

Defensors Ecclesiae: Relations Between the Secular and Ecclesiastical Hierarchies in the Carolingian Régime

Michael W. Beatty
The University of Missouri – Saint Louis

In the power vacuum that followed the collapse of the western Roman Empire in the fall of 476, the Catholic bishop of Rome remained the only magistrate whose influence, and to a lesser extent authority, extended throughout the West. Speaking in terms of the Eastern versus the Western Church, Eamon Duffy has observed that “[Outside Italy] ... [t]he Pope’s patriarchal authority was uniquely enhanced by the added prestige of Peter’s authority. That prestige, however, was a matter of moral authority rather than of administrative power. It was occasional rather than constant ...”¹ The Pope was an influential figure, but not necessarily one who exercised, in all places and at all times regarding all things, an authority resembling an ecclesiastical *imperium*.

For most of the next 300 years, as Germanic tribes marched and countermarched across the lands which Rome had ruled, and the Byzantine Emperors at Constantinople attempted to reassert political authority over the Italian peninsula, the Bishop of Rome maintained a network of communication and influence which exceeded, in scope as well as loyalty, anything that any secular potentate could command. Leopold von Ranke asserted that “... even whilst the empire was shattered in the Western provinces, the Church remained firm and undisturbed throughout all.”² Undisturbed the Church may have been, but the collapse of the Empire presented serious difficulties for the Popes of the period as they attempted to avoid being buried under the debris of the Empire.

The collapse of the Empire, while imperiling the security of travelers along the late

Empire's roads, had nonetheless not affected the quality of the roads themselves. Throughout the Christian portion of Europe, roughly between the Pyrenees, the North Sea and the Rhine River, missionaries and emissaries traveled back and forth bearing the Gospel and papal instructions outward, and reports and requests for guidance from bishops in communion with Rome back to the seat of the *Princeps Apostolorum*.

That system functioned well, and allowed the Bishop of Rome to remain "the last man standing," politically, through the centuries of entropic turmoil that followed the collapse of the vestigial control that the Roman Emperors had claimed in the West before Odoacer's deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476. The Roman pontiff's need to remain on good terms with a patchwork of secular lords, in order to maintain communication with his confreres hundreds of miles and several days' travel away, lead inevitably to a certain weakening of the secular influence, or *imperium*, of the Roman bishops. A man who must depend on his neighbors' whims for their continued good will cannot afford to alienate any one of them, lest he lose the chance to retain all of them as his friends. The compromises that post-Imperial collapse Popes made left them subject to interference from local potentates. Von Ranke formulates the situation thus:

[The Church] fell, as was inevitable, into many embarrassments, and found herself in an entirely altered condition. A pagan people took possession of Britain; Arian kings seized the greater part of the remaining West; while the Lombards, long attached to Arianism, and, as neighbors, most dangerous and hostile, established a powerful sovereignty before the very gates of Rome.³

Given the hostile hordes facing the civil and religious hierarchs of western Europe, protection from whom neither the eastern nor the western Empire had the means or the stature to guarantee, it was, if not inevitable that the Church and its hierarchy should fall into "embarrassments," at least necessary that they should do, lacking any other option.

Under such conditions, it was necessary for the Pope to find a protector, who would look out for the physical security of the Bishop of Rome and his court, as well as securing the Church's lines of communication and its property. This protection would come either of the protector's own free will, as a faithful son of the Church turning his temporal resources to support the independence of the Pope, or by the ecclesiastical hierarchy's co-option of a secular magistrate by the granting of religious, or spiritual favors. The fading remnant of the Byzantine imperial institution in Italy was of no help; the Exarchate of Ravenna, erected *ca.* 584 as a bulwark against Lombard incursions in Northern Italy, was itself, by the beginning of the Eighth Century, teetering toward collapse.⁴ The Exarch could provide no help to the Roman Pontiff, and the depredations that the Lombards had committed against northern Italy – to say nothing of the Arian Christianity which the Lombards embraced – argued against their inclination to support the Catholic bishop in Rome.

Protection came, eventually, from the centralizing force of the family of Pepin of Herstal, the mayor of the palace serving the Merovingian kings of Francia, in what is now western Germany and eastern France. The Franks were one of what Walter Ullmann referred to as “the virile and youthful Western nations” whose “veneration of St. Peter” was the fruit of the missionary activity sanctioned by Pope St. Gregory I the Great.^{*5} The fidelity of those virile and youthful Franks was to be the bulwark behind which Gregory II and his successors would find protection from both the failing Byzantine emperors and from the uncouth hierarchs who had, in diverse places, stepped in to exert local control over the fragments of the shattered western empire.

Even while the moribund Empire stood, relations between the Emperor and the Pope had

* When Pepin the Short heard the suggestion that the lands recovered from the Lombards should be returned to the Byzantine emperor, his response, in part, was that it was “but from veneration to St. Peter alone” that he had made war on the Lombards. Von Ranke, 14.

begun to spiral downward. The degree to which the Pope could interfere in the secular realm, or that to which the Emperor could interfere in the spiritual realm, presented a vexing question that poisoned relations between the temporal and spiritual realms. Ullmann noted that, while there were two functioning empires, “the Roman Church was within the constitutional framework of the empire ... As long as the Roman Church formed an integral part of the Christian Roman empire ... there was no means by which it could offer effective resistance to the imperial government.”⁶ The fundamental conflict appears, from Ullmann’s discourse, to have turned on the issue of the Emperor’s qualification to espouse doctrine in religious matters, and the Pope’s qualification to interfere in, or set conditions upon, the administration of the secular affairs of the Church by Imperial officers. Ullmann asserted that

The papal claim to magisterial and jurisdictional primacy (the *principatus*) was severely attacked by the emperor acting as a true monarch (autokrator): in this function he could not permit papal intervention in spheres directly affecting the working of his (Christian) body politic. The papacy, on the other hand, insisted on the proper qualification for determining doctrinal matters and for controlling the sacerdotal organism.⁷ [Italics in original.]

