

**THE CHURCH AT THE
TURNING
POINTS OF HISTORY**

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The Church at the Turning Points of History

BY

GODFREY KURTH

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FOREWORD.

The mission of the Church is to all nations and to all ages. "Going therefore, teach ye all nations Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and behold, I am with you all days, even to the consummation of the world". The doctrines of the Church must be always and everywhere the same, namely those her Divine Founder commanded her to preach. To teach them effectively, however, she must sympathize with the manners, customs and institutions of the various peoples she meets in her pathway across the centuries, adapting herself to their genius, to their forms of government and civilization. Like the Apostle, she must "become all things to all men, that she may save all". Hence, she has been obliged in the course of her history to break with old systems and organizations with which her life had become interwoven, in order to conform to new conditions of human society. This was not an easy thing to do. It always entailed a struggle. It often meant a crisis in her work of evangelization. If she were a mere human institution, she could not, any

more than the other human institutions whose wrecks strew the highway of history, have survived the onslaughts that have been made upon her. That she has passed every crisis and triumphantly outridden every storm that has beaten upon her for nearly two thousand years is evidence of the divinity of her mission to the nations and to the ages.

Her first struggle was with the judaizing influences which surrounded her cradle. Jewish thought and sentiment and practices threatened to restrict her work to the Jews and to those who would be willing to accept Jewish religious traditions and customs. In the Council of Jerusalem she took the bold step that enabled her to break away from her Jewish moorings and take to the high seas of the Gentile world—to encounter storms and tempests, but also enclose in her net the copious draught of fishes. From that time forward she emphasized the universal character of her mission, and, in the language of the Apostle, became a debtor to Gentile and Jew alike.

Again, when she had converted the Gentile world and ruled humanity from the very capital of civilization, there was danger that her destinies had become irrevocably linked with those of the Roman Empire. Hence, when the Barbarian invasions had sounded the knell of Roman civilization, many thought the Church would disappear in the great

cataclysm. But true to her universal mission, she offered the message of salvation to the Barbarians. These accepted the cross and carried it, together with the Christian civilization of which it is the symbol, to the remotest corners of the old Roman world.

The converted Barbarians in the gratitude of their hearts lavished upon the Church the wealth they had amassed, and Barbarian kings shared with her bishops and priests their own temporal rulership over the people. The prestige and power thus given to the Church became in time a real menace to her. In exchange for it kings persuaded themselves, contrary to the canons of the Church, that they had a right to select candidates for vacant sees and abbasies. The kings of Germany even went so far as to arrogate to themselves the nomination of the Sovereign Pontiff, and for a period of about one hundred years no Pope could ascend the chair of Peter without their approbation or consent. Under such a system royal favor and willingness to do the bidding of the king, rather than priestly virtue, became the chief qualifications for ecclesiastical dignities. The result was that simony and a general laxity of morals grew apace among the clergy, and heresy began to make inroads upon the people. The Church was stripped of her independence in things spiritual and became a mere creature of the State. Feudalism had, indeed, en-

riched her, but it was at the price of chains and slavery.

The evil was grave beyond all precedent. It seemed irremediable, because it had taken hold of the vitals of the Church; it attacked the very source of her life. And yet, with the vitality guaranteed to her by divine promise, her great heart slowly drove out from her almost atrophied body the fatal infection and clothed it again with health and liberty. The fire of Christian and priestly life which, in the monasteries at least, had not wholly died out, was fanned into a flame; Pope Leo IX and his two successors, by taking possession of the Pontifical See only after the prescriptions of the canon law had been complied with, prepared the way for the constitution of Nicholas II on the election of Sovereign Pontiffs; and the open warfare of Gregory VII, the immortal Hildebrand, on the right of Lay Investiture triumphed in the Concordat of Worms, the State giving back to the Church complete freedom in all canonical elections, from that of the Pope down to those of the lowest ecclesiastical dignitaries.

This was the greatest triumph of the Church. Free from the embrace of Feudalism, she extinguished heresy, united all Europe in defence of the Holy Sepulcher, brought Gothic art to its highest perfection, created and developed the great universities, placed saints upon the thrones of kings, be-

came the supreme authority of the West and the spiritual oracle of the world.

Independent in her own spiritual domain, the Church had succeeded in uniting all the states of Europe in one grand Christian republic, of which the Pope was the acknowledged spiritual chieftain. In the quarrels of kings with one another or with their subjects, the Pope was the supreme arbitrator. His decisions were final, because they had back of them the moral sanction which the common acceptance of Christian principles made effective. This happy condition was not to last. The spirit of nationalism, jealous of whatever savored of foreign interference, fostered by a laicizing movement envious of the social prestige of the clergy and directed by a general infatuation for Roman law, gradually developed a condition favorable to royal absolutism. The death of Pope Boniface VIII and the triumph of Philip the Fair widened the breach between the Church and the State, and hastened the day when kings everywhere would proclaim political maxims to be independent of religious belief and absolve themselves from conformity to the principles of Christian morality in the conduct of their realms—hastened the day when national policy would be no longer regulated by the moral standard which Christianity had set up for the individual—the day when monarchs, disregarding the ecumenical character