

SOME LIMITS AND CAUSES OF THE CENTRALIZATION OF THE CHURCH

EDWARD A. RYAN, S.J.

Woodstock College

WHEN the former "gloomy Dean" of St. Paul's Cathedral in London, Dr. W. R. Inge, called Roman Catholicism a totalitarian religion, he was reiterating a charge which has frequently been made.¹ Struck by the centralization of the Church many sincere non-Catholics condemn the papal system as so much machinery for regimenting Christians, as an attempt to secure Christian unity by means of external organization. They think that Rome treats the Church as though it were not a supernatural society, the Body of Christ, but an ordinary society on the natural plane. They claim that Catholicism is a dictatorship working through a bureaucracy, endeavoring to accomplish Christ's work in a way and with means not His, trying to find a short cut and to hurry God's slow progress. These critics consider that the papacy has yielded to the temptation our Lord rejected, to gain the kingdom of the world by a pact with the prince of the world. In their opinion the Popes have, since medieval times, fashioned themselves on the model of the vanished Caesars rather than on that of Christ who came not to be ministered unto but to minister.²

Denunciations of this sort are inherent in the Protestant position. From the days of Luther, very opprobrious epithets have been hurled at Rome, and the papacy has been accused of corruption and tyranny.

¹ Dr. Inge was addressing the Modern Churchman's Conference at Cambridge in England on August 14th, 1950. The *New York Times* of the following day carried the account we use. The *London Times* of the same day confined its report to Inge's attack on Calvin and Luther and did not mention his characterization of Catholicism.

² For a succinct exposition of this position cf. A. P. Carleton, *Society, Natural and Divine* (London, 1941), pp. 128 ff., 133 f. Dr. Carleton apparently feels the force of the historical position of the papacy and might be willing to accept the Pope if the latter would consent not to act as a Pope. "There is no doubt," he writes, "that the power of the papacy developed in the hands of great men like Gregory VII who desired to reform the Church; and it is not difficult to trace in history how their endeavors, successful for a time, sowed the seed of much trouble for the future." Rev. George P. Howard, in his article "Protestants, Catholics and Papists," *Religion in Life*, XIX (1950), 530, states: "The average American Roman Catholic would probably be angered by the statement of Count Kalergi-Coudenove: 'Catholicism is the fascist form of Christianity.'"

The earlier Protestants were inclined to trace the disease of centralization to the times of St. Leo the Great (440–61) or at the latest to those of St. Gregory the Great (590–604). The Protestant masters of recent decades, Harnack, Sohm, Seeberg, taking a page from the book of Catholic opponents of the papacy, point out St. Gregory VII (1073–85) as the creator of the new Church. For the invisible church of Augustine, they assert, he substituted the visible Roman Church.

Opposition to centralization in the Church did not of course arise with Protestantism. It has existed particularly in France since the Western Church was first effectively centralized. The long history of Gallicanism is indeed essentially the history of the effort to prevent closer grouping of the Church around the chief pastor. It began when the effects of the reform which reached its apogee in the pontificate of St. Gregory VII made themselves felt, lapsed during the period of papal residence in Avignon when the French crown could exact a certain amount of submission and aid from the French Popes of the period, was reaffirmed officially when, after the Council of Constance (1414–18), it became obvious that the papacy had returned to Rome for good, declined with the Concordat of 1516 and the resurgence of French Catholicism against the threat of Calvinism, but came back with renewed vigor during *le grand siècle*. According to the Gallican thinkers the papal primacy is limited, first, by the temporal power of the princes which *jure divino* is inviolable; secondly, by the authority of the general councils and that of the bishops, who alone can, by their assent, give to papal decrees that infallible authority which of themselves they lack; lastly, by the canons and customs of particular churches which the Pope is bound to take into account when exercising his primacy. Following these principles, the bishops of France claimed increased power, at the expense of the papacy, in the government of their dioceses and the magistrates extended their jurisdiction so as to cover ecclesiastical affairs.³

The early Protestants endeavored to strengthen their anti-papal

³ Cf. V. Martin, *Les Origines du Gallicanisme* (Paris, 1939). Msgr. Martin defines Gallicanism: "Le Gallicanisme se caractérise par l'union de l'Eglise de France avec le roi pour limiter, au nom d'une ancienne législation canonique, les droits du pape sur le pays" (II, 325). According to this author Gallicanism was born in the Council of 1406 and the motive back of it was: "L'Eglise étouffe depuis trop longtemps sous le poids d'une centralisation irrégulière et intolérable: c'est le moment de s'en libérer" (I, 38).

position by repeating and elaborating on all the public and private evil-doing charged against the Popes. This last page in the anti-Roman book has lost much of its effectiveness with the spread of historical science but it is still probably the one most widely read and readily believed.

ST. ROBERT BELLARMINE'S REPLY

Catholic apologists have always been at pains to answer these charges. St. Robert Bellarmine in his day (1542-1621) showed some embarrassment in handling the arguments drawn from the bad lives of certain Popes. He admits that Stephen VI, Leo V, Christopher I, Sergius III, and John XII were rather lacking in uprightness (*parum probi*).⁴ At least, he says, extant records give that impression. In his apology Bellarmine points out that the number of bad pontiffs is so small that they can rightly be regarded as exceptions. The whole beneficent action of the papacy is in no way obscured by the acts of a few black sheep. The good accomplished by the Roman pontiffs in every century has been immense. Briefly, the Cardinal sketches their missionary activity, their part in the defense of the faith against heretics, their support of exiled bishops. The papacy, he maintains, has been the guarantee of purity of doctrine, a bond of peace and guardian of the unity of faith. The fact that there have been bad Popes is a sign that the good in the Church is due, not to human wisdom and prudence, but to the providence of God who has strengthened His foundation.

