

Biography Activity



Crusades and Culture in the Middle Ages

Pope Gregory VII (1025–1085)

Born into an upper middle-class family near Tuscany, Gregory Ildebrando was educated in both a palace school and a monastery. In his twenties, too young to be ordained a priest, he became a confidant of then-pope Leo IX, who appointed him to remarkably high positions in the papacy. Gregory served the Church in France and Germany before returning to Italy to spend many years as a key figure at the papal court under four successive popes. When he became Pope Gregory VII in 1073, he began instituting the reforms that would mark his papacy as one of the most significant in the Church's history. He fought against simony, or the buying of Church offices by the wealthy, and insisted that priests practice celibacy. In his heated battle with Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV over lay investiture—the practice of kings' choosing local bishops—Gregory declared the primacy of the papacy in choosing bishops, which centralized Church power with the pope. This stands as one of his most important reforms.



More About the Image: This image of Pope Gregory VII was produced around 1080. He is shown with a halo, foreshadowing his later canonization as a saint.

- Determining Cause and Effect** What effect do you think Gregory's years as a leading figure at the papal court had on his decisions to make reforms in the church?

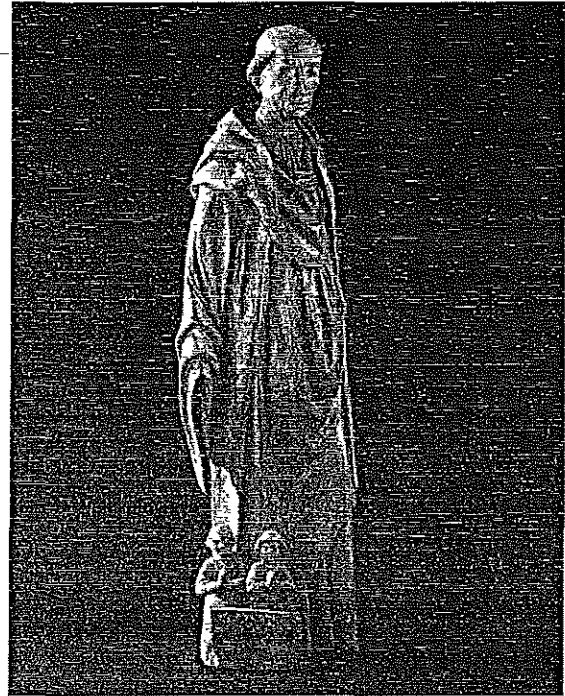
- Predicting Consequences** By asserting the primacy of the papacy over monarchs, Gregory strengthened the political as well as religious position of the Church in Europe. How do you think future monarchs reacted to this?

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Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153)

The son of an aristocrat, Bernard's journey to the monastic life began as a child in a home where his mother promoted virtuous living. He became a monk at the age of 22, and a few years later he was asked to set up a monastery in Clairvaux, France. Bernard suffered from ill health throughout his life, and as his health deteriorated, his dedication to spiritual pursuits intensified. While living in a hut at Clairvaux, he began to write the remarkable and poetic works that would distinguish his monastic life and influence both the Cistercians and the Church as a whole. He was torn between his desire to remain isolated in prayer and writing and his order's requirement to do charitable work for others. By the 1130s, Bernard had become one of the most important voices of the Church. He served as a confidant to five popes and played an increasingly significant role as a mediator of both civil and Church-related conflicts until his death.



More About the Image: This wooden sculpture of Bernard of Clairvaux can be found at a Cistercian monastery in modern-day Austria.

- Drawing Inferences** How might Bernard's ill health have contributed to his dedication to spiritual pursuits?

- Making Generalizations** Why do you think men like Bernard of Clairvaux and Francis of Assisi made such an impact on the Church during the Middle Ages?

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Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179)

Hildegard was born in West Franconia (Germany) to noble parents and was educated by Benedictine nuns, becoming a nun herself at the age of 15. Since childhood, she had experienced visions, and these were confirmed later in her life by a group of theologians appointed by the local archbishop. Twenty-six of Hildegard's visions were recorded in the book *Scivias*. She continued to write throughout her life on subjects ranging from stories of the lives of saints to medicine and natural history. She also wrote poems, many of which she set to music. In 1147 she established a new convent for nuns in Rupertsberg. She traveled throughout Germany and preached to crowds about her visions and other issues of faith and religion. Though she was never canonized as a saint, Hildegard was an important woman in the medieval history of the Church, and many Germans refer to her as *Saint Hildegard* to this day.



Michael Teller/akg-images

More About the Image: This image of Hildegard comes from the Hildegard Altarpiece, which is located in Bingen, Germany.

- 1. Drawing Inferences** An archbishop convened theologians to decide whether Hildegard's visions were legitimate. What does that suggest about the status of women at the time?

- 2. Interpreting Significance** Why might Hildegard of Bingen be of such interest to Church historians and scholars?

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Francis of Assisi (1181/1182–1226)

Francesco di Bernardone was the son of a cloth merchant, but he would become one of the most revered figures of the Catholic Church. As a young man he was inspired by visions of Jesus to take a vow of poverty and spend his life working to imitate the charitable and loving life Jesus had led. Francis was charismatic, and though he was not a priest, his message about walking in Jesus’s footsteps began to garner followers. In 1210 he founded the Franciscan order with the blessing of Pope Innocent III. (He would later cofound an order for women called the Poor Clares.) Francis considered all creatures on Earth—and nature itself—to be the mirror of God; it was not unusual for Francis to preach to animals as well as people. The Franciscans all took vows of poverty and rejected material goods and private property. Francis attempted to bring his message to other parts of the world, especially Egypt and the Middle East, but he spent most of his life attending to his order and the people of Italy. Nearly blind at the end of his life, Francis died in Assisi. Not quite two years later, Pope Gregory IX canonized Francis in 1228.



More About the Image: This detail of a panel depicting St. Francis of Assisi before Pope Honorius III is believed to have been painted by the great Italian master Giotto.

- 1. Making Generalizations** Why do you think Francis’s message was so appealing to other Christians at the time?

- 2. Interpreting Significance** In what ways have the Franciscan order’s founding beliefs influenced the Catholic Church?
