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Violence in the Medieval Church Before the First Crusade

The history of violence and attitudes towards violence within the medieval Catholic Church has often been interpreted through the lens of the Crusades.¹ The beginning of campaigns to counter growing Muslim influence in the Middle East provides a defining moment when a certain class of full-scale war was not only explicitly endorsed, but also declared holy at the highest levels of the institutional church.² However, the early and medieval church's attitudes on violence before Pope Urban II called the first crusade in 1095 were often ambivalent, and in some cases directly contradictory. At different points throughout the period between the New Testament in the 1st Century A.D. and the Peace of God movement at the turn of the 11th, various churchmen both endorsed and condemned violence under a wide variety of circumstances. The institutional church's stance on violence often seemed to depend as much on temporal conditions as it did on spiritual principles. However, the work of Augustine of Hippo, who influentially interpreted the Bible in a substantial corpus of books, sermons, and other writings, can be shown to provide the basis for many of the medieval church's actions and positions on violent activity. Augustine's teachings on violence, just war, and the duties of Christians with respect to both give us a common thread to follow from the 5th Century to the eve of the Crusades.

¹ F. Donald Logan, *A History of the Church in the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 118.

² F.H. Russell, *The Just War in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 38.

The New Testament Church

The early church as portrayed in the New Testament was a very peaceful institution. Jesus often preached non-violent conduct to his disciples, who were instructed in the Gospels to love their enemies and pray for those who persecuted them, offer the other cheek if struck on one side, and pay Caesar's taxes without complaint.³ The most explicit use of violence in Jesus' presence by one of his disciples was strongly rebuked, even though it came in self-defense against unjust authorities: "Then Jesus said to [Peter], 'Put your sword back into its place; for all who take the sword will perish by the sword.'"⁴

While the church in its infancy was unquestionably non-violent, the theoretical seeds for later aggressive actions can be found in the New Testament. Jesus seems to endorse the concept (and action) of restoring things to their proper order—through violence if necessary—as well as the principle that earthly rulers received their powers from God and could rightly exercise violent authority on His behalf. "Do not think that I have come to bring peace on earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," Jesus warns in Matthew 10:34, telling his followers that people on earth will be wrenched apart from one another on his account. Further, he personally acted to restore the temple in Jerusalem to its proper condition: "In the temple he found those who were selling oxen and sheep and pigeons, and the money-changers at their business. And making a whip of cords, he drove them all, with the sheep and oxen, out of the temple; and he poured out the coins of the money-changers and overturned their tables."⁵

³ Matthew 5:44, 5:39, and 22:21. This and all subsequent biblical quotations are from *The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (Camden, N.J.: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1966).

⁴ Matthew 26:52; cf. John 18:10.

⁵ John 2:14-15.

Despite their tendency to be pagan, the Apostle Paul also specifically endorsed the right of earthly kings to enforce justice with the sword, “For rulers are not are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of him who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God’s servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain; he is the servant of God to execute his wrath on the wrongdoer.”⁶ This apparent contradiction can be (and later was) seen as representing a distinction between state (i.e. the king’s) wars and “private” violence. Viewed in this light, Peter should not have “taken the sword” of his own volition, but kings and their soldiers can still rightly shed blood as God’s authorities on earth. Violence perpetrated by earthly rulers—or later, when the usual authorities were incapable of doing the job in the church’s judgment, the church itself—would eventually be justified along these lines.

Early Church Fathers

The period between the Ascension and the conversion of the Roman Emperor Constantine in 312 was characterized by uncertainty and periodic persecution of Christians at the hands of the Roman authorities. Contemporary church historians recorded an era of relentless persecution and heroically non-violent resistance to pagan attempts at forced conversion.⁷ Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea, writing of the persecutions under Diocletian at the beginning of the 4th Century, graphically lamented the violence done to believers at that time, even while extolling the virtue inherent in their suffering:

Why need we mention the rest by name, or number the multitude of the men, or picture the various sufferings of the admirable martyrs of Christ? Some of them

⁶ Romans 13:3-4.

⁷ W.H.C. Frend, *The Early Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1965), p. 123.

were slain with the axe, as in Arabia. The limbs of some were broken, as in Cappadocia. Some, raised on high by the feet, with their heads down, while a gentle fire burned beneath them, were suffocated by the smoke which arose from the burning wood, as was done in Mesopotamia. Others were mutilated by cutting off their noses and ears and hands, and cutting to pieces the other members and parts of their bodies, as in Alexandria. Why need we revive the recollection of those in Antioch who were roasted on grates, not so as to kill them, but so as to subject them to a lingering punishment?⁸

Eusebius' explanation for the sudden persecutions was that the rulers of the Roman Empire, "those esteemed our shepherds, cast aside the bond of piety." Despite this human rationalization for the violence done to his contemporary Christians, Eusebius couples his words with a quotation from Psalm 89: "For He has exalted the right hand of his [servant's] enemies, and has turned back the help of his sword, and has not taken his part in the war."⁹ The immediate meaning of this is disciplinary—God forsaking His servant for the servant's own good. However, a more far-reaching consequence is Eusebius' assumption that although He chose not to in this instance, God could be *expected* to "take his [servant's] part in the war."

Essential examples of God taking his servants' part were found in the Jewish holy books. These were considered valid and canonical by the early church. However, while early Christian fathers like Irenaeus of Smyrna were convinced of "the real harmony" of the Jewish books and the rest of the Christian canon, the Old Testament was somewhat eclipsed by the Gospels, Epistles, and other books of the New Testament.¹⁰ As the church emerged from the shadow of Roman persecution, theologians worked to reconcile the

⁸ Eusebius, *Church History*, VIII:12.

⁹ *Ibid.*, VIII:1.

¹⁰ Frend, 67.

stories of the Old Testament—often violent and extremely partisan towards God’s chosen people, the Jews—with the seemingly pacifist teachings of Jesus in the New Testament.¹¹

After the Conversion of Constantine

The conversion of the Emperor Constantine marked a turning point in the history of the church. Constantine adopted Christianity because he believed the Christian God had helped him triumph over his rivals, and perhaps saw a universal and monotheistic faith as a useful uniting tool for the Empire.¹² Despite its motivation from very temporal concerns, the conversion inaugurated a profound change in status for Christianity. From this point forward, the Catholic Church was undergoing a transition to becoming the state religion of the Roman Empire.¹³ The once-persecuted church was in the position to itself persecute—or at least to endorse the violent actions of the now-Christian emperor.

Eusebius, in his “In Praise of Constantine,” expanded upon the idea of the Emperor as divinely-appointed chastener (in war, if necessary) of humanity:

And as he who is the common Saviour of mankind, by his invisible and Divine power as the good shepherd, drives far away from his flock, like savage beasts, those apostate spirits which once flew through the airy tracts above this earth, and fastened on the souls of men; so this his friend [Constantine], graced by his heavenly favor with victory over all his foes, subdues and chastens the open adversaries of the truth in accordance with the usages of war.¹⁴

The early church knew the rich Old Testament tradition of violent but religious kings “subduing” their foes in the name of God. Such history was potentially useful for supporting the new order under a Christian emperor. It was also, at the very least,

¹¹ Maurice Keen, *Chivalry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 45.

¹² Frend, 125.

¹³ Keen, 45.

¹⁴ Eusebius, *In Praise of Constantine*, II.

superficially incongruous with the established doctrines of non-violence, and especially the practice of “turning the other cheek” in the face of religious persecution.

The problem of reconciling the ancient Jewish holy books with the pacifism of the New Testament was not trivial, and many would argue that the process is incomplete even today. As Joseph Lynch has written, “the intellectual history of Christianity can be viewed as an effort to cope with the Old Testament.”¹⁵ In any case, the problems confronting theologians in Constantine’s time who sought to integrate the scriptures into a coherent whole were significant, especially with respect to their disparate treatment of violence. Even the Old Testament spoke about God bringing peace to the earth:

It shall come to pass in the latter days that the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; and that all the nations shall flow to it, and many people shall come, and say: “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths.” For out of Zion shall go forth the law, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide for many peoples; *and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more.*¹⁶

This passage superficially seems flatly contradicted by another which refers back to it: “Proclaim this among the nations: Prepare war, stir up the mighty men. Let all the men of war draw near, let them come up. Beat your plowshares into swords, and your pruning hooks into spears; let the weak say, ‘I am a warrior.’”¹⁷ The key difference is that the passage from Isaiah describes the world “in the latter days,” when the Kingdom of God has come, while Joel portrays the present world and in particular the situation of the Jews in the Old Testament. The books of the Old Testament are clear on the point that God endorsed and even ordered a more violent lifestyle for them in this world.

