

Church & State

The prayer comes from Stephen Langton. Stephen Langton was an Englishman who served as archbishop of Canterbury. Before he was appointed archbishop of Canterbury, he spent about 20 years in Paris as a student and as a teacher. He was a first-class scholar. Although hardly anybody knows this about Stephen Langton, I expect that he is most famous and most remembered because he is the man who divided the Bible into chapters. Until Stephen Langton, whole books of the Bible would be copied without any chapter divisions. The chapter divisions of Stephen Langton were taken over when printing began. Thus, every copy of the Bible has become a memorial to this archbishop of Canterbury. He also wrote some commentaries on the Bible. And he wrote a poem directed to the Holy Spirit called “The Golden Sequence.” The prayer that I want to use now is a wonderful prayer that emphasizes God’s grace. It comes from Stephen Langton and “The Golden Sequence.” Let us pray.

“Our strength renew, / On our dryness pour Thy dew / Wash the stains of guilt away, / bend the stubborn heart and will / Melt the frozen, warm the chill / Guide the steps that go astray. Amen.”

There was no issue in the Middle Ages more vexing to people than the issue of authority. Where does ultimate authority and power reside? Does it reside in the church or does it reside in the state? Does it reside in Paris or does it reside in Rome, to put it another way? That struggle between the church and the state goes all the way back to the time of Constantine. In the Middle Ages it has some very dramatic episodes. I am not going to try to talk theoretically about all of this history, the church-state struggle, as to who is going to be superior. Instead I would like to illustrate it in describing the struggle between Thomas Becket and Henry II. There were two views that were common in the Middle Ages. One view, which the pope would advocate, is that God is above all things, but under God there is the pope. Under the pope is the king, and under the king and the pope are the people. So the pope has authority not only in the church, but in the state as well. Not everybody agreed with that, namely the kings. Another way of thinking about ultimate authority is that there is God, and under God there is the king. Under the king are the pope and the church. Under both the king and the pope are the people. So that sets up the conflict between church and state. Of course in the Middle Ages there is no division of church and state like we have today. The question of who was going to have the last say about something was always there. At times it really did not matter. But when the policy of the king conflicted with the will of the pope, there was a showdown and a conflict. This resulted in much struggle and unhappiness in the whole period of the Middle Ages.

Let us illustrate that struggle from this episode in English history: Thomas Becket, the archbishop of Canterbury, and Henry II, the king of England. For this we go back to the 12th century. You can see the dates of Becket: 1120-1170. Thomas Becket at first was the chancellor, the king’s right-hand man. He was a very good chancellor. King Henry and Chancellor Becket were good friends. They liked each other, and they trusted each other. Becket did everything he could to serve his king. For eight brilliant years he was the chancellor under Henry II. He was a polished gentleman, not particularly noted for his piety. He was not very worldly either, though. He was able to lead a decent life despite his high office in the kingdom. But in those days there was another important office. It was even more important than chancellor. This more important office was archbishop of Canterbury. It was the most important church office in England. When that office became vacant, the king decided to appoint his trusted friend and chancellor, Thomas Becket, to that post.

The problem was that Becket was not even a priest. He had not been ordained as a priest. He had not been interested in a clerical life. He was quite happy serving in the state. But Henry was so concerned to

get his man in that position that he appointed Becket. That happened from time to time in the Middle Ages. It is called lay investiture. Rather than the church, namely the pope, appointing someone like the archbishop, the king would. The king was a layman. He made the appointment here despite the fact that the church claimed that only the church could appoint an archbishop. But the king did it anyway. This created a problem. Lay investiture had been a practice in England for a long time. The strong kings in England and France and elsewhere would try to get their own people into these high clerical offices. If they were really going to control the kingdom, they had to control these offices. Issues would arise that made the king want this control. For example, when the king wanted to raise taxes, he would levy taxes to raise money. Sometimes he would tax the clergy. The pope said you cannot tax the clergy. Only the church can tax the clergy. So there would be a conflict between the king and the pope over an issue like this. The king wanted to have a sympathizer in an office like the archbishop of Canterbury in order to be able to further his program in England. So he appointed Thomas Becket, thinking that Thomas would serve him as archbishop just as he had served him as chancellor.

