

Church History I

(Early Church to Scholasticism)

Week 8 – 10th Century Decline and Cluny Reform

Introduction: The Papal office, which had its historic high point in the person of Gregory the Great in the late 6th and early 7th century, had unfortunately found itself at times far more political and worldly. Thus was the case in the 10th and parts of the 11th centuries. Sadly, common among these Popes were impious claims and moral compromise (or even abandonment). In an attempt to write these wrongs, particular reforms were made.

I. Papal Degradation and Abuse

A. Setting the Stage

1. Sadly, the amount of information that still exists from the time of the Middle Ages is minimal.
 - i. “One scholar has claimed that all the surviving writings (not counting duplicates) from roughly the last two centuries of the first millennium can be piled atop a single dining room table.”¹ **PTQ**
2. One of the things that is more clear than not is that the church, especially its papal system, was going through a time of moral apostasy.
 - i. 11th century writer Raoul Glaber said, “...the princes of both orders, spiritual and secular, turned to covetousness and began to sin in theft and greed as grievously as before, or even worse. Then those of middle rank and the poorer people, following the example of the greater, declined into horrible Crime. For who ere now had heard of such incests, adulteries, and illicit alliances between close kindred, such mockery of concubines and such emulation of evil men?”² **PTQ**
3. Unlike the time under Charlemagne, the Popes no longer had a strong French leader to tie themselves to. Thus, he found his position to be dangerous, precarious, and unmaintained by men of good moral character. **PTQ**
4. Even in the preceding centuries, the Popes seemed to be willing to lie, forge documents, kill, or commit potentially sexual acts (So much for the vows of celibacy).
 - i. The Donation of Constantine is a good example of this as it was a pretty easily noted forgery that the Papacy used.
 - ii. Pope Leo, from the time of Charlemagne, was saved from his opponents, over charges of perjury and adultery.³
5. One aspect that greatly increased the amount of wicked Popes was the appointment of men to the office of Pope by Theophylact. **PTQ**

¹ William J. Bennett, [*Tried by Fire: The Story of Christianity's First Thousand Years*](#) (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2016) 327.

² Ibid., 329.

³ Bruce L. Shelley, [*Church History in Plain Language*](#), ed. Marshall Shelley, 5th Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 213.

B. Particular exploits

1. Simony

- “The first known case of papal simony (the buying or selling of ecclesiastical privileges) seems to have taken place with two different candidates for pope under the rule of the ill-tempered Ostrogothic king Theodoric II.” (493-526)⁴ **PTQ**

2. Sexual Immorality

- i. Sergius III – “Pope Sergius III, who had deposed not one but two rival claimants to the papacy in 904, and sometime later in the year had both men strangled in prison. Sergius also became involved with Theophylact’s daughter, Marozia, and from their union would come a child who would later become Pope John XI (reigned 931–935).”⁵
 - ii. John XII – “John was only eighteen when he became the Vicar of Christ. His sexual exploits were legendary, and one historian wrote that he “made the sacred palace into a whorehouse.” This intemperance, in addition to his meddling in political conflicts, was too much for the German emperor Otto I. In 963, at Otto’s behest, the church called a synod at Rome with the purpose of deposing him. Fifty Italian and German bishops called John to defend himself on charges of adultery, simony, incest, murder, and sacrilege. He never showed up, and responded that he in fact would have everyone involved excommunicated if they removed him from the Holy See. At the synod, a number of clerics supplied the details of John’s seemingly endless indiscretions, sexual and otherwise. One said that they had seen him ordain a deacon in a horse stable. Another swore he had made a ten-year-old boy a bishop. He had fornicated with two widows, a concubine, and his own niece. He had a subdeacon castrated and killed. He played dice and invoked Jupiter and Venus for good luck. And he never made the sign of the cross. It is fitting that John is said to have died while in the act of adultery,”⁶
 - iii. Benedict IX – “(reigned 1032–1048) was only twenty when he became pope but had already established a reputation for hedonistic living...Benedict too had a rapacious sexual appetite, which, it was said, extended to both men and women. Other accusations included organizing bands of priests to dress up as robbers, regular applications of burns and tortures on his enemies, and bestiality. Benedict’s low point was his decision to sell the papacy to his godfather, and his subsequent decision to use his own army to take it back. Benedict’s actions ultimately led to his dismissal for the charge of simony.”⁷ **PTQ**
- ### 3. “Christian” power grabs
- i. John VIII – “He involved himself very heavily in the affairs of the Carolingians, and feuded with the patriarch of Constantinople on the question of who should have more influence over the Bulgarian church. In the end, John was murdered by being

⁴ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 330.

⁵ Ibid., 332.

