CHAPTER SEVEN

The Crisis of the Church

1. INNOCENT III (1198–1216): ORTHODOX REFORM

Innocent III ascended the papal throne in 1198, at a time of general disillusion. The great hopes of the previous century had been disappointed and Christian zeal was almost extinguished. Gregory VII had cried aloud, had spared not, had lifted up his voice like a trumpet, and had declared unto the Lord's people their transgressions. He had thrown the greater part of Latin Christendom into chaos by initiating the fratricidal wars with the Empire, in order that the Kingdom of God might be built upon earth; but one hundred and thirteen years later, though the wars with the Empire still continued, it had to be admitted that the Kingdom of God was more distant than ever. Secular rulers still succeeded by devious means in choosing most of the bishops they wanted, the greater part of the lower clergy still failed to observe the rule of clerical celibacy, and the Emperor's power in relation to the Church had revived. The Crusade had failed; Jerusalem had been won and lost again, largely (it was thought) because of treachery in the Christian ranks (p. 279), and the Emperor Henry VI had not scrupled to hold a returning crusader to ransom. The monastic enthusiasm of the earlier part of the century was exhausted; even the Cistercian monasteries, those former strongholds of asceticism, were already earning themselves a reputation for wealth and miserliness. On all sides laymen were criticizing churchmen for their pride, incompetence, or wealth. Anti-clericalism was common, and in many parts of Europe, more especially in southern France, it developed into anti-sacerdotalism and heresy. The Manichaean doctrines of the Cathari – that God created the spiritual world but the devil the material – were

spreading like wild-fire, and it seemed as if the Christian Church, for all its outward splendour, was in danger of losing its spirit.

That was the situation which confronted Lothario de' Conti when, on 8 January 1198, he was elected Pope as Innocent III. He could not ignore the fact that religion was rapidly becoming an ideal of the past, and he could not condone as an 'inevitable development' the change from an Age of Faith to an Age of Disillusion. As Pope it was his duty to stem the flood of unbelief and heresy and to lead a reaction in favour of Christianity. How was it to be done?

Innocent III believed that the most effective way was by making a proper and effective use of the authority which his holy office conferred upon him. He was absolutely convinced that, as Pope, he was Christ's Vicar on Earth, charged with the duty of wielding the spiritual sword, so as to uphold religion, justice, and morality everywhere. He claimed the very fullness of power (*plenitudo potestatis*) over the whole of Christ's people, and during his pontificate of eighteen years punished seven kings and two rival emperors with excommunication or interdict. Even at the time of his coronation, his views were clear:

> What am I [he said] or what is my father's house, that I should be admitted to rule over kings, to possess the throne of glory? For it is to me that the words of the prophet apply: 'I have established thee above peoples and kingdoms, that thou mightest uproot and destroy, and also that thou mightest build and plant.' It is to me that it was said: 'I will give thee the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatsoever thou shalt bind on Earth shall be bound in Heaven'.*

It should be added, however, that Innocent III was a truly remarkable man. He was elected Pope at the age of thirty-seven – his predecessor having been an octogenarian – and was blessed not only with vigour and determination but also with sanity and common-sense. It may be that he lacked imagination, but he was quite exceptionally clear-sighted. He invented no wonderful new remedy for the sins of the world, and expected no miracles, but simply concentrated on doing what was possible. He accepted the institutions of the Church as they were, but determined to make them work efficiently.

In this respect his treatment of the problem of anti-clericalism was typical. The main ground for the criticism of the clergy was, as he could not but recognize, that they were too wealthy and conformed more to the appearance of Jewish high priests than to the ideal of

* A. Luchaire, *Innocent III: Rome et l'Italie* (1905), p. 26.

the Gospels. Even in the first half of the twelfth century, Arnold of Brescia (*c.* 1100–1155) had found in Italy (and especially in the city of Rome itself) enthusiastic support for the notion that the Church should live 'of its own', that is to say on the revenues of tithes, surrendering all its temporalities to the laity. Later in the century the Poor Men of Lyons, or *Waldenses*, itinerant preachers who walked the roads of southern and central France barefoot, proclaimed the doctrine of apostolic poverty. What was necessary for the salvation of man, they said, was not a luxurious undergrowth of ecclesiastical institutions but the reading of the Bible – one of the first hints of the new religious thought which was to culminate in the Reformation. But even those of the laity who had no such deeply-rooted convictions joined enthusiastically in the criticism of luxury and in a demand for the redistribution of clerical wealth. Sancho I of Portugal, for example, was said by Innocent III to have suggested that since the clergy 'only simulated religion', their property should be confiscated and given to the knights who defended the kingdom against the Muslims.