Something happened when Thomas became archbishop. He took it seriously as a church office and not an office of the state. In fact, Thomas went to Rome and resigned as archbishop of Canterbury so that he could receive that office back from the pope's hands. His hands were holier than the king's hands. You can see now the scene is set for a clash between these two friends. Thomas appeared to be a man who would do the king's bidding in the highest clerical office in England. It turns out that he was not the king's man but the pope's man. We do not know why Thomas Becket made that dramatic and sudden change. King Henry could never figure it out either. He felt that Thomas had let him out. He kept hoping that Thomas would come to his senses and come back to his side. But Thomas Becket never did. The scene was set for a clash between the archbishop and the king. It was a clash set between the hammer and the anvil. That is the title I used for this lesson. It comes from the play by T. S. Elliot called "Murder in the Cathedral." It is the story of Henry II and Thomas Becket. One writer on English church history said, "Becket was determined to be as magnificently the hero archbishop as he had been the hero chancellor." Maybe that explains it, maybe not. The only thing we know for sure is that for eight years Thomas Becket was a hero chancellor. And for eight years he was a hero archbishop. When he was chancellor, he did everything he could to promote the cause of Henry. When he was archbishop, he did everything he could to oppose the policies of Henry that he felt conflicted with the interests of the church. The result you know perhaps from reading Gonzales or because it is a famous moment in history. In the year 1170 Thomas Becket was murdered in the Canterbury Cathedral. He had been in France for some time. He left England in order to escape the wrath of the king. He then felt at last he should return to England to fill the office that he served as archbishop. He was murdered in the cathedral by four zealous knights of Henry II. They had overheard Henry say, "I wish somebody would get rid of that troublesome priest." Henry probably did not mean it exactly like that—he did not think anybody would take him literally. He should have known better, though, because he was king. The four knights rode to Canterbury and confronted Thomas Becket right in the cathedral.

T. S. Elliot wrote the play "Murder in the Cathedral." It was first performed in Canterbury Cathedral in 1935. I saw it performed in 1988. I would recommend that you read "Murder in the Cathedral" sometime. When Thomas goes to the cathedral and the priests are there, they know the enemies are coming. The priests and Thomas go into the interior of the cathedral. The priests say, in the words of Elliot in the play, "Bar the door, bar the door. The door is barred. We are safe, we are safe. They dare not break in, they cannot break in. They have not the force. We are safe, we are safe." Something like this did seem to happen. It is not the same cathedral that is there now at Canterbury, but the priests locked the doors of that great church. They felt they could resist. Elliot then has Thomas say some magnificent words that have more meaning than just for that moment in history in 1170. He says, "Unbar the doors. Throw open the doors. I will not have the house of prayer, the church of Christ, a

sanctuary turned into a fortress. The church shall protect her own in her own way. Not as oak and stone, stone and oak decay. Give no stay, but the church shall endure. The church shall be open, even to our enemies. Open the door.” That was a great speech. The door was opened and the result was that the four knights came in and, near the altar, killed Thomas Becket.

We have the chancellor, the archbishop, and now the saint. It was not long, just three years after he was killed, that he was canonized. He became Saint Thomas Becket. The king himself did penance three days after he heard of the death of his former friend. Henry stayed in his room, fasting and weeping. It is hard to know what was going on in Henry’s heart. Is there genuine repentance here? Or is there frustration? Exactly what happened? Eventually Henry went to Canterbury and stood before the shrine of Thomas Becket and did public penance. Henry may genuinely have repented, but think of what happened here. This is conflict between the church and the state. The church has some very strong weapons. The king can kill the archbishop if he wants to. But the church can retaliate, and Henry knew that the church could retaliate. One way the church could retaliate was by excommunication. Henry could be excommunicated, which meant that he would be cut off from the sacraments of the church. We saw in the last lecture how important the sacraments were for medieval Roman Catholics.

There was another method that the church had that was even more powerful. It was the interdict. The pope could not only excommunicate the king, but he could also place the whole kingdom under an interdict. This meant that no services could be held, none of the sacraments could be performed, and nothing could take place in the churches. The sacramental system would be stopped, and the whole kingdom would be shut off from the means of salvation for as long as it took. When the people really believed that that was happening, the king would not dare risk an interdict because it would create a popular revolution. It would make for great trouble in the kingdom. The interdict was used frequently in the Middle Ages. Not only popes for nations and bishops for smaller areas used it, but there were even frivolous uses of the interdict. For instance, a bishop imposed an interdict on the people of a certain area in the Holy Roman Empire because they would not permit a monastery to have the exclusive right to make and sell beer in that area. People did not like the monastery’s product and wanted to make their own. The bishop then pronounced an interdict upon the people of that town. It was a powerful weapon, even if it was frivolously used. If you believe that salvation comes from the exercise of the sacraments, and those sacraments are cut off, then salvation is cut off. So King Henry may have been genuinely repentant, but he was also fearful, I am sure, of the reprisals of the pope.

