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Renaissance Papacy Church

The Role of Papacy in the Politics of Renaissance Italy

Introduction

Renaissance is synonymous with rebirth, yet rebirth from and to what is an important question. The first thing that comes to mind at the mention of the Italian Renaissance is that it is a period of great productivity and developments in the arts and literature made evident through the works by renowned Italian artists like Michelangelo and da Vinci, as well as in philosophical thoughts brought about by the rediscovery of the Hellenistic philosophies.

From the period between 1350 and 1550, there were progresses anew in such various cultural pursuits due to the growing ambiance of intellectual freedom. Indeed, there was a rebirth of the Greco-Roman civilization in Italy manifested through the proclivity of the Italian population with the humanist studies. More noteworthy a development, however, was the gradual drift of secular politics away from the stronghold of the papacy.

Behind the palpable developments in culture and the arts, therefore, is a rebirth from a previous lifestyle in an era marked by excessive religiosity, when all intellectual, artistic, personal, societal and political activities were centered on Christianity and papacy.

Its cultural, scientific and artistic contributions in history notwithstanding, the Renaissance is thus a period of turmoil; turmoil in political and religious institutions, where at its core is the greatest invested power of its time—the papacy of the Roman Catholic Church. This paper is about the position of the

papacy in politics in Italy during the Renaissance, with some references being made to European politics as well.

An Overview of the Papal Power Prior to and During the Renaissance

The pope, during the Renaissance, remains to be one of the most important forces to be reckoned in the cultural and political life in Italy as well as in Western and Central Europe in general. The papal jurisdiction, however, which came under grave attack at this time, was a phenomenon in the making since the earlier Ages. It is a marvel how the Church, an institution of extremely humble beginnings—the poor Christians savagely persecuted in the Roman Republic arenas—rose to such position of immense power and authority.

Suffice it to say though, that the conversion of Constantine propelled Christianity into the seat of prominence, as well as exemplified the union of state and religious leadership. When the Roman Empire eventually crumbled and was supplanted by the new powers, the European kingdoms, the church become independent of the States in religious matters and also gained political clout over purely secular matters.

It is in the " weak political system of feudalism", as Eckhardt explains, where the " well-organized, unified, and centralized" Roman Catholic Church flourished, under the directive, of course, of its pope. The papacy was the pillar that supported Europe and Italy community when they descended into a time of social and political disarray after the fall of the Roman Empire.

When references are made to the Middle Ages, the stage just before the Renaissance, it is almost instinctive to think of European societies as

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intrinsically intertwined with Roman Catholicism. During this time, the power of the popes reached its zenith; the church, patently the strongest influence in society and politics. Princes, feudal lords and peasants alike strictly adhered with religious tenets and paid homage to the leaders of the church.

That a bishop played a key part in the orchestration of a historic war, or that the permission of the pope was sought by kings before major undertakings was not at all unusual that time. The Church together with the pope was beyond reproach, beyond fault. That the church became central to European politics was justified, if not facilitated, by 11th century theories on the union of the church and state posited by St. Augustine and St. Aquinas and given credence by such popes as Gregory VII, Innocent III and Boniface VIII. In such theories, the temporal life is but a preparation for the life next world, which explains why the church encompasses all aspects of society, including the state.

The Roman Catholic Church used to be on top of the world. It was by the pope's edict that sovereign powers were instituted or ousted, that kingdoms became imperial rulers or mere subsidiaries. The papacy even granted Venice the "dominion of the sea", said grant being sealed by a ring symbolizing the union of Venice and the sea. Papacy was also the foundation of civil and international laws that time. After all, churchmen were the most educated individuals that time, not to mention the most commanding due to their claim of divine law.

Nonetheless, the decadence and unrestrained power that surrounded the medieval papacy and the Church invited abuses within its very ranks, from

the highest bishops down to the lowly priests. This and the quandary caused by the Great Schism in 1378 to 1417 eventually led to the split of disillusioned religious factions headed by the likes of Calvin and Luther. The Renaissance is the time when the papacy lost its infallibility, yet was still a potent political actor all the same. The succeeding discussions delve deeper into the role of papacy, particularly in the politics of Italy, during the Renaissance period.