Innocent III was not prepared to tolerate such views, but he was far too great a man to shut his eyes to the fact that there was real ground for discontent. It was true that there were scandals in the Church, and unless they were remedied the critics would continue to be vociferous. There was the question of the circulation of bogus holy relics, for example, which was bringing part of the Church into disrepute. Innocent dealt with this by proclaiming that no new relics were to be venerated unless they had first been approved as genuine by the Papacy itself. Similarly he worked out an elaborate system for the detection of forged papal privileges, the fabrication of which was a favourite hobby in many religious houses. But his main efforts were directed towards the improvement of the most ordinary standards of clerical life. He renewed the edicts against pluralism and, like so many of his predecessors, prohibited the purchase or inheritance of ecclesiastical benefices. He forbade clerics to frequent taverns, take part in warfare, keep company with *jongleurs*, or hunt with the hawk or hounds. He forbade them to wear extravagant clothes, complaining particularly of red and green garments with long sleeves and pointed shoes, and compelled them to wear the tonsure and a standardized clerical dress. A shaven head and black clothes, of the same general type as are still worn by the Roman Catholic clergy, would serve to remind priests of their order, and would help them to realize that their allegiance was not to the world but to the Church.

It was one thing to issue reforming edicts, however, and another to get them obeyed. Previous Popes had proclaimed many similar reforms; where they had failed was simply in getting them carried out. The bishops were the only men who could execute the actual work of reform and they, overwhelmed by the amount required, had grown accustomed to receiving orders which they found it impossible to obey. To them it seemed that the Papacy was always thinking in terms of a divine society, forgetful of the fact that on earth it was composed of mere humans. The stress laid on the rule of clerical celibacy, for example, could only seem artificial in an age when most of the country clergy failed to observe it. The difficulty lay not in depriving the married clergy of their benefices but of finding suitable unmarried men to take their place. There were so many vested interests in every parish, and so much human nature in clerics, that bishops often found it prudent to turn a blind eye to the lesser irregularities and to attempt reform only where it seemed possible.

Such an attitude did not suit Innocent III. He complained that the Church was suffering from inertia, and when bishops or archbishops failed to carry out his orders literally he took prompt disciplinary action against them, no matter who they were. Thus when his old friend and teacher, Pierre de Corbeil, failed to execute a sentence against a relative of the king, Innocent suspended him from his functions 'so as to give the whole episcopate a lesson':

> When We nominated you bishop [he wrote], We thought that We were doing a service to the church of Sens and the whole of France. In raising upon a candlestick the light that had been hid beneath a bushel, We thought that We were giving God's flock a shepherd and not a mercenary. But now your light is out; now it is nothing more than the smoke of a snuffed candle. The moment you see a wolf, you desert your flock and run away; you are like a dog that is dumb and cannot bark.*

The problem of finding loyal lieutenants, however, was one that Innocent never solved to his own satisfaction. For bishops, archbishops, and even papal legates, seemed only too often to be incapable of viewing their difficulties with the calmness and sobriety which were necessary for a man of God. Some were too rigid in their interpretation of the law, others too flexible, judging all things by the criterion of convenience. Consequently Innocent once declared that if the interests of the Church permitted it he would rather do everything himself. He was always ready to review ecclesi-

* A. Luchaire, *Rome et l'Italie*, p. 4.

astical judgments, and the number of appeals to Rome, already large at the beginning of his pontificate, increased enormously. Abbots who were revindicating their privileges against bishops or archbishops, candidates who considered themselves cheated of a bishopric, and learned clerks who were anxious to display their knowledge of canon law, all flocked to the papal court, together with others whose difficulties were more serious. The Bishop of Tiberias, for instance, had been converting Muslims to Christianity, and wanted to know if their previous marriages were valid, even if polygamous. Innocent, faithful to his axiom that mercy should be exalted on the judgment-seat, quoted the precedents of Abraham and the patriarchs, and permitted the polygamous marriages provided that they had been made before conversion. Similarly, when asked if a husband might divorce his wife if she became a heretic, he replied with an emphatic negative; in so serious a matter he did not wish to encourage false accusations.