Thomas immediately became a hero. He was a martyr, hero, and saint. He was canonized in 1173. He became a popular figure in the religious piety of the people of England. We were talking in the last lesson about the importance of pilgrimages. In England after 1173 the place to go was Canterbury. There was the pilgrim’s way through the south of England. Occasionally people still use the pilgrim’s way to go to Canterbury. Pilgrims went to Canterbury in order to visit the shrine and tomb of Thomas Becket. Chaucer’s *Canterbury tales* is the story of a group of pilgrims on the pilgrim’s way going to Canterbury. They spend the time entertaining themselves by telling different stories as they go.

I think there are two reasons why Thomas Becket became such a Christian hero to the English people. First, he did not resist. He was not a saint before he died in one sense of the word. He could be a very sharp-tongued person. He had his animosities and his bitterness. But at the last moment he did not resist. He opened the door. Christ’s church should be opened, even to its enemies. People remembered that. Second, when he died it was discovered that under his robe he wore a hair shirt. That was a particular kind of garment that some particularly pious people would wear in the Middle Ages. It made them become more uncomfortable. Apparently it was a very uncomfortable thing. It scratched; it was not something you would want to wear next to your skin. In order to afflict the flesh and suffer somewhat,

some people wore hair shirts. When it was discovered that the archbishop of Canterbury did that, it was viewed that he was a particularly holy man. Stephen Langton, whose prayer we used to begin the lesson, became a later archbishop. He promoted the jubilee of Becket's death so that the shrine of Thomas Becket became very central in the piety of the people of England. That is a famous story. It illustrates the point of this lesson. Will the king dominate the church, or can the church dominate the king?

Let us move on to 1294. Thomas Becket died in 1170. In 1294, an 80-year-old man became pope. He took the name Boniface VIII. He reigned until 1303. Someone has written of him, "He came in like a fox, he reigned like a king, and he died like a dog." Perhaps this is not a very complimentary or kind sentence to utter about Boniface VIII, but it does touch on some elements of his life. Boniface had his battle too, not with the king of England but with the king of France. Boniface struggled with Philip IV of France. It was over some of the same issues that we talked about earlier in England: taxation of the clergy, appointment of people to clerical offices, and a papal bull called *unum sanctum ecclesiam*: One Holy Church. It is a classical formulation of the papal claim to supremacy of the preceding centuries as well as of the following centuries. It sums up the view that under God is the pope, then the king, and then the people. It is sometimes described as the two swords. Boniface and popes before and after him would talk about the two swords. The church has one sword and the state had one sword. But the church had the superior sword. The sword of the church was superior to the sword of the state. The bull, One Holy Church, says, "Since spiritual power exceeds the temporal in honor it may be used against the temporal and it must be used if the temporal is in error." If there is an error in the state, if the king does something wrong, then spiritual power is above temporal power. It must correct the temporal power. If the spiritual power errs, he or it will be judged by the supreme power, who is the pope. If there is a mistake, an error, on the spiritual side at some lower level, the pope judges that. If the supreme power errs, that is the pope, he can only be judged by God. He is responsible to no one but God as illustrated in the chart. All of that was not new, but Boniface stated it with great force. Then he added something that was new. He said salvation requires subjection to the papacy. The church had said for a long time that there could be no salvation outside the church. Now this pope was saying there could be no salvation without subjection to the papacy. It sounds strong, and it was strong. It was a bit hollow, though.

By the time Boniface wrote these famous words the pope was not in much of a position to enforce them. A new phenomenon had arisen in Europe. We have not talked about this yet but eventually we will. We could describe it as nationalism. People were beginning to think of themselves as English, French, and Spanish. They were no longer just part of the church. Nationalism was going to favor the king and not the pope. Boniface VIII tried to suppress Philip IV of France by this bull and by threats of excommunication and the interdict. But with nationalism on the rise those threats were not as strong as they had been in the past. Phillip simply responded by encouraging Italian and French nobility to raise an army. He said they should go down to Rome and deal with the pope. The pope was attacked by this coalition. He was made a prisoner and quite soon died in humiliation.