⁶ Ibid.,

⁷ Ibid., 332-333.

smashed in the head with a hammer, after the poison slipped to him proved to work too slowly.”⁸

4. General wickedness

- i. Stephen VII – “Ultimately ruled only fifteen days as pope, desired to humiliate his deceased predecessor, Formosus, as a heretic. When Stephen took the papal throne, he ordered the body of Formosus exhumed. The corpse was then brought into the papal palace for a synod, and Stephen commanded the deceased Formosus to testify in his own defense. Because the disinterred body could produce no testimony but silence, a guilty verdict was pronounced against Formosus, and his rotting body was stripped naked. Stephen ordered the three fingers used for blessings cut off from the hand of the corpse, the whole of which was then thrown in the Tiber River.”⁹ **PTQ**

C. Using a mix of catholic and other reputable sources, these Popes in (RED) have been validly and historically verified as doing these sexually immoral or scandalous. Those in purple are legendary.

1. Joan (9th Century)
2. Sergius III (904–911)
3. John XI (931–935)
4. John XII (955–963)
5. John XIII (965–972)
6. John XIV (983–984)
7. John XIX (1024–1032)
8. Benedict IX (1032–1044)
9. Benedict IX (1045)

II. The Hope of Reformation

A. Among the Masses

1. Much to no one’s surprise, the corruption in the church, most specifically the papacy itself, caused great heartache among the general populace.
 - i. Bennet notes where the actual encouragement to reform the church often derived from, “Their decision to confront church abuses was partly the cumulative, calculated political response of local lords to the Christian masses of Europe who protested the injustices of the church.”¹⁰ **PTQ**
2. Generally. Christianized Europe hated the wickedness and instability that came from wicked Papal episcopates.
 - i. “Trends of immorality that had begun in the seventh and eighth centuries had now spread throughout the Western church. And the people noticed.
 - ii. Beginning sometime in the tenth century, the feudal masses of Europe began organizing themselves into crude mobs to protest the corrupted relationship between church and state.
 - iii. These rallies became known as the “Peace of God” movement, which demanded that local lords extricate themselves from dealing too closely with the church. These rallies

⁸ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 331.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid., 335.

were partly the impetus for reforms at multiple levels. And no area was more badly in need of reform than the papacy.”¹¹ **PTQ**

- iv. Another annoyance that perpetuated the problem was simony. Bennet notes, “simony was a practice that guaranteed that positions in the church could be passed down through wealthy families over time, a process that limited the ability of able and righteous men to advance in the church hierarchy.”¹² **PTQ**

B. Among the Monasteries

1. The History

- i. Monasteries had previously become beacons of hope in learning and simple holy living through the implementation of the Benedictine order.
- ii. We addressed the focus on learning and education from monasteries as well.
- iii. This was further established with Charlemagne requiring it to be mandatory throughout the Holy Roman Empire.

2. The Problem

- i. The problem with the monasteries was the same as that of the papacy itself. Outside forces like Lords enforcing their will on the monastics. **PTQ**
- ii. Unfortunately, with the church's leadership on the decline, some laxity set in with the monasteries as well.

3. A Potential Solution

- i. “The Cluniac program began as a movement for monastic reform, but in time it called for the enforcement of clerical celibacy and the abolition of simony...The ultimate goal of the Cluniac reformers was to free the entire church from secular control and subject it to papal authority.”¹³ **PTQ**
- ii. The story of it's beginnings are from a local duke William of Aquitaine who founded a monastery and then made rules that no one could be in charge of it from the outside.
 - “I warn and admonish everyone, in God’s name and that of all his saints, and by the terrible Day of Judgment, that no secular prince, no count, no bishop, nor even the pontiff of the aforesaid Holy See is to attack the property of these servants of God, nor alienate it, harm it, grant it in fief, or appoint any prelate over it against these monks’ will.”¹⁴
- iii. This monastic rule grew in influence and spread across many monasteries, bringing a greater freedom and holiness across the land.
- iv. Unfortunately, as opposed to the manhandling of outside rule, what ended up weakening many of the Cluniac monasteries was relaxing standards due to many benefactors. **PTQ**
 - Joseph Early notes in regard to this that although the priests themselves held a vow of poverty, the monasteries ended up extremely wealthy. Having the finest

¹¹ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 329.

¹² Ibid., 334.

¹³ Shelley, [Church History in Plain Language](#), 221.

