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Priest and Prince: Clement VII and the Struggle of Church and State in the Renaissance

Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"A historian once ended his work on Clement VII (r. 1523-34) by stating, "No pope ever began so well, or ended so miserably." True enough in the sense that most contemporary observers were more thankful than mournful at Clement's passing. However, one might also see in his papacy a vigorous defense of papal rights against the growth of monarchial power, a diplomatic and even pastoral struggle to retain the ancient division within Christendom of the priestly and kingly offices. Should the new monarchs of the early modern period reduce the papacy to a mere appendage of secular authority, religious issues would become little more than state policy. Control of bishops and cardinals could and, in the recent past, had led to the election of popes. Therefore, as his predecessors before him and his successors after him, Clement VII attempted to restrain the expansion of royal power and maintain the independence of Rome and of papal prerogatives."

PRIEST AND PRINCE: CLEMENT VII AND THE STRUGGLE OF CHURCH AND STATE IN THE RENAISSANCE

Fred Dotolo

A historian once ended his work on Clement VII (r. 1523-34) by stating, “No pope ever began so well, or ended so miserably.” True enough in the sense that most contemporary observers were more thankful than mournful at Clement’s passing. However, one might also see in his papacy a vigorous defense of papal rights against the growth of monarchial power, a diplomatic and even pastoral struggle to retain the ancient division within Christendom of the priestly and kingly offices. Should the new monarchs of the early modern period reduce the papacy to a mere appendage of secular authority, religious issues would become little more than state policy. Control of bishops and cardinals could and, in the recent past, had led to the election of popes. Therefore, as his predecessors before him and his successors after him, Clement VII attempted to restrain the expansion of royal power and maintain the independence of Rome and of papal prerogatives.

The future Clement VII was born Giulio de’Medici in 1478, an illegitimate son of the illustrious Giuliano de’Medici. The endemic political violence associated with the powerful families of the Renaissance claimed Giuliano’s life just prior to Giulio’s birth.

Fearing for the safety of her young son, Giulio's mother surrendered the infant to the protection of the *de facto* ruler of Florence, his uncle, Lorenzo de' Medici. Under the tutelage of *il Magnifico*, Giulio became, as others of that famous House tended, a patron of arts, politics, and religion. Possessing solid moral and spiritual sensibilities, Giulio entered the Church and, benefiting from a canonical dispensation given him by his older cousin Pope Leo X, which "gentled" Giulio's birth, became archbishop of Florence. Patronage may have secured his entrance into the hierarchy, a common practice during the Renaissance when rulers really only could trust their relatives with positions of power, Giulio's abilities, organizational skills, and spirituality earned him a cardinal's hat and appointment as papal administrator for Rome. In that administrative capacity, he served Popes Leo X and Adrian VI until being elected pope himself in 1523.

During the late Renaissance, the Church faced the danger that competing dynastic claims over Italy would reduce the papacy to a simple plaything for the monarchs and that rampant corruption would undermine papal authority over the Church in favor of bishops, traditional men more answerable to king than pope. Lay and ecclesiastical leaders, for example, urged various popes to convene an ecumenical council to reform the Church. The early sixteenth century popes resisted this call because the memory of the last time councils and popes clashed over the issue of conciliarism in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, the Church into competing popes and anti-popes. Similarly, the monarchs might use the need for reform to seize greater control over their national churches. Julius II, Leo X, and Adrian VI decided for good or ill that reform would come not from a council but from Rome.

The dynastic problem involved the struggles of Francis I of France and the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V over control of Italy while including to a lesser degree, at least where Italy was concerned, Henry VIII of England. The winner of this struggle would also control the papacy and through the office, the Church. Without the benefit of a large kingdom to protect his interests, Clement initially followed a pro-Imperial policy, reflecting a natural suspicion of the French monarchy. In 1309, King Philip IV of France removed Pope Clement V from Rome to Avignon beginning the dark period of papal history known as the “Babylonian Captivity.” When the papacy finally returned to Rome in 1377, its authority was so weakened that the theory of conciliarism, which argued that a general council of bishops held greater spiritual authority than any single pope, emerged.

