The Church and the City: Papal Power and Italian Society

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Introduction

This book explores a relationship that has defined Italy for more than a millennium: the dynamic between the Church and the city. From the first bishops of Rome who shepherded a fading imperial capital, to modern popes negotiating mass democracy, global markets, and European integration, the papacy has acted not only as a spiritual authority but also as a political actor, urban patron, legal innovator, and economic stakeholder. The story told here traces how successive popes navigated the tension between temporal power and spiritual leadership, and how their choices reshaped Italian cities, institutions, and identities.

Central to this narrative is the city—above all Rome, but also the dense constellation of Italian communes, republics, and regional capitals that made the peninsula a laboratory of urban life. Cities provided the stage on which the papacy exercised and contested power: through the administration of the Papal States; the construction of basilicas, hospitals, and universities; the sponsorship of artists and architects; and the negotiation of treaties with princes and republics. The city is where canon law met civil statute, where sermons echoed alongside edicts, and where diplomacy could be conducted as skillfully with marble and ritual as with parchment and seal.

Political history alone cannot explain the papacy’s influence. The Church’s contribution to law structured courts and jurisdictions well beyond ecclesiastical walls; its educational networks trained jurists, notaries, and thinkers who staffed civic governments; its art patronage shaped public taste and urban space from medieval mosaics to baroque avenues; its diplomacy linked Italian society to wider European and Mediterranean worlds. In these realms, the papacy did not merely react to social change—it often set the terms on which change occurred.

At the same time, papal authority was never uncontested. Emperors, kings, communes, and reformers challenged Rome’s claims, while local devotions and civic traditions sometimes ran counter to papal directives. The Investiture Controversy, the rise of communal republics, the upheavals of Reformation and Counter-Reformation, the revolutionary storms of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, and the Risorgimento culminating in the “Roman Question” all forced the papacy to redefine its role. These conflicts, far from marginal, became crucibles in which Italian political culture and national identity were forged.

Modernity introduced new dilemmas. The unification of Italy curtailed papal territorial rule even as it heightened Rome’s symbolic centrality. The Lateran Pacts reconfigured church–state relations; the devastations and moral ambiguities of war tested humanitarian claims; the postwar Republic saw Catholic social thought shape labor,

welfare, and party politics; Vatican II reimagined worship and governance; and late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century Italy grappled with secularization, migration, media revolutions, financial scandal, and institutional reform. Through each phase, the papacy remained both a mirror and a motor of Italian society.

This is a work of synthesis grounded in historical case studies. It moves chronologically while pausing to analyze legal regimes, educational reforms, artistic programs, economic instruments, and diplomatic strategies that illuminate the Church’s presence in daily life. The aim is not to sanctify or to indict, but to understand: to show how spiritual ambitions and worldly constraints intertwined, and how this entanglement produced enduring institutions and identities. If the Church shaped the city, the city in turn shaped the Church—its priorities, its politics, and its possibilities.

By the end of this book, readers will see the papacy not as an institution hovering above the Italian landscape, but as a participant embedded in it—negotiating with guilds and governments, commissioning streets as well as statues, crafting concordats alongside catechisms. In tracing this intertwined history from the early Middle Ages to the present, we can better grasp how Italy became what it is, and why the dialogue between altar and council chamber still matters for the future of both Church and city.

CHAPTER ONE: The Papacy in a Fragmented Peninsula: Late Antiquity to the Early Middle Ages

The city of Rome entered late antiquity as a place of layered power: imperial, senatorial, and episcopal. By the fourth century, the bishop of Rome had grown in stature, yet he remained one patriarch among several in a Christian world still shaped by the old imperial geography. The papacy's emergence was not a sudden seizure of authority but a gradual accretion of responsibilities—care for the poor, stewardship of property, mediation of disputes—while the Western Roman state unraveled. In a city where aqueducts, forums, and baths still bore witness to past grandeur, the bishop's modest administrative apparatus began to acquire a distinct gravity.