Renaissance Politics: The Papacy but a Shadow of Its Former Power

By now it is apparent that the pope was as much a religious leader as he was a political power player. It is understood that throughout the entire history of Italy since the time of Constantine—meaning, the Renaissance included—the papacy has played a decisive role in all aspects of Italian social organization, especially in the metropolitan areas that the church has left a lasting mark on state governance. In fact, the history of Europe, especially of Italy, is "subsumed" with that of the Church and papacy that there can be no discussion of medieval and Renaissance politics without ever a mention of the latter.

To illuminate, historians refer to thirteenth century Europe as a Christian society, the *societas christiana*, with the papacy claiming jurisdiction and suzerainty over the entire European and colonial Christendom. The relationship between the papacy and the vassal states, however, was more political than spiritual.

The fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, on the other hand, which were the dusk of the Middle Ages and the dawn of the Renaissance, were deemed the

"'forgotten centuries' of Italian church history" for reasons of religious and political upheavals largely connected with the papacy, and the sixteenth century as, finally, the time of Reformation and renewal of spiritual fervor. In all these periods, the papacy has varying roles and intensity of authority, but one thing is clear, from supremacy and infallibility during the Dark and Middle Ages, its power waned during the Renaissance as controversies after controversies rocked the foundation of the church.

The power of the Holy See reached its acme in the thirteenth century, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the papacy has degenerated to a downward spiral. Materially, the papacy was opulent, but its decline was spiritual and moral—in areas supposedly its realm. This decline epitomizes what to Barrows, Reed and Spencer was a "unique embarrassment" that the papacy has brought on Italy, which offset the church's spiritualizing influence and social authority.

There was a marked corruption and greed among the church leaders, who took advantage of their eminent position in Italian and European politics to enrich themselves and their relatives. Evidences have been adduced in the sixteenth century identifying Italian cardinals to have appropriated church property and wealth as their own. The preoccupation of the popes with the acquisition of wealth, power and material comforts has diverted the papacy from its primary task of spiritual leadership. Indeed, no man—not even the Pope—can serve two masters.

The Renaissance Holy See brings to mind "images of a Hollywood spectacular, all decadence and drags," opines Duffy, as the popes were

documented to have flaunted their young mistresses in the very Vatican so revered today. Sons and daughters fathered by the popes, shocking by present standard, were not news anymore that time. Pope Julius II was said to have fathered three daughters.

Then again, there is something worse than the popes siring offspring in breach of their vow of celibacy, and that is the enrichment of these children straight out of the coffers of the Vatican and the church, just as what Pope Alexander VI was reported to have done. Yet the most notorious of the Renaissance popes was possibly Pope Leo X, who left the papacy close to bankruptcy and whose sale of Indulgences, which funded the renovation of the St. Peter, was so infamous as to have provoked Luther to publish his Ninety-Five Theses and thus triggered the Reformation movement.

But the papacy was so busy then with tending over political affairs, not to mention occupied with self-aggrandizement, to have seen what was coming as regards the Reformation. In the first place, it was too drunk in its own avarice to have bothered with such an important religious matter at all.

The aforementioned examples, although just a trifling part of the larger picture, have implications that affected more than the spiritual lives of the faithful. The goings-on in the papacy obviously had adverse ramifications on the political events in Italy and Europe at that moment. The political ambiance under the papacy during the Renaissance, according to Duffy, is one in which nobody is ever safe enough to trust anything or anyone. Everything has its price and conversely, everyone is also dispensable, as

Pope Alexander VI was even believed to have poisoned his cardinals to usurp their wealth.

Things have not been going well already between the papacy and the monarchs, and as the decay of the former became more apparent, it also lost the political and spiritual authority it used to project before the state heads. The conflict between the papacy and the secular monarchies is said to have begun during the pontificate of Pope Boniface VIII, when the pope clashed with King Philip IV of France who, in turn, wanted to tax the clergies.

