



TEMPORAL POWER OF THE HOLY SEE, A SHORT HISTORY

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EDIFICATO IN ANNO DOMINI 1472
IN HONORE SANCTI PETRI
ALEXANDRI DE'

Origins

When on February 27th, 380 AD, the Roman Emperor [Theodosius I](#), and the two "Augusti," [Gratian](#) and [Valentinian II](#), issued the so called [Edict of Thessalonica](#), "*Cunctos populos*" to all their subjects, stating the Christian religion was to become the religion of all the peoples of the Roman Empire, the first step toward the birth of the Holy See's temporal power was made.

At that time the emperor was still the "*Pontifex Maximus*" (which, by the way means "the Supreme bridge-builder," which links back to Rome's Etruscan heritage, when technology and religion were one and the same, and the supreme religious chief was also the best civil engineer) – and who had total authority over all religious aspects of civic life. Thus, the Bishop of Rome was an official of an emperor and nothing more.

[Damasus](#), who was then Bishop of Rome, was given added authority when, backed by the Emperor, he asserted the primacy of Rome over all other bishops and patriarchs in Christendom, since the Bishop of Rome alone was the successor of Peter, the first of the Apostles, who had been crucified in Rome, on the Vatican Hill and buried there, and whose grave still lies in the Vatican caves, under the Basilica that bears his name.

The collapse of the Western Roman Empire in the 5th century created a political vacuum. Since the bishops and above all the Pope were the only existing officials of the empire who yet remained, it was in a certain sense normal that they should look after local organizational, administrative and thus political welfare. Likely, they started this kind of ruling activity just in that century; as far as we know, from the time of Leo I's pontificate, but we can't be sure, because of the lack of sources from that confused period. But we do know for sure that by the end of 6th century, that is to say since the time of Pope Gregory I, who was elected in 590. the Church was already deeply engaged in such activities.

At that time the clash between Byzantium and the Lombards was on-going, and the war especially ravaged Central Italy, where the Roman Eastern Empire wanted to keep at least Ravenna - capital of the Byzantine [Exarchate](#) - and the so-called "Byzantine Corridor," a strip of land from Ravenna, on the Adriatic Sea, to the other side of the Italian peninsula; that is to say to Rome and the Tyrrhenian Sea.

In 712, the Lombard king, [Liutprand](#), decided to affirm his rule over the two southern and semi-independent Lombard duchies of Spoleto and Benevento, on the southern side of the Byzantine Corridor. Thus, profiting from the riots occurring in Italy against the Byzantines, whose emperor, Leo III Isaurian, supported the Iconoclasts, Liutprand attacked.

Pope [Gregory II](#), elected in 715, realized that Liutprand's likely intention was to seize Rome. Thus, when the Lombards conquered the nearby city of Narni (Narnia in Latin - by the way, the original Narnia whose name was later used for the "Chronicles," although no speaking lions or other peculiar animals lived there!) - Gregory II said that Liutprand must return the conquered territories to Byzantium.

Liutprand had already accepted the submission of both the dukes of Spoleto and Benevento, and thus he was not so worried about the stability of the Lombard compact. But giving back territories to the enemy was not such a good idea. On the other hand, it was the Pope himself who was asking. So, what to do?

Liutprand found a smart solution. He presented the Pope with the city of Sutri - a strong-point which barred the route from the upper Byzantine Corridor to Rome - because the Pope was still an Imperial, that is to say a Byzantine, official. It is useless here to list all the towns and small castles the Lombards later gave the Holy See. What is important is to stress that such a process was not unusual and normal. It is commonly regarded that Popes [Zachary](#) (741-752) and his successor [Stephen II](#) (752-757) established temporal power, and this somehow triggered the fake *Donation of Constantine*.

As things now stand, given the state of philology and history, we still do not know where and when the *Donation* may have been created. What is certain is that it is fake.

[Father Döllinger](#), in the 19th century, suggested that was created in Rome between 752 and 777. Some scholars think it was aimed to support the Papal claim over Constantinople, with Roman supremacy over all other Patriarchal Sees. Other scholars suppose it to have been made in France. Regardless, when was it made? And who made it?

