Chapter 10

Reforming Priests and the Diverse Rhetorics of Ordination and Office from 1123–1418

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10.1 Introduction

During the period from the First Lateran Council (1123) until the Council of Constance (1414–18), reformers debated who had the right to reform or correct the clergy. This debate took place in a context where the nature and meaning of ministry was being reconsidered in light of new movements of people seeking to live the *vita apostolica*. The growth in lay piety and forms of ministry expressed by groups like the early Friars Minor and the Beguines as well as the challenges to ecclesial authority by groups such as the Waldensians and the Cathars generated great interest in the meaning of ordination and priesthood. The popes of this period formally promoted a vision of reform advocated by Pope Gregory VII, which was shaped by his struggle with Emperor Henry IV over ecclesiastical investitures. The Gregorian Reformers moved away from the more collaborative approach advocated by figures such as Peter Damian and toward a position that limited the laity’s ability to reform the Church.¹ This shift set off a series of conflicts with the members of the Church who felt there needed to be an outside check on ecclesiastical governance.

The debate over the relative authority, power, and autonomy of the ordained clergy in respect to the other orders of the Church centered upon the meaning of being an ordained officeholder. Since the stakes of this debate were high, the apologetics and polemics frequently moved to extreme, and indeed, apocalyptic positions. Most of the sources used to support the idea that ordination involves an ontological change come out of this period; yet it is also clear that these claims were vigorously contested.² The preoccupation with doctrinal


² Peter Marshall, for example, claims that ordination came to be seen as entailing radical ontological change in *The Catholic Priesthood and the English Reformation* (Oxford: 1994), 109. Of course, many of the other essays in this volume agree, more or less, with Marshall.
theology in the late 19th and early 20th centuries distorted the historical picture because theologians focused almost exclusively on scholastic sources, papal bulls, and conciliar statements. Indeed, Yves Congar argued that the preoccupation of Catholic theologians with the essential, structural elements of the Church was itself an apologetic strategy to suppress criticism.\(^3\)

Though much can be made of Thomas Aquinas’ notion of character and its relationship to the powers of the soul, scholastic discussions of this sort were not commonly referenced by those who were attempting to implement or to oppose various reform initiatives.\(^4\) Scholastic treatises concerning sacred character were responding to inherited and perceived anxieties over the sacramental ministrations of wicked or impure priests rather than addressing questions about metaphysical status. There is no evidence of medieval theologians claiming that ordination involved a substantial or essential change in the Middle Ages. Further, it is important to recognize that even the most “ontological” rhetoric concerning priesthood of this period also insisted that priests must live up to the functions of their office or be deposed. Being ordained did not necessarily imply holding an office; and, those who did not hold office could not exercise ministerial functions.

The primary concern of many of the reforming priests who presented the ordained as holding an elevated state was to establish the independence of the diocesan clergy. The canons of the First Lateran Council reflect this concern. The council forbade the monks from providing pastoral care outside of the monasteries.\(^5\) It also ratified the Concordat of Worms, which took the right of investiture away from emperor and stipulated that bishops would be elected by their clergy.\(^6\) Even so, the emperor could refuse to receive homage from them and thus held what John O’Malley has called “veto power” over the elections.\(^7\) Though the canons of the First Lateran established important precedents in canon law restricting the influence of the laity and the monks or regulars, there continued to be struggles between the clergy and the other orders of the medieval church over the canons of this council. What emerges from looking at the rhetoric of these reforming priests is the tension generated by elevating the state of priests while simultaneously calling for their accountability.

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5 First Lateran Council Canon 16, in Tanner 1.193. All of the citations in Latin and English are from Tanner’s edition.
6 *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, 188.