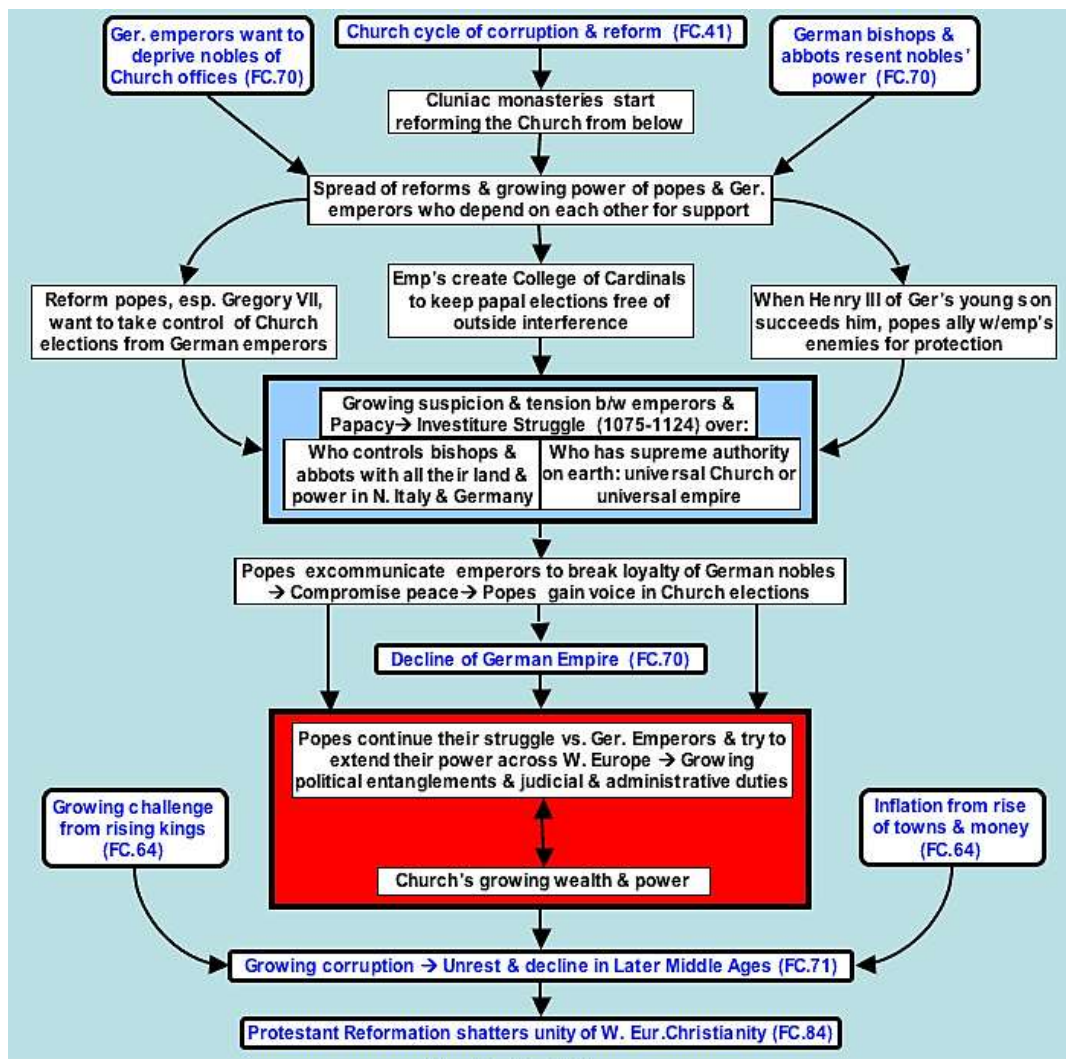


### FC66 Rise of the medieval Papacy (c.900-1300)



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Figure 1. FC66 in the Hyperflow of History  
Covered in multimedia lecture #6984.

#### A. Introduction: the plight of the Church in the Early Middle Ages

Few stories better illustrate the problems of the medieval Catholic Church than the story of Pope Formosus. When this pope died in 856, his troubles were far from over. A personal enemy became the new pope and had Formosus' body dug up and put on trial. To no one's surprise, the late Formosus was convicted of illegally seizing the papal throne. His body was stripped of its priestly vestments, the fingers on his right hand (used for giving the benediction) were cut off, and his body was thrown into the Tiber River. Not surprisingly, the rest of the Church, ranging from bishops, archbishops, and abbots down to the lowliest monks and parish priests, was also seething with corruption.

The Church's wealth, some 20-30% of the land in Western Europe, was a big part of the problem. With little money in circulation at this time, land was the main source of wealth and power, making the Church the object of the political ambitions of nobles throughout Europe. Naturally, such nobles, who were warriors by trade, usually ignored and even trampled over the religious interests of the Church.

## B. The zeal for reform (910-1073)

Even in such troubled times, the Church's ongoing cycle of corruption and reform meant there were always men of religious conviction determined to set the Church back on its spiritual path. As so often happened, reform started in the monasteries, in this case in the monastic house founded at Cluny, France in 910 C.E. The monks of Cluny placed themselves directly under the pope's power and out of the reach of any local lords. That meant virtual independence from any outside authority, since the popes were too weak to exert any authority from so far away. Technically, they were Benedictines and there was no separate order of Cluniac monks, but their agenda of reforms became so widely adopted that they have been referred to as Cluniacs ever since. Over the next 150 years, Cluniac reforms spread to hundreds of monasteries across Western Europe.