The *Donation* exists as a copy in the *Decretals* by [Pseudo-Isidore](#), and in some 12th century manuscripts of [Gratian's Decretum](#); and the real author of the *Decretals* is not known, even though in the past both Isidore Mercator and Pseudo-Isidore were regarded as such. Scholarship tells us that the *Decretals*

were not written by a single person, but by a team, under the direction of one coordinator. And if it is true that the documents used to create the fake *Donation* came from the library of the French abbey of Corbie, it is possible that the coordinator was Abbot Paschasius Radbertus - later [Saint Paschasius](#) - a theologian who served as the abbot of [Corbie](#) from 842 to 847. Thus, in 847, the ensemble of forged documents - a couple of hundred - aimed at supporting the Church's hierarchy and state power, may be considered nearly finished and ready to put to use.

Some scholars think the *Donation* may have been made earlier, perhaps a century earlier, to support Pope Stephen II when, in 754, he went to France, to negotiate with Pepin the Short. Stephen granted his support to Pepin who supplanted the Merovingian dynasty, in exchange for official recognition of Papal ownership of Italian lands that the Lombards had seized from the Byzantines.

Now, it is important to note that at the time, fakes were normal and widely used, and almost everybody relied on forged documents to support their claims. As the Italian scholar, [Federico Chabod](#), remarked in 1969, almost half of the decrees issued by the Merovingian kings were forged. For example, there is the [Privilegium maius](#) of the Dukes of Austria, which makes Austria an archduchy, giving it the same rank as the Princes Elector of the Holy Empire. The *Privilegium* was forged quoting documents by Julius Caesar(!) and Nero which supposedly granted Noricum, that is to say Austria, special status.

Thus, it comes as no surprise when Emperor [Otto III](#), living in a world of fake documents, in 1001 issued a decree rejecting the *Donation of Constantine* because it showed none of the seals and signs it must bear if it were original.

But this mattered little to the Church. For example, in 1440, [Lorenzo Valla](#) (a priest and a scholar) analyzed the *Donation* and realized that it was written in a Latin other than that used in Constantine's time; and in this way revealed it was fake. But things did not go too smoothly for Valla. His work, [De falso credita et ementita Constantini donatione declamatio](#), appeared only in 1517, and was later condemned and inserted into the [Index Librorum Prohibitorum](#). Why? Because the *Donation of Constantine* laid the ground supporting a further donation - that by Charlemagne.

This second *Donation* stems from the [Promissio Carisiaca](#), or the *Quierzy Promise* (named after the town, Quierzy-sur-Oise, from which it was decreed), [was not given](#) by Charlemagne, but by his father, [Pepin the Short](#) to Pope Stephen II. As already mentioned, Stephen had granted papal support to Pepin's claims to the Frankish crown, and in return had asked Pepin to help the Church by giving to her the

Italian lands now owned by the Lombards, instead of to the Byzantines.

Pepin agreed. But nothing happened until 774, when Charlemagne, in Rome, formally accomplished his father's promise.

Since the original documents of both the *Promissio Charisiaca* and of the *Donation of Charlemagne* were lost, what remained was only a detailed account in the biography of Pope Adrian I.

According to the Church the *Donation* meant that the Church had been presented by Charlemagne with absolute ownership of all territories north of the Tiber up to the Po valley. According to Napoleon, it meant simply that the Pope had been invested as a feudal lord by the Emperor, and thus was a subject of the Emperor, and thus a subject to the Emperor of France, that is to say to Napoleon.

Pius VII did not accept this conclusion. The harsh clash between he and Napoleon over the state of Catholic faith in France and in the empire was made harsher by the *Donation*. But [Leipzig](#) first, and then [Waterloo](#) solved the question. The Pope returned to Rome in 1814 and found a new problem: the Italians wanted to unite the peninsula, with Rome as the capital and possibly having no Pope at all in the city.

Dogma, Or Not Dogma, That Is The Problem

After the 1814 Restoration, the Pope and the Cardinals did not intend to abandon a sole inch of the Church's right and territories. The Church had just lost Avignon in France, and now wanted to lose her one-millennium-year-held Italian lands.

As long as there were only the relatively uncoordinated and weak groups of [Carbonari](#), there was not that much to worry about. But when, after 1848, it became clear that Italian unity was a threat likely to happen, the Church wondered how to react.

