

from
**LETTERS CONCERNING
THE INVESTITURE CONTROVERSY
1000s**

————— *Pope Gregory VII and Emperor Henry IV* —————

In 1075, a major political battle broke out between Pope Gregory VII and the Holy Roman emperor, Henry IV. It began when Henry ousted the archbishop of Milan and appointed a person of his own for the job. Gregory believed that the emperor should have no say in appointing church officials (investiture). The first selection below is a decree from Gregory forbidding investiture by emperors and other nonchurch leaders. The second is a letter from Henry to Gregory in response to the pope's threat to excommunicate the emperor.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Analyzing Issues

Explain the controversy over investiture. What did each side believe?

Decree of Gregory VIII Forbidding Lay Investiture, March 7, 1080

Following the statutes of the holy fathers, as, in the former councils which by the mercy of God we have held, we decreed concerning the ordering of ecclesiastical dignities, so also now we decree and confirm: that, if any one henceforth shall receive a bishopric or abbey from the hand of any lay person, he shall by no means be considered as among the number of the bishops or abbots; nor shall any hearing be granted him as bishop or abbot. Moreover we further deny to him the favour of St. Peter and the entry of the church, until, coming to his senses, he shall desert the place that he has taken by the crime of ambition as well as by that of disobedience—which is the sin of idolatry. In like manner also we decree concerning the inferior ecclesiastical dignities.

Likewise if any emperor, king, duke, margrave, count, or any one at all of the secular powers or persons, shall presume to perform the investiture with bishoprics or with any ecclesiastical dignity,—he shall know that he is bound by the bonds of the same condemnation. And, moreover, unless he come to his senses and relinquish to the church her own prerogative, he shall feel, in this present life, the divine displeasure as well with regard to his body as to his other belongings: in order that, at the coming of the Lord, his soul may be saved.

Henry IV's Letter to Gregory VII, January 24, 1076

Henry, king not through usurpation but through the holy ordination of God, to Hildebrand, at present not pope but false monk. Such greeting as this hast thou

merited through thy disturbances, inasmuch as there is no grade in the church which thou hast omitted to make a partaker not of honour but of confusion, not of benediction but of malediction. For, to mention few and especial cases out of many, not only hast thou not feared to lay hands upon the rulers of the holy church, the anointed of the Lord—the archbishops, namely, bishops and priests—but thou hast trodden them under foot like slaves ignorant of what their master is doing. Thou hast won favour from the common herd by crushing them; thou hast looked upon all of them as knowing nothing, upon thy sole self, moreover, as knowing all things. This knowledge, however, thou hast used not for edification but for destruction; so that with reason we believe that St. Gregory, whose name thou hast usurped for thyself, was prophesying concerning thee when he said: “The pride of him who is in power increases the more, the greater the number of those subject to him; and he thinks that he himself can do more than all.” And we, indeed, have endured all this, being eager to guard the honour of the apostolic see; thou, however, hast understood our humility to be fear, and hast not, accordingly, shunned to rise up against the royal power conferred upon us by God, daring to threaten to divest us of it. As if we had received our kingdom from thee! As if the kingdom and the empire were in thine and not in God’s hand! And this although our Lord Jesus Christ did call us to the kingdom, did not, however, call thee to the priesthood. For thou hast ascended by the following steps. By wiles, namely, which the profession of monk abhors, thou hast achieved money; by money, favour; by the sword, the throne of peace. And from the throne of peace thou hast disturbed peace, inasmuch as thou hast armed subjects against those in authority over them. . . .

Thou, therefore, damned . . . by the judgment of all our bishops and by our own, descend and relinquish the apostolic chair which thou hast usurped. Let another ascend the throne of St. Peter, who shall not practise violence under the cloak of religion, but shall teach the sound doctrine of St. Peter. I Henry, king by the grace of God, do say unto thee, together with all our bishops: Descend, descend, to be damned throughout the ages.

Source: Excerpt from *Select Historical Documents of the Middle Ages*, translated and edited by Ernest F. Henderson. (London: George Bell & Sons, 1905), pp. 365–372, 394–405.