¹⁴ Bennett, [Tried by Fire](#), 337.

linen clothes for the monks, large amounts of food, and altars adorned with jeweled cups and candelabras adorned with gold and silver.¹⁵

C. Among the Papacy itself

1. The King of Germany, Henry III, found himself frustrated by the wickedness of the papacy as well as the infighting among Papal claimants. **PTQ**
2. He determined to appoint his own Pope and did so actually twice with the first dying shortly after being elected.
3. The second nominee was his cousin Bruno who became Pope Leo IX.
 - i. “Leo had some unease about his own appointment. Henry had appointed Leo, but Leo worried that the transaction appeared to be a form of simony. Therefore, as he set out for Rome, barefoot as a sign of humility, he insisted that he would not accept the office of pontiff unless he was elected to the office by the clergy and the people of Rome.”¹⁶ **PTQ**
 - ii. Leo’s program of reform concentrated on combating two evils in the church: sexual immorality and simony¹⁷
 - iii. He accomplished this via the creation and institution of cardinals in hopes of making a standardized way of electing Popes. **PTQ**
4. Shortly after Leo, one of his close confidants, Hildebrand, ended up becoming a Pope as well, namely Pope Gregory VII.
5. Gregory also put forth great effort in reforming the church from simony and gross misconduct.

III. **Helpful dates from this Period**

- A. 909: The duke of Aquitaine establishes a monastery at Cluny.
- B. 962: Otto I revives the Holy Roman Empire and is crowned Holy Roman Emperor by Pope John XII
- C. 1000s: Gregorian Reform in the church opposes the abuse of simony and establishes papal reforms.
- D. 1000s: Celibacy is required for all priests in the western church.
- E. 1000s–1100s: The monastery at Cluny flourishes.
- F. 1050: The Sacred College of Cardinals in Rome is established by Pope Leo IX.
- G. 1054: The East-West Schism separates the church into Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy.
- H. 1059: Pope Nicholas II decrees that cardinals elect the Pope.¹⁸

Conclusion: This time of reform although a good point in catholic History also failed to bring about full and lasting change. Thus, solidifying the need for people to speak out

¹⁵ Joseph Early, *A History of Christianity: An Introductory Survey* (Nashville, TN: B & H Academic, 2015), 170.

¹⁶ Bennett, [*Tried by Fire*](#), 333.

¹⁷ Ibid., 334.

¹⁸ Jessica Parks, [“Monastic Reform Spreads to the Papacy.”](#) in *Church History Themes*, ed. Zachariah Carter (Bellingham, WA: Faithlife, 2022).

about failings within the Catholic Church and eventually leading to further calls for reform.

As a final note, this note from Sinclair Ferguson is worthy of contemplation: “The narrative is a salutary one, if only because there are signs that the church today has not yet learned from history what happened to the churches in the period preceding the new Millennium and the 10th century, which has an echo in modern church life. The church sought to convey the impressive message by building massive and massively expansive cathedrals. Its worship was characterized by observation rather than participation. Its communication of its message to the people took place through the mystery of plays rather than through biblical exposition. In the local churches, it was led by superstars rather than ministers—individual leaders with their followers, some of whom desired more than anything else to be in the shoes of their leaders and, so, taste the same adulation.”¹⁹

A Timeline of Church History

	1 AD–200 AD	200 AD–400 AD	400 AD–600 AD	600 AD–800 AD	800 AD–1000 AD
PEOPLE	Peter (d.c.67) Paul (d.c.67) Ignatius (d.117) Polycarp (c.69–160) Justin Martyr (c.100–165) Tertullian (c.160–c.220) Origen (c.185–c.254)	Anthony of Thebes (c.251–356) Constantine (d.337) Athanasius (c.296–373) Jerome (c.345–420) Augustine of Hippo (354–430) Patrick (c.390–c.461)	Leo I (d.461) Boethius (c.480–524) Benedict of Nursia (480–c.543) Gregory I (c.540–604)	Charlemagne (742–814) Nicholas I (d.867)	
EVENTS	Pentecost (c.33) Paul’s Missionary Journeys (c.46–c.57) Neronian Persecution (64) Fall of Jerusalem (70) Completion of New Testament (c.95)	Edict of Milan (313) Council of Nicea (325) Council of Constantinople (371) Christianity becomes the official religion of the Roman Empire (381)	Latin Vulgate (c.400) Augustine’s <i>The City of God</i> (427) Council of Ephesus (431) Council of Chalcedon (451) Fall of Roman Empire in the West (476) Council of Orange (529)	Muslim Conquest (633–732) Iconoclastic Controversy (725–843) Donation of Pepin (752)	Charlemagne crowned Holy Roman Emperor (800) Donation of Constantine (c.800) Cluny monastery founded (910) ²⁰

¹⁹ Sinclair B. Ferguson, *In the Year of Our Lord: Reflections on Twenty Centuries of Church History* (Orlando, FL: Reformation Trust, 2018), 107-108.

²⁰ Robert C. Walton, [*Chronological and Background Charts of Church History*](#), Revised Edition, ZondervanCharts (Zondervan, 2018), 1.

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