¹⁵ Joseph H. Lynch, *The Medieval Church: A Brief History* (London: Longman, 1992), p. 183.

¹⁶ Isaiah 2:2-5, emphasis added.

¹⁷ Joel 3:9-10.

And the Lord said to Joshua, “Do not fear or be dismayed; take all the fighting men with you, and arise, go up to Ai; see, I have given into your hand the king of Ai, and his people, his city, and his land; and you shall do to Ai and its king as you did to Jericho and its king”....When Israel had finished slaughtering all the inhabitants of Ai in the in the open wilderness where they pursued them, and all of them to the very last had fallen by the edge of the sword, all Israel returned to Ai and smote it with the edge of the sword. And all who fell that day, both men and women, were twelve thousand, all the people of Ai.¹⁸

This and other Old Testament stories of royal violence provided a measure of theological legitimacy to the convenience of a Christian military leader who supported rather than persecuted the church. Eusebius found the life of Moses particularly relevant, and drew parallels to the emperor’s story, mentioning the prophet a total of six times in his *Life of Constantine*. Just as Constantine had been surrounded by the trappings of a pagan government his whole life, Moses had been reared by the Egyptians before “God exalt[ed] him to be the leader of the whole nation, delivered the Hebrews from the bondage of their enemies, and inflicted Divine vengeance through his means on the tyrant race.”¹⁹ Eusebius later equated specific military achievements of Constantine with those of Moses in the Old Testament:

And now those miracles recorded in Holy Writ, which God of old wrought against the ungodly (discredited by most as fables, yet believed by the faithful), did he in every deed confirm to all alike, believers and unbelievers, who were eye-witnesses of the wonders [of Constantine’s victory over Maxentius on the bridge of the Tiber]. For as once in the days of Moses and the Hebrew nation, who were worshipers of God, “Pharaoh’s chariots and his host hath he cast into the sea and his chosen chariot-captains are drowned in the Red Sea.”²⁰

The Roman Emperor, acting “after the example of [God’s] great servant Moses,” could do little wrong in Eusebius’ eyes.²¹ Ironically, even as the Christian church itself was in the process of emerging from violent persecution, Eusebius saw as “right” the

¹⁸ Joshua 8:1-2, 24-25.

¹⁹ Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, XII.

²⁰ Ibid., XXXVIII; cf. Exodus 14:28.

²¹ Ibid., XXXIX.

persecution of Jews on God's behalf: "For it was right that in the very days in which [the Jews] had inflicted suffering upon the Saviour and the Benefactor of all, the Christ of God, that in those days, shut up 'as in a prison,' they should meet with destruction at the hands of divine justice...God was not long in executing vengeance upon them for their wickedness against the Christ of God." Although Eusebius goes on to describe in detail a famine that befell the Jews, he also mentions "attempts made upon them by the sword" as another calamity the Jews were justly subject to.²²

After the 381 Edict of Thessalonica and the establishment of Christianity as the official religion in the Roman Empire, the attitude of the Church towards war shifted dramatically. The *Pax Romana*, enforced by Roman soldiers and Roman wars, came to be seen (in Eusebius and other sources) as a benefit preserving the stability under which the Church flourished.²³ To Ambrose of Milan, the *Pax Romana* also provided another benefit: the preservation of orthodoxy. Heresy was officially treason, and the Empire's skirmishes with barbarian tribes seemed to Ambrose to be a sort of "perpetual holy war" against Arian heresy.²⁴ Although Ambrose focused on justifying immediate wars rather than creating an overarching theology of just war, his work provided an influential precedent for the man who would integrate just war with the Christian religion.

Ambrose's actions also provide a precedent for reactions within the church to violence other than turning the other cheek. In 386, Ambrose "flatly refused" to grant Justina, the Emperor's mother, use of a church for Arian members of the imperial court. Gothic troops surrounded the bishop and his flock, but Ambrose held firm and his congregation defiantly destroyed the imperial emblems placed on the church. "We

²² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History*, III:5.

²³ Russell, 12.

²⁴ Ibid.,14.

priests,” said Ambrose, “have our own way of rising to Empire. Our infirmity is our way to the throne. For *When I am weak, then I am powerful*.”²⁵ This attitude of powerful resistance provided background for the later forceful “resistance” against heretics—even though the scales of power were tipped in that case.

Augustine of Hippo

Ambrose did not contemplate the wider theological implications of Christians engaged in Roman wars. Several generations later, the church’s favorable change in attitude towards violence was largely complete. The unenviable intellectual task of more fully reconciling the late Roman reality of constant warfare with the Christian precepts of peace and moderation fell upon Augustine of Hippo. The influential North African bishop expanded and clarified the doctrines that today still form the basis for many theories of just war.²⁶ His writings contain seminal thoughts that were extensively used by the institutional church to justify violence in the early Middle Ages.

Augustine’s defense of righteous violence had two components. First, war was seen as merely the means to an end, a way of inflicting corrective and holy punishment upon evil-doers for the protection of society in general. He argued that “every war had peace as its goal, hence war was an instrument of peace and should be waged to secure peace of some sort.”²⁷ Augustine believed the intention of a person’s actions (e.g. to achieve redress of grievances) to be more important, ethically, than the result: “Any hostile act was justified provided it was motivated by charity.”²⁸

²⁵ Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), pp. 81-2.

²⁶ Russell, 16.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 17.

Finally, only the appropriate authority—namely, a king or other public official acting as representative for his people with “legitimate authority,” can wage a war, in order to avoid “passionate and willful” actions by private individuals.²⁹ The notion that kings, too, could be passionate and willful apparently did not occur to Augustine. His *City of God*, in which views on the proper interaction of the earthly and heavenly spheres are expounded, has several chapters dealing explicitly with the right of God-ordained kings to wield power (implicitly, through waging war) on earth, even if the kings themselves are impious.

These things being so, we do not attribute the power of giving kingdoms and empires to any save to the true God, who gives happiness in the kingdom of heaven to the pious alone, but gives kingly power on earth both to the pious and the impious, as it may please Him, whose good pleasure is always just.... He who gave power to Marius gave it also to Caius Caesar; He who gave it to Augustus gave it also to Nero;...He who gave it to the Christian Constantine gave it also to the apostate Julian....Manifestly these things are ruled and governed by the one God according as He pleases; and if His motives are hid, are they therefore unjust?³⁰

Augustine was clearly influenced by the Old Testament in his writings on wars and violence. In fact, he was influenced to the point of instructing that the New Testament words of Jesus to “turn the other cheek” if struck were not literal: “what is here required is not a bodily action, but an inward disposition,” he wrote in an epistle to the pacifist Faustus on the verse.³¹ The same letter explicitly cites Moses and his wars as “righteous”:

...The account of the wars of Moses will not excite surprise or abhorrence, for in wars carried on by divine command, he showed not ferocity but obedience; and God in giving the command, acted not in cruelty, but in righteous retribution, giving to all what they deserved, and warning those who needed warning....in obedience to God or some lawful authority, good men undertake wars, when they

²⁹ Ibid., 68-69.

³⁰ Augustine, *The City of God*, V:21.

³¹ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, XXII:76.

find themselves in such a position as regards the conduct of human affairs, that right conduct requires them to act, or to make others act in this way.³²

However, in Augustine's view, a war did not have to be instituted directly by God, as those of Moses and Joshua were, as long as the violence aimed to restore the proper order of things on earth, and was directed by "some lawful" earthly authority. "A great deal depends on the causes for which men undertake wars, and on the authority they have for doing so; for the natural order which seeks the peace of mankind, ordains that the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable...."³³

Augustine's position, essentially, is that war even under the proper authority is regrettable, but less regrettable than allowing the unjust to subjugate the just. "Therefore, to carry on war and extend a kingdom over wholly subdued nations seems to bad men to be a source of happiness, to good men necessity. But because it would be worse that the injurious should rule over those who are more righteous, therefore even that [carrying on war] is not unsuitably called a source of happiness."³⁴

In his exegetical commentary on the *Heptateuch*, the first seven books of the Old Testament, Augustine explained that wars instituted by God were by definition just, even if (like the slaughter of the city of Ai in the book of Joshua), they are not obviously justified as retaliation or self-defense. "Just wars are usually defined as those in which injustices are avenged if any nation or city, attacked in war, either neglects to avenge what was done wickedly by its own, or to recover what was taken away unjustly. But also this kind of war is without doubt just, which God commands...."³⁵ Combined with Biblical verses supporting the notion that earthly kings are appointed and supported by

³² Ibid., XXII.74.

