

## “How’d We Get Here?” (continued)

The Emperor Constantine did two things that were of great import to the Church: 1) he “converted” the Empire to Christianity and, 2) he moved the capital of the Empire from Rome to Constantinople (present day Istanbul, Turkey) in 330. Constantine’s conversion (in 312) had a number of effects on the Church, some good, but most detrimental. One of the positive effects was the cessation of persecution of Christians. In addition, the Emperor now directed the financing of churches and other favorable projects for the Church. On the other hand, this newfound acceptability meant that, unlike the first three centuries, some would become “Christian” merely because of the “bandwagon effect.” It also meant a wedding between the Church and State that would have consequences for centuries to come.

The second of Constantine’s contributions, the move of the capital from Rome to Constantinople, created a vacuum of temporal power in the West. The Bishop of Rome was in a perfect position to fill this void. The people began to look to the Bishop for both spiritual and temporal leadership. For example, the city of Rome was threatened by barbarians many times in the fourth and fifth centuries. It was the Bishop of Rome who on several occasions was able to cut a deal with the invaders. For this, the people gave their allegiance to the Bishop.

These developments conspired to create an environment ready-made for a skilled leader. In 590, Gregory became Bishop of Rome. His able administrative leadership and political savvy further advanced the authority and esteem of the Roman Bishop. On one occasion Gregory was able to fund an army that turned back an invading force. Further, Gregory asserted his leadership over the other bishops and the Patriarch of Constantinople.

For several centuries after the fall of Rome (in 476), political survival was a main concern for the Pope. With the rival patriarchs vying for supremacy (or, at least, equality) and invading hordes of barbarians knocking at the city gates, the popes formed political alliances with rulers who could protect them. In addition, the popes were able to advance their own power while securing badly needed military assistance. The eventual result of this political maneuvering was the development of the Holy Roman Empire. Historian Earle Cairns notes:

*The Lombards...knocked on the gates of Rome more than once during this period. These difficulties forced the Pope to look around for a powerful ally who would support his claims to spiritual power and to temporal possessions in Italy. The Frankish rulers seemed to be the most promising allies, and with them the popes made an alliance that was to influence both ecclesiastical and political affairs during the Middle Ages.*  
(Cairns, p. 181)

However, William Webster, author of *The Church of Rome at the Bar of History*, comments:

*The papacy could never have emerged without a fundamental restructuring of the Constitution of the Church and of men’s perceptions of the history of that Constitution. As long as the true facts of Church history were well known, it would serve as a buffer against any unlawful ambitions. However, in the 9th century, a literary forgery occurred which completely revolutionized the ancient government of the Church in the West. It provided a legal foundation for the ascendancy of the papacy in Western Christendom. This forgery is known as the Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals, written around 845. The Decretals are a complete fabrication of Church history. They set forth precedents for the exercise of sovereign authority of the popes over the universal Church prior to the fourth century and make it appear that the popes had always exercised sovereign dominion and had ultimate authority even over Church Councils.<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> From *Forgeries and the Papacy* at [www.christiantruth.com/forgeries.html](http://www.christiantruth.com/forgeries.html)

## I. The Zenith of Papal Power

### A. The Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals and other spurious documents<sup>2</sup>

Roman Catholic historian Johann von Dollinger confirms that these documents are false and provides a summary of their history and impact:

*In the middle of the ninth century—about 845—there arose the huge fabrication of the Isidorian decretals...About a hundred pretended decrees of the earliest Popes, together with certain spurious writings of other Church dignitaries and acts of Synods, were then fabricated in the west of Gaul, and eagerly seized upon Pope Nicholas I at Rome, to be used as genuine documents in support of the new claims put forward by himself and his successors. That the pseudo-Isidorian principles eventually revolutionized the whole constitution of the Church, and introduced a new system in place of the old—on that point there can be no controversy among candid historians.*

*The most potent instrument of the new Papal system was Gratian's Decretum, which issued about the middle of the twelfth century from the first school of Law in Europe, the juristic teacher of the whole of Western Christendom, Bologna. In this work the Isidorian forgeries were combined with those of the other Gregorian (Gregory VII) writers...and with Gratia's own additions. His work displaced all the older collections of canon law, and became the manual and repertory, not for canonists only, but for the scholastic theologians, who, for the most part, derived all their knowledge of Fathers and Councils from it. No book has ever come near it in its influence in the Church, although there is scarcely another so chokeful of gross errors, both intentional and unintentional (Johann Joseph Ignaz von Döllinger, *The Pope and the Council* (Boston: Roberts, 1870), pp. 76-77, 79, 115-116).*