An even greater threat emerged in 1519 than a renewed French monarchy, the Holy Roman Emperor Charles V, master of Spain, the Holy Roman Empire, and, recently, the kingdom of Naples. Imperial holdings of the most powerful ruler of his time completely surrounded the pope. Clement secretly signed an alliance with Francis I to assist the French in expelling Charles from Italy. Unfortunately, the imperial forces defeated Francis at the Battle of Pavia, south of Milan leaving the French king in chains and the pope in the bad graces of the emperor.

Undaunted by the prospect of defeat, Clement, once Francis was paroled and returned to France, forged an even greater, the anti-imperial League of Cognac. Once again the pope supported war against Charles to drive the Habsburgs from northern Italy. Charles ordered his agents to organize a revolt against the pope which soon engulfed the

Papal States and Rome forcing Clement to flee to the safety of the papal stronghold the Castel Sant'Angelo. Clement was allowed to return to the Vatican after signing a pardon with the rebels.

When fresh fighting erupted between the imperial armies and the Turks in Central Europe, Clement raised a new papal army that finally crushed the rebellion and then allied with England, France, Venice, and Florence. An enraged Charles thus vowed to finally bring the pope to heel and ordered a new army, mostly of German Lutherans, to capture Rome. It reached the Eternal City on 6 May 1527, and unleashed an eight-day rampage of killing, looting, and pillaging. Clement fled just ahead of an assault that carried the Vatican to the Castel Sant'Angelo.

The pope's allies could offer little assistance. After months of self-imposed "imprisonment" Clement reached an agreement that allowed him to depart Rome, returning only in October 1528 after agreeing to a complete and humiliating surrender. At this point Charles considered stripping Clement of all territorial possessions and forever subordinating the papacy to imperial authority. He paused though because most assuredly Clement would never accept such a position and would continually plot with the English, French, and even Poles to restore the papacy. This eventuality was too much bother for Charles, who faced an active *jihad* in Central Europe. Clearly, the emperor could ill afford to keep Clement a perpetual adversary. Instead, Charles made Clement a subordinate ally, thereby isolating the pope from the kings, rendering him in their eyes useless to their cause.

Bereft of allies and with little chance of restoring freedom of maneuver, outside an unthinkable alliance with the Turks, Pope Clement VII agreed in 1530 to meeting with Charles V. The pope, no longer able to oppose the emperor, became his invaluable defender. Clement forgave Charles for the sin of the sack of Rome and began to rebuild the city with papal monies, including restoring the University of Rome. He also raised several papal fleets for imperial service to protect the Mediterranean from the Turks.

Unfortunately, the monarchs were not so easily to reconcile with the pope. One issue in particular caused grievous problems for Anglo-Papal relations. Since 1525, Henry VIII had wanted to annul his marriage to Queen Catherine of Aragon, the aunt of Charles V, and marry the younger Anne Boleyn in the hopes of a male heir. His marriage to Catherine had produced a daughter, Mary. Clement refused to rule on the annulment, because he did not believe in the case and also wished to avoid alienating Henry and, after 1530, Charles. Henry viewed this long delay as evidence of Clement's treachery and a threat to the dynasty. Clement attempted a *rapprochement* by appointing one of Henry's advisors, who was also Anne Boleyn's former chaplain, Thomas Cramner, the new Archbishop of Canterbury. Once finalized, Henry imprisoned Queen Catherine and Princess Mary, and cohabitated with Anne.

In 1531, Clement warned Henry to return to his wife or face excommunication, though he suspended the sanction for an additional two years. Henry enlisted the support of his fellow monarch, and former papal ally, Francis in his attempt to obtain the annulment. The king of France wrote to Clement warning him against infringing on royal prerogatives and interfering in matters of state. The implication being that the

pope's actions threatened the king's lineage and endangered the papal authority over the Church in England. Bolstered by Francis and in flagrant breach of papal sanction, Henry married Anne in 1533. Cramner betrayed the pope by ruling on the legality of the king's divorce without consulting or waiting for Rome. Clement realized too late what had happened and quickly pronounced as valid Henry's marriage to Catherine. Clement died shortly thereafter in September 1534, a month before the English Parliament decreed King Henry VIII head of the Church of England.

Pope Clement VII safeguarded papal authority by first ensuring Italy remained independent of imperial control and when that failed next by allying with Charles. Clement also denied Henry VIII's demands to bow to royal prerogatives for political expediency. Both monarchs thus resorted to take by force what was not theirs legally, thus preserving for a while longer the medieval notion that Christendom required the separate sphere of temporal and ecclesiastical authority.