



35. THE APOGEE OF THE EMPIRE AND THE RENOVATION OF CATHOLICISM

The deposition in the year 887 of Charles III the Fat¹, severely invalid, represents the conclusion of the Carolingian dynasty. The Empire, thus, entered a stalemate due to the imperial vacancy². Historians in general, accustomed to joyfully welcoming “revolutions” on every occasion, consider this event a historical turning point from which the Empire underwent a radically change. Nothing could be falsier. During those seven decades, the feudal system was consolidated according to the principles established since the time of Charlemagne. Most of the fiefs became hereditary, establishing their bonds of fidelity and benefice with the vassals, Kings and the dukes³ who, in the absence of the Emperor, were his representatives. The same system of government was adopted between the fiefs of the vavasours and the vavasour's vassals. What we need to understand clearly is that sworn loyalty was mutual. If the superior feudal lord did not respect the contract of benefice conferred on his vassal, the latter had every right to protest before the Diet of Aachen. At best, he could, quite rightly, take up arms against his liege lord to assert his reasons. Due to their inability to understand the sense of honor, fidelity and loyalty of the medieval man, contemporary historians have unequivocally confused such right with rebellion⁴.



1. Feudal investiture of an abbot

Different fiefdoms were granted to bishops and abbots. In this case, of course, inheritance was excluded. Such concessions came from the Grandees of the Empire, which made the diocese coincide with the fiefdom. In general, the ecclesiastical fiefdom was used to separate the possessions of noble dynasties in

¹ He was the only Roman Emperor, together with Charlemagne, to have united all the kingdoms of Christianity under his crown: he was King of Alemannia and Lotharingia (876-887), King of Italy (879-887), Holy Roman Emperor (881-887), King of the Eastern Franks (882-887), King of the Western Franks, King of Aquitaine and, finally, King of Provence. All vassal kingdoms, indirectly participating in the Empire, reaffirmed their loyalty.

² From 888 to 924, five feudal Grand Lords succeeded one another, crowning themselves as Emperors by forcefully obliging the Pope to consecrate them (A. Zorzi, *Manuale di storia medievale*, quot., p.140). Their claims, however, were considered illegitimate because none of them had been acclaimed by the Diet of the barons of the Empire. During the interregnum from 921 to 962, no one declared himself as a pretender to the august throne.

³ Including also several sovereign marquises and counts.

⁴ This incapacity is due to the prejudices imprinted on the European mentality by the nefarious legacy of the French revolution. Not even the other bourgeois revolution, the American one, has come so far as to distort the capacity for understanding the past. The right to raise arms against the US central government is still a cornerstone of certain freedoms “liberal systems” that are now inconceivable in the “homologated” Europe.



historical competition with each other, with the result of maintaining the *Pax Imperii*. As illustrated in the previous chapter, this system held strong and did not lend itself well to the schemes of the few daredevils who tried to overthrow the Carolingian order to unduly extend their possessions or to unworthily seize royal titles or even the imperial one. In this period, however, the kingdom of West Francia, despite being reduced to a small area around Paris, crushed between the duchies of Normandy, Burgundy, Aquitaine and the counties of Flanders and of Anjou. Despite being governed by a Carolingian branch, this territory undertook then its policy of detachment from the Empire.



2. In blue the Kingdom of France in the 10th century

This was the only case of an embryonic rebellion that gained some success over the following centuries. As will be seen hereinafter in our overview, the kingdom of France always played a dissolving role in the medieval Christian ecumene. East Francia consisted instead of four great duchies. In this period of imperial vacancy, the four dukes were elected, by rotation, Kings of Germany.



3. Otto I the Great

In 955, Otto of Saxony, a member of a dynasty related to the Carolingians, obtained a definitive victory against the Magyars. Once defeated, this people settled in the present-day Hungary and became vassals of the Holy Roman Empire¹. The end of the long-lasting threat from the eastern front was a great success for Otto of Saxony, who in 962 was acclaimed and anointed Holy Roman Emperor. With the dynasty of

¹ Thus, they entered the sphere of influence of Catholicism, although their conversion was completed only under the reign of St. Stephen I in the first decades of the 11th century.