A pivotal moment came in 313, when Emperor Constantine and his co-ruler Licinius issued the Edict of Milan, ending persecution and granting Christians legal standing. This opened a new chapter for the Roman community and its bishop. Church property could be held openly, basilicas were planned, and endowments flowed from elites eager to align with the rising faith. The Lateran palace, donated to the bishop, became a center of hospitality and governance. While the empire's authority frayed in the West, the bishop of Rome stepped into the vacuum with a practical mix of pastoral care and urban patronage.

During the fourth and fifth centuries, Rome's bishops increasingly acted as civic leaders. They supervised charitable distributions, negotiated with officials to maintain grain supplies, and intervened when urban tensions flared. The administrative language of the Roman curia—still embryonic—borrowed from imperial models, with deacons, presbyters, and notaries organizing relief and record-keeping. The clergy became a network of local administrators, and the bishop's moral authority was reinforced by tangible service. In a city still defined by neighborhoods, the church provided a communal structure that crossed traditional social lines.

Pope Leo I, known as Leo the Great, exemplified the papacy's expanding role in both doctrine and diplomacy. In 452, he met Attila the Hun near Mantua and persuaded him to turn back from an assault on Italy, a striking demonstration of the bishop's influence in a world where military power alone seemed insufficient. The following year, Leo confronted the Vandals in Rome, negotiating protections for the populace. While later legend embellished these encounters, they underscored a growing perception: the bishop of Rome could function as a guardian of the city, even as imperial forces faded from the scene.

At the heart of the papacy's self-understanding stood the figure of Peter, the apostle

traditionally linked to Rome's episcopal lineage. The claim that Rome's bishop possessed a unique pastoral authority derived from Peter's ministry, articulated in texts such as the *Liber Pontificalis*, offered a theological foundation for expanding influence. It did not translate automatically into political supremacy, but it did set the Roman church apart in doctrinal disputes and appeals. The memory of Peter provided a portable legitimacy, useful in a period when political maps were being redrawn.

The sack of Rome in 410 by Alaric's Visigoths and the deposition of the last Western emperor in 476 did not erase urban life, but they transformed its terms. The city's population shrank, the Senate persisted in diminished form, and elite families increasingly invested in ecclesiastical offices. The bishop's court, housed near the Lateran and linked to the great basilicas—St. Peter's in the Vatican, St. Paul Outside the Walls, St. John Lateran—functioned as an alternative to a vanishing imperial administration. The papacy became a point of stability amid the fragmentation of authority.

In the East, the emperor in Constantinople presided over a vibrant court, while in the West, power dispersed among Germanic rulers—Ostrogoths, then Lombards—each with complex relationships to Rome. Pope Gelasius I articulated a classic two-swords theory in the late fifth century: spiritual and temporal powers were distinct but interdependent, and the priest bore a heavier burden in matters of the soul. The practical implication was clear: the bishop of Rome would claim moral leadership while cooperating with, and sometimes confronting, secular rulers. This tension defined papal policy for centuries.

Under the Ostrogothic king Theodoric, who ruled Italy from Ravenna, Roman institutions continued in hybrid form. The Senate met, the prefect of the city administered justice, and the pope maintained a careful diplomacy with a ruler who practiced Arian Christianity. The trial and execution of Boethius, the philosopher-official, highlighted the era's volatility, while the papacy's cautious engagement reflected a strategy: preserve the city's fabric, protect its people, and assert ecclesiastical independence when possible. Rome was neither fully autonomous nor fully subdued; it was a negotiated space.

The Byzantine reconquest of Italy under Justinian in the mid-sixth century brought renewed imperial oversight but also war's devastation. The Ostrogothic resistance, led by Totila, led to sieges and famine in Rome, with the population at times falling below thirty thousand. Pope Vigilius navigated between imperial authorities and local clergy, even as doctrinal disputes—especially around the Three Chapters—drew him to Constantinople. The empire's presence was real, but its capacity to govern Italy comprehensively was limited. In this context, the papacy's role as urban manager and moral guide deepened.