³³ Ibid., XXII.75.

³⁴ Augustine, *The City of God*, IV:15.

³⁵ Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, VI:10.

God (*e.g.* Romans 13:3), this idea easily bridges the gap to Augustine's highly influential position that "the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable."³⁶

This royal right to wage war did not require an absolute standard of evil or guilt in the enemy for a justified war. The fact that some good and Christian individuals might be among a population warred against and considered evil did not present much of a challenge for Augustine:

Accordingly this seems to me to be one principal reason why the good are chastised along with the wicked, when God is pleased to visit with temporal punishments the profligate manners of a community. They are punished together, not because they have spent an equally corrupt life, but because the good as well as the wicked, though not equally with them, love this present life; while they ought to hold it cheap, that the wicked, being admonished and reformed by their example, might lay hold of life eternal.³⁷

Augustine does place limits on violence even in the context of just war. Engaging in war on the right authority and for the right reasons is acceptable, but certain "result[s] of the custom of war," namely "slaughter, plundering, burning, and misery" are not.³⁸ On the contrary, the Christian should not continue to harass his conquered foes, but convert them. If protracted violence became necessary in the course of a war, however, Augustine viewed the situation as ordained by heaven. He submits an interesting rebuttal to those who criticize the Christian God for allowing long and bloody wars, emphasizing God's role in ordaining the length and conditions of war.

Thus also the durations of wars are determined by Him as He may see meet, according to His righteous will, and pleasure, and mercy, to afflict or to console the human race, so that they are sometimes of longer, sometimes of shorter duration. The war of the Pirates and the third Punic war were terminated with incredible celerity....But the second Punic war, lasting for the space of eighteen

³⁶ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaeon*, XXII.76.

³⁷ Augustine, *The City of God*, I:9.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, I:7.

years, and occasioning the greatest disasters and calamities to the republic, wore out and well-nigh consumed the strength of the Romans; for in two battles about seventy thousand Romans fell. The first Punic war was terminated after having been waged for three-and-twenty years....These things I mention, because many, ignorant of past things, and some also dissimulating what they know, if in Christian times they see any war protracted a little longer than they expected, straightway make a fierce and insolent attack on our religion....Let them, therefore, who have read history recollect what long-continued wars, having various issues and en-tailing woeful slaughter, were waged by the ancient Romans....³⁹

A specific class of justified war got particular attention from Augustine.

Embroiled in a conflict with the Donatists of North Africa, the bishop endorsed the use of violence to coerce Augustine used a fictitious conversation between a Catholic and a Donatist to emphasize the entrenched nature of the heretics' beliefs and therefore justify their persecution: "You say: 'You are perishing in your heresy, in this schism of yours: you will come straight to damnation.' [The Donatist replies:] 'What has that to do with me? As I lived yesterday, so I shall live today; what my parents were, so I intend to be.'"⁴⁰

The Catholic Church according to Augustine was a parent justly able to correct her errant, heretical children—a "formidable mother," like Monica. "One Mother, prolific of offspring: of her we are born, by her milk we are nourished, by her spirit we are made alive."⁴¹ He was later to carry this one step further, proposing that the sack of Rome in 410 was God's paternal punishment upon the whole human race: "And you, you spoilt son of the Lord: you want to be received, but not beaten." This catastrophic castigation

³⁹ Ibid., V:22.

⁴⁰ Brown, 216.

⁴¹ Ibid., 212.

was to “press” people into purified lives the way that olives are pressed into producing oil: “The world reels under crushing blows...the spirit turns to clear flowing oil.”⁴²

Augustine walks a fine line with respect to his attitude towards violent suppression. Coercion and even fighting against Donatists are acceptable, but judicial violence is not. Although Catholic imperial officials would automatically execute Donatists convicted of certain crimes, Augustine “opposed the death penalty in principle, for it excluded the possibility of repentance.”⁴³ Augustine did not take his perceived duty to correct heretics lightly, describing himself as “trembling” as he contemplates “the infliction and remission of punishment in those cases where we have no other desire but to forward the spiritual welfare of those we have to decide whether or not to punish” in a letter to Paulinus.⁴⁴ Forceful coercion was “genuinely corrective,” a “brusque way of winning over ‘hardened’ rivals, rather than an attempt to stamp out a small minority.”⁴⁵

Nevertheless, violence was clearly an integral—and even holy—part of the process. In 347, Count Macarius, an agent of the imperial government, was sent to Africa to violently put down Donatists and “frighten Africa into submission to the Catholic Church.” He was lauded as the “agent of a holy task” by the Church.⁴⁶ Later, noting around 400 that Catholic converts among the Donatists were treated “without mercy,” many of Augustine’s fellow bishops would call again for a “quick solution” like that of Macarius.⁴⁷ Augustine opposed this specific call for violence, but only because he believed that his congregation could not effectively absorb all of the new (and possibly

⁴² Ibid., 293.

⁴³ Ibid., 241.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 243.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 233.

insincere) Catholics that would result from disbanding the Donatists all at once.⁴⁸ His position on violence against the Donatists in general remained clear: “If they were only being terrorized, and not instructed at the same time, that would be an inexcusable tyranny on our part,” said Augustine in his Epistle 93—but the “terror” was still an acceptable and necessary component, and the violence *with* instruction was excusable tyranny.⁴⁹

Gregory the Great

By the fall of the Roman Empire in Italy, the church had adapted to a large extent to its role as Europe’s dominant religion. The theological developments of Ambrose and Augustine were set down soon after the conversion of Constantine. However, these seminal writings, especially those of Augustine, laid the foundation for the church’s institutional attitude towards violence for the rest of the Middle Ages and beyond. These issues gained new relevance with the absorption of warlike barbarian tribes into Christendom. While violence in the Frankish kingdoms was a way of life both before and after the conversion of the barbarians, the Church’s evolving outlook on violence was not limited to its institutions north of the Alps. The papacy itself was profoundly influenced by the shift. It is instructive to treat the life and policies of one of the most influential popes of all time, Gregory I “the Great.”

The pope’s tendency to follow Augustine in seeking “a hierarchically ordered system of authority, both in the cosmos and in human society, was deeply embedded in Gregory’s world-view, as it was in much of Late Antique imagination.”⁵⁰ Pagans, in the frontier areas of the empire, were often forcefully converted. “The unquestioned model

⁴⁸ Ibid., 234.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 240.

⁵⁰ R.A. Markus, *Gregory the Great and His World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 30.

behind Gregory's missionary enterprise was the long-established pattern of the coercive regime of the Christian Roman Empire. Force was acceptable, even a normal means, for the propagation of the faith."⁵¹

Gregory's world-view included a militarily strong emperor at the head of society, not a pope: "If we are to proclaim freely the right faith and to arrange everything in peaceful concord, we should pray unceasingly for the lives of our most serene lord and his offspring, that almighty God might subject the barbarian nations under their feet, and grant them long and fortunate times, so that faith in Christ might reign throughout the Christian Empire." In Gregory's view, "the rulers' duties included the defense and enforcement of Catholic orthodoxy."⁵²

This duty was more than theoretical. An Exarch of Africa earned the pope's regard for "warlike acts" pursued "not from a desire to shed blood, but to further the cause of the state in which we see God being worshipped, in order that the name of Christ might become familiar throughout the conquered peoples through the preaching of the faith."⁵³

A letter of Gregory to the bishops of Gaul, written to encourage their acceptance of a papal vicar, cleanly captured Gregory's view of the hierarchical nature of society:

The provisions of divine providence have laid down that degrees and various ranks should be distinguished, so that the lesser showing reverence towards the greater and the greater treating the lesser with love, diversity might bring about the unity of concord and that each office might function rightly. For the universe could not exist except by being subject to a great diversified order like this. Creatures cannot be governed, or even live, in single undifferentiated equality; for as the example of the celestial host teaches us, there are angels and archangels who are not equal but differ in power and rank....⁵⁴

⁵¹ Ibid., 82.