The issue was basically about ascendancy, with the papacy claiming universal sovereignty over both church and state and the royalty asserting control over all subjects, including the clergy. The monarchs elsewhere soon resented the encroachment of the papacy in state affairs and hence commenced the long struggle for secular independence. Whereas before they let the papacy adjudicate secular matters, kings and princes soon rebuffed the papal claims of authority under divine law.

Many states, England, Netherlands and Germany for example, even went to the extent of controlling ecclesiastical issues, such as prohibiting the sale of indulgences and imposing limits on the length of the sermon, thereby wrestling the control of the latter from the papacy.

The Great Schism in Avignon or the Babylonian captivity from 1378 to 1417 made matters worse, in that the already burdened followers of the Church had to support the two popes; one, a French pope and the other an Italian pope, who were both as indulgent and decadent as their predecessors. More than adding to the yoke of the struggling church, the Schism showed to the

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rest of the world what ruthless political players the popes were, with the papacy nothing more than a seat of power and a ticket to a life of luxury and decadence.

More importantly, it should be the divided papacy during the Great Schism that should take the blame for the irreparable disunity that soon ensued in the Roman Christendom. This is because partisans were divided between the two popes; some nations followed the French pope, while others the Roman pope. Hence, in the words of Carlo Angeleri, "if religion had any place in the Renaissance, it was a problem."

It was had that the schism popes neither have sincere regards for their laity nor for the latter's spirituality, for that matter. Their indiscretions included, among others, the imposition of heavy burdens on the churches and the sale of church offices. Yet their leadership competence must not go unnoticed, as the popes and their college of cardinals were able to achieve an efficient specialized bureaucracy.

Just like the developing monarchies, the papacy also adopted centralized administration, so that the Roman Catholic papacy was deemed to be the most sophisticated administrative machine that time. Moreover, during the Schism, the papacy was extra responsible in its administration of ecclesiastical matters in Venice, Milan, Florence and Naples, so as to ensure that it will get political aid from the said Italian states when the needs arise and retain control of the Papal States.

The Role of Papacy: Continuing Influence v. Declining Control

It cannot be denied that where before there was only reverence for the Church, during the Renaissance such pure belief was tainted by doubts and suspicion. In politics, leaders no longer consider the church's directive as the supreme and sole authority; if anything, the states have begun to assert their own sovereignty free from the control of the papacy. An important political happening during the Renaissance was the realization by the States of their sovereignty and all the powers which go inherently with being a sovereign.

States or kingdoms formerly under the control of the papacy, those which even submitted themselves to be vassals of the pope, soon realized that a government not affected by the pope is possible, if not better than the one they used to have. A gradual reversal of fortune took place. The popes used to be the best arbiters in international disputes and it was before the papacy that treaties were signed by parties, yet the downfall of the clergy has made the same unreliable—the papacy's impartiality was no longer assured.

Hence, the most notable act which indicated the consensus of the various Christian states to do away with papal intervention was the signing of the Peace of Westphalia, the treaty currently regarded as the earliest form of international law, where the parties stipulated not to let the papacy allow any party to rescind its obligation.

Thus, it has been held that the papacy was more of a liability, a lurking nuisance, to the progressive order of things. New trends and political movements emerged with the papacy being outside, or worse, averse of it.

One illustration was the aforementioned Treaty of Westphalia, in which different nations reached an agreement to dispense with papal power. In addition, nations began to consider secular matters as more important than the matters advanced by the papacy.

A clear example of this is when rulers of different states negotiated with and entered into trading pacts with the papacy's long standing enemy, the Ottoman Turks. As if things could not get any worse, pundits even insinuate that the disenchantment and resulting cleavage of its former followers in the person of kings and influential intellectuals have been caused by the papacy itself, for its having perpetuated and tolerated the abuses and greed within the Church.

