

- (a) Give an account of the rise and decline of the medieval papacy.
- (b) Evaluate the effectiveness of the papacy in governing the Western Church in the middle ages.

INTRODUCTION

The medieval Papacy or the middle age history of papacy covers the period between the 5th and the 15th century AD. This is an extensive period of time, the history of which could not be fully narrated within the limited number of words recommended for this essay. Nevertheless, I would try to concentrate on selective account, focusing on the key events, which illustrates its rise and its decline. For the second part of the question, I would evaluate the effectiveness of the papacy in governing the Western Church, basing my judgement on a particular element and what seems to me as individual pope's contribution and achievement in the Middle Ages. However, it is worthy of note from the onset that, one may not be able to separate completely those events that gave rise to the medieval papacy from those factors and events that made effective the governing of the western Church by the medieval popes. All the same, I would make effort to give more information on the latter as to prove its effectiveness.

THE RISE OF MEDIEVAL PAPACY

The Gothic War (536 – 553) passed up and down Italy like a withering flame, leaving disorder and poverty in its wake. Urban economy was in chaos. Political institutions lay in ruins; in Rome no secular authority survived except that of imperial legates weakly supported by unpaid and distant troops. In this collapse of worldly powers

the survival of ecclesiastical organisation appeared even to the emperors as the salvation of the state. In 554 Justinian promulgated a decree requiring that "fit and proper persons, able to administer the local government, be chosen as governors of the provinces by the bishops and chief persons of each province." This seems to me as the first step toward the rise of medieval papacy.

One of the most outstanding popes that contributed immensely to the rise of papacy was Gregory. He spent himself in ecclesiastical administration, papal politics, agricultural management, military strategy, theological treatises, mystic ecstasies, and a solicitous concern with a thousand details of human life. His administration of the Church was marked by economic wisdom and stern reform. He checked exploitation on the papal estates, advanced money to tenant farmers, and charged no interest.

Instead of spending the revenues of the church in building new edifices, he used them in charity, in gifts to religious institutions throughout Christendom, and in redeeming captives of war. To every poor family in Rome he distributed monthly a portion of corn, wine, cheese, vegetables, oil, fish, meat, clothing and money; and every day his agents brought cooked provisions to the sick or infirm. His letters, stern to negligent ecclesiastics or to political potentates, are jewels of sympathy to persons in distress: to a peasant exploited on Church lands, to a slave girl wishing to take the veil, to a noble lady worried about her sins. He was an excellent diplomat and a strategist, wonderfully gifted in negotiation and persuasion. For example, when the duke of Spoleto, at war with the Imperial exarch of Ravenna, threatened

Rome, Gregory signed a peace with the duke without consulting the exarch or the emperor. When the Lombards besieged Rome, Gregory shared in organising defense. These initiatives of Gregory and those other things listed above, contributed greatly to the rise of the medieval papacy.

In an age of war and chaos, of doubt and wandering, the Benedictine monastery was a healing refuge. It took dispossessed or ruined peasants, students longing for some quiet retreat, men weary of the strife and tumult of the world, and said to them: 'Give up your pride and freedom, and find here security and peace.' There was no distinction of persons in the monastery. In fact, freeborn men were not preferred to those coming from servitude, unless there be some other and reasonable cause. This gave rise to a hundred similar Benedictine monasteries throughout Europe, each independent of the rest, all subject only to the pope, serving as communistic isles in a raging individualistic sea. The Benedictine Rule and order proved to be among the most enduring creations of medieval papacy that contributed to its rise.

By a happy coincidence the "False Decretals" appeared shortly before the election of one of the most commanding figures in papal history, Nicholas I (858-67). Standing on the premises of the false Decretals which was accepted by all Christians – that the Son of God had founded the Church by making Peter her first head, and that the bishops of Rome inherited their power from Peter in direct line – Nicholas reasonably concluded that the pope, as God's representative on earth, should enjoy a suzerain authority over all Christians – rulers as well as subjects – at least in matters of faith and morals. Nicholas eloquently expounded this simple argument, and no

one in Latin Christendom dared contradict it. Kings and archbishops could only hope that he would not take it too seriously. But many popes assumed the authenticity of these documents, and used them to prop policies that eventually helped the medieval papacy to rise.