While it may be true, as Ullmann asserted, that “[T]he underlying causes of the virtually inexhaustible disputes and battles were simple,”⁸ the ramifications of the intractable dispute between Emperor and Pope would plague relations between the secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies for centuries. Indeed, the dispute constituted the fertile soil in which the dynasty of Pepin of Herstal would flower as, arguably, the most reliable secular friends the papacy would ever have. The so-called “Carolingians,” political consolidators *par excellence*, would emerge in the middle of the Eighth Century as a family of *defensors ecclesiae*, the temporal protectors of the Pope and the papacy.

C. Delisle Burns wrote of Pepin of Herstal’s rise to dominance of Francia that Pepin “had secured, at the end of interminable and confused struggles and treacheries, the power to control,

as chief of the Palace, the king of the Franks.”⁹ Those struggles and treacheries included Pepin’s deposition, in 731, of the last Merovingian king, Childeric III, with the blessing of Pope Zachary. What followed was, in Peter Brown’s memorable phrase, “The unprecedented coagulation of military power in the hands of the Frankish aristocracy who supported Charles Martel ...”¹⁰ The sequel to that gathering of temporal power, *imperium* in everything but name, was momentous for both Church and State in western Europe for the next century and beyond.

Pepin of Herstal and his bastard son Charles Martel achieved impressive success in consolidating and expanding their political grip over northwestern Europe, all the while living as loyal sons of the Roman Church, which had conferred the blessings of Heaven upon their political rise. At the same time, there remained beyond the borders of Francia pagan peoples who had not heard the Gospel. For the Franks, “Pagan Frisia represented a still undecided ‘might have been’ for the entire North Sea,” as Peter Brown put it. Speaking of their chieftain, Radbod, Brown noted that

Just because [Radbod] and his aristocracy had, in many ways, come so close to their Frankish neighbors, it was all the more important for him to assert an essential point of difference. Radbod was careful to maintain the pagan rites which gave so much prosperity to his people and which separated them from the Franks.¹¹

Thus the Church and the Frankish aristocracy felt the need for a specific effort to bring the Gospel to the Frisians, who in their independence represented an inescapable threat to the ability of the Franks to communicate with the outside world to the north. Pierre Broussard wrote, “Depuis 715, l’Église est gouvernée par Grégoire II qui, après le succès obtenu dans l’évangélisation de l’Angleterre un siècle auparavant, entreprend le grand mouvement missionnaire qui va porter le christianisme en Frise et en Germanie.”¹² Brown made the

* My translation: “After 715, the Church was governed by Gregory II, who, after the success obtained in the evangelization of England a century earlier, undertook the great missionary movement that would carry Christianity into Frisia and Germany.” Broussard, 9.

important point that “it was only in this period that anything like a concept of ‘missions’ developed in Western Europe.”¹³ Catholic missionaries to the pagan peoples beyond the Frankish frontier, especially Boniface, the English monk formerly called Wynfrith, would be the first wards of the developing Carolingian regime. Brown noted that “Boniface was protected by Charles Martel. Later, in the 740s, he was called upon by Charles’ son, Pippin [sic] ... to act as a ‘troubleshooter’ and reformer in the Frankish church.”¹⁴

This capsule overview of the Carolingians’ application of their burgeoning political influence in support of the Church’s missionary activity illustrates an important contrast between Western secular power and that of the East. As the political geography of the northwestern and north-central remnant of the Continental part of the bygone Roman Empire coalesced in the early Eighth Century, the western rulers adopted an approach to Church-state relations that was radically different from that of the Byzantines. Ullmann quoted at length from Gregory II’s “manly” response to Emperor Leo III’s threats to indict the Pope for treason, among other things: “The letters written by Gregory II in 729 ... mark the end of an epoch. Their language is firm and frank. They reveal utter contempt for the Emperor.”¹⁵ Ullmann’s dismissal of Leo’s response was equally contemptuous. He wrote, “The manly words of the pope ... produced a reply from the emperor that sounds as stale, hollow and stereotyped as it was unconvincing:

“Βασιλεύς και ἱερεύς εἶμι

“I am king and priest.”¹⁶

It appears that a significant factor in the Byzantine Emperor’s stubborn treading upon the religious, or supernatural rights of the Pope stemmed from the Emperor’s insistence on the religious aspect of the imperial office. That was a relic of the undivided Roman Empire, and indeed traced its roots back to the Republic, when the *Pontifex Maximus* (a title which the Pope

had, since the late Fourth Century, commandeered into his own panoply of titles) was an important player in the secular realm, by virtue of his status as head of the *Collegium Pontificum*. Throughout Roman history, secular officials bore the vital responsibility of maintain the *pax deorum*, the right relationship between the natural and supernatural worlds in which the goodwill of supernatural patrons was indispensable for the survival of society.

