

The Early 10th Century Church

Historical Theology

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PAPAL DECAY AND BEGINNING REFORM

Charlemagne's crowning by the papacy brought great prestige which in turn eventually led to the decay of the papacy because of the power vested in the position. The late 9th century saw powerful papal authority especially in political matters. But with dawn of the 10th century came the decline of the papacy. While at the same time in an obscure abbot at Cluny in France the beginnings of reform were born.

I. SAECULUM OBSCURUM - NAME GIVEN THE PERIOD BY HISTORIAN CAESAR BARONIUS IN THE 16TH CENTURY

A. THE RAPID SUCCESSION OF POPES

Pope John VIII was murdered by an aide and began what has been called the darkest time in the papacy. Succeeding popes and anti-popes came and went in rapid succession for the next 60 years. This period would later be referred to a time of pornocracy. It was characterized by simony which is basically the buying and selling of influential positions within the church.

1. Powerful Roman family dictated the appointment and disposing of popes

a. Theophylact and his wife Theodora

They both held prestigious political positions in Rome and thus were able to dictate the election of popes to further their political and financial ambitions. They supported the appointment of Sergius III who had his two rivals, former Pope Leo V and anti-pope Christopher I, imprisoned and executed. Although later historians may have exaggerated their reprobate character nevertheless they had exercised great influence over the election of popes. These popes themselves may not have been as corrupt as their supporters and some even sought to reform the papacy. This may in some cases brought about their own demise.

b. Daughter Marozia proved to have even more sway in the election of popes

She was alleged to have been the concubine at age 15 of Sergius III. Later she and her husband Guido of Tuscia, murdered Pope John X. Marozia later orchestrated the election of John XI her son from Sergius III. John XII was her grandson and John XIII was her nephew.

2. Popes during the Saeculum Obscurum

a. Sergius III (904–911)

b. Anastasius III (911–913)

c. Lando – (913–914) last pope until Francis in 2013 with a unique name

- d. John X (914–928), alleged lover of Theodora (the mother), allegedly killed by Marozia
- e. Leo VI (928–928)
- f. Stephen VII (928–931)
- g. John XI (931–935), son of Marozia, alleged son of Pope Sergius III
- h. Leo VII (936–939)
- i. Stephen VII (939–942)
- j. Marinus II (942–946)
- k. Agapetus II (946–955)
- l. John XII grandson of Marozia, by her son Alberic II of Spoleto.

2. Berno was followed by a series of very able and high minded abbots which spanned two hundred years.

- a. The monastic practices were a ray of hope during the period of rapid papal successions when popes and bishops had become feudal lords tainted by corruption and greed.

II. CLUNY ABBEY

A. SMALL BEGINNINGS

Founded by Duke William III a common practice of nobles. He deeded his favorite hunting grounds to "Saint Peter and Paul" providing it the protection of the papacy from intervention from bishops and feudal lords. The deed also forbade the papacy from invading what belonged to the two holy apostles which kept it from falling prey to corrupt popes.

B. HIGH ASPIRATIONS.

- a. At its zenith the Cluniacs set their sights on reforming the entire church.

Justo L. Gonzalez, *The Story of Christianity Volume 1*

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Saeculum_obscurum

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cluny_Abbey

1. The first Abbot was Berno known for his steadfast obedience to the Benedict Rule.

- a. Cluny was one of several monasteries that Berno found or reformed but Cluny became the center of a vast monastic reform
- b. The main occupation of the Cluniacs was celebration of prayer and Scripture. This eventually led to the neglect of physical labor.