CHAPTER III

THE CHURCH

REFERENCES: EMERTON, Mediæval Europe, Chapter XVI. (excellent); VAN DYKE, Age of the Renascence (primarily a history of the Papacy); ROBINSON, History of Western Europe, Chapters XVI., XVII.; LEA, A History of the Inquisition of the Middle Ages, 3 vols. (a scholarly account of mediæval heresies, abuses, and the origin of the friars); LEA, A History of Auricular Confession and Indulgences, 3 vols.; JESSOPP, The Coming of the Friars; CREIGHTON, History of the Papacy (councils, the temporal power, the first phase of the Reformation; from a Protestant point of view); PASTOR, History of the Popes (1305–1513) (a scholarly work by a Catholic).

SOURCE READINGS: ROBINSON, Readings in European History, Vol. I., Chapters II., XVI., XVII.; THATCHER and MCNEAL, A Source Book for Mediæval History, Sections V. and VIII.; Vol. III., No. 6 (heresies, Albigenses, etc.); TRANSLATIONS AND REPRINTS, University of Pennsylvania, Vol. IV., No. 4 (examples of ex-communication and interdict).

The mediæval Church is a state.

IT would be like giving a play without the hero to enumerate the states of Europe at the beginning of the Modern Period without presenting the greatest state of all—the Church. For a citizen of the twentieth century, above all for an American citizen, it is very difficult to realize what the Church was before the movement called the Reformation. For most of us a church is simply an organization which provides for the spiritual welfare of its members. This purpose the mediæval Church tried to satisfy and in the

fullest degree, but it also did a great deal more, and by exercising authority over its subjects in a great many matters that are now considered to belong more properly to the civil government, acquired the character of a state. We must, therefore, accustom ourselves to think of the mediæval Church not only as a spiritual association, but also as endowed with many of the essential functions of a state. Let us examine it under this double aspect, turning first to its organization.

Extent and organization of the Church

The Church embraced all western Europe, and all nations from Poland to Spain, from Ireland to Italy, owed allegiance to it. Its head was the Pope, who resided at his capital, Rome, and exercised an immense power by reason of the fact that he controlled the election of the bishops, appointed to many ecclesiastical offices, and approved all legislation. The territory of the Church was divided into dioceses, at the head of which stood bishops, while the dioceses were subdivided into parishes, presided over by priests. Priest, bishop, Pope, gives the ascending scale of the essential governing officials of the Church; but there are others which we cannot afford to neglect. Several dioceses were for the sake of convenience thrown together into a province, and one of the bishops thereof granted a kind of headship, under the name of archbishop. Legates were important officials in the nature of ambassadors, who carried the Pope's commands abroad, and spoke in his name. Very noteworthy were the cardinals. They were the highest dignitaries under the Pope, were associated with him in governing the Church, and upon them, constituted as a college or board, devolved the important business of electing each new successor of St. Peter.

The monks.

This organization went back in the main to very early Christian times. In the course of the Middle Ages there had grown up another body of churchmen who exercised

great influence—the monks. The monks were organized in societies called orders, dwelt in monasteries, and owned much land and many churches. The earliest and most famous order was the Benedictines, with the Cistercians, Carthusians, and others following in their footsteps. Later, in the thirteenth century, the two famous orders, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, came into being, fashioned in the heat of a great religious revival and pledged to ideals somewhat different from those of their earlier brethren. The older orders—all organized more or less on the Benedictine type—emphasized the life of studious contemplation of divine things in seclusion from the world and its temptations. The Franciscans and Dominicans, on the other hand, sought out the crowded centres to dispense among the poor and heavy-laden the offices of Christian charity. Dedicated to poverty, chastity, and obedience, and seeking their living, at least at first, from door to door, they were distinguished from the older monks under the name of begging brothers or friars (from Latin *frater*, *i.e.*, brother).

The friars.

The heads of monasteries were called abbots or priors. They and their flocks were usually subject to the jurisdiction of the bishop in whose diocese they resided, but occasionally individual abbots and, in the case of the begging friars, the orders themselves had obtained the right from the Pope to be responsible only to him. Naturally the Pope profited by this arrangement, for he acquired an army of immediate adherents. But the Pope's gain was the bishop's loss. In every diocese there was created a sharp competition, because the bishop and his following of priests looked with unconcealed displeasure upon the abbot or prior with his rival host of monks and friars, and many were the regions that were riven with this conflict.

The rivalry between abbots and bishops.

