

The Rising Power of the Church

Between the years 1000 and 1200 the Roman Catholic Church rose to its most powerful position in the history of Europe. These were years of sweeping reform in the Church. Despite the relative failure of the Crusades, the leaders of the faithful gained more power and prestige. By 1200, the Church was the strongest institution in the West.

One base of power for the Church was the continuing growth of monasteries. They were expanding in numbers and influence. In France alone, The 900s witnessed 157 new monasteries, 326 were built during the 11th century, and a whopping 702 in the 12th century. In England, by the 1200s, nearly one of every 50 adult males was a monk.

New monastic orders were established during these centuries. In 910, the Cluniac system was founded, with the abbey of Cluny, France, controlling 200 satellite monasteries. In 1098, the Cistercian order was created, also in France, by Bernard, Abbot of Clairvaux. He was responsible for the calling of the 2nd Crusade.

The papacy was also gaining power. During the 11th century, popes rose to new positions of prominence, partially due to the monastic movement. Strong stands were taken by the papacy against marriage among the Church's priests, bishops and other administrative clergy.

Pope Gregory VII (1073-1085) held a council in Rome denouncing a practice of secular rulers called *lay investiture*. This occurred when a king or local ruler took it upon himself to fill an empty Church office with a candidate of his choosing. Gregory believed that all Church positions came under his control and were to be filled by the Church. He even threatened to excommunicate, or deny worship and salvation, to any secular ruler who committed lay investiture.

Additional changes and reforms were instituted by the Church. In 1215, the Sacramental system was firmly established, recognizing seven sacraments within Catholic doctrine. The sacraments included baptism, confirmation (which recognizes a young person's preparation for adult Church membership), marriage, The Eucharist (taking the elements of wine and bread during Mass), ordination for the priesthood, penance through confession, and anointing the sick. These practices first took on significance during the medieval period as the instruments of salvation serving as a sign of a believer's relationship with God.

During the 1200s, other religious orders were established to further strengthen the papacy and to give new life to the Church. The old monasteries were losing their purity and enthusiasm. New ministers, called friars, were providing the needs of Christians across Europe. (The word *Friar* comes from the Latin word of "brother").

These men served as preachers for the Church. They did not completely separate from society as the monks did, but rather connected to the people, traveling about, rallying Christian communities, hearing their confessions, and seeking out heretics and critics of the Church.

Two such orders were established in the early 1200s: the Dominicans in Spain and the Franciscans of Italy. The founder of the Dominicans was Domingo de Guzman, who saw the need for highly educated preachers to fight heresy with learning. The Franciscans were founded by Giovanni Francesco de Bernadone, who was later known as St. Francis. His followers were less educated than the Dominicans, but they were devoted to preaching love and the brotherhood of humans. Despite these efforts to strengthen the Church between 1000 and 1200, this was the high water mark for the power of the Church in Europe. Political powers were soon going to require the Church to take a backseat, reducing the strength of Church leaders.