

## 45. THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN CHURCH AND STATE

It is winter, 1076 - 1077. It's harsh, very harsh weather. The snow lays thick on the fields and the roads, and the frost continues for weeks. About Christmas of 1076, a small group of people travel through Germany to the south in the bitter cold. They finally arrive at the Alps and travel over those high peaks. It's not so bad at the foot of the



*The French Alps in Winter (Wanderlustlers)*

mountains and in the valleys. At least they are protected against the icy wind there. However, the higher they go, the colder it gets. Nothing protects them from the freezing winds. How chilly it must have been there! Brrr! It's certainly not the right time of the year to make that long and dangerous journey over the inhospitable Alps. Wouldn't it have been wiser to wait until the summer months? Even then, a trip over the Alps was perilous, especially in those days.

It is foolish to undertake that journey in the middle of winter, with thick layers of snow covering the mountain roads, making them almost impassable, with the added danger of suffering from frostbite. In winter, that journey is life-threatening. All true, but it is a must. Those people cannot wait till summer, for their errand is urgent.

Who are those travellers, and where are they going? Even a woman and child are with them. They have finally reached the highest peaks; they go over those tops and travel down the other

side. Descending is even more dangerous than ascending the mountain. One slip and they will plunge into the dizzying depths below. Death lurks from all sides. Gaping chasms beckon them. The slippery roads, covered with ice and snow, give no grip to their tired feet. Clefts and crevices have become invisible because of the thick layer of snow. Will their mutilated bodies soon serve as food for birds of prey?

No, they are doing well. The group reaches Italy. Finally, the tower of a castle looms in the distance. Wonderful! That castle is their destination. There they will be able to warm their numb, frozen limbs.

In the meantime, it is already the second half of January 1077. This journey has lasted several weeks. But now the end is in sight. The outline of the towers shows up sharply against the clear, frosty sky. That castle is close to the village of Canossa in Northern Italy. When they get closer, the woman and child stay behind. Most likely, they find lodging in an inn.

Barefoot and dressed in a penitential robe, the man travels on by himself. He reaches the castle gate. He knocks and asks for admission. But the gate of that castle remains closed. The occupants let that numb traveller stand outside. Brrr! How cold it is! Again and yet again, the knocker falls on the door! However, it does not help. The heavy doors remain shut. To try to keep a bit warm, the man wanders up and down in front of the door.



*Canossa Castle. Wikimapia.org*

Hours pass. It becomes evening, then night. It gets colder, but the gates remain closed.

### THE POPE AND THE EMPEROR

Barefoot and dressed only in a penitential robe, that man waits three days and three nights in that biting cold!

But why does he do that?

Why doesn't he go back home?



German Emperor Henry IV  
1050-1106 (prabook.com)

Why doesn't he look for a warm room?  
Who is that man?  
That solitary penitent standing in front of the castle gate is the German emperor!

What...! The German emperor? That's unbelievable!

Yet it is true, however unbelievable it may seem. Which German emperor is that and why does he humble himself like that? Those emperors were not usually such humble people! And why would the emperor stand three days and three nights in the snow waiting for admission?

Well, that is quite a story.

In the year 1056, a young prince ascended the German emperor's throne. His name was Henry IV. He was a strong emperor who knew what he wanted. Although he was still young, he ruled with a firm hand and did not let anyone trifle with him. He demanded obedience from all his subjects.

However, that was not to the liking of the German dukes and nobles. They wanted to remain masters of their province and did not want to become servants of the emperor. He must learn that they will not allow themselves to be forced aside just like that! Who