Socially and economically, Rome after antiquity was a patchwork. Villas and estates

(*latifundia*) dominated the countryside, while the city's markets and ports at Ostia contracted. The papacy, through donations and bequests, became a major landholder, using rents and agricultural surpluses to fund poor relief and liturgical life. A rudimentary curial bureaucracy managed these assets, allocating resources to clergy, hospitals, and building maintenance. In practical terms, the pope functioned like an urban landlord, balancing pious obligations with fiscal realities. For many Romans, the church was simply the institution that kept the lights on.

Canon law began to develop its own procedures and terminology, distinct from Roman civil law yet borrowing its tools. Clergy could be disciplined in ecclesiastical courts, property disputes adjudicated, and marriages regulated. As secular tribunals weakened, church courts became attractive for their consistency and perceived fairness. The bishop's court in Rome handled cases ranging from inheritance to offenses against moral order, creating a parallel legal sphere. This dual system—civil and ecclesiastical—would remain a hallmark of Italian governance, long after the empire's formal disappearance.

The rise of the papacy in Rome paralleled a broader phenomenon: bishops across Italy becoming key civic figures. In cities like Milan, Ravenna, and Naples, bishops negotiated with invaders, organized defenses, and maintained social services. Networks of clergy and monasteries linked regions, facilitating communication and resource-sharing. The Roman bishop, however, occupied a unique position due to Peter's memory and the city's historical prestige. Over time, appeals to Rome increased from distant churches seeking arbitration. The papacy's authority, thus, grew not only from theory but from practice.

Administrative language evolved as the curia adopted and adapted imperial vocabulary. Terms like *patrimony* referred to church estates; *defensor* denoted an official protecting church interests; *notary* recorded legal acts. The *Liber Pontificalis*, a chronicle of papal lives and acts, recorded endowments, building projects, and diplomatic missions. It presented the pope as steward of sacred spaces and urban welfare. While the text's details are sometimes idealized, it reflects how papal authority was publicly performed: through construction, charity, and the ordering of ritual life.

Relations with Constantinople were intricate. The pope was often in communion with the imperial court, yet theological and jurisdictional disputes could flare. The condemnation of Monophysitism and later Iconoclasm created rifts. When Byzantine emperors enforced iconoclasm, Roman resistance was significant, though less violent than in the East. The papacy increasingly asserted doctrinal independence, drawing on local traditions and Roman sensibilities. This was not yet a claim to universal supremacy but a statement of self-governance. The city's ritual calendar, liturgical forms, and feast days reinforced a distinct Roman identity.

Money mattered. The papacy's economic base rested on gifts, estates, and market activities. The *schola* system—associations of clergy and laypeople organized around charitable tasks—helped manage distributions. The church financed grain, oil, and wine for the poor; it funded upkeep of roads and cemeteries; it supported clergy through stipends and housing. In an era of uncertain coinage and contracting trade, the papacy's ability to collect rents and allocate resources gave it a stable platform. Fiscal management, unglamorous but crucial, was the daily work of power.

Urban space reflected this new reality. The Lateran complex stood as the pope's headquarters, while St. Peter's and other major basilicas served as pilgrimage destinations and social hubs. Processions linked these sites, creating a ceremonial geography that mapped spiritual authority onto the city. Markets clustered near churches, because churches offered security and services. In a landscape where ancient monuments were repurposed—temples converted, theaters abandoned—the basilicas became the city's new anchors. The bishop's movement through Rome was both a pastoral visit and a demonstration of governance.

The Lombard invasion in the late sixth century reshaped Italy again. Their kingdom controlled large swaths of the peninsula, leaving Rome and its hinterlands increasingly isolated from Byzantine power. The papacy stepped into the diplomatic breach, sending envoys, negotiating truces, and at times appealing to the Franks. This period saw the emergence of the "patrimony of Peter," a conceptual and legal framework describing church property and jurisdiction. The term signaled that the pope acted as steward of a vast estate, responsible for its defense and productivity. Management of patrimony demanded expertise in law, agriculture, and diplomacy.