Saxony, the Empire reached the maximum of political and economic stability¹. However, the greatest feat of Emperor Otto I was to continue the consolidation of the Empire in its spiritual principles. The Ottonian Holy Roman Empire succeeded in encapsulating a universal and sacral conception of the *Regnum*, assuming the symbols, the doctrines and the rituals of the ancient Roman Empire and of the coexisting Byzantine Empire². Furthermore, Otto descended into Italy to remove the bellicose feudal lords, especially those of Lombard origin, who had devastated northern and central Italy during the previous decades. In southern Italy he reduced to reason the remaining Longobard duchies but showed consideration for the Byzantine enclaves³. In France he succeeded in regaining the loyalty of the Kingdom of Burgundy but failed to bring the Kingdom of France back into the imperial ecumene. Furthermore, the duchy of Normandy continued to elude its bonds of vassalage with the Empire.



4. A) Marotia does kill Pope John X - B) Papal “pornocracy”

However, the imperial interventions in Italy could not disregard the relations with the papacy. Taking advantage of the internal struggles among the great feudal Lords who had troubled the Italian landscape in the period of imperial vacancy, a family of obscure origins, the counts of Tusculum⁴, lorded

¹ Crypto-Marxism, surreptitiously infiltrated in all fields of academic sciences, has an obvious preference for an economic perspective of history allegedly capable of explaining every phenomenon of this mechanistic cosmos. To this historical period is usually attributed the flourishing of agriculture, a new demographic increase and the revival of the arts and sciences (indeed, all this should be backdated to the Carolingian renaissance). The technological discoveries to which academic historians attribute the prosperity of this period, the noria, the yoke and the metal ploughs, were already known for at least two millennia! Moreover, the apparent demographic and economic depression of previous centuries is a mere ideological reconstruction of modern historiography, since the documentation on which these inferences are based are in fact lacking. In the early Middle Ages, the documents worthy of being transcribed were the liturgical texts, the theological and dogmatic formulations, the transcription of the classical authors, as well as, edicts and decrees concerning feudal donations and benefices, certainly far from the shopping list mentality of modern times. If a demographic decline ever occurred, along with the consequent atrophy of the documentary and artistic production, this must be traced back to the period of barbarian invasions, whose real destructive reach has been hidden during the last two centuries by the increasing political and cultural hegemony of the Anglo-Saxon and protestant peoples, the last heirs of those barbarians, followers of the Arian heresy.

² It is worth mentioning that there is an architecture and, in general, an Ottonian art. It developed from the assumption of the Byzantine Christian symbolism reinterpreted in the optics of the ancient classical Roman art, whose ruins were admired almost everywhere in Europe, from which derived the denomination of “Romanic art”. This artistic style spread throughout the Empire, also taking on local connotations and replacing Christian-barbaric art. Hans Jantzen, *Ottonische Kunst*, Hamburg, Rowohlt Verlage, 1959.

³ Apulia and Calabria were still provinces of the Eastern Empire. Otto I was a great admirer of the sacredness of the Byzantine Empire. He managed to arrange his son’s marriage, the future Otto II, with a niece of the *Basileus*. All his policy towards the East was dictated by a strive for a close cooperation between the two Empires to reconstitute the pre-Theodosian status.

⁴ This comital title was granted in vassalage by the Pope. The counts of Tusculum, after gaining control of the city of Rome, took possession of the administration of the fiefdom called the “Patrimony of St. Peter”, thus usurping the imperial temporal power. It was under these favorable circumstances that the counts of Tusculum succeeded in raising to the papal throne their



undisturbed in Rome, illegally appointing five popes of their liking¹. Otto the Great descended into Rome, put order in the city, deposed the illegitimate pope and finally, in 974, he supervised the regular election of Benedict VII. Together with this new pope, Otto undertook with great energy the work of purification of Catholicism initiated by St. Boniface and Charlemagne.



5. Otto III and the *Basileus* Basil II get the homage of the Christian nations

The Emperor recognized the pontifical fiefdoms (even those seized fraudulently by previous popes), reaffirming, however, their vassalage to the Empire. He renewed also the validity of his right of confirmation of the elected pope, as it was sanctioned by the *Constitutio Romana* of Louis the Pious. Finally, he promulgated the *Privilegium Othonis*, which ratified that the Emperor was the guarantor of the doctrinal, liturgical and pastoral correctness of Catholicism, with the sacred authority to punish the transgressors². He was succeeded by his son Otto II, who died prematurely, and by his grandson Otto III. In the five years of his reign (996-1001³), Otto III made the ideal of the Universal Empire ever more

own courtiers and even two members of their family. Only the fulfillment of the spiritual duties was left to the popes. Due to the indecent interference of the women of that family (especially of Marotia) and to the repeated cases of bastardization this period is known as the “Roman pornocracy”. (C. Rendina, *I Papi*, quot. pp. 314-335).