In refuting the charges of tyranny and unbridled power—and these are the main concern of this article—Bellarmine denies that the Pope reigns in the Church and proves the contrary. A ruler acknowledges no superior in his kingdom. The Pope, however, is the vicar of Christ the King and professes himself a servant. Indeed, Bellarmine holds that, although the Roman pontiff has the widest powers in the Church of God and in Christ's kingdom, this power does not exceed that of a steward or servant.⁵ It is true that the Pope is not subject to the judg-

⁴ *S. Roberti Bellarmini Controversiae*, vol. I: *De Romano Pontifice*, Praef. (Naples edition of 1856, p. 306).

⁵ *Ibid.*, liber III, 458: "Regnare papam in ecclesia, vos (Lutherani) quidem dicitis, sed non probatis: nos vero contrarium nullo negotio demonstrare possumus. Nam qui regnat superiorem in regno suo non agnoscit; papa vero Christi regis vicarium se et famulum profitetur et quamvis in tota domo Dei atque in universo Christi regno amplissima potestate utatur, ea tamen potestas non excedit oeconomⁱ ac servi conditionem."²

ment of anyone on earth, because he is the servant whom the Lord has placed over his whole family, but he is accountable to God. To prove this Bellarmine quotes: "But if that wicked servant says to himself, 'My master delays his coming,' and begins to beat his fellow-servants, and to eat and drink with drunkards, the master of that servant will come on a day he does not expect, and in an hour he does not know, and will cut him asunder and make him share the lot of hypocrites" (Matt. 24:48 ff.).

Since Bellarmine's day these attacks have often been renewed. Gallicanism in its various modern forms continued its campaign with greater or less success. During the nineteenth century when the principle of political authority was questioned and constitutional governments replaced the monarchies, there were not lacking ecclesiastics who wished to see a similar change in the government of the Church. Doellinger thought that ecclesiastical, like civil, rulers should be more accountable to the people.⁶ Nor was he the only one to propose a revival of the Conciliar Movement. Yet it was precisely at that time that the supreme power of the Pope in the Church was defined by the Vatican Council. Leo XIII considered this definition a providential answer to the problem of the century: "When He desired in that very solemn decision to affirm the authority and teaching office of the Apostolic See, God desired it especially in order the more efficaciously to guard the minds of Catholics from the dangers of the present times."⁷ More recently the Modernists called for a reform of Church government. In accord with the principles of democracy they demanded that much more power be conceded to the lower clergy and to the lay members of

⁶ *The Pope and the Council* (Boston, 1870), p. xxvii: "What was it that gave the Councils of Constance and Basle, in the fifteenth century, so constraining an authority and such a lasting influence on the condition of the Church? It was the power of public opinion which backed them up. And if at this day a strong and unanimous public opinion, at once positive in its faith and firm in its resistance to the realisation of the ultramontane scheme, were awakened and openly proclaimed in Europe, or even in Germany only, then in spite of the utterance, so suggestive of gloomy forebodings, of the Bishops of Mayence, St. Pölten, and Mechlin, the present danger would happily pass away." Doellinger also speaks of the "development—artificial and sickly rather than sound and natural—of the Primacy into the Papacy, a transformation more than a development, the consequences of which have been the splitting up of the previously united Church into three great ecclesiastical bodies, divided and at enmity with each other" (p. xxi).

⁷ *Testem benevolentiae*, Letter of January 22, 1899 to Cardinal Gibbons; translated in *The Great Encyclicals of Pope Leo XIII* (New York, 1903), p. 445.

the Church. This appeal met with a stern rebuke before it was fully formulated.⁸

SUPERNATURAL CHARACTER OF CHURCH

There has never been any spontaneous demand among the people or lower clergy for the democratization of the Church. The tyranny of Church rulers so often charged has never, at least in modern times, been felt by the Catholic people or priesthood. The religious and supernatural character of the Church has furnished sufficient protection against any such condition of things. The ecclesiastical government exists in order to recall the laws of religion, the sovereignty of God, and the severe account which will be demanded of all earthly authority. It is impossible that their familiarity with these principles should not influence Church rulers themselves. Preaching them to others they cannot be totally oblivious of them. While the concentration of power in the hands of one and the appointment rather than the election of subordinate superiors have unquestionably given authority in the Church great powers of patronage and some opportunity for tyrannical domination, in practice they have generally contributed to the selection of capable and conscientious men for high position. They remove certainly the evils which attend electioneering and demagogy.

Again the officials of the Church cannot govern as they will. The fundamental constitution given by Christ has to be observed. And this constitution for all its suppleness and adaptability is nonetheless strictly fixed in its essentials, thus limiting the power of superiors. In addition there is the great ecclesiastical tradition, well maintained by officials who do not have to be forever watching public opinion. This tradition has in its more important points been embodied in Canon Law which binds all and which only the Holy See has the right to set aside. One of the most important supports of tradition in the Church is the frequent assemblage of councils and synods which is prescribed by the canons. Councillors are also given by the law to Popes, bishops, and other prelates in the persons of the cardinals and consultors. In these ways the Church clearly shows that it has no desire to make tyrants of its officials or slaves of its children. In practice

⁸ Denzinger-Bannwart-Umberg, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, n. 2091 (ed. 21-23; Freiburg: Brisgoviæ, 1937, p. 583).

Rome has always shown herself the foe of abuses of ecclesiastical authority.⁹

The term "centralization" applies properly to certain forms of the modern state. In this connection it means not so much the increase of the power of the central government at the expense of local officials, as the systematic destruction of all local autonomy which could in any way interfere with the action of the central bureaucracy. This is effected by the reservation to the central authorities of all business of any importance. If the government of the United States were centralized in this sense it would mean that the governments of the various states would either be abolished or deprived of all but nominal importance. To such a system as this the Church is opposed in many ways.