Innocent was untiring in his attention to detail. 'Nothing which happens in the world', he wrote, 'should escape the notice of the supreme pontiff'; and he did his best to see that it didn't. He thought that it was a part of his special duty to watch over the conduct of kings, and to see that they set a good example to their subjects in upholding morality and justice. He interested himself particularly in their matrimonial affairs, and punished Alfonso IX of Leon for attempting to marry within the prohibited degrees of affinity, and Philip Augustus of France for attempting to divorce his wife unlawfully (p. 293). In both cases the weapon he used was that of laying an interdict on the whole kingdom, so that all church-services except the baptism of infants and penance for the dying had to be suspended; and though kings were always able to find royalist bishops who would ignore the sentence, it was usually effective in causing public opinion to force them to return to the paths of righteousness. When more extreme measures were necessary, as in the case of King John of England, whose crime was the refusal to recognize the Archbishop of Canterbury nominated by the Pope, Innocent inflicted the further penalty of excommunication and even threatened physical force, in this case by encouraging the French to invade his kingdom. John was only able to receive absolution after he had surrendered his kingdom to the Papacy, to be held in future as a fief for the service of 1,000 marks a year. Other vassal-kingdoms of the Papacy were Hungary, Portugal, and Aragon, and there can be little doubt that to Innocent's mind it was there that the correct

relationship between the spiritual and temporal powers was to be found.

This can most easily be seen in his attitude to the Empire, which, it will be recalled, was both the traditional enemy and the necessary associate of the Papacy. The hostility was due in the first place to the Investitures Struggle, but had been inflamed by the Italian policy and ecumenical claims of the Hohenstaufen. No Pope could remain unmoved when Henry VI's courtiers told him that he, as Emperor, was 'God's vicar' and 'possessed the earth'. Association with the Empire, however, was none the less necessary. For if the Pope was to take upon himself the moral guidance of the world, it stood to reason that he needed a secular arm to execute commands at his nod, lest the sternness of his edicts should become as sounding brass or tinkling cymbals. How could the kings of this world be made to obey the Word of God unless the admonitions of the Pope were supported by the sword of the Emperor? Innocent III, being clear-sighted, knew only too well the limitations of ghostly thunderings, and considered it axiomatic that only the most perfect concord between Pope and Emperor could secure 'the tranquillity and glory of the Christian people'. Concord, however, did not necessarily imply equality. On the contrary, Innocent likened the two powers to the sun and the moon:

> Just as the moon receives its light from the sun, which is greater by far, owing to the quantity and quality of its light, so the royal power takes its reputation and prestige from the pontifical power.

The Empire, he claimed, 'belonged' to the Papacy, both because its origin was in the alleged transfer of imperial power from the Greeks to the Franks, effected by Leo III when he crowned Charlemagne, and because its end was the union of all Christian people in the Church. Reversing the roles played by the Emperor and the Pope at the Synod of Sutri in 1046 (p. 227), he welcomed the opportunity, afforded by the death of Henry VI (1197), of setting himself up as judge over the rival claimants to the Empire.

Unfortunately he misjudged his men. The candidates for the imperial throne were three in number. First there was Frederick II, the infant son of Henry VI, who had already succeeded to the kingdom of Norman Sicily by hereditary right. He was not acceptable as Emperor either to the princes (because he was barely three years old) or to Innocent (who feared the danger that would ensue to the Papacy from the continued union of the Empire with Sicily).

Secondly there was Henry's brother, Philip of Swabia, an honourable and clerkly man, who was supported by the great majority of the princes but was mistrusted by Innocent because he was a Ghibelline. And finally there was Otto IV, the son of Henry the Lion, who, though he had won but little support in Germany, was favoured by Innocent because he was a Guelf.