The zeal for reform was also strong in Germany, especially among the upper clergy and the emperors. The emperors saw church reform as a way to weaken the power of the nobles trying to control church lands and elections. By the same token, devout bishops and abbots looked to the German emperors for protections from ambitious nobles. As a result, both German emperors and German clergy supported the growing reform movement. Emperors put reformers into church offices throughout Germany. Such men were generally loyal to the emperor since they owed their positions to him and saw him as the main defender of reform.

The emperor, Henry III, even appointed four reform popes. One of them, Leo IX, carried out numerous reforms against simony (selling church offices), clerical marriage, violence, and overall moral laxity among the clergy. He even felt strong enough to tangle with the patriarch in Constantinople, thus causing a schism (break) within the Church in 1054 that was never healed. Since that time, the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox Churches have functioned as two separate Churches. Consequently, by the mid eleventh century, the popes were taken seriously as a real moral force in Western Europe. However, a storm was about to break that would destroy relations between Church and Empire.

## C. The Investiture Struggle (1073-1122)

In 1056, the reform Church's main ally and guardian, Henry III, died leaving a child, Henry IV, as his successor. This deprived the Church of any effective imperial protection until the young emperor came of age. As a result, the popes had to seek new allies, and settled on the Normans in Southern Italy and the dukes of Tuscany in Northern Italy. Both of these were enemies of the German emperors, thus creating a tense situation between the popes and Henry IV when he came of age. One reform adding to the tension was the creation of the College of Cardinals whose job it was to meet in private to elect a new pope. Designed largely to keep the turbulent Roman mob out of papal elections, it also kept the German emperors out of direct participation, although they still could veto any choice the College of Cardinals made.

Another problem was the pope, Gregory VII, an ardent and stubborn reformer who agitated to replace imperial with papal control of Church elections. Growing suspicion and tension between pope and emperor finally erupted in the Investiture Struggle over who controls Church elections and invests (bestows) the bishops and abbots with the symbols of their power.

The stakes in this fight were high on both sides. Henry needed control of the bishops and abbots to maintain effective control of his empire. Pope Gregory felt the Church had to free itself from outside secular control if it were to fulfill its spiritual mission. There was also the larger question of who was the real head of the Christian world: the Universal Empire or the Universal Church. Although the Byzantine emperor in the east usually held sway over the patriarch in Constantinople, this question of supremacy, extending back through Charlemagne to the later Roman Empire, had never been resolved in Western Europe.

The Investiture struggle was a bitterly fought conflict on both sides. Pope and emperor stirred each other's subordinates into revolt. The reform bishops, appointed up to this time by the emperor, generally supported him against the pope. Meanwhile, the pope stirred the German nobles into rebellion against Henry. When

Henry and his bishops declared Gregory a false pope, Gregory excommunicated Henry. Excommunication could be a decisive weapon since it released a ruler's vassals from loyalty to him until he did penance to get accepted back into the Church. As a result, Henry did such penance by standing barefoot in the snow outside the pope's palace at Canossa.

However, the struggle was hardly over. Gregory was driven from Rome and died in exile in the Norman kingdom to the south, while Henry's reign ended with Germany torn by civil war and revolts. Finally, a compromise was reached where only clergy elected new bishops and abbots, but in the presence of an imperial representative who invested the new bishop or abbot with the symbols of his secular (worldly) power. Although the struggle between popes and emperors continued for centuries, the popes had won a major victory, signifying the Church's rising power and a corresponding period of decline for Germany.

#### **D. The Papal monarchy at its height (1122-c.1300)**

The papal victory in the Investiture Struggle and the higher status it brought the popes led to many more people turning to the Church to solve their problems, in particular, legal ones. Canon (church) law and courts were generally seen as being more fair, lenient and efficient than their secular counterparts.

However, the more the Church's prestige grew, the more its courts were used, and the more its bureaucracy grew. As a result, the popes found themselves increasingly tied down with legal and bureaucratic matters, leaving less time for spiritual affairs. The popes of the 1200's generally had more background in (church) law than theology. By and large, they were good popes, but also ones with an exalted view of the Church's position. The most powerful of these popes, Innocent III (1199-1215), even claimed that the clergy were the only true full members of the Church.

Unfortunately, growing power and wealth again diverted the Church from its spiritual mission, and led to growing corruption. Two other factors aggravated this problem. One was the rising power of kings, which triggered bitter struggles with the popes over power and jurisdiction. Popes often used questionable means in these fights, such as overuse of excommunication, declaring crusades against Christian enemies, and extracting forced loans from bankers by threatening to declare all debts to the bankers erased if the loans were not granted. A second problem was inflation, which arose from the rise of towns and a money economy. The Church, with its wealth based in land, constantly needed money and therefore engaged in several corrupt practices: simony, selling indulgences (to buy time out of Purgatory for one's sins), fees for any and all kinds of Church services, and multiple offices for the same men (who were always absent from at least one office).

All these factors combined to ruin the Church's reputation among the faithful and undermine its power and authority. Eventually, they would lead to the Protestant Reformation, shatter Christian unity in Western Europe for good, and help pave the way for the emergence of the modern world.

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#### **REFERENCES**

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