Centralized governments desire in general to deal with their subjects as individuals. The Church on the contrary groups the faithful in numerous organizations and societies which often enroll their members for life. There is nothing stereotyped in this respect in the Church: older organizations disappear and new ones put in an appearance continuously. The religious orders and congregations in themselves represent a good deal of self-government. The Church, as is well known, encourages them in every way, and to insure an even larger measure of independence the more important are exempted from the authority of the local bishops.

DIVINE ORIGIN OF EPISCOPACY

Again we must note that the subordinate officers in the Church are not recent creations of the central power. The episcopacy is as old as the papacy, as old indeed as the Church. Like the papacy and the Church, the episcopacy is also of divine origin. The bishops have God-given powers in their dioceses and are not merely delegates of the Pope. Although they have to observe the Canon Law, they can make laws binding their subjects, they are judges of their clergy, and as a rule they fill, without any interference on the part of Rome, all the posts in their dioceses. Furthermore bishops are not removable at the whim of the Pope. Their position is, barring certain excesses which are

⁹ For a long apologetical essay on this subject cf. G. Neyron, *Dictionnaire apologetique de la foi catholique*, II, 313-24.

rare, assured for life. They dispose also of sufficient means to guarantee material independence. Finally if it is true that Rome names bishops, she does so according to the counsel of those on the spot. And this means, here in the United States, the advice not only of the Apostolic Delegate but also of the archbishops and bishops.

Certainly the Catholic Church is centralized. All power is concentrated in the hands of the supreme pontiff. Still the Catholic Church is not a dictatorship. If it claims independence for itself, it also recognizes the independence of the state and defends the autonomy of the family. External force is, moreover, very rarely employed at any level of the hierarchy. The authority of the Church is freely acknowledged by those who, except in very rare instances, are quite free to disregard it altogether.

A brief review of the historical development of centralization in the Western Church will prove perhaps even more illuminating from the viewpoint which is ours in this paper. It will show that the Church used its right of centralization only when there were good reasons to do so and that the initiative was by no means always that of the papacy.

The preeminence of Peter in the Apostolic College is a fact which any unbiased reader of the New Testament has to admit. Perhaps he was the oldest, possibly he was the first called, but certainly Peter was the leader of the apostles. Both Mark and Luke speak of Simon and his companions. When three are chosen by Christ to witness some event of special significance, Peter is always among them. At times he is singled out: "for me and for thee" (Matt. 17:26). Christ dines in Peter's house and preaches from Peter's bark. Peter speaks in the name of all. The promise of the primacy and its bestowal form, therefore, an integral part of the Gospel history. In the *Acts* this preeminence continues, although there Peter appears as one who desires to be considered "your fellow-presbyter and witness to the sufferings of Christ" (I Pet. 5:1).

PAPACY IN EARLY CENTURIES

From the early centuries enough evidence has survived to make it clear that the Church looked upon the successor of the Apostle in the Roman See as something more than an ordinary bishop. He is the head of the entire community, the guardian of the deposit of faith, the supreme judge in matters of controversy. The bishops of the early cen-

turies submitted their most serious problems to the bishop of Rome. The paschal controversy, the struggle about the validity of baptism conferred by heretics, the difficulties concerned with the reconciliation of apostates are cases in point. At the end of the second century we find St. Irenaeus in a well-known text proclaiming Rome the source of tradition and the criterion of orthodoxy. It is to be noted that this deference is clearly shown to the see and not to the person of the bishop. The Pope does not have to be an Ambrose or an Augustine to command respect.¹⁰

The practice of the *communio* in the early Church may perhaps be looked upon as a rudimentary organ of centralization. *Communio* meant the union of the faithful, people, deacons, priests, and bishops, among themselves and with Christ. Of this union the Eucharist was the sign and the bond. A traveler was admitted to the celebration of the liturgy if he had the testimonial of his bishop that he was an orthodox believer; if not, he was denied the Eucharist and hospitality. Despite differences of opinion, Pope Anicetus maintained peace and communion with St. Polycarp when, in the middle of the second century, the latter visited Rome. On the other hand, the reception of Holy Communion from heretics meant communicating in their errors. To avoid this, Catholic lay folk, when traveling to places in which there was no Catholic church, took the Eucharist with them. We read that Macedonius, the heretical bishop of Constantinople in the fourth century, forced Catholics to receive from his hand. To ensure a friendly reception, travelers carried the *tessera*, a kind of religious passport—a practice which brought about the frequent exchange of letters between the bishops of the early church. Communion with the majority of the episcopate was a proof of true belief. And here, also, Rome had a special position. The Roman pontiff was recognized as the center of the *communio*. Optatus, bishop of Milevi toward the end of the fourth century, after remarking that in the chair of Peter at Rome “unity

¹⁰ J. Lebreton et J. Zeiller, *L'Eglise primitive*, (Paris, 1934), pp. 382–86; *De la Fin du IIe siècle à la paix constantinienne* (Paris, 1935), pp. 403–421; J. R. Palanque, G. Bardy et P. de Labriolle, *De la Paix constantinienne à la mort de Théodose* (Paris, 1936), pp. 477–87. All three of these volumes form part of the *Histoire de l'Eglise depuis les origines jusqu'à nos jours*, edited by A. Fliche and V. Martin. The first two have been translated by E. C. Messenger, *The History of the Primitive Church*, in four volumes (London, 1942–48); this work has been reprinted in America.

should be preserved by all," gives a list of the Popes up to Siricius "who is today our colleague, with whom the whole world with us agrees by the communication of commendatory letters in the fellowship of one communion." Even well-informed pagans knew as early as 268 where the center of unity of the early Church was. When in that year the Emperor Aurelian regained possession of Antioch, he turned the church property over to the claimant who was in communion with the bishops of Italy and notably with the Roman bishop. This solicitude about communion with those of the true faith and only with them has continued to characterize the Catholic Church after external centralization as it did before.^{10 bis}