¹ It is, to say the least, surprising that the Church, ever so punctilious in judging the imperial conduct, has always considered these usurpers of the throne of Peter to be regular.

² M. Montanari, *Storia medievale*, quot. pp. 122-123. Otto exercised this power by ousting John XII (C. Rendina, *I Papi*, quot. pp. 327-332) after a trial before a mixed court of nobles and members of the clergy. The pope was found guilty of the most nefarious sins and vices, including turning the Lateran palace into a brothel full of prostitutes and corrupt youth, committing incest, murder, perjury, and exhibiting a completely godless belief.

³ The first millennium A.D. ended during his reign. All the allegations about the superstitious terror of medieval man about that date were invented by the humanists of the 15th and 16th century to discredit what they considered a period of darkness not illuminated by the subversive ideas of individualism and naturalism typical of the Renaissance. These were the same humanists who devoted themselves to the evocation of demons, to laboratory research to produce gold and to the reading of the stars to predict the future. This *leyenda negra* was later enthusiastically adopted also by the illuminists of the 18th century and, even today, by the fanatical practitioners of the “religion of progress”, even though this thesis has been entirely disproved. See Georges Duby, *L'anno Mille. Storia religiosa e psicologia collettiva*, Turin, Einaudi, 1976; Dominique Barthélemy, “La mutation féodale a-t-elle eu lieu?”, *Annales ESC*, 47, (1992), pp. 767-777. The Spanish term *leyenda negra* refers to an historical falsification fraudulently spread by means of propaganda among the mass population with the sole purpose of defining a long-lasting and irremediably negative image of an opponent, an historical period or a nation. The term was coined to indicate the immense accumulation of slander and lies fabricated by the pirate and heretical regime of Elisabeth I of England



charismatic and venerated throughout Christendom, keeping the papacy tightly under control and committing itself to the reform of the Church. The Ottonian dynasty then opened a period of splendor that continued with the following dynasty, though bringing along the invisible germs of its ruin. It was precisely the providential renewal of Catholicism that raised the discontent of the popes and their claims of revenge.

The consolidation of the order in the Empire undertaken by the Ottonians highlighted the inadequacy of the secular clergy¹ and of the papacy itself. Above all, in the period of imperial interregnum, priests and popes fell in the same ignorance and behavioral abjection that had already been affirmed in the Latin Church before the intervention of the Culdean monks². Under the dynasty of Saxony, the Italian, Burgundian and German high clergy, enjoying the feudal benefices, was now an expression of the aristocracy, possessing therefore a higher level of religious education. Those abbots, bishops and the Emperor became aware of the tragic situation of Rome³ and, in their project of universalization of the Empire, they included also the purification of the Church.



6. Cluny Abbey

The strategy chosen was to instruct monasticism to restore the Latin Church. By monasticism we mean the Benedictine order, which had monopolized the style of Catholic anachoristic life. To be able to operate this ecclesiastical correction, the monks began to become priests, thus acquiring their functions. This

to defame the Imperial and Catholic Spain. Such *leyenda* is still today strongly shared by the Protestant Anglo-Saxon circles and by their servants.

- ¹ Priests are also called ‘seculars’ because of their proximity to the laity. Monks, on the other hand, having renounced the world are not part of the secular clergy.
- ² The Irish and British Culdeans, however, continued to exercise a doctrinal influence on the Benedictines directly, as was the case of the Scot monk Richard of Saint Victor, or through their presence within the Benedictine Order, as was the case of Hugh of Saint Victor (born Hugh Count of Blankenburg). This action lasted at least until 1188 when, by decree of pope Clement III, the Church of Ireland and all its twin branches in the British Isles were definitively Romanized. In this way the initiatic characteristics of the Culdeans were also abrogated. Thus, disappeared the nocturnal method based on *crossfigill* techniques (*crucis vigilia*), similar to those of Hesychasm or Indian *haṭayoga* that replicated the body postures of Christ according to the sacred iconography, and the use of invocations (sskrt. *mantra*) and gestures (sskrt. *mudrā*) to activate the inner “heat and light” etc. (Nuccio d’Anna, *Il cristianesimo celtico. I pellegrini della luce*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell’Orso, 2010). , This was almost identical to the vigil of the arms of the medieval cavalry, even though the knights adopted the cruciform sword instead of the cross. This was probably a technique borrowed from the initiation rites of the Celtic knights. In fact, we know for certain that the Mithraic initiation of the Roman *militia* did not feature similar rituals; and there is no evangelical description of Jesus’s nocturnal vigils with his secret disciples.
- ³ In Rome even the Senate had in fact been weakened by some bullying families of the feudal nobility that in fact acted on behalf of the Lombard and Norman dukes, influencing, if not controlling, the nomination of the popes.



facilitated their task, diverting, however, their attention from the contemplative goals set forth for by their original Rule.