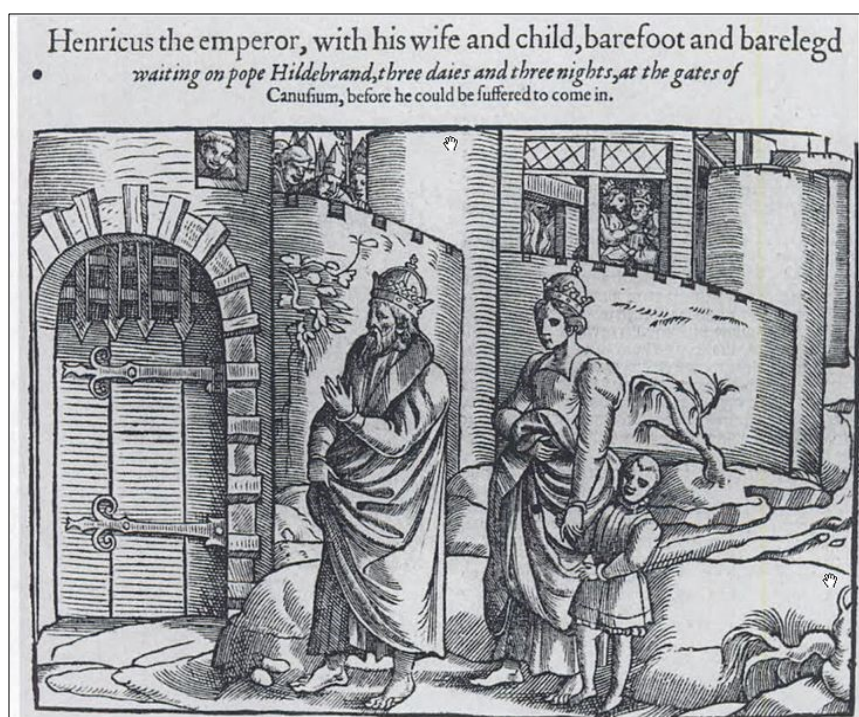
did that young emperor think *he* was?

Very soon, Henry IV got into great difficulties with the German nobles. Sure, they obeyed him because they had to, but spite and resentment grew in their hearts. To get some support in the struggle with those nobles, Henry IV appointed several bishops and gave them large tracts of land. Those bishops supported their emperor. The emperor was joining them in their practice of simony. (Buying or selling ecclesiastical positions). Whoever offered the most money had the best chance of getting appointed.

During that time, the pope of Rome issued his first ecclesiastical laws intended to free the church from the world's influence. His chief adviser in this was Hildebrand, about whom we told you in the previous chapter. Henry IV took no notice of those laws.

Hildebrand became pope in 1073, and then things started happening! Hildebrand or Gregory VII made one rule after another. He forbade simony. He commanded that secular rulers (like emperors) could not appoint bishops and other clergymen.

But young Henry IV ignored all those commands from Rome. He just continued to appoint bishops



16<sup>th</sup> century depiction of the scene outside Canossa <https://www.medievalists.net/>

because he needed their support in his struggle with the German nobles who opposed him whenever they could. Henry had previously ignored the pope's commands, which had never been a problem. But that was when the laws came from Hildebrand as an adviser. Then Hildebrand did not have the power to enforce his will. Now Hildebrand had become pope Gregory VII, but the German emperor assumed nothing much would change. In this, he was greatly mistaken!

Gregory VII was a ruler with an inflexible will. But Henry IV was also a ruler. He also pushed for things to go his way.

Gregory VII wanted to free the church from the world's influence. The emperor must not rule over the church, but the papacy must rule over the state.

But Henry IV did not want to give up his significant influence in the church. That was not an option! Anyone can understand that those two rulers would clash!

Both had great power.

Gregory was the pope of the church.

Henry IV was the mighty ruler of the German empire.

Because of this, that clash was very severe. Neither yielded an inch. Despite the command from Rome strictly forbidding simony, Henry IV



Pope Gregory VII 1015-1085  
<https://emmabellajackie.weebly.com/>

continued to appoint bishops and ignored that law. However, the pope decided to enforce that law. The obstinate German emperor *must* obey, whether he wanted to or not! Gregory excommunicated five of Henry IV's advisers who had received their appointment from him.

At first, the emperor thought:

"I won't start a quarrel," and to please the pope, he dismissed them. Gregory smiled shrewdly. That was easier than he had expected!

But after a few weeks, the emperor regretted his decision to obey the pope because he realised it would keep happening. Henry IV thought: "I won't allow this. I do not intend to become the pope's servant."

Do you know what he did? He reappointed those five advisers!

When Gregory heard that, he was outraged.

