

What were the aims and effects of Innocent III's policies on the religious life of the West

Innocent III has gained a reputation among historians as being one of the most influential and certainly one of the most powerful popes of the medieval era. Yet the strength of his position was due quite as much to the good fortune of his circumstances as to his personal influence. Lothar of Segni found himself as pope at a time when the other powers of Europe were in disarray: imperial schism in Germany, a tottering Byzantine power in the east; squabbling Lombard towns in northern Italy; growing baronial unrest in England; a fragmented and unsecured Spanish march and an as-yet still weak French monarchy. From these peculiarly conducive diplomatic circumstances it is easy to see why Innocent's papacy inspired such great respect relative to his predecessors. The papal message itself remained largely unchanged since a century previously: but as the will and means to dispense it grew stronger, the will and means to resist it was insufficient in temporal rulers of the time. By 1216, the clergy had once again demonstrated their influence and capacity for affecting the lives of all - and in many ways the reforms Innocent initiated were to lead to a revival of spiritual awareness in all levels of society.

What no temporal ruler could deny at the end of Innocent's pontificate was the influence which the papacy could now claim on their kingdoms, and the right to intervention in important matters of state was indeed proven in many cases - in the most sensitive matters of inheritance, marriages and episcopal appointments no less. Innocent's justification for this was an almost exact paraphrase of Gregory VII, when he said 'as God placed two great lights in the starry heavens...so he established in the realm of the Universal Church two great powers, one to rule the souls of men and one to rule their bodies. As the moon, inferior in size and quality, draws its light from the sun, so the royal power derives its splendour from the priestly.'¹ Yet where Gregory had found himself driven from the city of Rome, Innocent found himself meekly obeyed by most of the crowned heads of Europe. As Innocent liked to put it, 'Holy scripture testifies that a father rebukes and chastens the son whom he loves'² - his position as superior to kings was as a father - and disobedience or patricide was thus unthinkable. In his status as 'lower than God but higher than man' his role was to judge kings *ratione peccati*. An example of this in practice comes from when he attempted to mediate in the dispute between John of England and Philip of France over Normandy. French bishops protested that his intervention was unlawful since the matter was purely feudal and had been settled at Philip's feudal court. Innocent's reply on the other hand made clear that 'Let no man therefore imagine that we intend to diminish or disturb the king's jurisdiction and power, when he ought not to hinder or curb our jurisdiction and power.'³ His reasoning was instead that Philip had been denounced to him as a man pursuing a sinful course of conduct, and whose sin had broken the peace - 'to decide concerning a sin of which the judgement undoubtedly belongs to us.'⁴ Again as regards Philip, it was his responsibility to deal personally with the latter's irregular marriage status after the repudiation of Ingeborg of Denmark. Although 'the king of France acknowledges no superior in temporal affairs' he was clearly reliant on the pope as supreme arbiter and thus served to confirm Innocent's claim that 'not only in the patrimony of the church where we wield full power in temporal affairs but also in other regions, we may exercise temporal jurisdiction incidentally after having examined certain cases.'⁵ That this was an exercise in temporal power over kings is the refusal he gave to William count of Montpellier in an identical situation - pointing the latter to

¹ Letter to nobles of Tuscany 1198, quoted in Tierney *Church and State 1050-1300* p.132

² Letter to King John 20 Feb 1203, quoted in Cheney *Selected letters of Pope Innocent III*

³ Letter to French bishops, Apr 1204, quoted in Cheney *Selected letters of Pope Innocent III*

⁴ Decretal *Novit* (1204), quoted in Tierney *Church and State 1050-1300* p.135

⁵ Decretal *Per Venerabilem*, quoted in Tierney *Church and State 1050-1300* p.136

his overlord and not to the church authorities. Philip's position with no overlord that he approached the pope, and it was this situation which allowed Innocent to receive countries such as Castille, Leon and England as fiefs, and to crown the kings of Hungary, Bulgaria and Aragon.