⁵² Ibid., 84-85.

⁵³ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 86.

The hierarchy extended all the way to God himself, overseeing the higher members of human society. Gregory encouraged rulers, such as Brunhilda, to maintain the social order as much out of duty to God as for the benefits to themselves. “For it is fitting, most excellent daughter, that you allow yourself to be subject to the Lord. For by submitting the neck of your mind to the fear of the omnipotent God, you also solidify your dominion over subject nations, and by subjecting yourself to the service of the creation, you bind your subjects more devotedly to you in servitude.”⁵⁵

In his commentary on Job 9:4 (“Who has resisted him and had peace?”) Gregory further outlines the concept of peace as the maintenance of the “correct” order:

For he who marvelously created all things ordered all creation so that it would harmonize with itself. Where the Creator is resisted, the peace of harmony is dissipated, since things cannot be ordered which lose the management of heavenly government. For the things that are subject to God remain in tranquility, and those that have been abandoned to themselves bring disorder and confusion upon themselves since they cannot find in themselves that peace from above which they reject in the Creator.⁵⁶

It is known that Gregory provided money for the secular functions on the Italian peninsula, and took the initiative in making peace with the Lombards (as the emperors in Constantinople become less and less able or willing to defend Rome). In some cases, the pope appears to have taken a larger role than merely bankrolling Roman soldiers, by actually trying to direct the strategic placement of troops. “Large funds deposited by the pope in the treasury of the Church of Ravenna had evidently been used by the Exarch [of Ravenna] for the payment of local troops...The troops in Rome were left unpaid.”⁵⁷

Gregory urged the Exarch to devote—and pay—more troops for Roman defense. When

⁵⁵ Carole Straw, *Gregory the Great: Perfection in Imperfection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), pp. 86-87.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 77.

⁵⁷ Markus, 102.

the Exarch could not or would not, the pope himself “paid them from the church’s treasury” before buying off the Lombard aggressors with 500 pounds of gold.⁵⁸

Gregory’s dislike of the Lombards is palpable, and he saw little wrong with violence against even the Catholic Christians among them. In fact, he urged conversion of the Lombards to the “Catholic faith, so that, rewarding their conversion, the divine mercy might perhaps come to their aid in this life or, *if they should happen to die, as is more desirable*, they might pass absolved from their crimes.”⁵⁹ Gregory later exhorted the African Exarch, during an apparent revival of the Donatist heresy, to “fight the enemies of the church” with the “vehemence” usually reserved for barbarians.⁶⁰ Clearly, Gregory had few qualms about the use of violence when he felt it justified by the maintenance of social order and conversion of pagans (praying for the continued expansion of the empire), pressing practical needs (providing for the defense of Rome), or the suppression of heretics.

Violence in the Early Frankish Church

By the 6th Century, as the culture of the barbarian north merged with the religion and institutions of the old Roman Empire, the effects on the ground of the Augustinian doctrine of justified violence were becoming widespread. We can see the consequences in one of the great historical sources from this period, created by a rough contemporary of Pope Gregory the Great. In one former barbarian area of Western Europe, Gregory, Bishop of Tours, compiled and kept a record of events that includes many incidents of violent behavior.

⁵⁸ Logan, 50.

⁵⁹ Markus, 100; emphasis added.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 188.

Gregory's *The History of the Franks* is rife with examples of churchmen, including (or perhaps especially!) bishops, engaging in acts of violence. Bishops and other clergy are seen to plot, murder, torture, and lead armies. Gregory of Tours is not a neutral source. His biases include his factional allegiance to his particular Frankish king, as well as a tendency to support bishops. While violent anecdotes are often recorded in order to smear the churchmen they involve, we can see that Gregory pursues his agenda within the framework laid out by Augustine's theology. He implicitly or explicitly appeals to norms—often Augustinian norms—that his audience shares.

Bishops who plotted against their secular lords and clergy who sought to usurp property or other rights violated the Augustinian ideal of the “ordered” society with a Christian ruler at its head. Of course, as noblemen, bishops often had a hand in the plots and intrigue surrounding the Frankish royal courts. Bishop Egidius of Rheims was a “ringleader in the ambush” of Merovech and his companions, many of whom were tortured and killed “in the most revolting fashion.” Egidius was a favorite of Merovech's enemy, Queen Fredegund.⁶¹ He later confessed to treason, saying “I have repeatedly conspired against the interests of the King and his mother. It is as the direct result of my plotting that many battles have been waged and many lives have been lost.”⁶² Amelius, Bishop of Bigorra, plotted to murder Childebert II and Brunhild, as is mentioned in a letter Leuvigild to Fredegund: “Once we have taken vengeance on our enemies [Childebert and his mother], reward Bishop Amelius and the Lady Leuba, through whose good offices our envoys have access to you.”⁶³ Gregory lived in a very violent culture.

⁶¹ Gregory of Tours, *The History of the Franks*, trans. and ed. Lewis Thorpe (London: Penguin Books, 1974), p. 283.

⁶² Ibid., 579.

⁶³ Ibid., 476.

However, the negative picture he paints of his enemies' violence sticks in each of these cases at least partly because he chooses to record their efforts to upset what Gregory saw as an already properly "ordered" society.

Gregory also disapproved of Cautinus, Bishop of Clermont-Ferrand, who threatened the free-born priest Anastasius in order to seize his property:

Bishop Cautinus summoned him several times and asked him to surrender the title-deeds given by Queen Clothild and to make the property over to him. Anastasius refused to submit to the demands of his Bishop....In the end he ordered Anastasius to be brought into the city against his will, he had him locked up in the most outrageous manner and he went so far as to command that he should be beaten and starved to death if he would not hand over the title-deeds. Anastasius had the courage to resist....Then Bishop Cautinus ordered that he should be guarded closely and that if he did not hand over the documents he should die of hunger....They buried Anastasius alive.⁶⁴

Gregory later condemned the bishop's actions, telling us: "[Cautinus] was on familiar terms with the Jews and was much influenced by them, not for their conversion, which ought to be the preoccupation of a priest, but because he bought goods from them."⁶⁵ We may surmise that he badly wished to criticize Cautinus' actions, so he added the second charge of trading with non-believers to couple with the story of the unjust seizure.

Conversely, when Gregory praises the military and successful violent activities, they are portrayed as the agents of God taking the side of His flock and the will of God helped along by enthusiastic prayers. Troops who were friendly to Frankish towns and their prelates were warmly welcomed by the local churchmen. "Bishop Regalis [of Vannes] sent his clergy out to meet [the advancing army], carrying crosses and chanting

⁶⁴ Ibid., 205.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 207.

psalms, and they led the Frankish troops into their town.”⁶⁶ Beyond mere hospitality, clergy at all levels would pray for the success of the armies. St. Anianus, Bishop of Orleans, prayed to help defeat Attila’s Huns: “‘If you continue to pray in faith, God will come quickly’ [said the Bishop.] With much weeping and lamentation, they begged for God’s succor....Far away they saw what looked like a cloud of dust rising from the ground. This they reported to the Bishop. ‘It is the help sent by God,’ said he....They hastened forward to the city with their armies and drove off the enemy and forced them to retreat. Orleans was thus saved by the prayers of its saintly Bishop.”⁶⁷ Rocolen, who plundered the city of Tours, was “killed by the miraculous power of Saint Martin.”⁶⁸ Clearly, Gregory did not feel that violence was categorically wrong or unnecessary.

The presence of foreigners committing violent acts could also be seen by the Franks as a chastisement from God, who Augustine declared often saw fit “to visit with temporal punishments the profligate manners of a community” for correction.⁶⁹ In the *History* the holy man Hospicius prophesied such an event for Nice: “‘The Longobards,’ he said, ‘will invade Gaul and they will destroy seven cities, because the wickedness of those cities has grown great in the eyes of the Lord....’ [The Longobards arrived and] destroyed everything that they could lay their hands on.”⁷⁰

Violence in war, as well as to put down heretics (in keeping with Augustine’s justification of “terrorizing” theological dissenters⁷¹), also seems routine. Aurelius, Bishop of Le Puy, either ordered or tacitly approved the murder of a man pretending to

⁶⁶ Ibid., 557.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 116-117.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 255.