He sent some papal ambassadors to the German emperor with the threat: "If you do not immediately discharge those advisers, I will excommunicate you!"

Henry IV laughed scornfully. He could combat that. He called his friends, the German bishops, to a meeting and deposed the pope!

Emperors had done that before!

They could appoint the popes, but if they so desired, they could also depose them. Gregory heard what the German emperor had done. He turned red with fury, and in retaliation, he excommunicated Henry IV!

He also sent a letter to the German nobles and people. He wrote that they no longer needed to obey their emperor.

"Ha", rejoiced the German nobles, "we need no longer obey the emperor!"

Those nobles hated their emperor because they could not tolerate his ambition for power. Now they had an excellent opportunity to push their enemy aside!

This ruling and response put Henry IV into a challenging position, for the nobles told him:

"Unless you ensure the pope lifts the ban within a year, we will choose a new emperor."

They believed he would never succeed in getting that done! They told each other:



"He won't be successful anyway."

Those nobles wrote a letter to the pope asking:

"Won't you please come to Germany? Then we can discuss which emperor we want."

Gregory smothered a chuckle. He thinks:

"This is great! Soon they will all listen to me and obey me as they should! I shall decide who is going to rule over Germany."

And so, he eagerly accepts their suggestion. Soon after, he leaves Rome and travels to Germany. He must take advantage of this excellent opportunity! On his way north, he arrives at the Italian town of Canossa. A female friend of his, Countess Mathilda, lives there. She had often helped him when he had previously experienced difficulties. Since he was so close to her castle, Pope Gregory decided to visit her. But then the



*Mathilda. The iron Countess of Canossa 1046-1115 (A history of Italy)*

frost set in, and it became bitterly cold. Gregory did not feel like crossing the Alps during this cold spell. That's why he stayed at the castle of Countess Mathilda at Canossa.

### CLEVER HENRY IV

Suddenly, while pope Gregory is warming himself at the cheerfully crackling fire in the castle, the German emperor appears barefoot and wrapped in a penitential robe before the castle gate and desires to be admitted! Gregory had not counted on that at all and was quite disappointed. This cunning move on the German emperor's part put him in a difficult position. He did not feel like meeting his enemy, but, being a priest, he could not deny a penitent. He did not know what to do! He let the German emperor stand in the snow and cold for three days and three nights. He secretly hoped the emperor would get angry and leave, but he was mistaken. Henry IV did not dream of going away! Too much was at stake, and he knew that as a priest, the pope *could* not refuse to

pardon him! So, despite everything, he persevered. Now we know why Henry IV travelled to Canossa and waited patiently in the freezing temperatures. He had to because if he didn't, he would lose the imperial crown of Germany.

The pope is sitting in the large hall of the castle of Countess Mathilda. She sits next to him and advises him:

"You had better open the gate now. It has lasted long enough."

Some of the pope's other friends give him the same advice. Gregory still hesitates. He does not find it easy. Finally, he decides, "Go on then, let him come in."

A servant hastens out of the room, and finally, the heavy doors open. Chilled to the bone, Henry IV enters. In his heart, he is furious with the pope for making him wait for so long. But he does not say that. He knows that the pope will send him away immediately if he does. Then his journey to Italy would be a failure! So he hides his true feelings. With a bowed head and every appearance of reverence, the emperor approaches the throne where the pope sits. When he finally stands before him, he kneels and asks to be pardoned. He promises that from now on, he will obey the pope. Humbly, he requests the pope to remove the ban.

It is hushed in the large hall. Everyone holds their breath and tensely awaits Gregory's answer. What will he say?



*Emperor Henry IV at Pope Gregory's feet in repentance, AD 1077 <http://www.catholiclane.com/>*

The pope wages a severe struggle. He realises he must give in. Finally, Gregory raises his head and solemnly says:

"Because you have come so humbly to ask this of me, I pardon you and lift the ban."

Outwardly friendly and humble, the emperor answers:

"Thank you very kindly! Thank you so much!"

Then he rises from his kneeled position and departs. It is good that the pope does not see the flash in the emperor's eyes. But Henry IV controls himself. He is finally successful! Although his heart is full of hatred against the man who humbled him so profoundly, he comforts himself with the thought:

"Just you wait! My time will come!"