In supporting Otto, however, Innocent made a blunder. For while Philip was alive he had no hope of establishing himself – a fact which Innocent eventually had to recognize (1208) – and after Philip's murder (which Innocent hailed as a 'Judgment of God'), he proved unfaithful to the Papacy, even to the extent of invading Norman Sicily (1210). Innocent, therefore, although he had already changed his front twice, felt compelled to change it a third time and to support the imperial claims of the young Frederick, now almost seventeen years old, even though this greatly increased the danger of a union between the Empire and Norman Sicily. Though he received from Frederick a promise to abdicate the Sicilian throne as soon as he was crowned Emperor, there was little likelihood of the promise being fulfilled. The truth of the matter may have been that Innocent never expected Frederick to succeed in defeating Otto, and that he realized too late the disastrous possibilities of his victory.

Innocent died before the danger of a revived Empire had been fully realized, so that during his lifetime his policy seemed, though versatile, to be successful. But he was well aware that a mere reorganization of Christian government was not enough. Lawyer though he was, he saw that what was needed was not simply revised regulations but a new spirit of Christian enthusiasm. The aspirations of the previous century had to be revived, so that religion might once again become a real force in the lives not only of the clergy but also of the laity. How was it to be done?

The remedy which Innocent proposed was traditional but unimaginative. He decided to preach a Fourth Crusade, thinking that a new Crusade would inevitably revive the old crusading spirit. In fact it did nothing of the sort. An enthusiastic group of French knights started off from Champagne for the Holy Land, but having insufficient money for the journey, which they wisely proposed to make by sea, they sold their services to the Venetians, undertaking – in return for their passage to the East – to capture the Christian town of Zara on the Adriatic coast from the King of Hungary (1202). Innocent III excommunicated them for their pains, but subsequently forgave them, only to find that, lured on by the combination of Alexius Angelus, a Byzantine pretender, Philip of Swabia, Boniface

of Montferrat, and Enrico Dandolo, the blind Doge of Venice, the crusaders had determined to make the city of Constantinople their next objective. The greatest Christian city of the East, which for five centuries had borne the full brunt of the Muslim attack, was now to be assaulted by men who claimed to be the soldiers of Christ. When, on 12 April 1204, they finally captured it, they looted wildly for three days. Harlots besported themselves in the sanctuary of Santa Sophia, and the value of the booty officially declared to the commanders was 800,000 silver marks.

When Innocent heard of the outrages that had been committed he was furious:

> How is the Church of the Greeks, when afflicted with such trials and persecutions, to be brought back into the unity of the Church and devotion to the Apostolic See? It has seen in the Latins nothing but an example of perdition and the works of darkness, so that it now abhors them as worse than dogs. For they who are supposed to serve Christ rather than their own interests, who should have used their swords only against the pagans, are dripping with the blood of Christians. They have spared neither religion, nor age, nor sex, and have committed adultery and fornication in public, exposing matrons and even nuns to the filthy brutality of their troops. For them it was not enough to exhaust the riches of the Empire and to despoil both great men and small; they had to lay their hands on the treasures of the Church, and what was worse its possessions, seizing silver retables from the altars, breaking them into pieces to divide amongst themselves, violating the sanctuaries and carrying off crosses and relics.*

Innocent did not exaggerate. Amongst the holy booty which was transported to the West were the head of St. Philip, an arm of St. Stephen, some of the flesh of St Paul, a tooth of St John the Baptist, and the dish into which Judas dipped his fingers at the Last Supper. The desecration committed by the crusaders was an outrage which reverberated throughout Christendom, and made the schism between the Greek and Roman Churches definitive. Instead of reviving Christian enthusiasm, the conquest of Constantinople demonstrated the cynical lust and depravity which had overcome the Latin West.