By the end of the Seventh Century, in both the West and the East, a divergence had developed between the concepts of “good government” and “good religion.” The Iconoclast heresy, of which Emperor Leo III was a prime exponent, is arguably the most notable example of that divergence. Leo, taking seriously the ancient responsibility of government to maintain right relations between the natural and supernatural realms, turned the secular machinery of government against a popular form of religious expression, the veneration of icons. The orthodoxy of the practice of venerating icons received confirmation from the professional theologians in Rome, but Leo, for reasons of state and the satisfaction of his own “autocratic temper,”¹⁷ continued to interfere in the spiritual life of his subjects, an arena that, from the western perspective, was properly the province of ecclesiastics.

From the perspective of the Quirinal Hill, “good governance” meant doing what was necessary to ensure the free practice of the “True Religion”; that is, Catholic Christianity. Secular potentates were bound, in return for the social eminence that had been bestowed on them by Heaven, through the ministry of the vicar of Heaven, to ensure not only the free practice of religion, but also to create the conditions necessary for the spread of that religion. The definition of what constituted “True Religion” was not, as far as Popes and their supporters were concerned, any business of the Emperor. St. Ambrose’s famous rebuke to the Emperor Valentinian, that “The Emperor is in the Church, not over it,” encapsulates the papalist attitude.

The immediate problem that Popes faced was that the Emperor's control over the secular ordering of society placed in his hands adequate means to exert his will to control religious affairs by force. The Pope might, as vicar of Heaven, make or break an Emperor; but the Emperor possessed the means to intimidate a Pope and force him to acquiesce in a secular ordering of society that gave the Emperor the means to interfere in the religious sphere. The Pope's goal was to maintain his freedom of action to bring the right ordering of society.

For the Pope, freedom of action (which, in practice, meant freedom to assert control over those segments of Christian society which either recognized his authority, or acknowledged his primary influence) required that the interference, if not the reign, of the distant and increasingly alien Byzantine Emperor be overthrown. Ullmann wrote, "The only way open to the papacy was to extricate itself from the imperial framework, a step that was to entail freedom of movement for the papacy and a good deal of loss of prestige for the Roman empire."¹⁸ His analysis, though stark, was, and remains, fundamentally accurate.

In contrast, Burns was quick to observe that "[I]t cannot be said that, at any stage, the Popes deliberately substituted any other civil authority for that of the Roman Empire."¹⁹ Although the Roman bishops were only too eager to be free of the influence of the Roman Emperor, their purpose was not to replace one secular overlord with another. Despite what Burns characterized as "an increasing need for an alternative to the Emperor at Constantinople as protector and defender,"²⁰ the papal goal appears to have been to achieve the temporal autonomy that would allow, indeed would facilitate, the Popes' assertion of their role as the central and ultimate authority in matters of spiritual discipline and practice.

The issue that finally split Pope Gregory II from Emperor Leo III appears to have been Gregory's refusal to execute Leo's decree of a tax in the West, "although theoretically and

constitutionally [Gregory] was bound to obey ... What Gregory II did was to endorse the already considerable resistance to the imperial government. No doubt this was a bold and courageous move on the part of the Pope, who ... was virtually the viceroy of the emperor in Italy.”²¹ Leo threatened to prosecute Gregory for treason, but thinking better of it – or at least wary of provoking the Romans any further than necessary – agreed to refrain from persecuting the Pope if Gregory would join Leo’s Iconoclastic campaign. Gregory’s manly opposition to the imperial decree began “the extrication of the papacy from the imperial nexus,” which Ullmann characterized as “the presupposition for the fruitful deployment of papal authority.”²²

As noted above, the Merovingian mayors of the palace played a significant, if not necessarily essential role achieving the Hildebrandine reform of all ranks of the Frankish clergy, the more effectively to lift the Frankish people up. Still, there was a limit to what the (nominal) servants of the Frankish king could, or would, do in the name and for the benefit of religion, without some sort of payment, even if not so designated. Von Ranke wrote that

When Pepin the younger, not content with the reality of kingly power, desired also to possess himself of the name, he felt that a higher sanction was needful. This the Pope afforded him. In return, the new monarch undertook to defend ‘the Holy Church and the Republic of God’ against the Lombards. Nor did he content himself with merely defending them. On the contrary, he compelled the Lombards to evacuate that portion of territory called the Exarchate, and which they had wrenched from the Roman Empire.²³

Having wrenched the *quondam* Exarchate lands away from the Lombards, Von Ranke continued, “[Pepin the Short] caused the keys of the conquered towns to be placed on the altar of St. Peter, and in this act he laid the foundation of the whole temporal power of the popes,”²⁴ which considerably overstates the issue. The Popes were already, by the time of Pepin’s arrival in the mid-730s, personages of such political and economic importance that the Frankish king was bound to cultivate the good will and patronage of the Roman bishop.

The solution to the problem of Roman security appeared on the scene late in the third

quarter of the Eighth Century, in the form of Charles, King of the Franks, who came into Italy, not only as savior of the Bishop of Rome, but in the interest of advancing his own royal fortunes. The Frankish monk Einhard, the medieval biographer of Charles, wrote *ca.* 830 that “Conpositis in Aquitania rebus eoque bello finito, regni quoque socio iam rebus humanis exempto, rogatu et precibus Hadriani Roman[æ] urbis episcopi exoratus bellum contra Langobardos suscepit.”²⁵

The sequence of events is significant.

Charles first pacified Aquitaine as a matter of national security, to bring peace to the western border of his realm. Having established himself as master over essentially the whole of the Roman province of Gaul, Charles then had both means and opportunity to turn his attention to southern affairs. The Lombard menace to papal security and authority provided the Frankish king with opportunities both for territorial aggrandizement and for a sort of religious expression of loyalty to the Pope, his spiritual father.