Despite its position of leadership, Rome made no attempt to centralize the Church during the first four centuries. The evidence shows clearly enough that recourse to the Pope was exceptional rather than the rule. When problems of moment arose, especially in regard to the faith, eyes and hearts turned to Rome for a decision. But neither Eastern nor Western bishops had the custom of consulting Rome in regard to the normal conduct of their dioceses.¹¹

The early Popes allowed the state of decentralization in the Church to continue without, apparently, any effort to alter it. This procedure had become customary during the first three centuries. The hostile attitude of the Roman government made it imperative to avoid offending that suspicious dictatorship. Even in its self-effacing attitude the papacy was known to have power. The well-known saying of the Emperor Decius that he would rather have a rival emperor to contend

^{10 bis} Cf. L. Hertling, *Geschichte der katholischen Kirche* (Berlin, 1949), p. 33 ff. Father Hertling says of this *communio*: "den man geradezu einen der Schlüssel zum Verständnis der Alten Kirche nennen kann." For the statement of Optatus, cf. *CSEL* XXVI, 36 f. It recalls and helps to explain Cyrian's phrase "ad Petri cathedram atque ad Ecclesiam principalem, unde unitas sacerdotalis exorta est," as well as the "necesse est omnem convenire Ecclesiam" of Irenaeus and the "universo caritatis coetui praesidens" of Ignatius of Antioch. For the rescript of Aurelian, cf. Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, VII, 30, 19: "Imperator Aurelianus rectissime [so judges this Eastern bishop] hoc negotium diiudicavit, iis domum tradi praecipiens quibus Italici Christianae religionis antistites et Romanus pontifex scriberent epistolas." On this subject cf. *DTC*, III, 419-24, s.v. "Communio de la Foi."

¹¹ For a study of the centralization of the Church cf. V. Martin, "Pape," *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique*, XI (Paris, 1931-32), 1877-96. Some of the elements of a study of centralization are contained in the thesis of G. Paro, *The Right of Papal Legation* (Washington, 1947). In general we shall follow Msgr. Martin's article. F. Heiler, *Altkirchliche Autonomie und päpstlicher Zentralismus* (Munich, 1941), may also be usefully consulted.

with than see a new bishop elected in Rome clearly indicates this.¹² When peace came to the Church under Constantine the Great (306–337), the papacy did not change its attitude. During the ante-Nicene period councils had become important factors in the public life of the Church. They came to be the ordinary guardians of the faith and centers for the enactment of ecclesiastical legislation. This role of councils continued after the Christian Church was freed and even given a privileged position in the Empire. It is true that we find St. Julius I (337–52) sharply reminding an Eastern council and the Alexandrian Church, one of the leading churches of the East, that he should have been informed about the details of the Arian controversy. “Can you be ignorant,” writes Julius, “that this is the custom, that we should be written to first, so that from here what is just may be defined?”¹³ For the most part, however, the Popes accepted the *status quo ante*. The first moves in the direction of exterior centralization were taken by councils and emperors.

BEGINNINGS OF CENTRALIZATION

The Council of Sardica (343–44) is of first importance in this development. It decreed against the Council of Antioch (341) that the Popes should receive appeals from bishops condemned by councils and decide whether or not the cases should be reopened. This council also foresees that the Roman bishop may at times send legates to represent him at the new trial of a bishop. The importance of this decree we shall see presently. But the move to establish a regular procedure for appeal is, even though it was not put into effect, a step in itself of prime importance and we must see in it the first beginnings of centralization.¹⁴ In 378 the Emperor Gratian decreed that bishops who had

¹² *CSEL*, III, 630: “Multo patientius et tolerabilius audiret levari adversus se aemulum principem quam constitui Romae Dei sacerdotem.”

¹³ *PL*, VIII, 906 ff.: “An ignoratis hanc esse consuetudinem, ut primum nobis scribatur, et hinc quod iustum est decernatur? Sane si qua huiusmodi suspicio in illius urbis episcopum cadebat, ad hanc ecclesiam scribendum fuit.”

¹⁴ Denzinger-Bannwart-Umberg, *op. cit.*, p. 33 ff.: “Quod si aliquis episcopus iudicatus fuerit in aliqua causa, et putat bonam causam habere, ut iterum iudicium renovetur, si vobis placet, sanctissimi Petri Apostoli memoriam honoremus: scribatur vel ab his, qui causam examinerunt, vel ab episcopis, qui in provincia proxima morantur, Romano episcopo; et si iudicaverit renovandum esse iudicium, renovetur.”

been condemned by Pope or council and refused to vacate their ecclesiastical position, should be brought under escort to Rome or at least to the metropolitan city. In the case of archbishops they should always be brought to Rome. Thus this beginning of centralization was to be enforced in the West by the police of the state.¹⁵ Justinian the Great (527-65), whose legislation had such decisive influence both in the East and the West, was never slow to give the Roman pontiff the first place among ecclesiastics, at least in his words. In a constitution addressed to the patriarch of Constantinople in 533, the high-handed emperor forbids him to take any measure concerning the unity or the state of the Church without having submitted it beforehand for the approval of the bishop of Rome, the first of all priests.¹⁶ The canons of Sardica and the decrees of Gratian and Justinian, while of little importance in themselves and of little practical effect, do suggest that there was a tendency at the time to require the Roman pontiffs to exercise the primacy which was theirs. Rome continued to receive appeals as before without paying much attention to the letter of the decrees of Sardica. Neither was the decree of Gratian frequently invoked. But a beginning had been made in the West to bring the bishops into closer relations with their chief.