Marriage and inheritance, as the episode over Philip Augustus's marriage had shown, were certainly church matters and Innocent set great store in maintaining ecclesiastical control over them. Philip Augustus underwent a year's interdict for his contumacy for instance. The young Frederick II, later a scourge of the papacy, was in fact a ward of Innocent, and church's tightening grip on the processes of inheritance was a crucial one. Innocent also saw absolutely no difficulty in intervening in episcopal appointments to a scale unprecedented by popes before him. In England, for example, papal control over the clergy was such that despite five years interdict and gross provocations by the king, practically the whole clergy stuck by Innocent as pope merely for the principle of Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury - did the English clergy do such a thing thirty years earlier in the archbishopric of Thomas Becket? As the various translations of for example Peter of Corbeil showed in France, appointments to bishoprics were now firmly in clerical hands and no longer in the grasps of temporal rulers. The loyalty bishops themselves was another matter, as Peter of Corbeil himself showed in siding with Philip against his former pupil at Paris - ecclesiastical liberty, as Innocent says to the archbishop of Ravenna 'is nowhere better cared for than where the Roman Church has full power in both temporal and spiritual affairs'⁶ - but as John of England found out in 1208 the support of his bishops could no longer be counted on. If these were the most crucial rights that the papacy could claim from all rulers, then the papacy was no less forthright in maintaining its old rights and claiming new rights from a weakened schismatic empire. Most crucial surely of these was the right to arbitrate in imperial elections, made appeasingly in the decretal *Venerabilem* where Innocent said that 'we maintain that our legate did not act either as an elector...or as a judge when he approved King Otto...rather he exercised the office of one who declared the king was personally worthy.' Why was this important? 'It is clear from the law and precedent that, if the votes of the princes are divided in an election, we can favour one of the parties after due warning and a reasonable delay.'⁷ Yet the additions to Otto's coronation ceremony as emperor clearly state this precedence - he renewed the ceremony of *strator* with Otto acting as the pope's groom, as well as receiving his sword from the altar. Innocent's identification of himself with the priest-king Melchizedek was again shown graphically by his *phrygium* adorned by a crown. In all pictures we have of Innocent we see him in full papal finery as if to assert the papacy's supremacy over all others as Vicar of Christ, 'lower than God but higher than man.' However in posing thus he did not wish to destroy imperial rights, as he said 'for we do not (as some pestilent fellows pretend) aim at the minor abasement of the empire; rather do we aspire to preserve and exalt it'⁸ - Innocent's aim was for a realignment of papal and imperial interests to make them complementary.

Yet this power-play on a political level did not greatly change the course of religious life in the localities. Where it did, the effects were very drastic. The interdicts on England and France for instance served to effectively deprive the populations of the two countries of the church's aid with the divine power. Innocent's direction that 'all services except the baptism of infants and the confession of the dying' were to be stopped served to cripple many of the essential parts of feudal life such as marriage and funeral rites: the removal of the former posed a threat to hereditary succession, while the latter genuinely impeded it, since a father was often only legally dead after his funeral. On a slightly different note, it was papal power-play which ensured that newly-conquered marcher regions in Iberia, Poland and Bulgaria received Latinised Catholicism.

⁶ Letter to the archbishop of Ravenna 1198 quoted in Tierney *Church and State 1050-1300* p.132

⁷ Decretal *Venerabilem* (1202), quoted in Tierney *Church and State 1050-1300* p.134

⁸ Letter to ecclesiastical and lay princes of Germany (1199) quoted in Cheney *Letters of Innocent III* p.28

However, the new self-confidence of the papacy under Innocent did lead to new initiatives of a purely religious nature being taken under its aegis to try to dynamise the way that the church operated, and to reform the way the church was perceived by the general population of the world, of whose souls the pope saw himself as responsible. Firstly, Innocent claimed the exclusive right to canonise new saints 'for the confirmation of the Catholic faith and the confusion of heresy.'⁹ When he declared that "being assured of his merits and his miracles...we have inscribed the blessed Gilbert [of Sempringham] on the roll of saints and have decreed that his memory is to be celebrated among the saints"¹⁰ Innocent was ensuring that fresh examples of piety were recognised that could guide local populations away from heresy, and even enthusiastic amateurs such as the beguine Mary d'Oignies were acceptable for this. As Innocent knew full well, new saints such as Thomas Becket, could inspire great devotion in many people, though by also claiming the right to validate relics he maintained control over new pilgrimage sites. In the aftermath of the Sack of Constantinople in 1204 the enormous number of 'new' relics which flooded onto the market made papal control much more necessary. The recognition of monastic saints such as Gilbert of Sempringham was also carried out at the same moment as Innocent brought back into the fold of the Catholic Church new groupings such as the Franciscan preachers, who were to have such a regenerative effect on the reputation of the Church in the succeeding decades. Yet even this had to be done under the Church's aegis: Dominicans were trained at the University of Paris for example, which required papal blessing, and even then had to fulfil a triple role as preachers, confessors and inquisitors for the Catholic orthodoxy.