Then began a long line of popes, seven of them, who did not live in Rome. Instead they lived in France. France took over the papacy and moved the location of the head of the church from Rome, where it had been for centuries. It was moved to southern France, to Avignon. This is called the Babylonian captivity of the church. Seven popes lived in Avignon for about 70 years. That is why it is called the Babylonian captivity of the church: for about 70 years the papacy was "captured" by the French kings. There were seven popes and French colleges of cardinals. The papacy became French at this point. It centered in unmistakable extravagance in Avignon until finally Gregory XI, the last of the Avignon popes, reluctantly returned the papacy to Rome. He then promptly died. This created an even bigger problem. Gregory XI went back to Rome and died. The College of Cardinals met, and under pressure from the Roman people who wanted a pope in Rome again, they elected an Italian to serve as pope. But as soon

as most of these cardinals got out of town, they were sorry about what they did. They annulled that election, and they elected someone else as pope. But that meant that there were two popes. The pope in Rome stayed in Rome, the other pope went back to Avignon. Now there were two popes. We call this the Great Schism in the history of the church from 1378-1417.

With all these problems, and these are huge problems, the people were beginning to think that the church was not organized correctly. Something was wrong. One of the people who came up with a new idea as to how church and state should be organized is the famous poet of Florence, Dante. He wrote not only *The Divine Comedy*, but also *On Monarchy*. In it he set forth ideas that we could diagram this way: neither the pope nor the king is head of the other. Both are responsible to God. Under God is the pope, who is over the people as far as the church is concerned. Under God there is also the king, who is over the people as far as the state is concerned. That is a much more modern view. Dante felt that it was necessary for the papacy to surrender its temporal claims. This would mean the papacy would become simply a church. In the view of the popes, the papacy was both a state and a church. It had its own tax, its own armies, and its own ambassadors just like any other state. Dante said the church should be a church and the state should be a state. Both are responsible to God and to God alone. I do not know how many people read *The Divine Comedy* anymore, but it is worth reading. One excellent version is Dorothy Sayer's translation, especially because of her footnotes. If you read through *The Divine Comedy* you need the footnotes because there are a lot of names. It is difficult, but Sayer's footnotes are a wonderful way to become at home in the political and ecclesiastical world of the Middle Ages. There have been more recent translations of *The Divine Comedy*, but I do not think any are superior to Dorothy Sayer's. Nobody has come close to her notes in setting forth the theological significance of what Dante wrote about.

In the 19th canto of "Inferno" (Hell), Dante and his guide find the popes. Dante was a medieval Italian scholar and poet who wrote about hell. He put the popes in hell. They were in hell in unusual circumstances. One was head down in a crack in the earth with his legs pointed upward. They see this person with his head in a crack in the ground. Someone asks, "Oh wretched soul, who so thou art that keepest upside down, planted like a stake? Say a word if thou canst." Who are you there with your head in the ground like a tree or a stake? He cried out, "Art thou already standing there Boniface?" Boniface was the pope I was just talking about who produced the bull, One Holy Church. What Dante is saying here is that the next pope would come and press the earlier pope on down through that fissure totally into hell. Then another pope would do the same thing for that pope. This was the way a pope was being punished. He was waiting, and his successor Boniface VIII would push him more deeply into hell. That is striking, it is strong. That is not Luther, Calvin, or John Knox. It is a medieval catholic poet, Dante, describing the popes that way.

There was another Italian from Padoa named Marsilio. He later became rector of the University of Paris and wrote a book called *Defender of the Peace*. It is even more radical than Dante's view. Marsilio of Padoa said that people should begin to think that God is on the top (He never changes), but the people are no longer on the bottom. They have always been on the bottom, and Marsilio says they are right under God. God gives authority to the people who, through an assembly, can elect the king. Through a council it can set forth its will for the pope. God is working through the people in the state and in the church. The people work through an assembly and a council to direct the officer of the assembly and the people, the king, and the officer of the council in the church, the pope. Understandably neither kings nor popes cared for Marsilio of Padoa's book. One of the popes said it was the most heretical book he had ever read. You can see why. That is an amazingly modern view. It does not get out of the abstract area in the Middle Ages. In modern times it will become much more significant as actual practice. New ideas are occurring.