This happened mainly in the monastery of Cluny, which was founded by the duke William I of Aquitaine. The duke bore all the expenses of construction and installed Berno as abbot, provided that he and his monks made an act of submission to the pope. It was the first time that a monastery gave up its autocephaly¹, accepting direct dependence from Rome. The monks, now almost all priests, became defenders of the most rigorous liturgy, teaching with patience and method the precise way of performing sacramental rites. Their purity of behavior made them appear like angels among the clergy, becoming models to be imitated. They gave a new meaning to chastity, convincing the exterior clergy to become mediators between the faithful and God and to act accordingly. The result of this rectification appeared almost as a monacation of the clergy. This was certainly a success. However, this entailed a clericalization of the Cluniac monks and subsequent decline in spiritual commitment and initiatic transmission.

Not all Benedictine monks, still under the influence of the Culdean wisdom, followed the example of Cluny. In fact, especially in Italy, they responded by renewing the ascetic and eremitical ideals of the ancient monasticism of the desert, of the Thebaid and of Mount Athos. Saint Romuald (born Duke Romuald degli Onesti), disciple of Marinus, a Venetian monk of Byzantine rite, founded the hermitage of Pereo, near Ravenna, which had been the capital of Byzantine dominions in Italy. Later, he founded several small cœnobia and hermitages in central Italy. Among these the most famous remains that of Camaldoli, founded in the early years of 1000.



7. Benedictine cœnobia and hermitages

This experience, very close to the hesychast esoterism, originated, in the 11th century, the monasteries of Cîteaux in Burgundy, and, among others, the Calabrian hermitage of Santa Maria, all founded by Saint Bruno of Calabria. He spent years in the same cave where, in his time, Cassiodorus had withdrawn and built the *Vivarium* hermitage². Almost intentionally marking a continuity of transmission from

¹ Until that time, monks were by no means subject to the hierarchic authority of the bishops in whose dioceses their monasteries were located, in which case only a formal respect was observed. However, if the abbot was also mitred the monastery would have been even formally independent. Therefore, until then all monasteries were autocephalous, as they continue to be today in the Eastern Orthodox Church. Evidently, Cluny's purpose was to reform the Church from within, with the consequent "political" contamination that followed. Initiatic authorities undertaking activities of correction of the exterior environment should always remain aware of the risks of exposure so as not to get involved. Too many cases of piloted downscaling of the intellectual level had been operated with the best intentions of correcting the exoteric aspect of a tradition only to eventually lose control and fail the initial objectives.

² Gregorio Penco, *Storia del monachesimo in Italia. Dalle origini alla fine del medioevo*, Milan, Jaca Book, 1983.



Pythagoras, through Cassiodorus, Bruno assumed the initiatic hesychast method, probably learned from some Byzantine anchorite who was still present in the “vertical desert” of Copanello, in Calabria.



8. Hermitic life in the cave. S. Romuald; S. Bruno with disciples

The Camaldolese and the Cistercian monks distanced themselves from the Cluniacs, concluding that the moralizing work the Church had undermined the ascetic aspect of their rule. In fact, the Cluniacs dealt as peers with feudal Lords, Kings, Emperors, bishops and popes. Cluny soon became the richest monastery in Europe thanks to the donations and the feudal benefices received¹. On the contrary, all the other Benedictine orders emphasized the importance of the renunciation of worldly goods in order to heal the Church². The joint influence of the two Benedictine tendencies, under the guidance of the Emperors of the Saxon and of the following Franconian dynasties, had an outcome beyond any expectation. Thus, while the Emperors were strengthening the bases of the imperial ideal, keeping the election of the popes under control, they managed to restore the Church without realizing that it would have turned against them the moment its authority was once again restored. Storm clouds thickened on the horizon of the 11th century.

Petrus Simonet de Maisonneuve

¹ Glauco Maria Cantarella, *I monaci di Cluny*, Turin, Einaudi, 2006.

² However, even the holy hermits of Camaldoli and Cîteaux were often distracted from their contemplative life by Emperors, Kings, popes and bishops in order to restore the Roman Church. The historical record we received from that period often speaks of their suffering when trying to intervene in worldly transactions and their relief for returning to meditation and solitude.