He is fully determined to avenge himself!

## **TWO EMPERORS = CIVIL WAR**

With his wife and child, the emperor quickly travels back to Germany. But when he enters his palace, he hears that the German nobles have chosen another emperor during his absence, a man called Rudolph. The German nobles clearly show they want to get rid of him.

But the bishops decide to support Henry IV again now that the pope has absolved him.

So now there are two emperors in Germany! With their armies, the German nobles support Rudolph, the new emperor, but the German bishops, with their soldiers, support Henry IV.

The pope should have supported Henry IV, for hadn't he absolved him and granted forgiveness? But he didn't provide any support at all! As a result, civil war breaks out in Germany. The pope thought:

"I'll first wait and see who will win this battle!"

The battle commences, and Emperor Rudolph's army defeats the army of Henry IV.

Pope Gregory thinks, "Great! Rudolph is the victor."

But then he does something foolish. He excommunicates Henry IV again! That was not honest or fair because there was no reason for it. The German people think so too, and they decide to support their lawful emperor despite the papal

ban. Very soon, Henry IV had assembled a mighty army. For the second time, he marches to battle with his opponent Rudolph. Rudolph is defeated and killed in that battle. Now Henry IV is the only ruler again. He thinks:

"Now it is time to take revenge on the pope."

He marches to Rome and lays siege to that city. The struggle took three years. Then Rome is taken, and Henry IV victoriously enters the ancient metropolis at the head of his loyal troops. The German soldiers plunder Rome. Gregory himself manages to escape. He succeeds in leaving Rome but never returns. Some years later, in 1085, he died in exile.

While Henry IV was in Rome, he immediately appointed a new pope. Most cardinals did not dare oppose the German emperor and acknowledged the new pope. They left Gregory in the lurch.

Henry IV, the powerful German emperor, had obtained the victory.

He had avenged the humiliation Gregory had put him through.

It looked like the state had triumphed over the church.

But other popes continued Gregory's work. That power struggle lasted for many years. We cannot tell you all about it. Just remember that in the end, it wasn't the German emperors but the popes of Rome who obtained the victory. Not the state, but the ecclesiastical power triumphed.

## **QUESTIONS**

1. How did Henry IV offend Pope Gregory?
2. What command did Gregory give Henry IV?
3. How did Henry IV further antagonise the pope? What did the pope threaten to do?
4. How did Henry IV attempt to exercise the customary power over the popes? What did Gregory do to Henry?
5. What was the response of the nobles to Gregory's decree?
6. What was Henry IV's predicament?
7. Why did Gregory go to Germany?

8. Why was Gregory disappointed when he saw Henry IV dressed as a penitent? What did he do?
9. What was Gregory forced to do? What were the conditions for pardon?
10. Explain how civil war occurred in Germany.
11. How did the German people react to the second ban on Henry?
12. How did Henry IV regain his authority over the church?

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. What is excommunication or the ban?
2. Doing penance was a common practice during the Dark Ages. 'The penitent was obliged to dress humbly, go barefoot, fast, etc. Read Isaiah 58 and relate what the Lord says in this chapter regarding fasting and other signs of repentance to the practices of this time.
3. Some think that Gregory kept Henry IV waiting in the cold for three days to humiliate him. This belief gave rise to the expression 'to go to Canossa', which means to submit to great humiliation. Is this a correct or incorrect picture of what happened at Canossa? Explain.
4. Why did Gregory feel obliged to forgive Henry IV?

#### RESEARCH TOPICS:

1. Prepare a report on religion in Sweden today, including the following:
  - a. Does Sweden have a state church? If so, what denomination is it?
  - b. If it does not have a state church, what is the most prevalent religious denomination?
  - c. Does the majority or the minority of the people belong to a church?
  - d. List a few of the major denominations today.



*In the winter of 1088, a 'repentant' Henry IV followed the pope to his temporary residence at Canossa and waited barefoot in the snow outside the castle for three days before being pardoned.*

*Painted in 1881 by Eduard Schwoiser  
(German painter, 1826 - 1902)*