THE DECLINE OF MEDIEVAL PAPACY

Reform reached Rome last of all. The populace of the city had always been unmanageable, even when the Imperial eagle had wielded legions in its claws; now the pontiffs, armed only with a weak militia, the majesty of their office, and the terror of their creed, found themselves the prisoners of a jealous aristocracy, and of a citizenry whose piety suffered from nearness to Peter's throne. The Romans were too proud to be impressed by kings, and too familiar to be awed by popes; they saw in the Vicars of Christ men subject like themselves to sickness, error, sin, and defeat; and they came to view the papacy not as a fortress of order and a tower of salvation, but as a collection agency whereby the pence of Europe might provide the dole of Rome. By the tradition of the Church no pope could be elected without the consent of the Roman clergy, nobles, and populace. The rulers of Spoleto, Benevento, Naples, and Tuscany, and the aristocracy of Rome divided into factions as of old; and whichever faction prevailed in the city intrigued to choose and sway the pope. Between them they dragged the papacy to the lowest level in its history.

Apart from that, there were other three internal problems that agitated the Church at this time: simony in the papacy and the episcopacy, marriage or concubinage in the secular clergy, and sporadic incontinence among the monks. Simony – sale of church

offices or services – was the ecclesiastical correlate of contemporary corruption in politics. Good people were one source of simony; so the mother of Guibert of Nogent, anxious to devote him to the Church, paid ecclesiastical authorities to make him a cathedral canon at eleven; a church council at Rome in 1099 mourned the frequency of such cases. As bishops in England, Germany, France and Italy administered profane as well as ecclesiastical affairs, and were feudally endowed with lands or villages or even cities to supply their necessary revenues, ambitious men paid secular powers great sums for such appointments, and greedy potentates overrode all decencies to earn these bribes. In Narbonne a boy of ten was made archbishop on paying 100,000 solidi (1016)

The Church had long since opposed clerical marriage on the ground that a married priest, consciously or not, would put his loyalty to wife and children above his devotion to the Church. Among the general clergy the moral problem hovered between marriage and concubinage. In the ninth and tenth centuries the marriage of priests was customary in England, Gaul, and north Italy. Pope Hadrian II (867-72) himself had been a married man; and Bishop Ratherius of Verona (tenth century) reported that practically all priests in his diocese were married. By the beginning of the eleventh century celibacy in the secular clergy was though often contrary to the canons and ideals of the Church, it was quite in accord with the customs and moral judgments of the times. At Milan for instance, a married priest stood higher in public repute than one unmarried; the latter was suspected of concubinage. Even concubinage the regular cohabitation of an unmarried man with an unmarried woman – was condoned by public opinion.

The problem of investiture seemed simpler than that of clerical marriage. Assuming, as kings and popes agreed, that Christ had established the Church, it seemed clear that her bishops and abbots should be chosen by churchmen rather than by laymen; and surely it was scandalous that a king should not only appoint bishops, but (as in Germany) invest them with the Episcopal staff and ring – sacred symbols of spiritual power. But to the kings an opposite conclusion was equally evident; they had been invested by the king with lands, revenues, and secular responsibilities, (one of the most devastating conflict within papacy). In other word, lay appointment had begotten most of the simony, worldliness, and immorality that had appeared in the German and French episcopates.

For instance, it was recorded that pope Innocent VIII (1484 – 1492) owed his elevation to the Papacy in part to unseemly factional strife among the cardinals at the time of his election and to the powerful support of a nephew of his predecessor, Sixtus IV. That election was a glaring evidence of the deterioration of both the papacy and monasticism. Before ordination he had been married and had had a son by his wife and two illegitimate children. While in his private morals this widower seems to have reformed after being made a priest, he proved to be an amiable but weak administrator. He was largely under the influence of the corrupt nephew of Sixtus IV to who he owed his promotion, and under him the morals of the papal curia from the cardinals down were lamentable. In urgent need of income, partly because of his embroilment in Italian politics, Innocent VIII sold church offices and created new ones, also to be sold.

The hierarchy from the parish clergy through the bishops and archbishops, and including the Papal court and the Popes themselves, was corrupt. In much of Western Europe the structure, which had been developed with the express purpose of serving the Christian community and lifting it towards the Christian standard had become a handicap rather than an aid. The papacy especially, which many of the earlier reformers had strengthened in the hope that through it the entire Church would be purified and all society brought to conformity with the purpose of God in Christ, had become a scandal. Several of the cardinals lived in luxury in the style of secular princes, hunted, gambled, entertained lavishly, and had mistresses.

Outstanding among them was Rodrigo Borgia, nephew of Calixtus III. Handsome, able, genial, an orator, forceful, compellingly attractive to women, possessing a huge income from the benefices lavished upon him, he had been elevated to the position of a cardinal when he was still under thirty years of age and served prominently under five Popes. For all of his offspring he sought position and wealth. One of them, Caesar Borgia, was designed by his father for a career in the Church. At the age of seven he was given benefices. Later he was made bishop and when his father became Pope he was made archbishop and then cardinal.