The officials of the Church from Pope to priest, and including the monastic orders, formed one of the component

The clergy is the first estate.

classes of the feudal state, and were called the clergy. The importance of the clergy appears from the fact that they everywhere composed *the first estate*. The rest of the inhabitants constituted the laity. The laity, however, in its turn, consisted of two classes, an upper, embracing the nobility, called *the second estate*, and a lower, composed of commoners—that is, merchants, peasants, artisans, and day-laborers—and named *the third estate*. In the government of the Church the laity had no voice whatever, for that privilege was reserved exclusively to the clergy, in recognition of the fact that only through their mediation, and by reason of the authority and jurisdiction vested in them, could the great work of saving human souls be carried on.

Clergy and laity.

We have now seen how the Church was governed. We have also seen that there was a governing class of Christians of particular distinction called clergy, set over a far more numerous class called laity. Even so, if the governing clergy had governed only in matters spiritual, there would be no reason for speaking of the Church as a state. But it engaged in other, distinctly secular activities, in the enumeration of which its judicial prerogatives deserve the first place. The Church possessed its own body of law called canon law, made up of acts of councils and decisions of Popes, and pronounced justice in its own courts. To these courts, conducted by ecclesiastics in ecclesiastical buildings, the clergy were exclusively answerable, which means that they could not be cited before the civil courts, while the laity itself had to appeal to them in many matters, such as marriage and divorce, which the state has since taken under its own jurisdiction. From this situation it followed that the individual ecclesiastic owed a primary allegiance to the Church, while the individual layman was expected to render obedience to two states, each claiming sovereignty over him in certain respects.

The Church has its own system of justice.

The Church taxes, marries, educates.

The Church also levied taxes. Finding the income from its immense estates insufficient to maintain its organization, it collected in every community of Europe a tax called tithe, amounting, as the word indicates, to one-tenth of the annual produce of the soil. If we add that the Church had complete control of marriage and divorce, probated wills, and had charge of education—all matters considered nowadays to belong to the competence of the state—we get some idea of the varied activity of the clergy in the Middle Ages. But let no one dream for a moment that these prerogatives were unlawful usurpations. They were exercised by the Church by universal consent, and every unprejudiced student will acknowledge that they were exercised in the main to the advantage of humanity. But they show very clearly that the Church of the Middle Ages discharged many of the functions which are reserved at present to the state.

Relation of Church and state.

A curious subject for modern reflection is how this state contrived at all to accord with the various civil states with which it existed side by side, and which it in a sense comprised. To begin with, the harmony was never perfect. The Church trenched upon so many prerogatives that were of the essence of sovereignty, that the state, also claiming sovereignty, grew jealous and alarmed. Two heads of equal authority are calculated to produce discord in this imperfect world, and yet, none the less, the Church and state, united for better and for worse, endured one another for many centuries. The explanation of the prolonged union lies in the fact that whenever there was a clash the weaker gave way, and the weaker in the Middle Ages was usually the state. This subordination of the civil to the spiritual, so astonishing to the modern mind, is explained by the favor with which the people of all classes regarded the Church. Quite apart from the awe which it inspired as the dispenser of eternal bliss, it had conferred so large a number of solid

benefits in protecting the weak against the strong, in preaching peace, and in spreading enlightenment that men looked up to it with love and trust, and defended it, when occasion arose, against all opponents, including the state.

The Church as the means of saving souls.

So much for the power and the splendor of the Church. And yet not to recognize at the heart and core of this magnificent structure, covering the whole earth, the simple mission of saving souls which it had received from Christ, would be to take the shell and let the kernel go. Whatever else the Church did, it certainly considered its main business to be the guidance of mankind in the spirit of Christ's teachings, and in this mystic calling lay its chief hold upon the mediæval mind. The Church received the new-born babe into its fold immediately after birth with the rite of baptism. If the growing boy sought instruction, he could get it only from the schools conducted by the clergy, for there were no others. Sin could be wiped out by repentance, but only the priest had the power to certify the Lord's forgiveness by means of confession and absolution. Marriage could be celebrated only with the sanction of the Church. Finally, when a man died, the priest granted or refused his body Christian burial. So from the cradle to the grave the Christian walked the path of life with his hand, like a child's, in the hand of his mother, the Church. The modern man relies, or aspires to rely, largely on his individual strength. We have remarked how this characteristic was fostered by the Renaissance. Since that time many men, perhaps presumptuously, have not been afraid to face the mysteries beyond the veil alone and unsupported. The mediæval man abominated any such pretension as hollow and blasphemous. The Church was founded upon a rock, the one sure and abiding thing in a world of change. She had arisen in obedience to a fiat that fell from the mouth of God; she had been dowered with grace to cleanse man from the consequences of sin

and reconcile him with the Father; finally, to him who yielded perfect obedience she opened, after a period of probation in purgatory, the gates of paradise. All this was accepted with such unconditional faith that the least doubt was looked upon as an enormity, and in case of persistence, invariably punished with death.