The weak point was that there was no mention about temporal power in the Gospels, nor in any of the Apostolic letters or in the Acts of the Apostles. Thus, there was only the legal basis to turn to. But once the *Donation of Constantine* was deprived of its value because it was fake - as a consequence, the

Donation of Charlemagne, though used by Napoleon, held no legal value and was not recognized by the [Congress of Vienna](#). Therefore, by which legal or religious bases could the temporal power of the Church be asserted? Could perhaps a dogma be issued?

This was a very difficult problem and there was not that much room to solve it. The dogmatic validity of temporal power by itself never existed. No Gospel speaks of it. Moreover, Jesus said just the contrary when, as recorded in Matthew 22:21 and confirmed by Luke in 20:25, and Mark 12:17, Jesus said, "Render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and unto God the things that are God's." That is to say the separation of Church and State, each in its own jurisdiction.

[Gregory XVI](#) stressed this separation and readily refused to embroil the Church in secular controversies when on August 5, 1831, he issued the [Sollicitudo Ecclesiarum](#); but this dealt with what to do in states and countries other than the Papal ones. The problem the Church faced was quite different. Theologians and lawyers tried to gather as much material as they could, but the result was not that convincing.

Regardless, they began with Saint Paul's 1st Letter to the Corinthians, where, in chapter 9:11, he said: "Si nos vobis spiritualia seminavimus, magnum est, si nos carnalia vestra metamus? Si alii potestatis vestrae participes sunt, quare non potius nos? (If we have been planting the things of the Spirit for you, does it seem a great thing for you to give us a part in your things of this world?)."

The next step was "enhanced" by the *Donation of Constantine*, whose forgery was silently and conveniently not mentioned or forgotten. Then, further support was provided by way of Pope [Nicholas III's](#) constitution, *Fundamenta militantis Ecclesiae*, issued on July 18, 1278.

Unfortunately, as the Italian legal experts remarked, it had a vice in its substance, for it relied on the *Donation of Constantine* and used that as a legal basis to assert once more the Church's authority on the city of Rome and on Roman government.

Oh well. But there was [Saint Thomas Aquinas](#). The supporters of the Church's temporal power used his authority, because in his [Scriptum super Sententiis](#), [liber II, Distinctio XLIV, quaestio 2 (o articulus 2) "Utrum Christiani teneantur obedire potestatibus saecularibus, et maxime tyrannis", ad 4 in fine], where Aquinas says, "Ad quartum dicendum, quod potestas spiritualis et saecularis, utraque deducitur a

potestate divina; et ideo intantum saecularis potestas est sub spirituali, inquantum est ei a Deo supposita, scilicet in his quae ad salutem animae pertinent; et ideo in his magis est obediendum potestati spirituali quam saeculari. In his autem quae ad bonum civile pertinent, est magis obediendum potestati saeculari quam spirituali, secundum illud Matth. 22: 21: reddite quae sunt Caesaris Caesari. Nisi forte potestati spirituali etiam saecularis potestas conjungatur, sicut in Papa, qui utriusque potestatis apicem tenet, scilicet spiritualis et saecularis, hoc illo disponente qui est sacerdos et rex in aeternum, secundum ordinem Melchisedech, rex regum, et dominus dominantium, cujus potestas non auferetur et regnum non corrumpetur in saecula saeculorum. Amen.

(In the fourth point it must be said [that] since the spiritual and secular power, both come from divine power, therefore the temporal power is under spiritual power, insofar as it is subjected to it by God, that is to say, in those things that belong to the salvation of the soul; and therefore in those [things] it is necessary to obey more to the spiritual power than to the secular. In those [things], too, which pertain to the civil good, one must obey the secular power more than the spiritual one, according to what Matthew 22: 21: Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar. If not in the case that secular power is combined with the spiritual, as in the Pope, who holds the top of both, that is, the spiritual and the secular [powers]; this, because they are disposed by him, who is a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek, king of kings and ruler of rulers, whose power will not be removed and the kingdom will not be corrupted forever and ever, Amen).