At the end of the fourth and the beginning of the fifth centuries another step forward was taken. Here too only the West was concerned and again the initiative was in the main not that of the papacy but rather of the episcopacy. Almost numberless questions on matters of discipline and ecclesiastical administration were addressed to the Holy See and received answers.¹⁷ Although the Popes consulted show their pleasure that the bishops turn to them in their difficulties, there is no evidence of any attempt on the part of Rome to seize the direction of affairs, or any indication of a plan for aggrandizing Roman influence and control. St. Leo the Great, whose pontificate falls in this period,

¹⁵ *CSEL*, XXXV, 57; the decree speaks in one place of Damasus and a council of five or seven bishops.

¹⁶ *DTC*, XI, 1879.

¹⁷ To the bishops of the Council of Milevi (416) Innocent I writes: "Inter caeteras Romanae ecclesiae curas et apostolicae sedis occupationes, quibus diversorum consulta fidei ac medica disceptatione tractamus" (*PL*, XX, 589). Celestine I (422-32) writing to the bishops of Illyria expresses himself as follows: "Inter caeteras curas et diversa negotia quae ad nos ex cunctis veniunt semper ecclesiis" (*PL*, L, 427).

states plainly the rights of the Holy See in this matter but neither he nor his successors act to make recourse to Rome obligatory.¹⁸

During the fifth century their solicitude for all the churches did lead the Popes to take certain initiatives which pointed the way to future centralization. The Council of Sardica had, as we have seen, provided that the bishop of Rome should send legates to represent him in certain trials of bishops.¹⁹ Moreover the Popes had, since the Council of Arles (314), sent representatives to important councils in an effort to influence these important organs of Church government. The use of legates to transact some definite task soon became usual. When, for example, St. Leo the Great heard of a practice of illicit ordination in Mauretania, he sent Bishop Potentius as his legate to investigate. This practice of sending legates *a latere*, once established, was never abandoned and became an important element in the process of centralization.²⁰

¹⁸ In this connection the letter of Leo to the bishops of the province of Vienne is worth quoting: "Nobiscum itaque vestra fraternitas recognoscat apostolicam sedem, pro sui reverentia a vestrae etiam provinciae sacerdotibus, innumeris relationibus esse consultam, et per diversarum, quemadmodum vetus consuetudo posebat, appellationem causarum, aut retractata, aut confirmata fuisse iudicia: adeo ut servata unitate spiritus in vinculo pacis, commeantibus hinc inde litteris, quod sancte agebatur, perpetuae proficeret charitati: quoniam sollicitudo nostra, non sua quaerens, sed quae sunt Christi, dignitatem divinitus datam nec ecclesiis nec ecclesiarum sacerdotibus abrogabat. Sed hunc tramite[m] semper inter majores nostros et bene tentum, et salubriter custoditum Hilarius ecclesiarum statum, et concordiam sacerdotum novis praesumptionibus turbaturus excessit; ita suae vos cupiens subdere potestati, ut se beato apostolo non patiat[ur] esse subjectum, ordinatione omnium per Gallias ecclesiarum vindicans, et debitam metropolitanis sacerdotibus in suam transferens dignitatem; ipsius quoque beatissimi Petri reverentiam verbis arrogantibus minuendo: cui cum prae caeteris solvendi et ligandi tradita sit potestas, pascendarum tamen ovium cura specialius mandata est. Cui quisquis principatum aestimat denegandum, illius quidem nullo modo potest minuere dignitatem; sed inflatus superbiae suae, semetipsum in inferna demergit" (*PL*, LIV, 629 f.).

¹⁹ Denzinger-Bannwart-Umberg, *op. cit.*, p. 35: "Quodsi qui rogat causam suam iterum audiri et deprecatione sua moverit episcopum Romanum, ut e latere suo presbyterum mittat, erit in potestate episcopi, quid velit aut quid aestimet: et si decreverit mittendos esse, qui praesentes cum episcopis iudicent, habentes eius auctoritatem, a quo destinati sunt, erit in suo arbitrio."

²⁰ *PL*, LIV, 646: "Vicem curae nostrae proficiscenti a nobis fratri et consacerdoti nostro Potentio delegantes, qui secundum scripta quae per ipsum ad vos direximus, de episcopis quorum culpabilis ferebatur electio quid veritas haberet inquireret, nobisque omnia fideliter indicaret." Cf. G. Paro, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-64.

VICARS APOSTOLIC

Another form of papal legation which played an important part in the spreading of Roman influence was that of the vicar apostolic. In our day this title is reserved for prelates who rule missionary countries not as yet divided into dioceses. In the early and medieval Church the vicar apostolic was the residentiary bishop of some important see who was made papal representative in the region and could act in the name of the Roman pontiff in matters of ecclesiastical discipline. Such vicars were at times given power to organize and supervise the local hierarchy. The vicariate apostolic of Illyria goes back to the time of St. Damasus I (366–84). Arles, Vienne, and Rheims in Gaul obtained vicarial status during the fifth and sixth centuries. In Spain during the same period like privileges were accorded the bishops of Seville and Tarragona; the elevation of Toledo was later. In 731 all the churches of Britain were made subject to Archbishop Tatwin of Canterbury. Similar delegations were made in Sicily. These apostolic vicars became bonds of union between their countries and the Roman see. Their correspondence with the Pope was frequent. They kept the pontiff informed and in turn transmitted his orders to the bishops in their region. In the early Middle Ages these vicars apostolic were the most effective instrument Rome had at its disposition for controlling the Church in the West.²¹

A number of the early medieval missionaries, Ninian, Palladius, Patrick, Augustine of Canterbury, Boniface, and Methodius had papal sanction in their enterprises. The most successful among them, St. Boniface, was especially close to the Roman authorities and merits special attention here. His first care was to gain the support of the Pope. In 718 he went to Rome and spent most of the year there while Gregory II examined his personal qualities and the prospects of his mission. The result was a formal commission to preach the Gospel to the pagans. In 722 Gregory summoned Boniface to Rome once more and consecrated him bishop. Boniface's oath on this occasion was identical with the one taken by the bishops of the Roman province, an indication of the close union with Rome which was the keynote of all the future action of this great missionary and reformer. As far as he could Boniface, an Anglo-Saxon Benedictine, always followed

²¹ G. Paro, *op. cit.*, pp. 64–72.