What was the cause of this debasement of the ideals of the previous century? To Innocent III it seemed to lie in the fact that the fundamental tenets of Christianity were no longer understood or sincerely believed by a large part of the population. In the great towns of northern Italy and southern France the rapid growth of

* Migne, *P. L.*, ccxv, col. 701 (letter cxxvi).

population had far outstripped the parochial organization, with the result that many people, receiving none of the proper ministrations of the Church, had fallen a prey to false doctrines, and particularly to Manichaeism. This was a heresy of Eastern origin, founded by Mani in the third century, and it had spread to the West primarily through the agency of traders. By the end of the eleventh century it had churches in Constantinople, Bosnia, Roumania, Bulgaria, and Dalmatia, and during the twelfth century it was more or less officially tolerated by the municipal authorities in towns such as Milan, Viterbo, Ferrara, Florence, Prato, Vicenza, and Spoleto, while in the south of France, particularly in the region of Albi, its success was even greater, since the Count of Toulouse and the ruling factions in many of the towns were said to be numbered among its converts.

The central belief of these heretics, who were usually called Cathari, or Albigensians, was in the dualism of the Perfect and Imperfect, the Eternal and the Temporal, the Spiritual and the Material, the Good and the Evil. They believed that God, being perfect, had created only the world of the spirit, which was eternal, and that the material world, being corruptible, had been created by an evil God (Satan, Lucifer, or Lucibel) who was to be identified as Jehovah, the God of the Jews. Consequently, they not only rejected the Old Testament, but also denied Christ's Incarnation (for how could God have had a body which was the creation of Satan?). Having thus rejected the central doctrine of the Christian Church, they proceeded to undermine the fundamental institution of society, which was the family. Carrying their belief in the wickedness of all matter to its logical conclusion, they held that it was a sin to add to the amount of evil in the world by the procreation of babies; and while they preached chastity for the 'perfect', they declared that prostitution was normally a lesser evil than motherhood.

It stood to reason that the Church could not allow such doctrines to go unchallenged, and for sixty years, at least, vigorous preaching campaigns had been conducted in the disaffected areas. But even though the preachers had included such men as St Bernard himself, the results achieved had been negligible. Innocent, therefore, at the beginning of his pontificate, intensified the efforts of the Catholics. He sent papal legates, notably Pierre de Castelnau, to the south of France and enlisted the active support of the Cistercian Order. In 1205 he encouraged two Spaniards, Diego, Bishop of Osma, and his sub-prior St Dominic, to abandon their original intention of going as missionaries to East Prussia, and to preach against the Albigensians instead. But even though they travelled the country on foot

and were remarkable for their learning, so that they were able to vanquish the leaders of the heretics in public disputations, they were unable to effect large-scale conversions. The heretics remained obstinate because they were encouraged by their temporal rulers.

That was the root of the problem, and it became evident to all when, on 15 January 1208, the papal legate, Pierre de Castelnau, was murdered at a crossing of the Rhône near St Gilles. Rightly or wrongly, it was universally believed that the murder had been committed at the instigation of Raymond VI, Count of Toulouse. Raymond was a typical product of what all good churchmen considered to be the decadent and immoral civilization of the towns of southern France. He was the idol of the troubadours and the paragon of courtly love. He himself was suspected of heresy, and was said to have received the murderer of the papal legate in public and to have congratulated him on his deed. Though excommunicate, he remained unrepentant.

In these circumstances it seemed to Innocent, and indeed to the vast majority of Christians, imperative that some definite action should be taken. He therefore approached Raymond's feudal overlord, Philip Augustus, King of France, and enjoined him to confiscate his lands as a heretic. From Innocent's point of view, all would have been well if only Philip had agreed to play the part allotted to him. Unfortunately however, he refused, since, being already at war with King John of England and the Emperor Otto IV, he could not afford to dissipate his military strength in the south. Innocent therefore took the matter into his own hands and preached a Crusade against the Albigensians.

The call to arms met with a wide response. The barons of northern France coveted the wealth of Languedoc, and were only too eager for a holy war in which the prizes were both tempting and conveniently near to hand, and on 24 June 1209 a vast army assembled at Lyons. Raymond of Toulouse was in despair. Thinking resistance impossible, he announced his repentance, submitted to the papal legates, and in the hope of being allowed to retain his dominions joined the Crusade against his own people. But unfortunately for him his repentance was too late. Even though Innocent apparently believed in the sincerity of his conversion and tried to save him from ruin, he found that events had passed out of his control. Once the Crusade had been launched, there was a massacre at Béziers and an *auto-da-fé* at Minerva (1210), and nothing could stop the progress of the holy war. Even though many of the greater barons, such as the Duke of Burgundy, eventually returned to their

fiefs, the lesser barons, under Simon de Montfort,* continued the war of conquest and won a decisive victory at Muret (1213). They were convinced that they were fighting in the cause of righteousness, and enjoyed the full support, if not of the Pope, at least of his legate.