Von Ranke’s description of the turn of Frankish attention from the west to the south is more florid: “[A] Christian power had already arisen among these [“German tribes of the West”], and toward this the Pope had but to stretch forth his hands, when he was sure to find the most effectual succor and earnest allies against all his enemies.”²⁶ Thus emboldened,

[Pope Gregory II’s] successors became even more and more impressed with the conviction that it was needful to separate themselves from a power (that of the Roman Empire) by which many duties were imposed on them, but which could offer them no protection in return. They could not safely permit a succession to the mere name and empire to fetter them, but turned themselves rather toward those from whom help and aid might also be expected.²⁷

Those “from whom help and aid might be expected” were the rising dynasty of Pepin the Short, the Frankish mayor of the palace who had deposed the corrupt and feeble Merovingian dynasty.

* Firchow and Zeydel’s translation: “When the affairs of Aquitaine had been settled and the war ended, Charles undertook a campaign against the Lombards at the request and pleading of Bishop Hadrian of Rome.” Note that Einhard, as late as *ca.* 830, refers to Hadrian I as “bishop of the city of Rome,” (my translation) rather than as “Pope.” Firchow and Zeydel, 44-5.

More than forty years would pass between Gregory II's death in 731 and the ability of Pepin's son Charles to project sufficient force into Italy effectively to take up the role of protector of the Roman See. The war that Charles undertook against the Lombards would mark him out as the champion that the Bishop of Rome sought, which would have profound consequences for the political and religious construction of Europe, and the development of the concept of feudalism.

Pope Adrian I had chosen his champion well, summoning Charles, an established, experienced soldier who was deeply invested in the necessity of bringing *quietas* to the whole of the former western Empire. Einhard characterized the Frankish realm before Charles' wars thus:

Nam cum prius non amplius quam ea pars Galliæ, quæ inter Rhenum et Ligerem oceanumque ac mare Balearicum iacet, et pars Germaniæ, quæ inter Saxoniam et Danubium Rhenumque ac Salam fluvium, qui Thuringos et Sorabos dividit, posita a Francis qui Orientales dicuntur incolitur, et præter hæc Alamanni atque Baioarii ad regni Francorum potestatem pertinerent: ipse per bella memorata primo Aquitaniam et Wasconiam totumque Pyrinei montis iugum et usque ad Hiberum amnem ...^{*28}

Contrast this with Jacques Broussard's observation, regarding the expansion of the scope of Charles' holdings after the death of his brother and co-sovereign (as King of the Franks) Carloman in 771, that:

La mort de Carloman laisse Charlemagne seul maître d'un immense territoire allant de l'embouchure du Weser aux Pyrénées et du Danube à la Bretagne. C'est lui qui va achever l'œuvre ébauchée par Charles Martel et poursuivie par Pépin, ... et faire renaître l'idée, effacée depuis 476, d'un Empire romain d'Occident.^{†29}

The recreation of the idea of a western Roman Empire meant, in the context of Carolingian expansion beyond the borders of the lands of the Franks, the reestablishment of order and control

* Firchow and Zeydel's translation: "Formerly, the Frankish territory had encompassed only that part of Gaul lying between the Rhine and the Loire, the ocean and the Balearic Sea, as well as that part of Germania inhabited by the so-called East Franconians and bordering on Saxony and the Danube, the Rhine and the Saale – a river separating the Thuringians from the Sorbs – and, finally, the land of the Alemanni and Bavarians. Through the wars described above Charles conquered first Aquitaine, then Gascony and the entire Pyrenees region as far south as the Ebro River." Firchow and Zeydel, 66-7.

† My translation: "[T]he death of Carloman left Charlemagne sole master of an immense territory reaching from the mouth of the Weser to the Pyrenees, and from the Danube to Brittany. It was he who would complete the work begun by Charles Martel and continued by Pepin [the Short] ... and recreate the idea, erased since 476, of a Roman empire of the West." Broussard, 25.

in the that portion of Gaul which lay west of the Rhine (the land of the West Franks) and its extension into the territory east of the Rhine (the land of the East Franks) which had defied complete incorporation into the old Roman Empire. Broussard summed up the plan neatly with his observation, that “Les réformes administratives de Pépin et de Charlemagne ont eu pour but le rétablissement de l’*autorité royale*.”^{*30}

One aspect of the process of reestablishing royal authority depended upon the proper use of that authority, which assumed the knowledge of when not to insist on royal prerogatives. An example appears in relation to Charles’ war against the Duchy of Benevento 786-7. According to Einhard, as the Frankish army marched into Italy,

Prævenit hoc dux gentis Aragisus: filios suos Rumoldum et Grimoldum cum magna pecunia obviam regi mittens rogat, ut filios obsides suscipiat, seque cum gente imperata facturum pollicetur, præter hoc solum, si ipse ad conspectum venire cogere^{†31}retur.

The practice of a defeated potentate being forced to appear in person before the victor, to have the victor’s justice done unto him, arguably is a forerunner of the feudal practice of a vassal being subject to summons into the lord’s court. It is an interesting foreshadow of the rise of feudal duties of vassals toward their lords, either as part of the normal course of the lord exercising his lordship over his vassals by “mustering the troops,” or as part of the lordly right to dispense justice among and against his vassals.

By the time Charles humbled Duke Aregis, he was already *Patricius Romanorum*; Walter Ullmann stated that “Whilst the father [Pepin the Short] had refused to bear the title, the son adopted it, certainly from 774 onwards.”^{**32}

* My translation: “The purpose of the administrative reforms of Pepin [the Short] and Charlemagne was the reestablishment of royal authority.” Broussard, 25.