It was this sacred character of the Church that made that appeal to which men have ever been most susceptible. With hearts filled with piety and reverence they looked to her as the one sure door to salvation. And here we must enter for a moment the difficult realm of theology. The Church, recognizing the advantage of system, had taken the mystic faiths and practices of the early Christians and given them a precise theological formulation under the name of the seven sacraments. Chiefly by means of them the Church performed its work of saving souls, and when in the period of the Reformation the whole manner of this work was challenged, it was the sacraments that formed the particular object of Protestant attack. Without a knowledge of them the movement inaugurated by Luther must remain a riddle.

The seven sacraments.

1. Ordination. The fundamental sacrament was that of *ordination*, performed only by the bishop, and conferring upon the candidate to priesthood the sacerdotal character with the authority and power to perform other sacraments. By the sacrament of *baptism* the new-born child was received into the membership of the Church. The holy water on his brow was a symbolic act, signifying that his share in the guilt of Adam's fall was washed away. When the boy reached the age of about twelve years he received, after due instruction in the creed, *confirmation* from the bishop, who rubbed holy oil and balsam on his forehead. The significance of this act was to strengthen him to resist temptation. The sacrament of *marriage* bound man and wife in a holy bond

2. Baptism.

3. Confirmation.

4. Marriage.

which must never be sundered. At the hour of death the priest stood by the bedside, and by anointing the dying man with holy oil strengthened the soul to pass through its ordeal. This was called the sacrament of *extreme* (or last) *unction*. If a man fell victim to temptation and sinned—and in the view of the Church man, owing to his wicked nature, was constantly sinning—he could receive pardon only by the sacrament of *penance*. This consisted of four parts: contrition over the sin committed, satisfaction (or reparation) for the sinful act, confession to a priest, and absolution by the priest. Finally there was the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. It is the kernel of the mass, the noble and ancient service of the Church. During mass the bread and wine offered at the altar are mystically changed into the body and blood of Christ and given to the faithful in communion. The mystic change is called transubstantiation.

5. Extreme unction.

6. Penance.

7. Holy Eucharist or the Lord's Supper.

It will be observed that one sacrament, ordination, conferred upon the priest an especial quality and character. On this quality rested largely the claim of the clergy to be regarded as a body entirely distinct from the laity, and alone fitted to carry on the government of the Church. Other important consequences of the sacramental system demand attention. Since the sacraments were administered exclusively by the clergy, and since there was no salvation for sinful man without them, it follows not only that the clergy acquired an absolute command over all souls, but also that any requirements imposed in connection with the sacraments had to be conscientiously fulfilled. This brings us to the important matter of works, so fiercely attacked in the period of the Reformation. Not only did the sacraments, as described, impose a considerable number of ceremonious acts, but in the sacrament of penance lay the germ of a great many performances which require a further word. In addition to contrition, confession, and absolution, penance

Consequences of the sacramental system.

The sacraments encourage the belief in works.

to be complete called also for satisfaction. Now the theory of satisfaction is that, although the sin is forgiven by God by virtue of contrition, confession, and absolution, there remain certain temporal punishments which must be *satisfied* either in this world through good works or in the next by prolonged punishment in purgatory.[1] It will be seen that penance with its demand for satisfaction encouraged the performance of good works, which might take the form of pilgrimages, acts of charity, or contributions to the ecclesiastical building fund, and which would be moral and exalting if not performed mechanically or through fear. And therewith we reach a later outgrowth and adjunct of the sacrament of penance—the Indulgences. The Church came to believe that the temporal punishment which according to the theologians is a sure consequence of sin, can be remitted by means of the application of the treasure of the Church. The treasure of the Church is the whole sum of the merits of Jesus Christ, in addition to all the good works of all the saints. The saints and martyrs suffered with patience many unjust tribulations, which, reckoned as merits, more than sufficed to expiate such sins as they themselves may have committed while on earth. All such good works in excess of what they needed to make satisfaction for their own sins are called works of supererogation, comprise the treasure of the Church, and may at the discretion of the Church, that is, of its head the Pope, be applied to the benefit of others, who are lacking in such good works. One of the ways in which the Pope distributes the treasure of merits is by means of personal certificates, issued for a greater or a lesser fee, and called Indulgences.

Indulgences.

Indulgences and the treasure of merits.