Roman instructions and conformed to Roman practice. His task in the north was that of creating an ecclesiastical province with its dioceses and bishops. Boniface first of all prepared the ground. Then before the actual organization of the German hierarchy he spent another year, 737-38, in Rome. Returning to Germany he proceeded as rapidly as circumstances permitted to the erection of bishoprics throughout the Germanic lands eastward from the Rhine. Later Boniface played a role of importance in the reform and reconstruction of the Frankish Church. Here again his basic principle was close union with the Roman see. For these achievements he is known as the apostle, not alone of Germany, but of western unity.²² More than any other missionary or vicar apostolic he contributed to the preeminence of Rome in the West by binding the great churches of Germany and France closely to the See of Peter. No more important step had been taken up to that time in the centralization of the Western Church.

The initiative in Boniface's missionary endeavors was of course his own. In going to Rome and depending in all his labors on the Pope for sanction and direction he was following the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon Church as established by Augustine and Theodore. Here, then, as frequently also in the case of the ancient vicars apostolic, the increase in centralization can only be attributed to Rome in a secondary way.

EXEMPTION OF RELIGIOUS

The exemption from the control of residential bishops of monasteries, orders, and congregations of religious men and women has developed into a powerful bond between the Holy See and many of its sons and daughters. That it has been an important element in the centralization of the Church is obvious. Exemption of monasteries has been traced back to sixth-century North Africa. In Europe Bobbio, founded in 612 by St. Columbanus (d. 615), obtained this privilege in 628.²³ The most important exemption, however, and the one which led to the practice becoming a regular feature of Canon Law, was that of the Abbey of Cluny. Founded by William the Pious, duke of

²² E. de Moreau, *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, IX (Paris, 1937), 883-95; *The Letters of Saint Boniface, Translated with an Introduction*, by Ephraim Emerton, p. 6 ff.

²³ *Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche*, III (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1931), 907 f.

Aquitaine, September 11, 910, it was by the will of its founder made directly dependent "upon the papacy and subject to no other dominion or authority. Thus since they owed homage neither to emperor nor king nor to any great local lord, Cluny and its lands were fitted to become the seat of a monastic kingdom exempt from civil powers."²⁴ The desire of the founder was confirmed by the Holy See whose relations with Cluny soon became close enough to defend it effectively from the interference of episcopal or civil powers. When in the course of time many abbeys and priories were subject to the Abbot of Cluny the Popes sanctioned this order of monasteries under a monarchical head who ruled a vast religious empire and whose power was exceeded in the Church only by that of the Pope himself. Indeed at one time the papacy and Cluny seemed to be but one force. In 1095 Urban II, who had been a monk at Cluny, came back to the abbey as Pope. His successor Pascal II had, like Urban, passed his youth at Cluny. In 1106, as Pope, he spent two months in the abbey. In 1119 Pope Gelasius II died at Cluny and his successor Callistus II was elected there. Relations then between the two powers were the closest possible. And the great order did much to prepare the reconstruction and centralization we associate with the name of Hildebrand (Gregory VII). And this remains true whether or not Gregory himself had been a monk trained in the Cluniac tradition. In the matter of exemption the initiative which led to the creation of a new organ of centralization was not taken by the Holy See. Duke William wrote independence into Cluny's charter and invoked a terrible curse on those who should violate its freedom.²⁵ The duke wanted the abbey free so that its religious spirit might not suffer from the interference of those who could pervert it. Cluny owed its greatness to this provision of its charter. Once it developed into an order its holiness radiated through much of the Church and its power was traced to its exemption. Other religious naturally wanted the same privilege.

Collections of the canons of councils and of decrees of the Popes began in the West with Dionysius Exiguus early in the sixth century. This Eastern monk worked at Rome under the eyes of the Popes. His

²⁴ J. Evans, *Monastic Life at Cluny 910-1157*, p. 7 f. Miss Evans quotes Dom Besse, "L'Ordre de Cluny et son gouvernement," *Revue Mabillon*, I (1905), 6.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

collection was afterwards revised, notably in the time of Adrian I before it was presented to Charlemagne. Various other collections appeared in the course of time, among them the celebrated False Decretals. This forgery, which was perpetrated in France near the middle of the ninth century, aimed at strengthening the power of bishops in their struggles with the civil power and with metropolitans and provincial synods. To achieve this purpose the author of the hoax exalts the papal power. Some use was made of the False Decretals by the Roman authorities, particularly in the Gregorian reform, and they contributed not a little to the centralization of the Church. But to attribute a decisive influence to them at any time is simply untenable. Taken with the authentic collections of canons and decrees, the False Decretals are one element in the process.²⁶

THE GREGORIAN REFORM

The greatest advance in the centralization of the Western Church up to the time of the Council of Trent was made in the eleventh century. St. Gregory VII inaugurated the struggle to rescue the Church from the suffocating power of lay lords and used centralization as one of the principal means of reconstructing the Church. The efforts of this great Pope were continued by his immediate successors and eventually met with success.²⁷

The use of legates which, as we have seen, existed in the Church for several centuries prior to the eleventh century was much extended by Gregory VII. In this way the Pope made his presence felt through much of Western Europe. Sometimes, as had also obtained formerly, these legates were residentiary bishops who served more or less permanently in fixed territories to press for reform by holding councils and imposing penalties in the name of the pontiff. Other legates, and this was true

²⁶ Louis Saltet, *Cath. Encycl.*, V, 773-80. He writes: "Even without Isidore, Nicholas I would have brought about the same mode of government. And it has been well said that the principles of Nicholas I were those of Gregory VII and the great popes of the Middle Ages; that is to say, Isidore or no Isidore, Gregory VII and Innocent III would not have acted otherwise than they did" (p. 779). Soloviev saw this very clearly. Cf. Heiler, *op. cit.*, p. XV.