The issue of the new ideas of clerical poverty had proved quite a difficult one for the church to deal with up until this point, for the simple reason that the church could not control exactly *what* was said by preachers, many of whom were illiterate and ignorant of agreed dogma. The bishop of Carcassonne in particular fulminated against the Waldenses. In this respect we must give the credit to Innocent himself for bringing them and other groups like the Humiliati back into the body of the Church. Certainly his policy on this issue was confused, as is seen by the fact that he said of the clergy in general that 'It is said "The Lord is the portion of mine inheritance": therefore it is proper that they should be supported by the revenues of the Church, in which they are set apart for the service of God.'¹¹ However, for the purposes of speaking to the various heretical groups especially in southern France, it was clear that 'by imitating the poverty of Christ' poor preachers could get results. Certainly the results of this licensing of poor preachers provided a great regenerative spirit into the Catholic church as it was perceived at large. The impression certainly gained by Giotto in his picture of Innocent's dream is of the entire church structure leaning on the shoulder of St Francis. It is a nice contrast to see the finery of the pope concerned as he was with law depending on the simple purity of the preacher for his survival.

However the correct dogma for preaching needed careful clarification, and it is unsurprising therefore that the pinnacle of Innocent's achievement, the Fourth Lateran Council, debated this issue first of all; its canons are headed *Firmiter Credimus*: 'we firmly believe'. The tenets of Catholic Christianity are then dealt with for the purposes of deciding what constituted heresy and what did not. But more than that it clarified an enormous range of matters which in themselves showed to what extent the clergy was involved in the daily life of all: the end of clerical involvement in the ordeal; creation of the marriage bans; reduction in the proscribed degrees of consanguinity; clarification on the status of illegitimate children; simplification of the appeals process in cases sent to the Curia; regulation on communion annually as a minimum for all over 15: these decrees under Innocent's presidency showed an effort to reform the religious life of the Continent that was much greater than previous popes could muster.

⁹ quoted in Sayers *Innocent III* p.135

¹⁰ Letter to the archbishop of Canterbury 30 Jan 1202, quoted in Cheney *Selected Letters of Innocent III*

¹¹ Letter to the archbishop of Canterbury 8 Mar 1202, quoted in Cheney *Selected Letters of Innocent III*

Of course we must not assume that Innocent's aims were always realised or always turned out according to his plans. Indeed often the clergy and churches had to pay a heavy price for Innocent's manoeuvres on a political level. Part of his reasoning for intervening in the dispute between Philip of France and John of England was as he said to the former 'Look! because of your conflict, churches are destroyed, the rich are impoverished, the poor oppressed... We entreat your Majesty, we exhort you in the Lord, we charge you as you hope for remission for your sins, to make an enduring peace with King John.'¹² Even more tellingly than this the misfortune of the archbishop of York among other English clergy, who 'Among the other difficulties...to which on account of sin the English church is subjected...John, illustrious king of the English had planned to take a thirteenth from churches and lands attached to the province of York...Further, when the archbishop, unable to endure such evils, had withdrawn from England...the king robbed him and his of their temporalities moveable and immovable.'¹³ Innocent's interdict had not merely paralysed the religious life of the country but also severely jeopardised the temporal situation of that church which was apparently powerless to reply. Elsewhere, papal legates ran very serious risks in the course of their business, with Cardinal Leo seized by King Imre of Hungary, while Peter of Castelnau was assassinated in the course of his legation to Languedoc. That this event led to a bloody crusade in which the new legate could condone indiscriminate murder with the cry 'Kill, kill. God will know his own' can hardly be said to be Innocent's fault. Yet the necessity of relying on plenipotentiary legates inevitably led to events running out of papal control. Elsewhere the diversion of Innocent's crusade to the Holy Land, in order to sack Constantinople and destroy the Hungarian town of Zara redounded infinitely to the pope's shame. As great as his power appeared to be, the papacy under Innocent was only able to effect a genuine change in clerical status by virtue of the relative weakness of opposition to it. Where an army gathered, such as the crusading ones at Venice or in Languedoc, the Church quickly lost control of the situation. In reforming the internal workings of the Church, he was far more successful, helping to create a more dogmatically secure yet simultaneously more open church which through its new initiatives and use of popular religion was more able to appeal to the hearts and minds of all the people of Europe.

¹² Letter to Philip Augustus May 1203, quoted in Cheney *Selected letters of Pope Innocent III*

¹³ Letter to bishop London 27 May 1208, quoted in Cheney *Selected letters of Pope Innocent III*