The fourth, and last, although quite weak, pillar was [Saint Robert Bellarmine](#), who in his [*Tractatus de potestate Summi Pontificis in rebus temporalibus, adversus Gulielmum Barclay*](#), published in 1610, wrote "Etsi absolute forte praestaret Pontifices tractare solum spiritualia et reges temporalia, tamen propter malitiam temporum experientia clamat: non solum utiliter, sed etiam necessarie, et ex singulari Dei providential donatos fuisse Pontifici aliisque episcopis temporales aliquos principatus."

But this piece of evidence only makes the claim for temporal power, after "propter malitiam temporum": "Experience shows that not only usefully but also necessarily and by a singular providence of God certain temporal principalities were given the Pontiff and other bishops." This meant that temporal power had only been given the Church because of the difficult times she lived in, and that such power had been useful, not that it was an article of Faith.

The whole "legal" structure was quite weak, if not non-existent, as is obvious. Then the Pope added his own argument. On March 25, 1862, speaking to the clergy of the Santa Maria sopra Minerva Church and

College, Pius IX said that temporal power was not to be an article of Faith, but that it was necessary to the independence of the Apostolic See. This was a knock out, what to do? Someone, we don't know who – came up with an idea.

The End Of Temporal Power

The idea, whose author is not known, was complicated: to hold a Council dealing with several issues, and, within it, once the main problems were solved, as a second step, to render temporal power as dogma.

Making temporal power legally or ideally stronger was not easy, especially after that [Pius IX's](#) recent statement. On June 9, 1862, that is to say only two and a half months after his speech to the clergy of the Minerva, the Pope received an address by 390 bishops from all over the world, who convened in Rome for the canonization of the Japanese martyrs. They told Pius IX that temporal power was to be necessary.

In 1863, the most convinced [Legitimists](#) strongly supported the idea of making temporal power a dogma. Then, when celebrating in Trent the 3rd centennial of the end of the [Council of Trent](#), with huge participation of the German and Austro-Hungarian clergy, the first idea of holding a council openly appeared.

The Vatican did not say, "Yes," or "No," and the proposal was left aside. Then, in the years following, the French left Rome, because of an agreement signed with Italy, in September 1864. Was it by chance that the Pope announced the forthcoming council to the cardinals living in Rome a few months later in December 1864?

Then the opening date of the council was decided, June 1867, but was soon delayed.

Of course, before that date many things had happened: a Protestant power like Prussia deprived a Catholic one, Austria, of German leadership; [Queen Isabella](#) of Spain, a loyal Catholic, lost the throne; the Mexicans shot [Maximilian](#) of Habsburg; and in Rome the Jesuits' journal, [La Civiltà Cattolica](#) suggested, or seemed to suggest, that a Council after all could be opportune to address and solve some issues that the new order of things was presenting.

The Council had, above all, to discuss papal infallibility, and then, although this was not stated, if everybody agreed, the dogma of temporal power could be discussed and even approved. The papal allocution *Pericunda* announced the Council, to be opened on December 8, 1869.

But was it necessary? Did the infallibility really need a dogmatic definition?

No one doubted the infallibility of the Pope; and, by the way, Saint Augustine had already clearly indicated the primacy of the Bishop of Rome and the obligation to defer to what he stated. But many theologians doubted that it was possible, and conveniently failed to define infallibility in a clear and authoritative way.

There was, however, one aspect that ultimately made that dogma appropriate to the life of the Church. In the first half of the 19th century, the independence of South and Central America had created as many counterparts to the Holy See as there were new independent states. Even in Europe there had been changes of major importance. Britain in 1829 ended three centuries of marginalization of Catholics from public life, allowing them access to civil and military administration, while maintaining restrictions in some areas. Then came the [Oxford Movement](#); and, thanks above all to [John Henry Newman](#) and [Archbishop Wiseman](#), in a few years, between 1845 and 1850, there was an impressive return of the British to Rome. The Catholic hierarchy in Great Britain was re-established, and a primate was appointed - Wiseman, now a cardinal - in Westminster. This had also opened up the British Empire to Catholic missions, which, shortly thereafter and until the end of World War II, would include a third of the lands in the world.

At the same time, in the 1840s, the famous Irish potato famine increased Irish emigration, pushing hundreds of thousands of Catholic Irish to the United States, which at that time was still almost completely Protestant and anti-Catholic. The Church therefore faced a world changed profoundly in a generation. Meanwhile, the problems of Latin America, which previously could only be solved in Madrid and Lisbon, had now to be dealt with in eighteen different overseas capitals. Then there was the legal denial by the British of any direct or indirect political authority of the Pope, an authority that in the United States continued to be feared and suspected until the Second World War, and even beyond.