† Firchow and Zeydel’s translation: “Aregis, the duke of Benevento, prevented [the Frankish attack] by sending his sons Rumold and Grimold with a large sum of money asking the king to accept them as hostages. He promised that he and his people would do as Charles demanded, on the condition that he would not be forced to appear before the king in person.” The sons’ names should, possibly, be “Rumoald” and “Grimoald.” Firchow and Zeydel, 56-7.

On Christmas Day 800, while Charles attended Mass at St. Peter's Basilica, Pope Leo III crowned him Emperor of the Romans, an act of (apparently) thoroughly planned spontaneity.

Duffy reported that

... the crowd, "at the bidding of God and that of St Peter, keybearer of the kingdom of heaven" sang three times the "Laudes" or praises reserved for an emperor ... The Frankish accounts, but not the papal one, record that the Pope then performed the *proskynesis*, the solemn adoration customary before an emperor ... The papal chronicler adds that the Pope also anointed Charlemagne, "his excellent son," as king.³³

Leo's act appears to have caught Charles off-guard. The notion of such a solemn and momentous (to say nothing of portentous) act being carried out without the full knowledge and involvement of the one to be so dramatically and publicly elevated, almost passes belief. Such, at least, is the legend handed down through the centuries-long process of the political construction of Europe: that the Roman Empire was reconstituted on a wintry Roman day by a papal surprise, as Leo – apparently – casually, almost insouciantly, plopped yet another crown onto Charles' head.

Einhard stated that "Quo tempore imperatoris et augusti nomen accepit. Quod primo in tantum aversatus est, ut adfirmaret se eo die, quamvis pr[æ]cipua festivitas esset, ecclesiam non intraturum, si pontificis consilium pr[æ]scire potuisset."^{*} Duffy concisely rebutted this idea. He wrote, "This claim can certainly be discounted. It is inconceivable that Charlemagne stumbled unawares into the carefully choreographed ceremony in St Peter's." Indeed, even by modern standards, the Eighth Century public liturgies of the Pope were attention-grabbing events. As Duffy put it, "The Pope's Christmas Day Mass was always said in the basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore. Its celebration at St Peter's instead was in itself a notable departure from custom, and a very public indication that something unusual was afoot."³⁴ As an alternative, Duffy

* Firchow and Zeydel's translation: "It was on this occasion that he accepted the titles of Emperor and Augustus, which at first he disliked so much that he said he would never have entered the church even on this highest of holy days if he had beforehand realized the intentions of the Pope." Firchow and Zeydel, 98-9.

speculated that “Charlemagne’s later protests, then, were probably designed to soothe the outraged sensibilities of the court in Constantinople, and to excuse his presumption in making himself emperor in the West.”³⁵

Not the least vexatious question surrounding the coronation of Charles as Emperor is arguably the least likely to produce a definite answer: “Why?” Why *did* the King of the Franks, whose kingdom presented no pressing internal need for external glorification, seek, or allow, the imposition of the authority, or at least the gauds, of a defunct régime? Richard E. Sullivan encapsulated two opposing schools of thought, which posited either that “[T]he imperial title was taken by Charlemagne merely to adorn himself and to impress his semi-barbarian followers,” or that “[Charles] was led to assume the imperial crown by a high-flown idealism which at the same time served practical political needs.”³⁶

C. Delisle Burns wrote that

Charles the Great may have thought that he was a successor of that Augustus^{*}; but it is by no means certain that he himself took his new titles as seriously as did some of his followers.

Charles the Great was a play-Emperor. The “Holy Roman Empire” in the West, throughout the Middle Ages, was an historical pageant, without any relation to the realities of the time ...³⁷

That pageant of empire was, in Burns’ interpretation, the focus of the intellectual life of Charles’ court. Governance, in this view, becomes the subject – indeed, the object of a child’s game, with the imperial Charles as the star player. Burns went so far as to assert, based on the literary production of the intellectual circle which surrounded Charles in Aachen, that “Evidently the Court of Charles the Great enjoyed ‘make-believe,’ as children do. They knew they were pretending; and yet, like children, they were not very certain where pretence ended and reality began.”³⁸

* Constantine VI, who had been deposed and blinded by his mother, the Empress Irene, on 18 August 797, almost two and a half years before Charles received the imperial crown from Leo III. Irene ruled until her death in 802.

But in almost the very next breath, Burns asserted that Charles grasped at the prospect of empire as a means of decorating himself ever more gaudily, as though kingship of the Franks was not sufficient for a warrior-king who had made the Franks a name to be feared and respected throughout the land which had formerly been the restive frontier of the Romans. This is not, to my mind, a realistic assessment of Charles' attitude toward the imperial title. If anything, Burns' analysis tends to stand the facts on their head.

Charles had no more need for the shattered glory of the imperial title than a lily has need of gilding. Charles had already established himself, with his "strong right arm," in an essentially unassailable position as the only secular hierarch who could claim dominion over the whole of Europe, or at least that part of Europe worth having. His domains stretched from the trackless sea in the west to the pagan lands that stretched, apparently endlessly, beyond Germany to the east. His word was law from the storm-tossed, foggy sea on whose shore the troublesome Frisians dwelt, south to the borders of the Byzantine empire and the encroaching Muslims, who had reached their high-water mark in the West in 732 when Charles Martel defeated them at Poitiers.* The bestowal of the title of *Augustus*, even if it had had a practical effect[†], added nothing to the horde that Charles commanded by virtue of his successful consolidation and expansion of the Frankish territorial claims in the first thirty-plus years of his reign.

