

Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Canossa

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In his extended discussion of pluralism in the “The Public Square” section of the November 1997 issue of *First Things*, Fr. Neuhaus made reference to the events at Canossa in 1077.

The monism of one form of Christendom reached a peak with Hildebrand, who as Gregory VII received in 1077 the humble submission of Henry IV in the snows of Canossa.

This is elaborated by citing Hildebrand’s twenty-seven “sentences,” one of which asserts that civil authority is derived from, and subordinate to, spiritual authority. Equally problematic, at least from an Orthodox or Reformation perspective, was the imposition of priestly celibacy, for which Gregory VII successfully contended in his struggle with Henry IV.

At the same time, Fr. Neuhaus is undoubtedly justified in assessing Gregory as “a holy and thoughtful man.” Indeed, it was a completely justified attempt to assert one of the *proper* roles of the papacy against imperial transgressions that led Gregory to the confrontation with Henry in the first place. At issue was a practice called “lay investiture,” namely the appointment of bishops by lay rulers rather than Church authorities.

In February 1075 Gregory issued a papal decree forbidding all lay investiture. Henry openly defied this by making an appointment to the archbishopric of Milan. This led to Gregory’s decree of February 1076 excommunicating Henry. The excommunication was dramatically successful. Henry was forced by the nobles to convene a reichstag (or diet) at Augsburg, scheduled for February 1077. It was to be presided over by Gregory himself and would determine whether Henry could continue as Emperor. This prompted Henry’s dramatic appearance in January 1077 outside the castle where Gregory was staying temporarily at Canossa, en route to Augsburg.

The image of Henry standing in the snow at Canossa certainly invokes the power of the medieval papacy. In this circumstance, Gregory was clearly in the position of power. It was not at all to the Church’s advantage to absolve Henry in January. Far better to wait until Augsburg in February, after full, public resolution of lay investiture and other issues under dispute.

Gregory did, however, pronounce absolution on Henry at Canossa in January, with disastrous results. Henry seized the initiative and eventually drove Gregory from the papal see, installing a rival. Gregory died in exile soon after. Not until 1122, at the Concordat of Worms, was lay investiture ended, in a compromise which still allowed civil rulers something like veto power over the appointment of a bishop.

This struggle over lay investiture, resisting secular control of Church appointments, has been central to the Church struggle against totalitarianism in the twentieth century. This has been evident in the appointment of cardinals and bishops by Pope John Paul II. His insistence upon appointing and supporting faithful churchmen (in China, Lithuania, Ukraine, Czechoslo-

vakia, Nicaragua, and elsewhere) has been a significant step in the struggle against communism.

All this brings to mind a statement about the event of 1077 made by the German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906 - 1945), who was executed for opposition to National Socialism. He expressed it in a letter to his friend (and later biographer) Eberhard Bethge, written 16 July 1944. It was prompted by a letter from Bethge, who was then a soldier in a German army detachment retreating in Northern Italy. Bethge had mentioned partisan activity "close to the event of 1077." Here is what Bonhoeffer wrote in response.

Only ten years ago we should hardly have realized that the symbolic crozier and ring, claimed by both emperor and pope, could lead to an international political struggle. Weren't they really *adiaphora*? We have had to learn again, through our own experience, that they were not. Whether Henry IV's pilgrimage to Canossa was sincere or merely diplomatic, the picture of Henry IV in January 1077 has left its mark permanently on the thought of European peoples. It was more effective than the Concordat of Worms of 1122, which formally settled the matter on the same lines. We were taught at school that all these great disputes were a misfortune to Europe, whereas in point of fact they are the source of the intellectual freedom that has made Europe great.

Bonhoeffer's statement about "our own experience" undoubtedly refers to the Confessing Church struggle against National Socialism. The "picture" that "has left its mark permanently on the thought of European peoples" is, presumably, the image of papal power in the humble submission of Henry. On the other hand, the assertion that the "dispute" was much more than merely a "misfortune to Europe" suggests Bonhoeffer's sympathy for Gregory. Bethge has affirmed this in the following assessment of Bonhoeffer's passage.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer had written that because of the Hitler regime we would have to think differently about Canossa. We had been taught to sympathize with Henry IV, but now we came to sympathize with Pope Gregory as well

Gregory absolving a penitential Henry seems the more significant image at the end of this century of totalitarian monisms. Even so ardent a supporter of the prerogatives of the papacy as Gregory VII evidently understood that he was, first of all, the pastor of souls. Faced with a penitent, he was called to absolve, despite enormous advantages to the Church thereby forfeited. Confronted with conflicting priorities between pastoral and papal offices, Gregory recognized the priority of the former, even at the expense of the latter. Of such deeds it can indeed be said that "in point of fact they are the source of the intellectual freedom that has made Europe great."