⁶⁹ Augustine, *The City of God*, I:9.

⁷⁰ Gregory of Tours, 334.

⁷¹ Brown, 214.

be Christ. When the impostor entered Le Puy: “The Bishop was quite put out. He chose some of the toughest of his servants and told them to go and find out what it all meant. One of them, the man in charge, bowed low as if to kiss the man’s knees and then held him tight. He ordered him to be seized and stripped; then he himself drew his sword and cut him down where he stood.”⁷² “A large force of Auvergnats took part in [the battle of Vouille], for they had come under the command of Apollinaris”—who later “took plenty of gifts with him and was given the bishopric [of Clermont-Ferrand]” by King Theuderic.⁷³

Although certain churchmen earned Gregory’s disapproval, other prelates (including the Pope) did not necessarily agree with his assessment. While this reveals Gregory’s status as a not-completely-balanced source, it also raises the possibility that violence is perhaps more commonplace than Gregory would like to admit. In the disagreement with the pope, Gregory criticized that Bishops Salonius of Embrun and Sagittarius of Gap “were no sooner raised to the episcopate than their new power went to their heads: with a sort of insane fury they began to disgrace themselves in peculation, physical assaults, murders, adultery, and every crime in the calendar. One day when Victor, Bishop of Saint-Paul-Trois-Chateaux, was celebrating his birthday, they sent a mob to attack him with swords and arrows.” Even though King Guntram called a council of bishops to depose the two bishops, Salonius and Sagittarius appealed to Pope John III, and “the Pope sent a letter to King Guntram, ordering them to be restored to their former positions.” Further, Gregory tells us that “the worst of the story is that from then onwards

⁷² Gregory of Tours, 585.

⁷³ Ibid., 154, 163.

they behaved no better.”⁷⁴ Indeed, soon after the incident, “in the battles between the Mummolus and the Longobards they armed themselves like laymen and killed many men with their own hands. They engaged in a quarrel with their own congregations and beat quite a few of them with wooden clubs, until in their rage they made the blood flow.” A separate description of the battle of Plan de Fazi is earlier in the *History*: “Two brothers called Salonius and Sagittarius, both of them Bishops, fought in this battle. Instead of seeking protection in the heavenly Cross, they were armed with the helmet and breastplate of this secular world and, what is worse, they are said to have killed many men with their own hands.”⁷⁵ The wayward bishops are finally sentenced to armed guard in a monastery, each with “one religious only as a servant,” not for any violence but for quibbling about royal succession laws!⁷⁶

Violence in the Time of Boniface of Mainz

The Anglo-Saxon church in the 8th century enjoyed close ties with Rome and the pope, the lasting consequence of the evangelism efforts of Pope Gregory I in Britain. This intimate relationship made the highly organized English church a better model of “normative” and Rome-focused Christianity than many Catholic churches geographically closer to the pope. By 677—only ninety years after the introduction of Christianity to the Anglo-Saxons—the first steps towards missionary work on the continent were taken with the attempts of Wilfrid, Archbishop of York, to convert Germanic pagans on his way to Rome. Although his work had only temporary success, it set a precedent for later efforts

⁷⁴ Ibid., 285.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 237.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 286.

by Willibrord (renamed Clement) among the Frisians and Winfrith (renamed Boniface) among many of the pagan Germanic tribes on the fringe of the Frankish kingdom.

The letters of Boniface, given the title of Archbishop of Mainz late in life, make only infrequent mention of violence of any kind. However, while there is a trend towards accepting the Augustinian “ordered society” concept of peace, Boniface and his correspondents seem to condemn violence, even when violence could be seen as meeting the disciplinary, restorative or coercive goals of the churchmen on the ground. The areas in which Boniface worked often had the structures of the Frankish church in place. His efforts as a proponent of normative, Rome-focused Catholicism included the reform of the existing church as well as conversion of pagans and the creation of new bishoprics.⁷⁷ Boniface’s condemnations of violence, then, must be taken in the context of his overall criticism of the Frankish church. He acted as a reformer and a “roaming” archbishop more closely tied to Rome than the prelates under his supervision. In these circumstances, we may characterize his denunciations of violence as personal disapproval of the exercise of violence by the Frankish clergy. This does *not* necessarily translate to a general condemnation of violence by or on behalf of the church. Indeed, Boniface’s own hagiographer (a fellow English missionary who wrote within thirteen years after his death) revels in the quick and bloody end his murderers meet.

Boniface frequently uses violent imagery in his vivid description of troubles in Germany, favoring especially a nautical analogy. However, this would seem to be more spiritual violence than physical, and directed against the church in any case:

⁷⁷ Keen ,54-59.

This German ocean is dangerous for sailors and we pray that we may reach the haven of eternal peace without stain or injury to our soul....⁷⁸

Boniface's contemporaries and confidantes clearly agree with Augustine in feeling that non-believers could be convinced by the obvious advantages of society ordered in the Christian fashion:

This point is also to be made: if the gods are all-powerful, beneficent, and just, they not only reward their worshipers but punish those who reject them. If, then, they do this in temporal manners, how is it that they spare us Christians who are turning almost the whole world away from their worship and overthrowing their idols? And while these, that is, the Christians, possess lands rich in oil and wine and abounding in other resources, they have left to those, that is, the pagans, lands stiff with cold where their gods, driven out of the world, are falsely supposed to rule. They are also frequently to be reminded of the supremacy of the Christian world, in comparison with which they themselves, very few in number, are still involved in their ancient errors.⁷⁹

Boniface did favor effecting conversion through changing hearts rather than physical coercion. However, since many of the areas he operated in still had significantly powerful pagan populations, the more direct conversion by force advocated by Augustine may not have been possible. On the whole, most methods of conversion discussed in his correspondence are very peaceful and even gentle—although the pope's admonition to follow this tender path especially “with those chieftains who are helpful to you” hints that such moderation may not have been universal:

It often happens that those who are slow in coming to a perception of the truth under strict discipline may be led into the paths of righteousness by the influence of their table companions and by gentle admonition. You ought also to follow this same rule in dealing with those chieftains who are helpful to you.⁸⁰

Boniface clearly condemns the violent practices of Frankish bishops. As part of his efforts at reformation within the Frankish church, Boniface wrote often to the pope

⁷⁸ Boniface to Pehthelm of Whithorn, XXIII, in Ephraim Emerton, trans. Thomas F.X. Noble, *The Letter of St. Boniface* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), p. 39.

⁷⁹ Daniel of Winchester to Boniface, XV, *Ibid.*, 27-28.

⁸⁰ Pope Gregory II to Boniface, XVIII, *Ibid.*, 33.

and to his English mentor, Bishop Daniel of Winchester, who advised him on how strictly to deal with errant priests. Violence, while a major problem, is listed alongside sexual sin and other infractions. There are many references to regulations against those who have spilled human blood—even the blood of pagans—serving as priests. The frequency with which this practice is condemned, however, must indicate that it was not at all uncommon:

...May I have the formal prescription of your authority as to your procedure in such cases so that they may be convicted by an apostolic judgment and dealt with as sinners? And certain bishops are to be found among them [the Franks] who, although they deny that they are fornicators or adulterers, are drunkards and shiftless men, given to hunting and fighting in the army like soldiers and by their own hands shedding blood, whether of heathens or Christians.⁸¹

...Then, if you find bishops, priests, or deacons who are violating the canons of or the rules of the fathers...if they have shed the blood of Christians or of pagans...you shall on no account permit them to perform the duties of priests; for such persons are condemned out of their own mouths as false priests and are known to be worse than laymen,...having their hands stained with human blood.⁸²

Regarding all of this [sexual immorality] as a matter of little importance and calling down upon themselves the wrath of God, they commit still greater crimes by slaying Christians and pagans with their own hands; so that those on whom, for the remission of sins, they are bound to pour the water of baptism and to whom they are bound to administer the sacraments of Christ are, on the contrary, killed by their sacrilegious hands. But how can any reasoning mind regard as priests those who neither abstain from lust nor keep their hands clean of blood?⁸³

...You remember, reverend brother, that we have more than once written to you that no murderer or adulterer or fornicator may be allowed to degrade the sacred ministry....⁸⁴

Upon the report...that the Lord had inclined your hearts, together with those of your princes, to obey his instructions, and that you had cast out false, schismatic, murderous, and unchaste priests, we returned thanks to our God Omnipotent and

⁸¹ Boniface to Pope Zacharias, XL, *Ibid.*, 42.