The Protestant historian, George Salmon, explains the importance and influence of Pseudo-Isidore:

*In the ninth century another collection of papal letters...was published under the name of Isidore, by whom, no doubt, a celebrated Spanish bishop of much learning was intended. In these are to be found precedents for all manner of instances of the exercise of sovereign dominion by the pope over other Churches. You must take notice of this, that it was by furnishing precedents that these letters helped the growth of papal power. Thenceforth the popes could hardly claim any privilege but they would find in these letters supposed proofs that the privilege in question was no more than had been always claimed by their predecessors, and always exercised without any objection...On these spurious decretals is built the whole fabric of Canon Law. The great schoolman, Thomas Aquinas, was taken in by them, and he was induced by them to set the example of making a chapter on the prerogatives of the pope an essential part of the treatises on the Church...Yet completely successful as was this forgery, I suppose there never was a more clumsy one. These decretal epistles had undisputed authority for some seven hundred years, that is to say, down to the time of the Reformation.*

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

*If we want to know what share these letters had in the building of the Roman fabric we have only to look at the Canon Law. The 'Decretum' of Gratia quotes three hundred and twenty-four times the epistles of the popes of the first four centuries; and of these three hundred and twenty-four quotations, three hundred and thirteen are from the letters which are now universally known to be spurious. (George Salmon, *The Infallibility of the Church* (London: John Murray, 1914), pp. 449, 451, 453).*

The authority claims of Roman Catholicism ultimately devolve upon the institution of the papacy. The papacy is the center and source from which all authority flows for Roman Catholicism. Rome has long claimed that this institution was established by Christ and has been in force in the Church from the very beginning. But the historical record gives a very different picture. This institution was promoted primarily through the falsification of historical fact through the extensive use of forgeries...Forgery is its foundation.<sup>3</sup> As an institution it was a much later development in Church history, beginning with the Gregorian reforms of pope Gregory VII in the 11th century and was restricted completely to the West. The Eastern Church never accepted the false claims of the Roman Church and refused to submit to its insistence that the Bishop of Rome was supreme ruler of the Church. This they knew was not true to the historical record and was a perversion of the true teaching of Scripture, the papal exegesis of which was not taught by the Church fathers.

#### B. Excommunication and the interdict

A couple historical examples will suffice to show the power of the popes during the Middle Ages.

##### 1. Henry IV versus Pope Gregory VII

Henry was the emperor of the Holy Roman Empire and came into conflict with Gregory over who had the authority to elevate and individual to a church office. Henry called a council in January 1076 at Worms. The council rejected papal authority. Gregory met this bitter denunciation and rejection of his authority by excommunicating Henry and releasing all his subjects from allegiance to him. This was as bold a step as any pope had ever taken with the temporal power.

In the fall of 1076, Henry was urged by his people to seek release from Gregory's excommunication or else they'd depose him! Henry capitulated and, with his wife and his baby son, crossed the Alps in the winter of 1077 to meet Gregory at Canossa. It was a difficult journey; and when Henry finally reached Canossa, Gregory let him stand barefoot in the snow outside the gates of the palace on three successive days before he would admit him to his presence. He then released him from his sentence of excommunication.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> See Appendix B for further documentation of this issue.

<sup>4</sup> Cairns, p. 213

## 2. Pope Innocent III versus Philip of France

Philip forced the bishops of France to annul his marriage to his first wife and took another. Innocent ordered Philip to put away the new wife and to restore his first as his lawful wife. When Philip refused, Innocent placed France under an interdict in 1200. The interdict, which affected everyone in the nation, closed all churches, except for the baptism of infants and the granting of extreme unction (last rites) to the dying; forbade the celebration of the mass, except for those who were sick or dying; and banned burial in the consecrated ground. The priest was not allowed to preach except in the open air. The uproar that the interdict created all over France forced Philip to submit to the pope, and he sent his new wife away and brought back his first. Thus, Innocent, by the use of spiritual weapons had forced the ruler of one of the great new nation-states to obey the moral law.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 215