In my own view, the most important events that brought about the final tumbling down of the medieval papacy started when in 1309 the seat of the papacy was

removed to Avignon. Claiming their place as head of the Catholic Church by virtue of the fact that they held the post of Bishop of the Church of Rome, because of the disorder in Italy for which the centuries-long conflict between their predecessors and the Holy Roman Emperors was largely responsible, the popes found residence in that city dangerous if not intolerable. The first Avignon Pope, Clement V, was subservient to Philip IV, "the Fair," King of France.

The Papacy remained at Avignon until 1377. Although technically that city was not then in France, during most of its years there the Papacy was under French influence. As mentioned above, life was luxurious for the cardinals and their dependents and the financial devices used to support them bore heavily on Western Europe and provoked much criticism. Seven Popes made Avignon their residence. None was as evil as some who were to follow. Several of them put their relatives in lucrative and important posts. The very complexity and weight of the machinery, which had been constructed with the ostensible welfare of Christendom and of the millions of individuals who constituted its population as its purpose entailed abuses, which even the strongest and most high-minded of the Avignon Pontiffs, could not eliminate and could scarcely check.

The papacy was paying the price for having utilised the kind of power, which seemed essential to the realisation of its objectives but which entailed contradictions of Christian ethical and spiritual principles. Conditions continued to deteriorate and permeated the entire church of which the papacy was the head. Pluralism (the holding of two or more benefices and drawing the incomes from them), absenteeism

(not living in the post the income from which came to the titular holder), self-seeking greed, and loose living among the clergy mounted.

Not only did the papacy sacrifice much of its moral leadership. It also had its administrative powers restricted. It was losing the struggle to free the Church from domination by lay princes and to make the papacy supreme in all aspects of the life of Christendom, a struggle in which the great popes of the middle ages had seemed to be succeeding. In some states the monarchs, supported by the rising tide of nationalism, curtailed the papal revenues and judicial functions and limited the power of the Pontiffs to control the choice of the higher officers of the Church in their realms. Thus in 1438, the Pragmatic Sanction had reduced the papal revenues from France. Not far from the same time, similar actions were taken for England and Germany. Late in the fifteenth century Sixtus IV was constrained to concede to Ferdinand and Isabella the right to nominate to Spanish sees. In the fifteenth century the custom grew in France of taking appeals from the church courts to those of the king. All these situations eventually led to the collapse of the medieval papacy.

THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PAPACY

Apparently, the above-mentioned "False Decretals" later fortify the papacy. We do not know the date or provenance of these Decretals; probably they were put together at Metz about 842. The author was a French cleric who called himself Isidorus Mercator. It was an ingenious compilation. Along with a mass of authentic decrees by councils or popes, it included decrees and letters that it attributed to pontiffs from Clement 1 (91-100) to Melchiades (311-14). These early documents were designed to

show that by the oldest traditions and practice of the Church no bishop might be deposed, no Church council might be convened, and no major issue might be decided, without the consent of the pope. Even the early pontiffs, by these evidences, had claimed absolute and universal authority as vicars of Christ on earth. Pope Sylvester I (314-35) was represented as having received, in the "Donation of Constantine," full secular as well as religious authority over all western Europe.

Furthermore, the occupants of the Fisherman's throne had varied in ability and achievement, but the most outstanding of them had made their office a force in the major aspects of the life of Western Europe and one to be reckoned with in the Byzantine Empire and Western Asia. In their efforts to implement their dream the popes had developed an ecclesiastical structure which reached throughout most of Western Europe and which made necessary an elaborate bureaucracy at its centre. In addition to the pope the chief figures in the bureaucracy were the cardinals.

After about a hundred years after the death of Gregory, Innocent III made effort to realise a large part of Gregory's dream of a world united under the Vicar of Christ. We also read that though, Hildebrand grasped higher than his reach, but for a decade he was able to raise the papacy to the greatest height and power that it had yet known. His uncompromising war against clerical marriage succeeded, and was prepared for his successors a clergy whose undivided loyalty immeasurably strengthened the Church. His campaign against simony and lay investiture prevailed in the end. His use of papal legates extended the power of the popes into

every parish in Christendom. Through his initiative, papal elections became free from royal domination. This gave the Church an amazing succession of strong men.

We also read about Rodrigo Borgia who was elected pope in 1492. He took the title of Alexander VI, and held the post until his death in 1503. He proved to be an able and strong administrator. He was hardworking and was expert in the business and etiquette of the Vatican. At one time he appeared to give himself to much needed reforms in the Church. He encouraged some of the religious orders. Like Sixtus IV, he was clearly on the side of those who, in the current disputes on the subjects, held to the immaculate conception of the Virgin Mary. He defended the prerogatives of the Church in the Low Countries against those who were encroaching on them. Thus, the western church was effectively governed during the middle ages.