⁸² Pope Zacharias to Boniface, XLI, *Ibid.*, 62.

⁸³ Pope Zacharias to Boniface, XLI, *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁴ Pope Zacharias to Boniface, XLVIII, *Ibid.*, 87.

prayed without ceasing that he who has begun this good work among you may continue it to the end.⁸⁵

As to the priesthood of murderers and adulterers, who refuse to repent and dare to continue in their sins: the sacred canons and the decrees of the pontiffs give you ample directions. If the perfecting of life—that is, the grace of the communion of Christ—is granted only before death to murderers who have repented, how can the office of ruling a Christian society be entrusted to men who are still impenitent?⁸⁶

We have forbidden the servants of God to wear showy or martial dress or to carry arms.⁸⁷

Contemporary synods were convened in the name of the pope four times by Frankish rulers at the behest of Boniface as part of his reforming efforts. These synods did allow priests to accompany soldiers on campaign, but were clear about the limits on their participation. Further, it seems that the synods included laymen as well as clerics. The existence of passages giving lords the right to continue the common practice of using church property to support armies calls into question whether it was laymen or clerics driving the meetings. In any case, it seems clear that the synods were much less concerned with violence being exercised on behalf of the church than violence being exercised *by* churchmen themselves:

We have absolutely forbidden the servants of God to carry arms or fight, to enter the army or march against an enemy, except only so many as are especially selected for divine service such as celebrating Mass or carrying relics—that is to say: the prince may have one or two bishops with the chaplains, and each prefect one priest to hear confession and prescribe penance. We have also forbidden the servants of God to hunt or wander about the woods with dogs or to keep hawks and falcons.⁸⁸

We order also, by the advice of the servants of God and of the Christian people and in view of imminent wars and attacks by the foreign populations which

⁸⁵ Pope Zacharias to Boniface, XLIX, *Ibid.*, 89.

⁸⁶ Daniel of Winchester to Boniface, LII, *Ibid.*, 96.

⁸⁷ Boniface to Cuthbert of Canterbury reporting on Frankish synods, LXII, *Ibid.*, 115.

⁸⁸ Carloman publishes the decrees of the synods of 742 and 743, XLIV, *Ibid.*, 69.

surround us, that a portion of the properties of the church shall be used for some time longer, with God's indulgence, for the benefit of our army....⁸⁹

One passage vividly indicates Boniface's support of the Augustinian concept of peace, in decrying a situation where heretical priests have upset the proper order of things:

We have not only, as the Apostle says, "fightings without and fears within," but we have fightings within as well as fears, caused especially by false priests and hypocrites, enemies of God, running themselves, misleading the people with scandals and false doctrines, and crying to them, as the prophet says "Peace! Peace!" when there is no peace.⁹⁰

Even while enforcing all the proscriptions against priests spilling blood, it still does seem that Boniface accepted violence as a part of his daily life. In particular, as part of a letter warning a king to stop committing adultery, Boniface lists "strong in war" as a positive trait among races of men, and warns that military prowess is necessary to defeat (or at least deter) the Saracens:

If the English people...are scorning lawful marriage and living in wanton adultery like the people of Sodom....At last the whole race will be debased and finally will be neither strong in war nor steadfast in faith, neither honored among men nor pleasing in the sight of God. So it has been with the peoples of Spain and Provence and Burgundy. They turned thus away from God and lived in harlotry until the Almighty Judge let the penalties for such crimes fall upon them through ignorance of the law of God and the coming of the Saracens.⁹¹

This delay [in sending letters] was owing to my great preoccupation with the restoration of the churches burned by the heathens. Within our parishes and cloisters they have pillaged and burned more than thirty churches.⁹²

One suspects that violence must have gone the other way as well, in at least a few instances, but the letters do not seem to treat these cases. Although Boniface is himself

⁸⁹ Carloman publishes the decrees of the synods of 742 and 743, XLIV, *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹⁰ Boniface to Daniel of Winchester, LI, *Ibid.*, 92-3.

⁹¹ Boniface and other bishops to King Ethelbald of Mercia, LVII, *Ibid.*, 106.

⁹² Boniface to Pope Stephen II, LXXXVIII, *Ibid.*, 159.

reluctant to endorse violence, his hagiographer is not. The *Life of Boniface* records an instance of retributive violence soon after Boniface's death with approval:

For it was the will of the omnipotent Creator and Savior of the world that He should be avenged of His enemies; and in His mercy and compassion He demanded a penalty for the sacred blood shed on His behalf. Deeply moved by the recent act of wicked savagery, He deigned to show the wrath He had concealed so long against the worshipers of idols. As the unhappy tidings of the martyr's death spread rapidly from village to village throughout the whole province and the Christians learned of their fate, a large avenging force, composed of warriors ready to take speedy retribution, was gathered together and rushed swiftly to their neighbors' frontiers. The pagans, unable to withstand the onslaught of the Christians, immediately took to flight and were slaughtered in great numbers. In their flight they lost their lives, their household goods, and their children. So the Christians, after taking as their spoil the wives and children, men and maidservants of the pagan worshipers, returned to their homes.⁹³

The pagans, the hagiographer Willibald continues, were “struck with terror at the visitation of God's vengeance, [and] they embraced after Boniface's death the teaching they had rejected while he still lived.”⁹⁴ This seems to be a textbook application of Augustine's principle of terror preceding education in the conversion of pagans.

Violence in the Carolingian Church

Charlemagne was necessarily surrounded by clerics. They ministered to the emperor and his court, wrote legal documents, and kept written records from which to compile flattering biographies of their employer. It will be useful to investigate the reactions of these clerics to the obviously violent life of a medieval warrior king, and if possible discern what clergy accompanying Charlemagne reveal through their words and actions. While the Carolingian clergy seem to easily accept violence in most cases, especially Charles' wars of expansion against mostly heathen opponents, there was some

⁹³ Willibald, *The Life of St. Boniface*, VIII.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

difficulty in accepting cases of violence involving monks. However, the overall pattern fits broadly into the Augustinian rubric of violence justified by the legitimacy of the Christian king. Two Carolingian chronicles are particularly relevant for this analysis: the Royal Frankish Annals, kept by several authors from 741 to 829, and Nithard's *Histories*, a record covering 814-843 written by Charlemagne's literate grandson (later the lay abbot of St. Riquier or Centulum) on campaign with Charles the Bald.

The context of the Royal Frankish Annals and Nithard's *Histories* is one in which approaches to religion seem contradictory. This was a world where a doctrinal controversy over Christ's nature ("whether in regard to His manhood He should be believed and proclaimed the real or the adopted Son of God") in Spain could occupy most of the Frankish annalist's entry for a whole year.⁹⁵ Yet, the sacrament of baptism was bluntly considered equivalent to domination: "Widukind and Abbi were baptized with their companions. The whole of Saxony was then subjugated."⁹⁶ "Many Saxons were baptized and according to their custom pledged to the king their whole freedom and property if they should change their minds again in that detestable manner of theirs and not keep the Christian faith and their fealty to the Lord King Charles, his sons, and the Franks."⁹⁷ Baptizing the enemy was one goal of the military campaign against the Saxons.⁹⁸

Although churchmen often behaved little differently than secular lords, the influence and invocation of God were considered strong enough to be serious factors in battles and everyday affairs alike. "Bishop Hildegard [of Cologne] was killed by the

⁹⁵ *Royal Frankish Annals*, 792, trans. Bernhard Walter Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970).

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 785.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 777.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 780.

Saxons in a castle called Iburg.”⁹⁹ Bishops and abbots were killed in battle and led military forces, but it was apparently still a useful petition for (the younger) Charles to “implore [his brother and opponent] Lothair to remember Almighty God and to grant peace to his brothers and to the entire church of God.”¹⁰⁰ In this environment, God’s word might be broken, but it was never completely ignored.