This is not to say that the Vicar of Peter had nothing to offer to the King of the Franks. Indeed, Charles, who though an accomplished warrior was not a homicidal maniac, needed the moral and evangelical authority of the Pope as much as the Pope needed the Frankish king's

* Burns observed, apparently in rebuttal to Henri Pirenne, that "This battle has been given by some historians an exaggerated importance. It is even said to have saved western Europe from becoming Mohammedan. But it seems likely ... that the Saracen raiders defeated by Charles Martel were only seeking for loot and not for permanent conquest; and besides, the Saracen leaders were already divided among themselves before [the battle]." Burns, 581.

[†] In regard to which, see Burns' commentary on the legal impossibility of the Pope erecting an emperor in and for the West, since there was never a "Western" or an "Eastern" Empire, but only one empire ruled by two co-equal emperors, the surviving Eastern one having inherited the full authority, if not control, over the whole Empire after the collapse of the Western hierarchy in 476. Burns, 571; quoted in Sullivan, 15.

sharp sword. The missionary zeal of Pope Gregory II, and the evangelists Wilibrord and Boniface, constituted invaluable tools in the pacification, not merely of the neighboring Frisians, but of the Saxons and the rest of the Germanic peoples to the east, beyond Austrasia.

There were two primary considerations on Charles' agenda. The first, and arguably the more fit for public consumption, was a desire to bring the benefits of Christianity – salvation, civic order, the general uplift of the pagan peoples – to an area that had not yet heard, or at least not yet accepted the Gospel. A subsidiary consideration was that secular assistance in the advancement of the Catholic Church's evangelical effort brought spiritual benefits to the secular potentates who created, or fostered, the conditions in which missionaries carried the Gospel into new lands.

The real agenda item was the imperative need for Charles to extend his religious confession as far as he extended his political authority. That is, Charles the consolidator faced, even in his own self-estimation, the compelling need to preside over a kingdom that was unified in every aspect. It appears that religious heterogeneity in a politically homogeneous realm would have invalidated, or otherwise fallen short, in Charles' estimation, of his ideal vision of what his realm should be. This is an issue to which the extant literature does not appear to have given sufficient consideration.

In this formulation, the Gospel becomes a necessary co-factor in the establishment of what would constitute "good governance" in the Frankish sense. The authority of the Gospel (at least in the spiritual realm) must have been congruent to, and coterminous with, the secular authority of the Frankish king/emperor. Secular authority could secure the environment for the fruitful labors of missionaries, by intimidating or subduing the boisterous pagans, but the religious authority of the missionaries, and the fruit of their labors, was necessary for the

perfection of the expansion of secular control.

Without the Gospel, territorial expansion was pointless and futile. The Carolingians had demonstrated themselves, at an early moment in their rise to power, as determined to expand the territory over which they – or even, before the deposition of Childeric III, their nominal masters – held sway. Thus we see that the papacy, and in a larger sense the whole institutional Church, became the means to achieve Charles' desirable end. It was not merely the Popes who co-opted the Frankish crown; the Frankish kings appear to have co-opted successive Popes in turn.

Approaching the issue from the opposite direction as Burns, Louis Halphen asked if, in light of Charles' extension of his power as King of the Franks, by which "time the power of Charlemagne radiated clear to Pannonia and already made itself strongly felt in the Slavic world,"³⁹ did not demand a more lofty title than merely "King of the Franks." Halphen asked,

Under these conditions, was it not to be expected that in addition to the accumulated titles of king of the Franks, king of the Lombards, and *patricius* of the Romans ... there should be added or substituted a general title better suited to the preponderance of power which he had acquired so as to make evident to all the position which had in fact devolved on him in the West?⁴⁰

In Halphen's formulation, Leo's conferral of the two titles, of *Imperator* and of *Augustus*, become nothing more than what was due to Charles in recognition of he had achieved by force of arms. Charles had, at least to a degree, recreated the Empire in the West in the sense of a single secular polity; although his realm was not completely coterminous with the old Empire (Iberia and the whole of the East being notably beyond Charles' grasp). As Richard Sullivan summarized, "[Charles'] military exploits, his religious leadership, his championship of culture, his responsibility toward the papacy all raised him to a level above any previous ruler in the West."⁴¹ Should he not also bear the title of Emperor? To acclaim Charles as Emperor would certainly flatter the Frankish court, growing increasingly conscious of the importance of Francia

on the political stage.

A third argument states that it was Pope Leo III, not either Charles or his court, who felt the need for an Emperor. Leo's election had been unpopular among the Romans; less than a year later, in April 799, a Roman mob set upon Leo, beat him and attempted to gouge out his eyes and tear out his tongue. Halphen wrote that,

[B]athed in his own blood, he was helped up only to be thrown onto the floor of a cell in the monastery of Saint Erasmus, from whence only the opportune intervention of two *missi* of the Frankish king succeeded in saving him. But the conspirators were not yet disarmed, and they heaped their accusations upon the pope, accusing him in particular of adultery and perjury.⁴²

Such serious charges against a Pope could not be ignored, or papered over by papal claims of immunity from judgment.* The Pope must be tried – but who possessed the authority, or the credibility, fairly and impartially to judge the Pope? The Byzantine Emperor was instantly disqualified; the intractable antagonism between Pope and Emperor meant that Leo could never receive a fair trial at the hands of the Emperor (or Empress; Irene, the widow of Emperor Leo IV the Khazar, had ruled since 797). An Emperor was needed in the West.