If Innocent was haunted by the fear that the crusaders might have proceeded beyond the bounds of absolute justice, he contrived to conceal his feelings from the world at large. The Crusade was outwardly successful; the heretics were defeated and the Catholic faith vindicated. At the fourth Lateran Council which he summoned in 1215, Innocent was able to give a most impressive demonstration of the unity of the Church and the strength of papal leadership. It was attended by 405 prelates from Italy, Germany, Flanders, France, the kingdoms of the Iberian peninsula, England, Scandinavia, and (thanks to the Latin conquest) Byzantium itself. It was a most impressive assembly, since even the fact of attendance signified obedience to the papal summons. In many ways it could be compared to the 'Marchfield' of the Merovingians (p. 108) or to the solemn crown-wearing of a king. It was an expression of the Church's innate unity and of its desire to maintain a single discipline by means of papal authority. Detailed plans were made for the reform of both the regular and the secular clergy, and the archbishops were instructed to hold annual synods in their provinces in order to ensure that the reforms were carried out. The manners and customs of bishops, monks, and parochial clergy were reviewed with the calm eye of apostolic authority, and even the laity was brought within the purview of reform. Every Christian was enjoined to declare any knowledge that he might have of heretics, and all secular rulers were informed that it was their duty to extirpate heresy in their dominions.

More important still was the decree that all adult Christians were, on pain of excommunication, to confess to their own parish priests at least once a year, and to communicate at Easter. By this means, Innocent was able to ensure that in every parish the priest would have firm control of his flock. The maintenance of the true faith, he thought, could not be left to the fortuitous inspiration of the virtuous. It was a matter which required organization and discipline. He, as Christ's Vicar on Earth, would supervise the archbishops; archbishops would supervise the bishops; bishops would supervise ordinary priests; and priests would guide the laity into the paths of righteousness.

* The father of the Simon de Montfort who played such a large part in the history of England in the reign of Henry III.

That was the real meaning of Innocent's claim to 'possess the throne of glory', and the reason why he declared that nothing which happened in the world should escape his attention. His was the office on which the whole Church depended, and he thought that he, and he alone, could organize its effective defence. The qualities which he brought to his task were in every way remarkable – clear-sightedness, efficiency, a deep-rooted sense of justice, courage, and faith. He spoke with the tongues of men and of angels, and no one can deny him his greatness. But unfortunately he lacked the spark that might have kindled sympathy and enthusiasm, and all his reforms might have been ineffectual if it had not been for the intervention of St Francis of Assisi.

2. ST FRANCIS (1182–1226): INSPIRATION AND AUTHORITY

Innocent III had met St Francis in 1210, had given him his blessing, and after some hesitation had approved his primitive Rule, though only verbally. A less broad-minded or less courageous Pope might easily have refused to do as much, for on the surface St Francis and his eleven companions were very similar to such heretics as the *Waldenses* or Poor Men of Lyons. They were laymen who had been 'converted to Religion'* but who had refused to enter any of the monastic orders. They lived by a rule of their own, interpreted the doctrine of apostolic poverty so strictly that they refused even to possess houses or books, decried book-learning, and wandered about the countryside preaching. Innocent saw, however, that in spite of these superficial resemblances to the heretics, St Francis and his followers were different. They were not anti-clerical, but showed an immense reverence for the priesthood in general and the Papacy in particular. They were prepared to obey the Church, and therefore, in spite of their wild and unconventional ways, there was a chance that they might be able to serve it. It was true that they might eventually develop heretical views, but the risk was worth taking. Inspiration was what the Church needed, and, provided he did not break loose, St Francis was clearly the man to provide it.

St Francis (1182–1226) was born at Assisi, a hill-town in the vale of Spoleto, and he owed his name to the fact that his father, a

* For the significance of this term, see p. 251.