²⁷ The best study of centralization under Gregory VII seems to be V. Martin's, *DTC*, XI, 1883-88. Soloviev apparently considered that centralization in this period consisted essentially in the transfer of the dependence of bishops from the metropolitans to Rome; cf. Heiler, *op. cit.*, p. X f.

also before the Gregorian reform, were sent *a latere* for a fixed time and often to deal with some particular difficulties. Both types of legates received detailed instructions, had to keep Rome well informed, and in their capacity as legates took precedence over local prelates of whatsoever rank, even metropolitan.

Gregory also established much closer relationship between the Holy See and the episcopacy throughout Western Europe. Metropolitans had to come personally to Rome for the pallium, the symbol of their archiepiscopal power. Various types of litigation were also transferred from the metropolitan to the Roman courts. Gregory sought for more and more direct contact with the bishops. He watched over their election and even on occasion tried to impose his own choice on the electors. He likewise demanded an account of their administration from the bishops. This last was often done through legates, but at times, to give his admonitions greater solemnity, Gregory delivered them in Roman synods which recalcitrant bishops were required to attend.

Gregory VII was also the driving force back of new collections of Church canons. Abuses were often entrenched by possession and custom. Gregory's retort was that Christ did not say He was custom but truth. Distinguished canonists under pressure from the Pope reorganized Church law on the principle that the Pope is the source of all law in the Church and that no enactment has juridical force unless it has been approved by the Pope at least tacitly. It was also clearly stated that in the case of conflicting legislation, the law coming from a higher prevails against that of a lesser authority. Such principles seem elementary today and it is clear that in a centralized Church their absence would lead to chaos. Gregory was the first Pope who effectively tried to put them into practice.

These and the other reforms of St. Gregory VII meant a vast advance in centralization. This little ugly man who was a ruler of altogether exceptional powers, was also a saint whose burning zeal gave him no rest as long as abuses persisted unchallenged.²⁸ But even if great irregularities had not induced him to reconstruct the central government of the Church it is probable that he would have done much in that direction. Even before his election as Pope he seems to have

²⁸ P. E. Santangelo, *Gregorio VII e il suo secolo* (Garzanti, 1945), p. 348: "homuncionem exilis staturae . . . deformis aspectu."

reorganized papal finances. But *de facto* it was the crying abuses of the age and the need of reconstruction which led Gregory to centralize. He was of course assisted in his efforts by a strong party which saw in the papacy the only strong bulwark against the corrupting influence of civil interference in the purely spiritual domain.

The positions taken up by Gregory VII were consolidated under his successors. As time passed it became quite clear that Rome had the plenitude of jurisdiction. Consequences were that the power of bishops in the matter of dispensations was greatly curtailed while the right to canonize was withdrawn. The introduction of the Inquisition limited the judicial power of ordinaries. In the last instance it was of course the need to protect the faith, seriously threatened by the great medieval heresies, which led to this action.²⁹

From the twelfth century onward the Popes, like the secular rulers of the day, found it increasingly hard to live within their revenues. In addition to the expenses inevitably involved in the functioning of a large bureaucracy, large sums were being expended on the crusades and the maintenance of the crusaders in the East. To meet the need for an increase of revenue in the fourteenth century the Holy See embarked upon a policy which aimed at the reservation to Rome of numerous benefices. It appeared as if a centralization of a new type was being planned. Since the crusades were mainly a hope in this century, some have seen in this move an attempt on the part of the papacy to counterbalance the loss of prestige and influence suffered by the Holy See from the time of Boniface VIII (1294–1303). In this opinion the direct appointment of bishops and lesser officials was undertaken to give the papacy a clientele based on the right of patronage to make up for the one of which the modern state was depriving it.³⁰

The centralization effected between the pontificate of St. Gregory VII and the Council of Trent may be traced to several causes. The most important seem to be: (1) the natural development of a bureaucracy once established; (2) desire to safeguard the faith; (3) financial necessity; and (4) the need of supporters against the encroachments

²⁹ V. Martin, *DTC*, XI, 1888–94.

³⁰ It is interesting to note that this feature of centralization has not survived; cf. V. Martin, *DTC*, XI, 1890 ff., and W. E. Lunt, *Papal Revenues in the Middle Ages*, I (New York, 1934), Introduction.

of the state which was also centralizing more and more during the later Middle Ages.

COUNCIL OF TRENT

The final and most important step in the external centralization of the Church in the West was one of the most important results of the Protestant revolt.³¹ In 1542 Paul III created the Holy Office, the first of the cardinalitial congregations through which the Pope rules the Church. The function of the Holy Office was to guard the purity of the faith in the Church. Three years later the same Paul III finally succeeded in convening the long-awaited general council at Trent. The council lasted with long interruptions until 1563. In addition to condemning Protestant errors in matters of faith the council passed decrees on practically all points of ecclesiastical discipline. Its decrees treated of bishops, chapters of cathedrals, parish priests, synods, the education of the clergy, instruction in the faith, and the administration of Church property. There was scarcely a detail of Catholic life which was not touched upon by the council.³²

When faced with adjournment the Fathers of Trent were naturally concerned about the future of their decrees. They clearly foresaw the difficulties which would arise to hinder in Catholic countries the reception and enforcement of the reform decrees. The council, which had on several occasions paid tribute to the power of the supreme pontiff in the Church and had submitted its decrees to the reigning Pope for confirmation, asked Pius IV to see to the publication of an *Index librorum prohibitorum*, a catechism, a missal, and a breviary. It also—and this is of capital importance in the matter of centralization of the Church—asked the Pope to see to the enforcement of its decrees.