Pope Gregory I, known as the Great, epitomized the late sixth-century papacy's breadth. A trained administrator, Gregory reorganized church finances, cleaned up monastic discipline, and sent missionaries to England. He wrote extensively on pastoral care and liturgy, shaping practices across the West. In Rome, he managed grain distribution during shortages and mediated with Lombard rulers. Gregory's letters reveal a hands-on leader, attentive to details ranging from the behavior of deacons to the provisioning of hospitals. His pontificate bridged late antiquity and the early Middle Ages, forging administrative habits that endured.

Meanwhile, the city's population stabilized at a modest level. Ancient apartment blocks (*insulae*) stood in partial ruin, while new dwellings clustered near churches and markets. The senatorial aristocracy persisted but increasingly invested in ecclesiastical careers, blending old prestige with new utility. Monasteries sprang up on the city's edges and in the countryside, providing centers of learning and agricultural management. The papacy's patronage—grants of land, protection of privileges—made monasteries allies in spiritual and economic terms. A web of institutions, not just a single office, defined Rome's power structure.

The development of “apostolic poverty” as a theme—linked to Peter’s example—offered a moral frame for papal leadership. Yet the papacy was also materially rich, with estates stretching across Italy. This duality—ascetic ideals alongside substantial assets—would recur throughout history. In practice, the papacy argued that wealth served mission: it funded charity, liturgy, and construction. Critics sometimes charged corruption, but supporters saw stewardship. The debate framed later controversies, but in this period it was managed through careful record-keeping, visits to estates, and a pragmatic focus on results: bread for the hungry, protection for the vulnerable.

Relations with the Frankish rulers took a decisive turn in the late eighth century. Facing Lombard pressure, Pope Leo III sought the protection of Charlemagne. In 800, Charlemagne was crowned emperor in Rome, a ceremony orchestrated by the papacy and staged at St. Peter’s. The event symbolized a new alignment: the pope recognized the emperor’s temporal authority, and the emperor guaranteed the papacy’s security and independence. The coronation did not grant the pope political supremacy over the empire, but it elevated the bishop of Rome as a key player in European politics and gave the papacy a powerful ally.

The coronation also introduced a fresh set of practical challenges. How should a spiritual office coordinate with a military and administrative empire? The papacy’s administration expanded, absorbing expertise from the imperial court and the local Roman elite. The *scrinia*—papal secretariats—grew more sophisticated, handling correspondence, legal documents, and finances. Diplomatic missions linked Rome to Aachen, Constantinople, and other centers. The papacy’s ability to move between ritual and administration—crowning emperors while auditing estates—became a hallmark of its governance style.

In the Italian peninsula, political fragmentation intensified. City-states and regional powers began to emerge, while the Byzantine presence persisted in the south. The papacy’s territorial holdings—the Papal States—expanded as the Lombard threat receded, but governance was uneven. Rome itself remained the symbolic and administrative heart, yet the countryside required constant negotiation with local lords. The pope’s authority was strongest near the city and in key corridors; elsewhere it relied on alliances, compromises, and occasional coercion. This patchwork governance reflected the broader reality: power was negotiated, not imposed uniformly.

Legal pluralism characterized the era. Roman law, Germanic customs, and ecclesiastical canons overlapped, creating a complex jurisdictional environment. Church courts handled clergy and certain moral cases, while secular courts dealt with other matters. Disputes over property often crossed boundaries, invoking both civil and canon law. The papacy developed a reputation for adjudicating difficult cases,

drawing on the prestige of Rome and the consistency of its procedures. For Italians, this meant living under multiple legal regimes, with the bishop's court offering a venue that could navigate the gaps.

Economic life adapted to new patterns of exchange. The papacy's estates produced agricultural goods traded in local markets; monasteries operated mills and vineyards; guilds (*corporazioni*) began to organize in urban centers, especially in central and northern Italy. The bishop's oversight of fairs and markets, often held near churches, integrated sacred and commercial rhythms. While large-scale trade contracted compared to antiquity, regional networks remained active, and the papacy's resources were crucial in sustaining them. In practical terms, church patronage could stimulate local economies through employment, construction, and hospitality.