The coronation of Charles thus became a *deus ex machina*; the Pope needed an Emperor, so he made one. Karl Heldmann wrote of the so-called *Blutbanntheorie* that

It goes as follows: the *patricius* Charles had been promoted to Roman emperor by the pope and his following 'primarily' or solely for this reason, that he alone – being in full possession of the 'higher, the imperial power' and 'the highest jurisdictional authority,' ... - could carry through the trial for crimes and treason against the enemies of Leo according to the precedents of the Roman criminal law.⁴³

In Heldmann's formulation, Charles' coronation was neither the self-aggrandizing act of an overwhelmingly prideful monarch nor the conferral of a title to match the achievements of a conqueror, but a means to fill a felt need. Leo III required the sanction of a legal process to

* Papal claims of immunity from judgment by any earthly power, while arrogating to the Pope the right to judge all men, are beyond the scope of this paper.

prove his innocence of the charges leveled against him; since only an Emperor, as the fount of justice, could do justice, an Emperor was created. The only viable candidate being the dominant King of the Franks, Leo, according to Heldmann, created his own judge for the sake of clearing his good name.

Heldmann's theory, like those of Burns and Halphen, is problematic. Burns and Halphen attempt to ascribe causation to an act, where the actors either were close-mouthed about their reasons for acting as they did, or at least disingenuous about them. Leo at least spared himself the hypocrisy of coming out and stating that he had crowned Charles as Emperor for the sake of saving his own skin; Charles' protestation that, had he known what Leo had in mind on Christmas 800, he would never have entered the Church, is demonstrably false.

As noted, Charles had no need for the gaudy title of "Emperor"; his feats of arms in bringing order and stability to his realm spoke for themselves. In the same way, Halphen's notion that conferral of the titles of *Imperator* and *Augustus* on Charles satisfied the aspirations of the Frankish court is less than convincing, if only in light of Charles' established respect for the status of the Byzantine Emperor. The Frankish king went to great lengths to cultivate good relations with the *régime* in Constantinople; seeking out the title of Emperor would have been a counterproductive slap in the face to Constantinople.

The notion that Leo created an Emperor because he needed one is also problematic. Quite apart from the fact that such an act would have represented a gravely immoral instrumentalization of a person (thus offending Charles' human dignity), there is the inescapable truth that Leo would have faced the dilemma of what to do with Emperor Charles after his usefulness as the instrument of justice on Leo's behalf was ended. The last thing Leo, or any of his successors, would have wanted would have been an Emperor at large in the West. Not only

would such a situation fail to resolve the Pope's disputes with the *Eastern* Emperor, but it would have resurrected the disputes which Leo's predecessors had had with the *Western* Emperors. Leo would have vaulted from the frying pan of his unpopularity with the Roman mob into the fire of having the "enemy within," in the sense that the struggle for power between Pope and Emperor would have been renewed, a long-term disadvantage of a short-term solution to a pressing, but not intractable problem.

On the other hand, by conferring upon Charles a dignity commensurate with his achievements, Leo actually achieved a long-term solution to the principal problem that he, like his predecessors for centuries, faced; namely, interference of the alien Eastern Emperor in the temporal affairs of the West. Charles had already proved himself a different breed of monarch, respectful of the Church and less inclined to interfere violently in her affairs. This is not to say that Charles and his Frankish court were completely respectful of the rights of the Church in Francia. Indeed, in the relations between the secular and ecclesiastical hierarchies throughout Charles' realm, one sees the first stirrings of the Investiture Controversy, which would poison relations between the Popes and the German Emperors for most of the next 500 years.

Charles' great qualification for the dignity of Emperor, where that office can be read as "protector of the See of Peter," was that he had already achieved the political reconsolidation of the former Empire. Charles was *patricius* of the Romans in fact as well as in title. In demonstrating his ability to perform the duties of the office, Charles demonstrated also his qualification for the title of Emperor.

The role of the Carolingian dynasty in the construction of Europe, and particularly that of Charles, who earned the sobriquet "the Great" by virtue of his military and political achievements, represent an important sequel to the collapse of the old Roman Empire. The

institution of the Empire may have become dormant by Odoacer's refusal to claim the imperial title after the deposition of Romulus Augustulus in 476, but the idea of empire as a political desideratum remained among the debris. That is, although there was no longer a *de facto* Empire from 476, there was still a need for a cohesive polity in Western Europe.

The internal disorder within the western portion of the former Empire, as warlords squabbled among themselves for bits of territory, indicates the fundamental urge to extend power among those who have power. None of the tribal chieftains who seized and claimed their little bit of territory were able either to consolidate their holdings with the holdings of other chieftains, either by diplomacy, artifice, or naked force; neither were they able to establish stable, enduring dynasties through subsequent generations. The Merovingian dynasty in Austrasia almost uniquely established a stable base from which their servants could expand into Neustria, Frisia and Germania, in addition to siring generations of successors who maintained their secular influence beyond the lifetimes of the consolidating patriarchs.

In Pepin of Herstal, his son Charles Martel, and Charles Martel's son Pepin the Short and grandson Charles, the western portion of the Empire found a dynasty of tribal chieftains who displayed three traits necessary to the reconsolidation of the Empire. The Carolingians possessed the military skill to impose their political will on their neighbors; they possessed the devout fidelity to the Pope as successor of St. Peter at the head of Church necessary to make them largely unconflicted co-operators in the Church's mission to expand Catholic observance throughout western Europe, and they possessed the diplomatic skill and grace to achieve their papal approbation of their expansionistic agenda.