Churchmen, especially bishops, were intimately involved in all the affairs of state. Although more commonly mentioned in the Royal Frankish Annals as emissaries or ambassadors, churchmen also held bloodier roles. Throughout the RFA, Pope Leo is portrayed as being unafraid to use violence—or petition for its use by Charlemagne—to defend his territory or punish plots against his papacy. Of one conflict, the RFA reveals without fanfare: “Since the pontiff had been informed in advance [of a plot against his person], all the ringleaders were butchered on his order.”¹⁰¹ Later, Pope Paschal in 823 declared that a man murdered for loyalty to Lothair had been “justly slain,” while simultaneously denying any complicity in the deed.¹⁰² The RFA is a biased source, tending to record information that would make the Frankish kingdom look good (and those whom the kingdom clashed with—perhaps the pope—look bad). However, the sparse, matter-of-fact manner in which the pope’s reaction to the attempted plot is recorded does not seem to carry with it particularly negative connotations. Bishops could be on the other side of violent plots, as well. In addition to the “depraved men” conspiring with Bernard to take over Italy in 817, “many other distinguished nobles were

⁹⁹ Ibid., 753.

¹⁰⁰ Nithard, *Histories*, II:9, trans. Bernhard Walter Scholz, *Carolingian Chronicles* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1970).

¹⁰¹ *Royal Frankish Annals*, 815.

¹⁰² Ibid., 823.

caught at the same crime, among them also some bishops: Anshelm of Milan, Wolfold of Cremona, and Theodulf of Orleans.”¹⁰³

Further, clergy serving in positions at court could be used to lead military actions, just like any other magnate. “The emperor sent the priest and abbot Helisachar [chancellor of Louis the Pious] and with him Counts Hildebrand and Donatus to stamp out the revolt in the Spanish March.”¹⁰⁴ In Nithard, Lothair’s men, including “all counts, abbots, and bishops” in a particular region are stationed by the Seine to keep Charles from crossing by force.¹⁰⁵ Bishops could even develop reputations for “hatred” and aggression: “Lothair...bent his whole mind on subjugating Louis by deceit or force, or preferably, destroying him altogether. In this enterprise he included Bishop Otgar of Mainz and Count Adalbert of Metz, who were just the men for the job, since both of them had a mortal hatred of Louis.”¹⁰⁶ Nor were clergy immune from the ambition displayed by secular military leaders. After a successful coup, “the monk Guntbald, whom we mentioned above, immediately wanted to be second in the empire because he had done so much for Louis’ restoration.”¹⁰⁷

Throughout the RFA and Nithard’s *Histories*, Augustine is never explicitly cited. However, we see that his ideas about the justness of order-restoring war (especially when pursued against heathens) clearly resonate. We are told that “the Saxons had, as usual, broken their promise to accept Christianity and keep faith with the king,” just prior to an invasion of Saxony by Charles, while conversely the leader of the Avar kingdom is

¹⁰³ Ibid., 817.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 827.

¹⁰⁵ Nithard, II:6.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., II:7.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., I:3.

praised for wishing “with his land and people, to submit to the king and on his instruction accept the Christian faith.”¹⁰⁸ Again, submission and baptism are closely linked.

Military campaigns to help the pope are framed in the context of the restoration of the correct order of justice: “King Pepin, on papal invitation, embarked on a campaign into Italy to seek justice for the blessed apostle Peter.”¹⁰⁹ Charles’ mission against the Lombards in 774 is described as “subduing the city and setting it to rights.”¹¹⁰ The most explicit reference to religious justification of order-restoring violence—an explicit absolution of violent sin from the pope—comes during the RFA’s record of Charlemagne’s campaigns against Tassilo, the Duke of Bavaria: “If the duke [Tassilo] in his stubbornness intended to disobey the words of the pope [to fulfill the duke’s oath to Charles] entirely, then the Lord King Charles and his army would be absolved from any peril of sin, and the guilt of whatever burning, murder, and other atrocities might occur in his country should then fall upon Tassilo and his supporters, and the Lord King Charles and the Franks would remain innocent.”¹¹¹ Plainly, the RFA regarded this arrangement as a good thing.

It is clear that few, if any, of the upper clergy had any real problem with ecclesiastical violence, either at the behest of Charlemagne or of their own accord. The king not only exacted military service and a supply of men from the ecclesiastical estates of bishops and abbots, he gave abbots and bishops control of his cities’ defenses. The abbot Sturmi was left in charge of Eresburg’s fortifications during the Saxon wars.¹¹² A Bishop of Turin soon after Charlemagne’s death complained about going on campaign

¹⁰⁸ *Royal Frankish Annals*, 795.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 755.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 774.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 787.

¹¹² Heinrich Fichtenau, *The Carolingian Empire* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979), p. 128.

against heathens, not due to the violence but because all the fighting didn't give him enough "leisure" time to study his religious texts:

As long as I was forced to pay for my keep with work and money, I had leisure to study the holy Scriptures. Since I have been a bishop, the amount of business has grown and has given rise to more and more worries. There is no leisure for my favorite studies during the winter, when I am traveling to and from the palace. In the middle of spring I take my parchments and my arms and go down to the coast to fight Saracens and Moors. At night I hold my sword; during the day I use my books and my pen. Thus I seek fulfillment of my dreams.¹¹³

The impression this bishop gave of military duty while on campaign coexisting with the scholarly activities of a churchman is telling. The bishop, though he wished for more reading time, did not see any inherent conflict in pursuing violent warfare along with pastoral duties. There was absolutely no sense that the fighting itself could be morally reprehensible or even regrettable, nor was there any guilty explanation for why this was not so. A general climate of violence and its trappings seems to have been accepted and expected. "The clergy of the whole of Aquitaine were more adroit in riding, armed exercises, and archery, than in celebrating the Christian ritual," wrote the Astronomer in *The Life of Louis the Pious*.¹¹⁴

In many cases, it appears that it was the imperial court actually *checking* the violent tendencies of the clergy, rather than the other way around! Heinrich Fichtenau argues that "In the West, as the empire declined, some of the bishops and abbots managed to maintain their power. They used the weapon of excommunication and no longer hesitated to use the sword, with the result that they sometimes managed to provide a haven of peace in a time of troubles."¹¹⁵ The emperor apparently also had to keep close tabs on church arsenals: spiritual lords are forbidden from handing over arms to any but

¹¹³ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 123.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 142.

their own vassals. Further, Carolingian capitularies contained directives such as: “All superfluous swords and chain mail stored in churches were to be reported to the king.”¹¹⁶

Fichtenau explains that “the higher clergy were only too happy to ignore the synodal decrees forbidding the clergy not only to take part in actual fighting but even to carry arms or participate in military expeditions.”¹¹⁷ Such an attitude goes beyond Augustine, who thought that it was the place of the soldier, not the priest, to wage a just war on the command of a king, not a church. Alcuin was partially supportive of the Augustinian perspective; he wrote that abbots were to resist from avenging themselves on their enemies—but he put no such prohibition on other high clergy. Ironically, Bishop Theodulf of Orleans engaged in a “blood feud” with Alcuin himself around 801, while Alcuin was abbot of Tours. Churchmen under the two rivals at Charlemagne’s court clashed, and blood was shed. The abbot did not personally except himself, or his monks, from the prohibition against violence: “Alcuin’s defense [in later writings], however, was confined to heart-rending descriptions of the acts of violence that had been perpetrated,” rather than moral or theological justification.¹¹⁸

Einhard’s perspectives on Charles’ violent activities indicate that he mostly took them in stride (perhaps a reflection of his aristocratic Frankish background), although they were colored by a tendency to cast the enemy as an evildoer and enemy of Christianity. This approach, casting the enemy as a heathen menace, pigeonholes most of Charlemagne’s wars into one of the Augustine-supported categories. Says Einhard of a war against the Saxons: “No war taken up by the Frankish people was ever longer, harder, or more dreadful [than this one], because the Saxons, like virtually all the peoples

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 141.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 128.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 122-123.

inhabiting Germany, were naturally fierce, worshiped demons, and were opposed to our religion. Indeed, they did not find it shameful to violate and contravene either human or divine laws.”¹¹⁹ Describing the fickleness of the Saxons for accepting peace terms, Einhard complains that:

“In fact, the war could have been brought to a close sooner, if the faithlessness of the Saxons had [but] allowed it. It is almost impossible to say how many times they were beaten and pledged their obedience to the king....At different times, they were so broken and subdued that they even promised to give up their worship of demons.”¹²⁰

To Einhard, interestingly, the last step in accepting Charlemagne’s rule was conversion to Christianity from paganism. This is in harmony both with Augustine’s doctrine of conversion through “terror” and the establishment of a correct and God-pleasing order in society. In fact, Einhard tells us that Charlemagne “was fond...of St. Augustine's books, and especially of the one entitled *The City of God*”—the specific work where these doctrines are explained.¹²¹ Charlemagne, crowned by the Pope himself, may well have believed that adherence to the Catholic faith was an indicator that a people were more likely to accept his authority and psychologically become a part of his empire. This is further supported by Einhard’s record of what the final peace terms with the Saxons actually were: “The war...ended on the terms laid down by the king and accepted by the Saxons, namely that they would reject the worship of demons, abandon their ancestral [pagan] rites, take up the Christian faith and the sacraments of religion, and unite with the Franks in order to form a single people.”¹²² Although Einhard approved of

¹¹⁹ Einhard, *The Life of Charlemagne*, VII.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid., XXIV.

