

## **Context for the Struggle between Pope Gregory VII and King Henry IV**

### **Kings and Popes Gain Power**

After the fall of the Roman Empire there was no central political power authority. Many groups fought for land, resources and power. While these groups were sorting out the land, dividing themselves into kingdoms and fighting for dominance, the vast multitude of common people found themselves caught in the middle and life was very difficult. Christianity, with its promise of a heavenly afterlife, was appealing. The kings (political leaders) and the pope (spiritual leader) realized that they could help each other. Kings forced conquered people to accept and participate in Christian traditions, including attending church. At church, the sermons often included instructions to obey and be loyal to the king.

Kings and popes became tremendously powerful and each demanded to be obeyed. The pope was the spiritual authority and proclamations from him were believed to come directly from God. Disobeying the pope could mean excommunication which was feared because it meant that one would be removed from the entire church community and be blocked from heaven in the afterlife. The king was the authority on earth and had an army at his disposal. He could send you to the afterlife at his will.

### **King and Holy Roman Emperor**

Kings and popes understood the benefit of having and increasing their power. They wanted to bring Europe back together under one ruler, as it was during Roman times, but instead of polytheistic Roman gods, the religion of the people would be Christian. To this end, the church chose a strong and loyal king to have the title "Holy Roman Emperor." In 1056, King Henry IV received this honor and was the ruler of both his Germanic kingdom and Italy

### **Problems with the Partnership**

Dating back to the 800s, kings and nobles appointed bishops and other church officials within their kingdoms. Church officials had high status and some even paid the king or noble to appoint them. These people were usually loyal to the kingdom and some were not interested in religion at all. Although it was only a relative few who acted selfishly and were corrupt, they gave the church a bad name. The balance of power was shifting to the king.

### **From Monk to Pope**

A monk named Hildebrand was part of a movement to limit the power of the king and make the church more independent. In 1073, he was appointed to the papacy and with his new title, took a new name. Hildebrand became Pope Gregory VII.

### **Lay Investiture: The Battle Royale**

In 1075, Pope Gregory VII issued a document warning that the pope was above the king, only popes could appoint church officials, no matter where they were in the world and, any government official who disobeyed the pope could be removed from office. Not only did King Henry ignore the pope and continue his policy of Lay Investiture, appointing people to church offices within his kingdom, but in 1076, he also sent a letter to the pope which criticized him and called for him to step down from his position as head of the church.

Gregory, who had made a name for himself as someone who wanted to stop the king from influencing the church, was not going to listen to Henry. Instead of resigning, Pope Gregory sent a reply letter to Henry which excommunicated him and demanded that all Christians in his kingdom to shun him. Since nearly everyone in Western Europe practiced Christianity, this was a real problem for the king.

Because Lay Investiture was widely practiced, Henry had expected the nobles to support him, but they were warned by the pope that they too, would be excommunicated if they helped the king in any way. Not only was Henry alone, but he found out that the nobles were planning a meeting with Pope Gregory to decide his fate.

Henry had only one way to keep his throne. He traveled to the pope's residence and, presented himself, not as a king, but as a humble beggar asking for forgiveness. Pope Gregory kept him waiting for three days (in the snow!) before letting Henry in and negotiating to recant (take back) the excommunication.

### **Concordat of Worms**

Although Pope Gregory VII clearly won this round and the church gained power, there were other battles between the king and the pope until the year 1122 when a meeting called the Concordat of Worms\* officially settled the matter. Only the pope could appoint church officials and only the king and nobles could give new land.\*\*

\* "*Concordat of Worms*" simply means "Agreement in the German city of Worms." Worms does not refer to animals. It is pronounced in English as *Verm*s.

\*\* Private land-holding citizens could buy, sell or give land as an inheritance and the church gained a lot of land this way.