Now holding on desperately to the last slivers authority, the papacy attempted as much as it can to rebuild its relations with states and kings. It struggled in vain to recapture its former authority which used to bring kings and princes down to their knees, submissive and willing to proffer their respective tithes.

This it did by making use of concessions with secular rulers not only within the five republics of Italy including the Papal States, but also with other European rulers such as those in France and Germany. Essentially, what was strikingly known about the Renaissance papacy in Italy is that it focused much of its attention and energy toward reinstating control over its Papal States located in Central Italy.

There was patent vehemence not to let these Papal States fall into the hands of foreigners, nor even to allow them to be beyond the control of the popes.

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One reason for such is that the Papal States always served as the " most readily expandable source of revenue for the Renaissance papacy." More important than the pecuniary importance of the States is that they are also considered by the papacy the " patrimony" of Saint Peter himself.

The lands, in other words, belonged to the Saint and thus also to the papacy. In such effort, the papacy was engaged in state-building. Unfortunately, however, the Papal States were geographically located in such a way that makes it harder for the papacy to emulate the efficient governance of the Florentines over Tuscany, and of the Venetians as to the Lombardy and Veneto.

Whilst others regard the Renaissance as a period of secularization, a secularized period " sandwiched" between two ages of severe religious movements—the Middle Ages and Reformation—many pundits would rather view it as a time of continuing religiosity despite the papacy losing its credibility as a spiritual leader and becoming more of a secular and political actor. That there was complete secularization, thus the term " pagan Renaissance", does not make any sense to Peterson.

One safe conclusion is that there never really was complete abrogation of religious powers, that the Church was not *totally* deprived of its authority despite the widespread attack against and separation from it which painted the general description of the political movement of that time. Although many political wonks expected that the communal conflicts in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries would lead to the creation of a modern, sovereign secular Italy, the so-called Geulf alliances, or pacts between the Italian

bankers and the papacy, stalled this prospect and the papacy ended having enough political and social sway all the same. In addition, the papacy itself prevented the earlier formation of a centralized Italian government by objecting to the rule of the Hohenstufen emperors.

In case there are impressions that the Renaissance population was completely freed from the influence of the Holy See, the fact is that there really was no abandonment of religious life. What occurred was a mere political shift. What happened was that just as the papacy was embroiled in its own political problems, the religious orders which have lower profiles and enjoy none of the decadence of the Vatican, such as the Augustinian and Franciscan friars, were helping transform the Italian society into one that is a "civic Christianity", which can be described as a Christian community in which the church, instead of purely focusing on spiritual affairs, also delivers civic services to the community, such as aid to the poor, care for the sick and reconstruction of public infrastructures.

Conclusion

As much as criticisms have been hurled countless of times against Renaissance papacy for all its transgressions and barefaced abuses, its hard work in achieving political and religious stability once more must not be ignored. The Church embarked on a "massive task of reconstruction" to fix the quandary that was the Great Schism, and to heal whatever wounds caused by the same. It was also because of the papacy's efficient administration that Rome flourished anew, after its tragic fall at the end of the Roman Empire.

Pope Nicholas V exemplifies the industrious and visionary pope who wanted to institute significant changes in the papacy, particularly for the healing up of the traumas caused by a divided Christendom during the Schism. In a way, it can be said that Nicholas V aided in the transition from Middle Ages to Renaissance, as he promoted the renewed appreciation toward Greco-Roman culture. The streets that were left abandoned were once again developed through the directive of the pope, relics of an almost forgotten civilization were reconstructed, and the people pauperized by the plagues and contingencies of the Middle Ages were given renewed hope.

The result was a breathtaking Rome which attracts countless of tourists and pilgrims at present. Hence, in the end, whilst history reveal the dark side of the papal rule, the mere fact that the same still exist to date attests as to the tenacity of the Roman Catholic institution under the leadership of the papacy. It has weathered the grueling tests of the Italian Renaissance and reinvented itself to become more of the spiritual body that it is supposed to be, insofar as what the people see today is an institution that has learned so many lessons from its past.

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