All these new elements presented the problem of a new form of obedience – and which also meant that a Catholic could no longer view politics and Faith as two sides of the same coin, or as the same thing, because now even in Catholic countries the altar could no longer be the companion of the

throne.

The Enlightenment had traced the first furrow between the two. Eighteenth-century jurisdictionalism had deepened it but, no matter how jealous of his prerogatives, no 18th century Catholic ruler would have ever acted against the Faith, and very few against the Church.

The French Revolution, however, had broken that binomial of altar and throne, pushing declared atheists to power. The 1814 Restoration tried to recompose the union between throne and altar, but now the expansion of Catholics into Protestant lands made that union dangerous. If Catholics wanted to exist in certain areas of the world, Rome must not try to impose her political vision there, but must limit herself to protect religious liberty. And thirty years earlier, Gregory XVI had already understood and said that.

The presence of Catholics was no longer vertical. It was becoming horizontal, that is to say, it was evolving from being institutionally parallel and similar, and interlaced with the structure of the State in which Catholics lived in - to a now scattered presence, not necessarily connected to the institutions of the country in which Catholics lived, as it had been in the Roman Empire after Constantine and before Theodosius I.

Deprived of the support of secular power, Rome now had to take care of spiritual obedience much more than in the past; and, to do so, it had to explicitly and dogmatically stress some points that in the past were assumed as givens, starting primarily with the Pope's infallibility.

It is hard to say to what extent Pius IX realized the transition that the Church was experiencing, in a world whose speed of change was proportional to the speed of the news, and therefore increasing day by day. Of course, like everyone in the Curia, in the Papal court, had the Pope been able to keep things as in the good old days, he would have been happy. But, since he knew something about the world beyond the Papal States (he was the first Pope who in his youth had been in the Americas, namely, Chile), and since he had to ensure the continuity of the Church and the transmission of Tradition and of the Gospel in their integrity, he fell relied on more spiritual positions when he called the Council, in which bishops were informed of all the transformations taking place in the world, and thanks to which the Truth would continue to live and spread. He had no doubt that they would approve such spiritual positions of the Church.

I do not think it was a coincidence that the Council was announced to the Curia cardinals in December 1864, the year of the [September Convention](#). To anyone making the slightest, impartial assessment - and the Pope had made much assessment, no matter how impulsive he could be - it was clear that external protection of the Church, whether French, Austrian or whatever else, would sooner or later end, and thus the Church could lose its State. If the opening of the Council, originally scheduled for June 29, 1867, was delayed until December 8, 1869, it is likely that it was because of what was happening in Europe and in Italy.

The discussions in Rome were carefully followed by all the nation-states. Discordant voices raised among the Council fathers, precisely regarding infallibility. But the European powers were hardly concerned about what, at the moment, was a purely doctrinal question, and they held back any intervention to when and if the Council would touch the temporal sphere.

Britain could only be an obstacle; and from Britain came some perplexity. But London was kept calm by the skill and social relations of Archbishop Manning, the next primate of England.

On July 18, 1870, the Council approved papal Infallibility. The next step could be temporal power. But on the following day, July 19, 1870, France declared war on Prussia. The telegraph immediately reported the news in Rome, and in the blink of an eye the city emptied, and whatever examination and proclamation of the dogma of temporal power that might have been forthcoming vanished with the French, Belgian, Austrian and German prelates running back to their seats.

Then, two months later, on September 20, 1870, the Italians seized Rome. The Pope retreated into the Vatican, and the Council was officially declared "suspended" on October 20, 1870, and was formally closed by [John XXIII](#) in 1960 before the opening of [Vatican Council II](#).

Thus, it was that the story of temporal power, before collapsing in front of the oncoming Italian army, became the instrument by which in fact Papal infallibility was approved and became dogma. No matter what men do, nobody can stop the Spirit.

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The [*image*](#) shows, "*Jacopo Pesaro Being Presented by Pope Alexander VI to Saint Peter*," by Titian, painted ca. 1508–1511.