It is important not to underestimate the value that accrued to the Carolingians by having the papal banner flying, at least metaphorically, over their cause. Papal benevolence was an

important boost to the credibility of the Carolingian *régime*, as early as Pepin of Herstal's deposition of Childeric III. With the Pope on his side, Pepin's act of treason became an act of righteousness, if not actually a religious observance.

Similarly, temporal and spiritual cooperation smoothed the way for missionary activities among the pagans beyond the eastern Frankish frontier. The evangelization of the pagans was imperative for both the King of the Franks and the Bishop of Rome. As noted, religious homogenization of a potentially subject people completed, or perfected, the social unity of the temporal Frankish realm. The spiritual realm of the Pope gained from the increase in souls saved for Heaven.

Thus we see that the Carolingian dynasty in Francia arose at a time when the papacy was in need of a protector as a bulwark against the harassment and persecution of the Eastern Emperors. At the same time, the political and social reconsolidation of the rubble of the former western Empire required religious sanction in order to advance and gain credibility with the people whom the Frankish king attempted to bring under his authority. Both sides had what the other needed; their marriage may have been one of convenience, but it was one from which both partners drew significant advantage.

In the ruthless politics of empire, however, the Pope was fighting for his very survival. The descendants of Pepin of Herstal, especially Pepin's great-grandson, constituted for the papacy a family of *defensors ecclesiae*, who helped guarantee the viability of the papacy as an institution in the history and the construction of Europe.

NOTES

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- ¹ Eamon Duffy, Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 32.
- ² Leopold von Ranke, History of the Popes: Their Church and State, vol. I. Trans. E. Fowler. (New York: Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1901 [1966]), 10.
- ³ Walter Ullmann, The Growth of Papal Government in the Middle Ages. (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1955, 1962), 45.
- ⁴ "History of Italy," n.d., 1, accessed 10 April 2008 at <<http://www.historyworld.net/wrldhis/PlainTextHistories.asp?historyid=ac52>>.
- ⁵ Ullmann, 49.
- ⁶ Ullmann, 44-45.
- ⁷ Ullmann, 44.
- ⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁹ C. Delisle Burns, The First Europe. A Study of the Establishment of Medieval Christendom, A.D. 400-800. (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1947), 580.
- ¹⁰ Peter Brown, The Rise of Western Christendom, second ed. (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 378.
- ¹¹ Brown, 417.
- ¹² Jacques Broussard, Charlemagne et son temps, in the series, l'Univers des Connaissances. (Paris: Hachette, 1968), 9.
- ¹³ Brown, 378.
- ¹⁴ Brown, 420.
- ¹⁵ Ullmann, 46.
- ¹⁶ Ullmann, 48, citing E. Caspar, "Papst Gregor II und der Bilderstreit," in *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte*, Vol. LII (1933), 83. The cited Greek text apparently appears on line 335 of Caspar's edition.
- ¹⁷ Adrian Fortescue, "Iconoclasm," n.d., transcribed by Michael C. Tinkler. Accessed 28 April 2008 at <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07620a.htm>>. Fortescue's analysis of how Leo III and successive patriarchs of Constantinople bent fidelity to Iconoclasm to the needs of political reliability and personal advancement is illuminating, especially the case of Patriarch Anastasius, who by turns embraced Iconoclasm, Orthodoxy and then Iconoclasm again, and wound up being publicly flogged and blinded by the heretic Emperor Constantine V Copronymus, who eventually reinstated Anastasius in the patriarchate.
- ¹⁸ Ullmann, 45.
- ¹⁹ Burns, 575, quoted in The Coronation of Charlemagne: What Did It Signify?, ed. Richard E. Sullivan, in the series, "Problems in European Civilization," gen. ed. Dwight E. Lee. (Boston: D.C. Heath and Company, 1959, 1966), 17.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*
- ²¹ Ullmann, 45.
- ²² Ullmann, 51.
- ²³ Von Ranke, 14.
- ²⁴ Von Ranke, 14-15.
- ²⁵ Einhard, Vita Karoli Magni, trans. & ed. Evelyn Scherabon Firchow and Edwin H. Zeydel. (Coral Gables, FL: University of Miami Press, 1972), 44. Firchow and Zeydel state that they based their translation on the text as published in the *Monumenta Germaniae historica*, although it is not clear whether the took Holder-Egger's revision (to which they refer) into account, or not.
- ²⁶ Von Ranke, 11-12.
- ²⁷ Von Ranke, 14.
- ²⁸ Einhard, 66.
- ²⁹ Broussard, 25.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Einhard, 56.
- ³² Ullmann, 88.
- ³³ Duffy, 76.
- ³⁴ Duffy, 76.
- ³⁵ Duffy, 77.
- ³⁶ Richard E. Sullivan, "Introduction," in Sullivan, x.

³⁷ Burns, 569-70, in Sullivan, 14-15.

³⁸ Burns, 573-4, in Sullivan, 16.

³⁹ Louis Halphen, Charlemagne et l'empire carolingien, in the series "L'évolution de l'humanité," ed. Henri Berr. (Paris: Éditions Albin Michel, 1947), 120. Quoted in Sullivan, 28.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Sullivan, in Sullivan, x.

⁴² Halphen, 124, quoted in Sullivan, 30.

⁴³ Karl Heldmann, Das Kaisterum Karls des Grossen: Theorien und Wirklichkeit. In the series, "Quellen und Studien zur Verfassungsgeschichte des deutschen Reiches in Mittelalter und Neuzeit, gen. eds. F. Hartung et al., Vol. VI, Part 2. Quoted in Sullivan, 62.