

The Investiture Controversy

Spanning from the 11th to the 12th century, the Investiture Controversy was the power-struggle between the papacy and the monarchy. While it centered around the figures of Pope Gregory VII and Holy Roman Emperor Henry IV, the tension between church and state had built steadily for years. During the period after Henry III's death, the reformers seized the opportunity of a weakened regent government, attempting to wrest the appointment of ecclesiastical positions away from the aristocracy and place it firmly in the hands of the church. Their goal was independence from secular rulers and an end to simony.¹ The Papal Election Decree in 1059 moved the election of clerks and priests from the hands of the laymen (and the interference of the nobles) into the hands of the church. Infuriated by this issue, the Germans threatened to invade Rome. Due to this, Pope Nicholas II allied with the Normans to ensure protection should the Germans invade. Professor Thomas F. Madden says this freed 'the papacy from imperial control. They were implementing the fondest dreams of the Reform movement.'² In 1073, Gregory VII became Pope. As a reformer, he wished to root out the corruption which had tarnished the ecclesiastical offices for so long. This movement is often called the Gregorian Reform due to his avid defense of an independent church. In his infamous '*Dictatus Papae*' he lists his desires:

That [the pope] may remove emperors. That he may be the only one whose feet must be kissed by all rulers. That he cannot be judged by anyone. That the bishop of Rome, if consecrated according to canon law, is undoubtedly sacrosanct through the merits of St Peter.'³

Gregory viewed the Church as the ultimate power in Europe to which all, even the emperor, ultimately must bow.

Yet many believed in Sacral Kingship and the emperor as head of the Christian empire had a responsibility to care for the souls of his people. As the two leaders of Christendom, the pope and the emperor both claimed supremacy over the other and both felt they were chosen by God for their positions. Graced with the divine authority of St. Peter, the church insisted they invested a king with his *earthly* power. This was cataclysmic for the union of church and state. Henry IV ignoring Gregory's demands of submission, appointed a bishop to Milan. In response, Gregory excommunicated him, deposed him and 'forbid anyone to serve him as king.'⁴ Weakened by this papal blow, Henry IV was given the option either to seek forgiveness from the church or to surrender his title to another. Things were resolved in 1077 when Henry stood in the winter snow for three days before the castle of Canossa where Gregory dwelled. It was a dramatic exhibition

¹ Thomas F. Madden, 'The Medieval World I: Kingdoms, Empires, and War,' *The Modern Scholar Series* (2009), Ch. 8 [audible].

² Ibid., Ch. 8 [audible].

³ Wim Blockmans and Peter Hoppenbrouwers, *Introduction to Medieval Europe, 300-1550*, trans. by Isola van den Hoven (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 130.

⁴ Pope Gregory VII, *The Correspondence of Pope Gregory VII: Selected Letters from the Registrum*, ed. and trans. by Ephraim Emerton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 91.< <https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/2027/heb05995.0001.001>> [accessed 3 November 2025].

of his penance and desire for absolution. Gregory, forced to acknowledge Henry's contrition, reinstated him and welcomed him back into the Catholic Church. However, tensions remained high; Henry was excommunicated multiple times afterwards and Pope Gregory was run out of Rome by the Germans before his death.

It wasn't until the Concordat of Worms in 1122 that the Controversy was solved in an official capacity. It was determined that the church appointed bishops; however, the emperor could bestow the symbols of earthly power upon the bishops before they were endowed with the spiritual symbols of the ring and the staff by the church. This helped 'preserve and protect papal authority' while also instigating the administrative growth of the monarchy which helped kings 'escape the powerful grip of the pope.'⁵

⁵ Bruce Bueno De Mesquita, 'Popes, Kings, and Endogenous Institutions: The Concordat of Worms and the Origin of Sovereignty,' *International Studies Review*, 2.2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 115-116, doi: 10.1111/1521-9488.00206.

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