Pius IV confirmed the decrees of the council by his authority early in 1564. He also forbade under heavy penalties any interpretation of the decrees by anyone except the Holy See. For this purpose he founded the Congregation of the Council, the second of the cardinalitial congregations. Its purpose was to supervise the execution of Trent's decrees. The whole body of legislation of the council was thus placed

³¹ *DTC*, XI, 1894: "On peut dire que la forme actuelle de la centralisation, c'est Luther, en bonne partie, qui donna prétexte de l'introduire."

³² *Ibid.*

under the care of the Roman pontiff. This meant that at the will of the Fathers of Trent the Pope had to supervise nearly all details of ecclesiastical life. In principle the centralization of the Church in the West was complete.³³

As a matter of fact the government of the Church since Trent has not changed greatly. New Roman congregations have been added to the administrative machinery at Rome and the consistory has ceased to be the main instrument for the expediting of papal business. With this change the papal government accepted the principle of the division of labor in administration. With the improvement of means of communication and travel, improved methods have, of course, been adopted to strengthen the bonds which bind the great Catholic family together. The Vatican Council of 1870 is notable in this regard, principally because it consecrated the system which had reached its full development long before.³⁴

If we examine the motivation of the great centralization effected by the Council of Trent, we find again that papal thirst for power, of which one hears so much in certain quarters, had very little to do with it. Rome was frankly afraid of the council—the shadows of Constance and Basel were long—and especially afraid of what the Fathers might do in the matter of reform. The papal representatives tried at the outset to have the decrees on dogma given precedence. The concurrent treatment of dogma and moral had been a compromise. But events proved that Rome had nothing to fear. The Fathers were on the whole very deferential to the Holy See. And it was the reform decrees and the request by the council that the Popes look after their enforcement which led to the decisive centralization of the Church.³⁵

RETROSPECT

At the end of this rapid survey of some of the limits and causes of Church centralization in the West we shall cast a glance behind. In weighing the motives which led to the creation of the papal bureaucracy, the words of Newman come to mind: "Local disturbances gave exercise to bishops and ecumenical disturbances gave exercise to popes."³⁶ To a certain degree it was abuses and troubles within the

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 1895.

³⁵ *DTC*, XV, 1431 f., 1485 ff.

³⁶ J. H. Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, Part I, chapter IV, section 3, number 4.

Church that occasioned centralization. This applies first and foremost to the great reconstruction of the Church under Gregory VII. A great ruler and a saint, Gregory had to draw tighter the bonds that linked the churches of Western Europe to the Holy See, in order to prevent civil rulers from destroying them. But even Gregory's initiative was by no means a personal one. He was in his lifetime the spearhead and has become the symbol of a powerful movement which began beyond the Alps in the Cluniac reform. And, as we have seen, in its origins Cluny was quite independent of Rome.

Most of the organs of centralization appear to have been, at least partially, of spontaneous growth. Appeals were made to Rome before the Council of Sardica and the emperors Gratian and Justinian legislated about them. The Western bishops spontaneously turned to Rome for advice long before *ad limina* visits were known. Various motives influenced them in this, among them the need of counsel and the fear of disavowal after the event. But ultimately it was because they felt that the Roman Pontiffs had the plenitude of jurisdiction in the Church that the bishops of the West turned regularly to them in their trials. And Rome assumed the burden of direction in this and in other matters because the Popes felt obliged to do so. "I am under constraint. For woe to me if I do not" (I Cor. 9:16). As Bishop Gasser said at the Vatican Council in regard to infallibility, the Popes would never have waged their unremitting warfare for Christian truth if they had not been certain that they could not err in matters of faith.³⁷ So in the matter under consideration the Roman pontiffs were led half willingly, half unwillingly to take up the heavy burden of close supervision of the Western Church because of their love of Christ and the mission He had confided to them.

In answer to the charge of tyranny, it must be stoutly maintained that the papal Church is not a religious tyranny. It is as true in our day as in that of St. Robert Bellarmine that the Popes do not "reign" in the Church. They are now as they were then the stewards of Christ:

³⁷ *Acta et Decreta sacrorum conciliorum recentiorum*, Collectio Lacensis, VII, 392: "Iterum iterumque perlegi epistolas genuinas Romanorum Pontificum a Constantio et recentissimo illius continuatore Andrea Thiel edita. Quo saepius illas legebam, et quo magis illas perpendebam eo magis convictus fui Romanos Pontifices tanquam testes, doctores et iudices universalis ecclesiae pro veritate christiana incessanter pugnatos de fide in arenam descendisse, quod vi promissionis divinae errare non possent."

“non excedit oeconomi ac servi conditionem.” They are bound to reflect on the sayings of Christ: “Let him who is greatest among you become as the youngest, and him who is the chief as the servant” (Luke 22:26). “Whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your servant, even as the Son of Man has not come to be served but to serve” (Matt. 20:28). The Popes have reflected on them and as a consequence have chosen as one of their most cherished titles *Servus servorum Dei*.

Finally to the subsumption that, servant of Christ or not, the Pope rules the Church autocratically, we can only answer that this is the will of Christ: “He who hears you, hears me; and he who rejects you, rejects me; and he who rejects me, rejects him who sent me” (Luke 10:16). Our Lord did not want his followers to be adrift and rudderless on the seas of opinion.