People were trying to determine how to solve the great problem that the church had gotten itself into. One of the ways in which the church tried to solve the problem was through conciliarism, the idea of the council. If the popes could not solve the problem of the church, then a council could meet and solve the problems of the church. The problem was that one pope would excommunicate the other pope and then place under interdict all the people who were following that pope. This meant that eventually everybody in Christendom was excommunicated.

Let us talk about how The Great Schism worked out. If you have two popes, you have to decide which one to go with. There were lands giving allegiance to Avignon. You would expect France to do that, as well as parts of Spain, the kingdom of Naples, and Scotland. Scotland was linked with France in the old alliance. England was going to go the other way, and whatever England did, Scotland did the opposite. There were lands giving allegiance to Rome. This included part of Italy, Eastern Europe, and Scandinavia. The Holy Roman Empire and Portugal could not make up their minds as to which way to go. It was an important decision. If you chose the wrong pope, you got an invalid sacramental system. The system depended on the pope being the right pope and being able to guarantee the efficacy of all the sacraments. We must attempt to imagine what it meant for people at that time. It seems ludicrous to us, certainly unfortunate. It was a tragedy for the people in Europe, for Christianity, and the people who were taking the church seriously.

The idea was to bring in a council. If the popes could not get it right, maybe a council could. So a council was called at Pisa, Italy. It elected a new pope, opposing both the Roman pope and the Avignon pope. Neither of those popes was impressed with the decision of the Council of Pisa. Rather than ending up with one pope, they made the situation worse by not resigning. The church was now divided among three popes. The Pisan pope, Alexander V, soon died. He was succeeded by John XXIII. John XXIII was a very interesting character. He was not an incompetent man, although he had a reputation that he brought with him to the papacy. He had been a pirate! He ruled as the third pope. You might recall that Giuseppe Roncalli, when he became a pope in 1958, a beloved pope, took the name John XXIII. For almost 500 years no pope had used the name John. Until the second Pisan pope there had been 22 popes named John. John is such a beloved name in Christian history. But no pope dared risk the name John after John XXIII. There is a second John XXIII because the first John XXIII is not considered the true pope by the Catholic Church today. This is because he was a Pisan pope and not a Roman pope. When the modern John XXIII took that title, it said something to people that his pontificate was going to be something unusual. He dared risk taking a name that was honored but dishonored. His short reign of five years was very unusual. Vatican II was called during that time with all the changes that it brought to the Catholic Church. To go back to this period, there were now three popes. People talked about the “cursed trinity” rather than the blessed trinity because there were three popes: Pisa, Avignon, and Rome.

Finally another council was called. The Council of Constance was one of the most important councils of the late Middle Ages. It met for over four years. This council did a number of things. We will see later something else that it did. The main point that I want to make now is that in the Council of Constance, conciliarism triumphed. The council was able to force all three popes to resign. They established the idea that the church would now be ruled by a council. It would not be ruled by a pope. You can read in the syllabus the heart of the statement of the Council of Constance. It says that the Roman Catholic Church is a conciliar church, governed by the council. The council would meet periodically in order to govern the church. It started off well, but the new pope, Martin V elected at Constance, almost immediately prohibited appeal from the pope to any other court. Before too many years Pope Pious II prohibited any and all appeals to a council over a pope. When the popes were weak and divided, the council was strong. When there was one single pope again, the council became divided and weak. The

papacy was able to reestablish its supremacy in the Roman Catholic Church, which has continued down to the present.

There was the Council of Trent in the 16th century. But that had to be ratified by the pope before any decision could be accepted. There was Vatican I in the 19th century. That set forth the dogma of papal infallibility. Once that was clearly in place, what was the role of a council? The pope is infallible when he speaks *ex cathedra*. There was Vatican II in the 1960s, but Vatican II was clearly a council called to advise the pope. It had no independent authority.

Even though conciliarism failed in the Catholic Church, it was not without effect. We are close to the Protestant Reformation. The Protestant churches organized themselves quite differently from the Catholic Church. Conciliarism viewed the church as a community of believers. It set forth some idea of representative church government. It stressed the importance of lay people. Even though those ideas failed in the Catholic Church, the conciliar ideas would prevail in different forms in the Protestant churches of the 16th century. “The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of our God will endure forever” (Isaiah 40:8).