¹²² Ibid., VII.

this forced conversion, it is difficult to determine whether it is because souls were saved or Charlemagne's empire was enlarged.

Rosamond McKitterick (writing in *The Frankish Kingdom Under the Carolingians*) has much the same take on this series of events, calling Saxon baptisms during this period "rather statements of political realignment than affirmations of religious faith."¹²³ The assembly at Paderborn in 785 laid down rules for the Saxons that included punishments of "death or prohibitively heavy fines" for resisting baptism, the Church, or its clergy in any way.

While Charlemagne's wars of expansion get the most treatment (and praise) in the *Life of Charlemagne*, similarly acceptable to Einhard were wars that resulted in the recovery of church property. "The end result of this war [against the Lombards] was that Italy was conquered, King Desiderius was sent into permanent exile, his son Adalgis was driven out of Italy, and the properties stolen by the Lombard kings were returned to Hadrian, the head of the Roman church."¹²⁴

McKitterick lists as a factor for institutional complacency with Charlemagne's wars the aristocratic "background and tradition" of many of the Carolingian bishops. Ainmar, Bishop of Auxerre, for instance, had fought with Charles Martel at Poitiers. Milo, a member of the Widone family that controlled the sees of Trier and Rheims, was bishop of Trier until he was gored to death by a boar while hunting in 757 (as McKitterick says: "not really a seemly end for a man of the cloth.")¹²⁵

¹²³ Rosamund McKitterick, *The Frankish Kingdom Under the Carolingians, 751-987* (Boston: Longman, 1989), p. 62.

¹²⁴ Einhard, VI.

¹²⁵ McKitterick, 41, 42.

The Peace of God

The Peace of God was a movement to curtail violence through religious influence that began in France around the year 1000. Many of the most striking clues to the medieval church's attitude towards peace come from contrasts between illicit violence carried on by laypeople and the acceptable violence of clerics (and their allied laypeople) during the enforcement of the Peace of God. At this point in the history of violence in the medieval church, the influence of Augustine subtly changes. The idea that "just wars avenge wrongs" is certainly quite evident in this period.¹²⁶ However, the Augustinian notion that "the monarch should have the power of undertaking war if he thinks it advisable" became much less emphasized.¹²⁷ Churchmen who were proponents of the Peace of God movement generally sought to bring the violent activity under the control of the church. Although many individual councils enacted slightly different version of the agreements, the Peace generally prohibited attacks (by laymen) on the unarmed, particularly clergy, robbing the poor of livestock, and breaking into or stealing the possessions of churches and monasteries. In most cases "control" of violence by the church meant attempting to limit bloodshed. However, there are several cases of retributive violence—punishment for breaking the Peace—exercised under the direct supervision of prelates.

The same prohibitions against attacks under certain conditions did not necessarily apply to the clergy and those charged by the clergy with enforcing the Peace. Under the "clauses of reservation" for clerics in the canons of the 994 council of Le Puy, "Bishops had the right of plunder to obtain their rents, and those who led a military escort had the

¹²⁶ Augustine, *Questions on the Heptateuch*, VI:10.

¹²⁷ Augustine, *Reply to Faustus the Manichaean*, XXII:75.

right to slaughter animals and requisition food supplies along the way. One could seize whatever one wished to, build or lay siege to a fortified place, as long as one was on one's own land, allod, benefice, or domain for which one had the *comanda* [the obligation to protect and the right to tax]. One could exercise the right of seizure over male or female serfs or demand from them a ransom if they were dependents of one's own domain or benefice or of a territory that was the subject of a dispute."¹²⁸

The Peace of God documents included provisions for retributive violence against any parties who broke their oaths. These attacks were to be carried out by the other signatories of the agreement. Although no mention was made in the Peace agreements of churchmen actually leading the campaigns, this soon began to happen. A gathering unilaterally assembled by Bishop Guy of Le Puy ca. 975 at Saint-Germain-Laprade, "so that [all knights and rustics] might give him their advice on the correct way to assure the peace" turned into a peace ambush as Guy set about "asking his nephews to gather their troops," who later "came during the night." After the knights called for "advice" agreed to give back church possessions, including a castle, the chronicler concludes: "This was done with the help of God."¹²⁹ Here is a view of violence, or at least the threat thereof, not only organized by churchmen but also directly attributed to God's help.

Churchmen up until this time had maintained a tradition of bearing arms personally, and upper clergy of leading groups of fighters in battle. "Arms-bearing clerics hunting or in battle were a common enough sight...bishops and abbots and their followers formed the backbone of Carolingian military strength. These clerics did not just send warriors to join the king but were required to accompany them—to the point of

¹²⁸ Eds. Thomas Head and Richard Landes, *The Peace of God: Social Violence and Religious Response in France around the Year 1000* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), p. 71.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 116-117.

participating actively in battle.”¹³⁰ However, in 994 “the council of Le Puy revived the old, hardly observed tradition against people of the church bearing weapons at all.” The Peace’s protection applied to “not the entire clergy...but only those clerics who were unarmed.”¹³¹ The Peace of God, in the ideal case, should have negated the necessity for clerics to carry arms for personal defense. However, on many occasions, the ideal of safe passage did not match the reality of threats against clerics—or perhaps just as likely, the ideal of laymen leaving church properties unmolested did not match reality to the extent that clerics desired.

Archbishop Aimon of Bourges, at the ca. 1038 peace council, “swore an oath on the relics of the proto-martyr, Saint Stephen, to fight against the violators of the Peace of God, namely those who destroyed ecclesiastical goods, or stole them, oppressed monks or any other male or female religious or attacked the church in any way.”¹³² Aimon’s priests, in enforcing this oath, “frequently took out banners from the sanctuary of the Lord and attacked the violators of the sworn peace with the rest of the crowd,” writes Andrew of Fleury.¹³³ Although bishops raising and leading armies was not uncommon in the enforcement of the Peace, this example is extreme and perhaps meets with all the more criticism for Aimon’s lack of success. After the archbishop was severely wounded leading a peasant and clerical army, with typical medieval confidence that God is on the side of the winners, Andrew comments that “They forgot that God is the strength and rampart of his people and ascribed the power of God to their apostate power.”¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Ibid., 284.

¹³¹ Ibid., 266.

¹³² Ibid., 177.

¹³³ Ibid., 224.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 225.

Conclusion

The attitude of the medieval church towards violence before the First Crusade in 1095 underwent a significant institutional evolution, from the peaceful tradition of the New Testament and the Roman persecution, through the prelate-led military campaigns of the Carolingian period and the Peace of God era. It would be superficially easy to characterize this transformation as the pragmatic and entirely secular response of a growing power to the changing world. However, such a simplification does not fully do justice to the underlying theology. While church leaders from the 5th Century to the 11th had vastly different motivations and circumstances under which to develop their responses to a variety of violent activities, the teachings of Augustine of Hippo provided a unifying theme. Augustine's just war theology, in establishing which conflicts are acceptable in the eyes of God, focused on determining whether a proper *causa belli* or basis for war exists, and then whether a legitimate authority declares and leads the war. Augustine masterfully integrated aspects of the Old and New Testaments to create a lasting and compelling case for his definition of justified violence. Although at different times and places his theology has been used to support a variety of different attitudes, the profound influence of his work on the medieval church's evolving position on violence is clear.