness outside of Italy brought on by the separate “concordats” negotiated with secular rulers of France, Spain, and England, which granted these monarchs extensive powers over their subject churches.

The circumstances varied from kingdom to kingdom, and control over the territorial church often resembled a tug of war, for example in France, where the struggles resulted in seven different official protocols between 1418 and the Concordat of Bologna in 1516 that finally placed the Gallican Catholic Church formally under royal control. The loss of influence over emerging “national” churches pinched off the flow of revenue from papal provisions, taxation, and judicial fees and forced the Renaissance popes to draw from their limited temporal resources as rulers in the Papal States, while endemic warfare in Italy eventually drove them to borrow heavily and ultimately to sell ecclesiastical offices in their bureaucracy.³⁵ Cash-strapped monarchs all over Europe sooner or later would resort to venality, the sale of offices such as judgeships to the highest bidder, but the sale of administrative offices in the papacy reeked of simony.

Italian politics operated under the shadow of French and Aragonese claims in southern Italy and Sicily. During the fifteenth century the age of the small and fiercely independent medieval communes in northern and central Italy slowly gave way to larger regional states dominated by *signori* such as Visconti and later the Sforzas at Milan, or by the urban oligarches who controlled nominal republics, such as Venice or Florence. The French–Aragonese conflict divided these regional states into rival alliance systems and factionalized the magnates within each territory. The popes as elected rulers of the largest single Italian state were critical players in this political drama, and prominent Italian families sought representation in the curia and, if possible, control over the see of Peter. Papal elections punctuated shifts in the balance of power on the peninsula, and spiritual qualities were often counterproductive when it came to effective papal leadership. Some popes saw themselves as defenders of Italian interests against the foreign influence of France and Spain. Nicholas V (*1447–55) had tried to secure an Italian defensive alliance through the Peace of Lodi of 1454, but not all Renaissance popes were peacemakers. Sixtus IV (*1471–84) intrigued in the Pazzi conspiracy in 1478 in which an assassination attempt against Lorenzo de’ Medici was orchestrated during Mass at the Florentine cathedral. Several popes faced assassination plots themselves. Alexander VI’s (*1492–1503) political machinations plunged Italy into a destructive round of wars during which his successor, Julius II (*1503–13), earned a reputation as a talented and ruthless general. The Italianization of the papacy and the deepening engagement of the Roman curia in the power struggle for hegemony on the Italian peninsula ultimately weakened

papal authority in religious matters, both on the peninsula and beyond the Alps.

As members of wealthy and powerful aristocratic families, Renaissance popes such as the humanist Pius II (Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini) and the Venetians, Eugene IV and Paul II, brought aristocratic tastes to the curia. By the mid-fifteenth century, papal architectural and artistic patronage had begun in earnest and would bear full fruit in the early sixteenth century with Michelangelo's painting of the Sistine Chapel and the construction of St Peter's Basilica. The grandeur and artistry of these projects did much to beautify Rome but little to improve papal finances or religious life. By the beginning of the sixteenth century, it was clear that reform from above was highly unlikely.

The fifteenth-century Church was fully integrated into the systems of political and social power throughout Europe. Factional disputes, violence, and snobbery seemed distasteful in men and women of God and would inspire anticlerical literature and art. It is easy to read pent-up anger in this anticlerical criticism, but much of this literature focused on reform rather than radical change. Some scholars have argued that people mocked and poked fun at the Church in poems and during Carnival burlesques because they were familiar and comfortable with it. People took the Church for granted and "wore it lightly".³⁶ Throughout fifteenth-century Europe lay folk desired increased participation in ecclesiastical affairs at all levels of society, from royal involvement in reform movements to local lay participation in religious confraternities and third-order movements.³⁷ Tensions between lay demands for spirituality and clerical supply would play a key role in turning reform into Reformation.

The late medieval Church was resilient, and the Reformation was not inevitable. The papacy had weathered decades of schism when two, then three, rival popes claimed spiritual authority over all Christendom. The expense of sustaining multiple courts and, after 1417, increasing papal involvement in volatile Italian politics had stimulated the papacy's fiscal appetite at a time when lay princes were also undertaking the expensive first steps of state-building. Lay princes found in the Church a wealthy and privileged estate in need of closer supervision, though clergy and lay folks with a stake in the old Church resisted reform to protect vested interests. Earlier the plague had prompted increased pious donations and religious exercises among surviving commoners, but as the economy

soured, their poorer descendants grew frustrated with the cost of salvation and the real or imagined unholiness of its purveyors, the clergy. It was into this mix of anticlericalism and earnest piety that the Reformation preachers brought their message. If Church leaders had maintained closer and more cooperative ties with lay rulers and officials, then the reform movements would probably have had limited impact. Unfortunately Church officials continued to fight with kings and princes in Italy – where it seemed every major ruler had some interest – and elsewhere. Thus political ambition had driven a wedge between the popes and their potential religious allies, and it would be nearly impossible for Church authorities to rally secular support to suppress religious reform movements that enjoyed the backing or tolerance of lay rulers. In the end even where Reformation movements failed, the popes would lose their religious authority to Catholic princes and kings. The growing influence of monarchical states in ecclesiastical affairs was a principal precondition for the European Reformation, which then completed the shift of religious power into the hands of state officials.

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