



News from the Nations— In A.D. 1215

The splendour of the Fourth Lateran Council

Seldom if ever has the city of Rome experienced such a magnificent spectacle as it experienced recently when the Fourth Lateran Council, called by Pope Innocent III, was inaugurated. A total of 2,283 representatives from the Roman Catholic world heeded the summons to travel to Rome and attend the Council. There were seventy-one archbishops, over 400 bishops and 800 abbots, as well as envoys from the countries and chief cities of Europe. The first Lateran Council (the name comes from the fact that they are held in the Lateran Palace in Rome) was held ninety-two years ago in 1123, and others were held in 1139 and 1179. This one looks like being the most significant one yet, for Innocent III is clearly using it to bring in a number of significant measures to strengthen the already impressive power of the papacy.

POPE ASSERTS CONTROL OVER FRIAR MOVEMENT

A recent development in the Roman Catholic Church is the friary movement. Friars (from the Latin *frater*, brother), like monks, take vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, but instead of remaining in a monastery go out to the people. Two orders of friars have come into being in recent years. The first, known as the Dominicans, from the name of their founder, Dominic, was founded in Toulouse, France in 1214, and they are sometimes called the Blackfriars from the colour of their robes. They were set up to reinforce church teaching amongst the people, counteracting the influence of heretical groups like the Albigensians and the Waldensians. The other order is the Franciscans, set up by Francis, a native of Assisi in Italy, in 1208, and otherwise known as the Greyfriars from their grey robes. They lay great stress on poverty and simple living. The coming into existence of these orders of friars who travel amongst the people is expected to strengthen the grip of the Church on the people, and for that reason Pope Innocent III seems determined to keep control over them as part of his policy to extend the power of the Church.

Different treatment of Jews

Though Innocent III is the most powerful pope ever to hold the office, nevertheless it is difficult for the papacy to enforce its decrees right across Christendom, and it remains to be seen how widespread is the obedience to the new regulations concerning the Jews. In practice the treatment of Jews across Europe has varied from country to country and from period to period. The Jews are often useful to monarchs in lending them money and in providing administrative and financial skills. In Britain the Jews are regarded as the king's property in order to preserve them from persecution from the people, so that in Norwich, for example, the Jews' quarter is in the shadow of the castle to emphasise this point.

Council proclaims new doctrine

One of the most significant decisions of the Fourth Lateran Council so far has been the introduction of the doctrine of transubstantiation as an official part of the teaching of the Church. This doctrine has been defined by the council as follows: "Christ's body and blood are verily contained under the species of bread and wine, the bread being transubstantiated into the body and the wine into blood, by Divine power". The word 'transubstantiation' means 'change of substance', and this is exactly what the new doctrine is intended to involve, the changing of bread and wine into the actual flesh and blood of Christ, although there is no outward change. The new doctrine is based on taking literally the words of Christ which he uttered about the bread and the wine at the Last Supper, when he said, "this is my body" and "this is my blood" (Mt. 26:26,28). Christians originally took this to mean "this represents . . ." but in recent years there has been widespread discussion within the Roman Catholic Church about imparting this new meaning to the words, discussions which have now come to their fulfilment in the proclamation of the new doctrine. It is not difficult to see the reason for the change. By attributing to its priests, and only its priests, this supposed power to transform bread and wine into flesh and blood, and by proclaiming that all must receive the body of Christ from the priest in order to escape the eternal tortures of hell, the power of the Church has been strengthened greatly.

The Church clamps down on heresy

There can be little doubt that the main reason why the pope has called the Church Council is to impose the authority of the Church in the face of what it perceives as heresy, in particular the Albigensian movement in France. This arose in the twelfth century and gained a firm hold in Languedoc in the south of France, and to a lesser extent in northern Italy. The roots of the Albigensians can be found in the ancient heresy of Gnostic Christianity. In 1209 Innocent III launched a crusade against them, led by the barons of France. Pockets of the heresy are still being ruthlessly dealt with. Another perceived heresy that is that of the Waldenses, the name given to the followers of Peter Waldo of Lyons in France. His followers stand for a more Bible-based preaching, which is anathema to the Catholic Church's claim that only it can interpret the Bible to the people. Innocent III is determined that all heresies should be ruthlessly stamped out, and the Waldenses, who have spread to Germany, Spain and northern Italy, have been severely persecuted in recent years.

The anti-Jewish pope

The measures against the Jews brought in at the Fourth Lateran Council by Innocent III provide further evidence of the anti-Jewish stance he has shown throughout his period of office. Many examples can be quoted from the various decrees and declarations he has issued. Here is one: "Whilst the Jews should not be killed, lest the Christians forget the law of God, they must continue to be dispersed and to wander upon the face of the earth, until their faces will be filled with shame and they will seek out the Name of the Master, Jesus the Messiah".

The papacy reaches the height of its power

Lothario dei Segni became pontiff in 1198, seventeen years ago, taking on the name Innocent III. An energetic and capable man, he has used every opportunity to strengthen the power of the papacy. Politically he has strengthened papal rule over large areas of central Italy and engineered the election of his own candidate, Frederick II, as Holy Roman Emperor. When he became pope he likened the papacy to the sun and the emperor to the moon, and later he claimed that the pope has been given by Christ not only "authority over all the churches" but also over "the whole world". It was in the year 607 that the Eastern Roman Emperor, Phocas, issued a decree confirming the pope as head over all the churches of Christendom. Since then the power of the papacy has grown and grown and is now, over 600 years later, surely at its zenith. Students of Bible prophecy point to the fact that the time periods of Daniel and Revelation refer to a 1,260-year period of papal power, and it is appropriate that half way through this period, just as the sun reaches its height in the heavens at midday, so papal power should now be seen at its greatest.

Jews must wear distinctive dress

Another of the provisions of the Fourth Lateran Council is one that decrees that Jews must wear a patch or badge on their garments to show that they are Jews. The decree, which applies to Moslems as well, covers all over the age of twelve. A Jewish delegation has visited the Vatican to complain about this decree but without success. The pope argued that the Law of Moses in any case decreed that Jews should wear fringes to their garments so there should be no problem in keeping to the new regulation. The Jews are not convinced, regarding this regulation as one which will expose them to ridicule and persecution wherever they go. Other regulations introduced at the Council include forbidding Jews to go out at all during Easter and forbidding Jews to be employed in the public service where they would have authority over Christians.

THE MONGOLS ARE COMING

In the Far East a threat has emerged to the security of the Middle East and Eastern Europe. For hundreds of years Mongol horsemen have ranged across the vast plains of Central Asia, but only in recent years have they united to form a powerful nation. The man who has achieved this is Genghis Khan, born in 1167 near Lake Baikal in Siberia and proclaimed head of a united Mongol nation nine years ago in 1206. Turning his attention eastward, he invaded China, and the most recent news is that he has taken the Chinese capital Beijing. It is widely thought that he will invade India next, then the Middle East or Eastern Europe. Students of revelation have been looking for the next in the sequence of invading powers prophesied under the figure of the trumpet judgements of Revelation 9, and it appears that in the Mongols under Genghis Khan a likely candidate has emerged. But what has driven these nomadic hordes to invade the more settled and cultivated areas? Some think it is a change in climatic conditions which has reduced the availability of the pasture which is so vital to nomadic horseman.