

The Gates Of Hell Shall Not Prevail...

Lessons from The Story Of The Church

The Age Of Innocent

“Jesus answered, “My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight.”

John 18:36

We have seen the power and influence of the bishops of Rome grow steadily from the days of the early church and through the Middle Ages. It was in the reign of Innocent III that it reached its height.

Innocent III

Innocent III, who became pope in 1198 at the age of 37, claimed to be the “vicar of Christ” — the visible manifestation of Christ on earth — exercising Christ’s supreme authority not just over the Church but over all human beings, all earthly kingdoms and even over the angels and demons. He insisted on the absolute right of the papacy to control the beliefs and moral conduct of the entire Catholic world — and that involved the right to depose any king or emperor who broke the Church’s laws. Political circumstances at the time allowed him to make those claims a practical reality and he made his power felt across Western Europe.

At the beginning of his reign, war between two rival claimants to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire plunged Germany into confusion and Innocent seized the opportunity to make himself political master first over the city of Rome and then over all of central Italy. He established the Papal States as an independent political dominion that survived until the 19th Century.

By stirring up and supporting an alliance against the victorious contender for the Imperial crown— a German — and placing his own candidate on the throne Innocent permanently weakened the authority of subsequent Emperors and the influence of Germany in Europe. In a disputed election to the archbishopric of Canterbury he forced king John of England into submission by placing England under an interdict — forbidding all English clergy to perform any of their sacramental or spiritual functions. For four years England went without church services. In the end Innocent excommunicated John, released all English nobles from their oath of loyalty to him and summoned the other kings of Europe to dethrone him. John was forced to grovel, surrendered his entire kingdom and England and Ireland became the property of the pope. Innocent also humiliated the French monarchy in similar fashion. Europe’s three greatest kingdoms had been forced to bow to the will of the Vicar of Christ

Innocent strengthened the position of the pope within the church. He imposed a tax on all Catholic clergy, to be paid to the papacy, and expanded the system of papal “legates” These were ambassadors appointed directly by the pope to oversee church affairs in different localities. They had authority over bishops to ensure that the bishops carried out the pope’s policies.

At the Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 he brought in wide-ranging reform measures. The Council decreed, for example, that all Catholics must confess their sins to their priest at least once a year, and receive Holy Communion at least once a year at Easter. It was this Council that gave the first official definition of transubstantiation. It also declared that in Christian societies Jews must wear distinctive clothing and live separate from the Christian population. This ultimately led to the expulsion of all Jews from England, France, Spain and Portugal and the massacre of thousands of Jews in Spain and Germany.

The Inquisition

Up to this time the Western Church had left it to local bishops to deal with heresy within their dioceses. They were often ineffective. Innocent turned the investigation of heresy into a

centrally controlled, systematic operation carried out by special papal agents and so laid the basis for what soon became the “holy office” or “Inquisition”.

The Inquisition was a separate organisation within the Catholic Church, subject only to the pope and dedicated to uncovering and punishing heretics. It became the most feared organisation of the later Middle Ages.

Anyone suspected of heresy was arrested and tortured until he confessed. Those who confessed had financial penalties and acts of penance forced upon them. Those who did not confess, depending on the seriousness of the heresy, had property confiscated, faced life in prison or were handed over to the secular authorities to be burned at the stake. Once someone was accused by the Inquisition it was almost impossible for him to be acquitted.

Behind the concerted efforts of the Inquisition to suppress heresy lay the fact that from about 1150 on there was an upsurge of religious dissent across Europe. A number of new religious movements flourished. The two most widespread were the Waldensians and the Cathars.

The Waldensians

Sometime around 1175 Valdes, a French merchant, was challenged by Jesus’ words to the rich young ruler, “Go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me” (Matthew 19:21). He followed the command literally and began a new life as a lay preacher, living on voluntary contributions from others. He soon had a band of followers known as “the poor men of Lyons” or Waldensians. However Church law restricted preaching to the clergy and in 1184 the pope excommunicated all Waldensians.

Having been forced out of the Church the Waldensians assembled for worship and celebrated Holy Communion among themselves. They began to think afresh about many other aspects of Christian belief and concluded that the Bible should be the supreme rule of belief and practice. They rejected the infallible teaching authority of the pope. They rejected the Church’s teaching about transubstantiation, purgatory, prayers for the dead and indulgences. In time they set up schools to train preachers and evangelists.

The Waldensian movement spread from Lombardy into Spain, Austria and Eastern Germany and, in addition to those who were themselves committed Waldensians; many who continued as members of the Catholic Church supported their preachers and training schools and attended Bible studies led by Waldensians. In some ways they were “Protestants” before the Reformation. Many died as martyrs but they survived in northern Italy until, in the 16th Century, they linked up with the Protestant Reformation. The Waldensian church still exists in Italy today.

The Cathars

The largest and most influential dissenting movement of the time was the Cathars. Their beliefs were largely those of the Gnostics from the early Church period. By 1200 they were a powerful force in southern France and it was the French Cathars (who came to be known as Albigensians) who aroused the greatest hostility from the Catholic Church.

Innocent III set himself to eliminate them by the sword and proclaimed a crusade against them in 1209 — the Albigensian Crusade — promising spiritual rewards to all who took part. The resulting horrific bloodshed left southern France, which had been one of the most prosperous parts of Europe, a desolate wasteland. It also destroyed the French Waldensians for the crusaders did not distinguish between one “heretic” and another.

New Religious Movements

It was also in the time of Innocent III that some important new religious orders emerged: the Franciscans, founded by Francis of Assisi, the Dominicans, the Carmelites and the Augustinians. They presented a new kind of monasticism.. They were mendicant orders,¹ exempt from the authority of the local bishops and, rather than withdrawing from society, their

¹ A mendicant order is one which follows the practice of begging for food rather than cultivating it within the monasteries as had previously been the practice of most monks.

whole purpose was to win disciples. These orders were responsible for a new wave of missionary enterprise to Muslims and Mongols that continued until the middle of the 14th Century when it was halted by the Black Death.² Most of the great Catholic theologians and preachers of the later Middle Ages came from the mendicant orders.

Times Of Change

In some ways the age of Innocent III was a turning point. After his reign the power of the papacy went into decline and never again reached the heights achieved under his leadership. Dissenting groups continued to arise from within the church but now with increasing frequency and wider influence. Europe itself began to change with the growth of towns, cities, trade and industry. The old feudal system began to fall apart, the security it provided was lost with it and middle-class merchants took the place of the old feudal nobility. Capitalism had arrived.

Some Questions for Discussion

1. How do you think it was possible for the pope to achieve such a position of power in Europe?
2. Why do you think there was such an apparent increase in religious dissent from this time onwards?

For Further Study

Consider the New Testament teaching about the Kingdom of God in, for example Matthew 13, and compare it with pope Innocent III's attitude to temporal power.

² The Black Death, or plague, swept through Europe between 1347 and about 1400. A third of Europe's population perished — half of the population in some countries — the missionary programme stopped and it was another 200 years before the Church was able to effectively revive it.