[1] The functions, according to Catholic theology, of hell, purgatory, and paradise are clearly brought out by the following quotation from the manual of Father Dati: "There are many Christians who when they die are neither so perfectly pure and clean as to enter heaven, nor so burdened with unrepented deadly sin as to go to hell. Such as these the Church believes to be, for a time, in a middle state, called purgatory."

Since the clergy were the most exalted and richest class in Europe—the first estate—they paid the usual price of power by more than ordinary exposure to temptation. All through the Middle Ages serious charges of corruption were preferred against them. Occasionally Popes and prelates inaugurated a reform, but in spite of these praiseworthy efforts the abuses persisted or cropped up again. Human nature is weak and frail even under surplice and cowl. The chief abuse was perhaps simony—the buying and selling of Church offices. The Church officially recognized simony as a sin, but many clergymen and even Popes were none the less guilty of it. So long as abbacies and bishoprics produced huge revenues, it is easy to see how ambitious men should crave their possession even at the price of bribery. Another charge against the upper clergy was that they lived in pride and worldliness, quite out of keeping with followers of Christ and the apostles. Many rode to hunt and even to war, and lived in splendid palaces amid a round of festivals. The lower clergy were accused of squeezing excessive fees out of the parishioners for marriage, burial, and other necessary services, and there is reason to believe that many ecclesiastics of all ranks were guilty of gross carnal vices. To this latter charge the monks in particular seem to have laid themselves open.

Corruption of the clergy

Simony.

Worldliness.

Fees.

Sensuality.

These shortcomings of the clergy were scourged by ardent and upright priests all through the Middle Ages, sometimes even by men occupying the highest ecclesiastical positions. It did not derogate from the Church to make public recognition of the fact that some of its ministers were unworthy. Here then was a field of permissible criticism. But it was different when criticism began to gnaw at the organization and doctrine of the Church, stamped with a holy and unalterable character, and proclaimed and lauded as God's own handiwork. Against such critics the Church

Permissible and impermissible criticism.

Excommunication.

was armed with formidable weapons. She branded them as heretics, and launched her excommunication against them, excluding them from her fellowship and the association of the living. There she left them, for an ancient principle forbade her to shed blood; but the state, at this juncture, stepped in to seize the heretic as a public enemy and put him to death, usually by fire.

Heresy in the Middle Ages.

In spite of these rigorous measures heresy and heretics were not uncommon in the Middle Ages. Even in that period of authority some men were inclined to urge their individual convictions. Of the occasional isolated heretics, who were perpetually cropping up at odd corners of Europe, there is no need to speak. But there were concerted movements, affecting a wide area, which really jeopardized the existence of the Church. Of these collective heresies, two, the Waldensian and the Albigensian, gave the Church much concern about the beginning of the thirteenth century. The Waldensian movement originated with Peter Waldo of

Waldensians and Albigensians.

Lyons, who preached poverty, humility, and personal sanctification. He did not attack the Church directly, but professed to be able to do without it as a means of salvation. The Albigensians, who were particularly strong in a town of southern France called Albi—hence their name—went much further, asserting that the religion of their time was false and the Church a usurper. The Church treated both sects as enemies, but naturally felt more implacably hostile toward the Albigensians. When the ordinary method of excommunication proved ineffective, Pope Innocent III. in 1208 preached a crusade against them, which resulted in their being crushed in a general and horrible massacre. To complete the work of the crusade, the Inquisition was invented. It was composed of special tribunals, that is, ecclesiastical law-courts, which investigated disbelief, and brought the offenders to punishment. This is the first appearance of this

famous institution, which afterward acquired so unenviable a reputation in Spain.

Wyclif.

But the tale of mediæval heresy does not end here. In the fourteenth century John Wyclif of England attacked the Pope, criticised Indulgences, pilgrimages, and other features of the Church, and soon boasted a considerable following. He himself was not seriously molested, and died peaceably in his bed in 1384; however, his followers, called Lollards, were presently persecuted and hunted to death. But criticism was in the air and had come to stay. Wyclif, dying, passed on the torch of protest to John Huss of Bohemia, and

Huss.

when Huss was sentenced to be burned at the stake by the General Council of the Church, sitting at Constance (1415), his death raised such a commotion among his countrymen and followers that, although crusade after crusade was preached against them, they were not crushed for many years.

As Wyclif followed the Waldensians, and Huss Wyclif, so Huss found a successor in Martin Luther. The revolt inaugurated by him stamped its name and character on the first century of the Modern Period. Why Luther's movement succeeded where so many earlier ones had failed will appear in the following pages.

PART I

THE REFORMATION