THE PONTIFICATE OF ST. GREGORY VII.

The pontificate of Hildebrand, who on his election assumed the name of Gregory VII., is by many regarded as the most interesting epoch in the history of the Papacy. In the history of modern Europe, four great events, according to a brilliant writer, Mr. W. S. Lilly,* stand out as landmarks upon which the student who desires accurately to explore that field will do well to fix his attention. The first is the coronation of Charles the Great on Christmas Day, in the year 800; the second the election of Hildebrand to the Papal Chair on the 22nd of April, 1073; *the third, the fall of Constantinople on the 29th of May,* 1453; the fourth, the sacking of the Bastille on the 14th of July, 1789. The first of these, the bestowal of the Imperial Crown upon the great Frankish monarch, was the outward sign, as he explains, of that new order which emerged from amid the decay and dissolution of the Roman world—was the beginning of the Middle Ages. The Pontificate of St. Gregory VII. he terms the turning point of those ages, determining in, vitally important matters, the course which they were to run. The taking of Constantinople by Mohammed II. marks their close, that event which by scattering Greek scholars over Italy, contributed more than anything else to that movement called the Renaissance, and to all that came therefrom including the Protestant Reformation. "And the passing bell of the Cæsarism which had arisen upon the ruins of the medieval order is sounded," Mr. Lilly adds, "in the presageful words of the Duke of Liancourt, when announcing to Louis XVI. the capture of the royal fortress, and the murder of its little garrison: 'Sire, it is not a revolt; it is a revolution.'" The second of these great events, is that he believes the significance of which is least understood. For the most important part of our heritage in this new time is held to have come to us directly from the medieval period, that period of which Hildebrand was by all means the greatest figure and the most momentuous issue of which was that conflict which he waged, and which is waged in our own day under different conditions.

For centuries the memory of Hildebrand was reprobated as *that of a man of insatiable ambition, and spiritual pride.* Instead of the aureole of sanctity a kind of diabolical splendour encircled him, and the grim pun, borrowed from the German, whereby he is described in the Anglican "Book of Homilies" as "the brand of hell," did but express the general estimate of him, formed alike by Tentonic and English historians. Nor was he judged more favourably in France. "The Church has numbered him among the saints, the wise have numbered him among the madmen," wrote Voltaire. Even ecclesiastical writers scarcely recorded a more favourable verdict upon him, "but Time," to quote Mr. Lilly's words, "at length retried his cause,
—Time

"who solves all doubts
By bringing Truth, his glorious daughter, out."

More exact and more thorough investigators within the last half century have examined what manner of man Hildebrand was, and have revealed to the world a true view of the great Pontiff. To Guizot more than anyone else perhaps, is due the passing away of the old error from the European mind. Setting at nought the false Gallican notions, he exhibited him not in the guise of a reactionary, an obscurantist, a foe of intellectual development and of social progress, but as a reformer alike of the Church and of civil society, upon the basis of morality, justice, and order. "We are accustomed," writes Guizot, "to represent to ourselves Gregory VII. as a man who wished to render all things immoveable; as an adversary to intellectual development and social progress, and as a man who strove to maintain the world under a stationary or retrograding system. Nothing could be so false. Gregory VII. was a reformer under the plan of despotism as were Charlemagne and Peter the Great. He, in the ecclesiastical order, was almost what Charlemagne in France, and Peter the Great in Russia, were in the civil order. He sought to reform the Church, and from the Church to reform society, to introduce therein more morality, more justice, and more law; he wished to effect this through the Holy See and to its profit."

The great fact of the age which witnessed the great struggle between the Empire and the Papacy was feudalism, side by side with which had grown up the great ecclesiastical system by which Europe had been formed into "a spiritual commonwealth called Christendom." And the principles of the Church were of a kind to correct in the world the evils of the feudal organization. "Feudalism," says Mr. Lilly, "tended to the annihilation of the individual. The Church taught, and could not keep from teaching, the supreme worth of human personality. Feudalism, essentially aristocratic, set the greatest store upon the glories of birth and state. The Church maintained the absolute equality of all men, not in secular rights, but in their common spiritual nature, in their common dependence upon and accountability to God. The supreme argument of *feudalism was the sword. The Church wielded mightier weapons, not carnal, but spiritual.* . . . Feudalism sternly forbade the individual to break his birth's invidious bar.' The Church proclaimed loudly the doctrine of a career for talents. Her constitution was still largely democratic. . . . Her religious houses were so many little republics scattered up and down Europe. Her councils and synods were real, deliberative assemblies. Her free institutions were the germ and norm of the civil franchises which were afterwards to spring up, once more. Feudalism was by its very nature disruptive; its tendency to universal war. But as political unity perished from Europe a higher unity developed, and from the bosom of the most frightful disorder the world has ever seen, arose the largest and purest idea, perhaps, which ever drew men together —the idea of a spiritual society."

Of that society the Roman Church was the centre and head. But the two centuries that intervened between the election of Pope Nicholas I. (858) and Gregory VII. (1073) are not the brightest, by any means, in the history of the Papacy. Violence and impurity disgraced the chair of Peter; the simoniacal scale of benefices had grown into a scandal, and that everything in Rome had its price passed into a proverb. The feudal tendency of the time was to convert the bishops into feudal barons. Under the successors of Charlemagne, the Episcopate had become in large measure a donative belonging to royalty, and abbacies and sees were conferred by the nomination of the prince. Indeed, the spiritual character of the *higher clergy was obscured by their civil employment as counc*illors and governors of provinces. Some of them, St. Fulbert of Chartres testifies, were better acquainted with the laws of war than most secular potentates. Then other abuses crept in, and extended themselves to the inferior clergy, until it looked as if the spiritual society would be swallowed up by the feudal system. That it was not so, and that the great principles survived, of which the Church in the world is the sole representative,—the principles of the supremacy of the law, the freedom of conscience, the equality of men and their brotherhood in the Faith,—was the work of one man, humanly speaking, and that man was Hildebrand, afterwards Gregory VII., whose Pontificate, as has been said, is regarded as the turning-point of the Middle Ages.

Hildebrand was born in a carpenter's shop in the little Tuscan town of Soano. A letter addressed to him by a contemporary abbot on his elevation to the papacy, speaks of him as *vir de plebe*, "fit origin," Mr. Lally thinks, "for the great champion of religious democracy in the Middle Ages, 'the holy athlete of the Christian faith' as Dante sings, who was to maintain the cause of the poor against a military aristocracy." His father had a kinsman who was the head of the monastery of St. Mary on the Aventine, and thither Hildebrand was sent, as a youth, to learn the liberal arts and moral discipline. To the great religious house of Odelo, Abbot of Clugny, he turned a few years later. The prescient mind of St. Odelo discerned the coming greatness of the neophyte, applying to him the words spoken of an earlier reformer, "He shall be great in the House of the Lord."

"After some years," the chronicler relates, he set out to return to Rome. When the conscience-stricken Gregory VI. resigned the Rome See, on account of the unworthy means by which his election had been effected, and the Emperor carried the fallen Pope with him to Germany, "Hildebrand beloved of God attended him thither wishing to show reverence towards his lord." Nine months later the troubled life of Gregory ended, and Hildebrand returned to Clugny. That was in 1045. It appears to have then been his intention to devote himself thenceforth to the monastic life, of which Clugny was the great centre. But shortly after the election of Pope Leo IX. (A.D. 1048) the new Pontiff was brought into intercourse with Hildebrand. *From the first the new Pope clave to the young monk*

* "*Chapters in European History,*" *Chap. II. p. 98.*