The death of Ottone Visconti (1295) opened a period of difficulty in the relations between the metropolitan, who from 1277 was also the signore of the city of Milan, and suffragan bishops of the archdiocese. Ottone had known how to maintain equilibrium in the government of the metropolitan territory, without clashing with the strong ecclesiastical personalities operating in it, and restricting himself to controlling the situation of the Milanese Church, intervening only on the orders of the pope in dioceses in which problems of a religious nature arose.

The high point in the direction of the ecclesiastical province had been reached in September 1287, when in the palaeochristian basilica of Santa Tecla Archbishop Ottone had presided over a provincial council in which were present the suffragans of Vercelli, Brescia, Novara, Lodi, Turin, Cremona, Alba, Ventimiglia and Acqui, and representatives of the cathedral chapters of Bergamo, Tortona, Savona and Alessandria, sees which at that moment were vacant. The Council had begun badly, because there had immediately been a dispute between the bishop of Brescia, Berardo Maggi, and the bishop of Vercelli, Aimone of Challant, over who should sit on the right hand of the metropolitan. Such a right conferred on the prelate the office of presiding over the Council if the metropolitan see was vacant. According to the Milanese liturgical calendar known as Beroldo Vecchio, compiled at the end of the tenth century, the position to the right of the archbishop belonged to the bishop of Vercelli, the successor to Eusebius, a bishop active in the middle of the fourth century, while the bishop of Brescia occupied the position to the left. But in the course of the twelfth century the story, now known to be false, spread throughout Milan, that the Christian faith had been preached in Milan and in Brescia by Barnabas, the companion of Paul of Tarsus, and that he had consecrated Anatalone bishop of both cities. In Milan this story necessitated the rewriting in 1269 of the Beroldo Vecchio, with the insertion of an important miniature depicting the apostle Barnabas in the act of conferring the mitre on Anatalone, placed between the two cities of Milan and Brescia.
which he had evangelized. This story upset the ritual order and the bishop of Brescia occupied the position to the right, while the bishop of Vercelli left the meeting.\footnote{E. Cattaneo, Il culto di Sant’Anatalone nella Chiesa milanese e bresciana, “Ambrosius”, 34 (1958), pp. 247–252; P. Tomea, Tradizione apostolica e coscienza cittadina a Milano nel Medioevo. La leggenda di San Barnaba (Milano 1993), pp. 55–208.} During the Synod thirty legislative decrees were issued, which confirmed the validity of canonical norms fixed in previous provincial councils, in regulations of papal legates, pontifical decretals and in decrees against heretics, including those promulgated by Frederick II. Monks were to observe the Rule of St Benedict, and regular canons that of St Augustine; ample room was reserved in the decrees for the defence of ecclesiastical libertates, with the prohibition of usurpation of Church property. There were strict regulations against usurers and moneylenders, with a prohibition on receiving interest on loans to ecclesiastics and on asking for res ecclesiae, such as chalices, codices and precious liturgical objects, as security.\footnote{Bernardino Corio, L’Historia di Milano (Padova 1646), pp. 289–290; and Concilium Mediolanense in Causa Disciplinae Ecclesiasticae habitum anno Domini 1287, in G.M. Mansi (ed.), Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio, 24, (Reprint: Graz 1960), coll. 867–882; and A. Thompson, Cities of God: the religion of the Italian communes, 1125–1325 (Pennsylvania State University, 2005), pp. 296–300.}

In these years Ottone had also acted as a papal delegate in resolving the major questions of the political struggle between the suffragan Churches and the decision-making bodies of their respective Communes. For example, in 1282 he had received from Martin IV the charge of intervening in the question of the libertas Ecclesiae at Brescia. In that city the bishop, Berardo Maggi, had opposed the decisions of the Consiglio del Comune and the podestà, who had approved anti-ecclesiastical legislation preventing clerics from testifying against laymen or from appealing against the decision to prosecute them in lay courts. The pope had ordered the metropolitan to annul the decisions taken by the Council and Ottone had obeyed, going as far as the excommunication of recalcitrant officials. In the end an accord favourable to the Brescian Church was reached and the bishop, Berardo Maggi, in line with the archbishop, could remove the excommunication.\footnote{G. Andenna, L’episcopato di Brescia dagli ultimi anni del XII secolo alla conquista veneta, in A servizio del Vangelo. Il cammino storico dell’evangelizzazione a Brescia, L’Età Antica e Medievale, ed. G. Andenna (Brescia 2010), pp. 153–155.} Nicholas IV also turned to Visconti, in August 1291, after St. John of Acre in the Holy Land had fallen into Muslim hands, so that he would speed up the convocation of a new provincial council to establish how it might be possible to recover the city, and to impose an