Education, too, took shape under church auspices. Cathedral schools in Rome and other Italian cities trained clergy and lay officials, teaching grammar, rhetoric, and basic law. While universities would emerge later, these schools preserved classical learning and Christian doctrine. The papacy's patronage of scholars, copyists, and liturgical musicians fostered a cultural milieu. Rome's libraries—modest by later standards—held manuscripts essential to law and theology. In a fragmented world, education became a stabilizing force, and the church, with its networks and resources, was a primary educator.

Ritual life anchored urban identity. Processions, feast days, and pilgrimages created public rhythms and reinforced the bishop's presence. The *Liber Pontificalis* recorded the installation of relics, the decoration of basilicas, and the organization of liturgical celebrations. These acts were not merely spiritual; they were civic events that drew crowds, directed traffic, and displayed the papacy's capacity to manage public space. Pilgrims brought offerings and news, linking Rome to distant regions. The city's economy benefited from their visits, while the papacy's reputation for hospitality enhanced its moral authority.

Diplomacy became a refined art. The papacy sent legates to negotiate with Lombard kings, Byzantine officials, and Frankish courts. Letters from the pope carried weight; they could defuse tensions, assert positions, or mobilize support. The papacy's diplomatic vocabulary—terms like *officium*, *honor*, and *patrimony*—framed negotiations in moral and legal terms. Success depended on reading the political landscape accurately and choosing the right allies. In a world where military force was decisive but not omnipresent, words, alliances, and ceremonial gestures often proved as effective as armies.

The papacy's relationship with the city's physical fabric continued to evolve. Basilicas were repaired, new churches founded, roads maintained. The Lateran complex served as a hub for administration and hospitality; St. Peter's attracted pilgrims and elites alike. Urban planning was modest—Rome was no longer a million-strong imperial

capital—but church projects provided employment and focus. In a landscape where the Colosseum and Forum were monuments to a vanished order, the basilicas and papal courts offered living institutions that structured daily life. The city's identity was rewritten in stone and ritual.

Across Italy, bishops became crucial intermediaries. In Lombard territories, they negotiated local truces; in Byzantine regions, they balanced imperial expectations with local needs; in emerging communes, they mediated between factions. The Roman bishop's prestige lent weight to these efforts, and the papacy's administrative support—letters, legates, legal advice—enabled action. This system of "papal diplomacy by proxy" expanded influence without requiring a large standing army. It was a pragmatic approach: leverage networks, rely on local elites, and aim for stability that protected church interests and community welfare.

By the early Middle Ages, the papacy had become an institution of multifaceted authority: spiritual, legal, economic, and diplomatic. Its power was not absolute, but it was resilient. The memory of Peter and the prestige of Rome provided symbolic capital; the administration of estates and courts provided material resources; the coordination of ritual and charity provided social legitimacy. In a fragmented peninsula, the papacy offered continuity. It did not replace the empire, but it did function as a durable scaffold around which Italian society could reorganize itself.

In practice, this meant that Rome's bishop was simultaneously a pastor, a landlord, a judge, and a diplomat. The city's residents saw him in multiple roles: preaching at the altar, settling disputes in court, organizing grain distribution, hosting envoys. This breadth of function defined the papacy's early medieval identity and set patterns for later centuries. The tension between spiritual ideals and worldly responsibilities was never resolved, but it was managed—sometimes deftly, sometimes awkwardly—through administrative habits, alliances, and ritual performances that grounded authority in the daily realities of urban life.

The story of this period is not one of rapid transformation but of gradual accretion. The papacy's influence grew through countless small decisions: which case to hear, which gift to accept, which alliance to pursue. Over time, these choices accumulated into structures—legal, economic, and cultural—that shaped Italian society. Rome remained a city of ruins and renewal, and the bishop's court remained a central institution amid the flux. The foundations laid in late antiquity and the early Middle Ages would support the papacy's later claims and challenges, as the peninsula moved into new eras of communal republics, regional powers, and renewed imperial ambitions.

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