

The Babylonian Captivity of the Popes: Lessons for the 21st Century Church Leaders

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Abstract

Since the death and resurrection of Christ, the church has been a focal point in the history and development of the human race. Church as an institution has been a determinant factor in the socio-economic, politico-cultural and religious segments of the society. As a great player, its success has been the success of the society and its failure the failure of humanity. However, this institution has affected the society positively and negatively through her various stages it has passed since inception. Nevertheless, looking at the present church characterized with politics of rancor, struggle for power, excesses and abuses, intolerance, corruption, divide and rule, ethnicity, favoritism among others, it seemed as if to say that the church has not learnt from her passed. The captivity of the popes has a great volume of lesson for present leaders in a view to have rethink. Therefore, this work ventures at investigating why this captivity in order to prevent such event in this present time.

Introduction

Since the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the church has metamorphosed into series of stages. It has been persecuted more than any other institution yet has survived. In each period the church came out not being the same. However, between 1305-1416 the church passed through prolonged period of crises during which it seems that the church is doomed to destruction. It found its authority undermined, openly challenged and divided among rivals. Although, at the end, it emerged with its authority, yet the struggle for supremacy brought about significant changes to the structure of the church and sowed the seed that germinated during the reformation era.

This period of crises and captivity was divided into two periods of unequal lengths. In the first phase, the new elected pope in 1305, Pope Clement V, a Frenchman declined to move to Rome. For Melissa, (n.d) this is because Philip IV of France was instrumental in securing his election and this act was unpopular in Rome where factionalism against France was prominent. To escape the oppressive atmosphere, Pope Clement chose to move the papal capital to Avignon which was the property of the papal vassals at that time, (*retrieved from <http://historymedren.about.com/od/thePapacy/p/Avignon-papacy.htm>*). In such

circumstances, the authority and dignity of the papacy was threatened by secular rulers. For Jackson (2003) from 1305 to 1377, the popes lived in Avignon and during this time sentiment against the papacy grew because it was improper for the bishop of Rome to reside in Avignon.

Hence, the Avignon papacy refers to a period in the history of the Roman Catholic Church from 1305 to 1378 when the seat of the pope was moved to Avignon. This period has been termed the Babylonian captivity of the popes or the church, particularly by Martin Luther and some other historians. (Retrieved <http://faculty.ucc.edu/egh-damerow/avignon-papacy.html> on November 15th 2011). This period coincidentally lasted for seventy years as prophesied by prophet Jeremiah, in Jeremiah 25:11. But, one may ask, is it actually the plan of God? Obi (1985) noted in a remark from the “letters of Pope Celestine VI to all mankind as cited by Giovanni (1948) thus: “every history is sacred history, every history is a gospel, eliminate God from history and you will not be able to understand even the history of man which is just an episode, a chapter, a reflexion of the history of God” (p.3). What is the importance of this captivity to the church and our present society?

Nevertheless, in 1378, the seat was moved back to Rome resulting in one of the greatest power struggle in the history of the church termed “papal schism” or “the great controversy of the anti-popes”. No matter the terminology, the fact remains that the church was in a problem and finding solution is very important. Therefore, this work aimed at looking at the causes and implications of this dramatic event with a view to challenge the 21st century leaders of the church.

Background to the crises:

The papacy since the fifth century had claimed supremacy over the affairs of the church and in addition had political control in some secular matters. As believed that power corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely, the increase in this power of the papacy lead to excesses and abuses as seen in decrees of Pope Gregory VII:

- That the Roman Catholic was founded by God.
- That Pope alone can with right be called universal.
- That he alone can depose or re-instate bishops.
- That Pope's name shall be spoken in the churches.
- That his name alone is the only name in the world that it may be permitted to him to depose emperors.
- That he himself may be judged by no one.
- That the Roman Church has never erred nor will it err to all eternity, the scripture bearing in mind.

These claim for religious and political power over secular matters in the eleventh century, turned out to the worst. The church leaders raised an agitation over the appointment of the church leaders by the kings and emperors through their practice of lay investiture. To stop such coronation and power of the secular rulers, Pope Gregory claimed that he the Pope alone was truly God's "Vicar on earth" and that Pope's authority extended over the entire Christian world, including its rulers. In this vein, the papacy was working towards the internal freedom of the church. Gregory's claim made Henry IV, the king of Germany to disagree with him over the appointments of high ranking clerics as his administrators.

In reaction to the above misunderstanding and claim to power, the Pope issued a decree in 1075 forbidding high ranking clerics from receiving their investiture from lay leaders. In his words: "we decree that no one of the clergy shall receive the investiture with a bishopric or abbey or church from the hand of emperor or king or any lay person". This struggle between Henry IV and Gregory VII dragged on until a new German king and a new Pope reached an agreement in 1122 known as the concordant of Worms in which a bishop in Germany is first elected by the church officials after which the new bishop paid homage to the king as lord.

One thing is certain; the absolute power of the church over the kings is becoming to wane. Jackson (2003) observed, Pope Innocent III at the height of the church political power in 1198 wrote:

As God, the creator of the universe set two great lights in the firmament of heaven, the greater light to rule the day, and the lesser light to rule the night so He set two great dignitaries in the firmament of the universe church... the greater to rule the day that is the souls and the lesser to rule the night, that is bodies. These dignitaries are papal authority and the royal power. And just as the moon gets her light from the sun, and is inferior to the sun... so the royal power gets the splendor of its dignity from the papal authority.(324).

During this period, the pope maintained absolute political and religious powers in Europe: but at the inception of the fourteen century after the first Jubilee- a holy year to celebrate the centenary of Christ's birth proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII on 22nd February, 1300 the power of the pope was threatened. The success of this Jubilee coupled with that of the crusades re-affirmed the absolute growing power, respect and dignity of the papacy. No wonder, Bruce (2008) complained that the decades ahead looked bright to Boniface because for two centuries, the papacy had held an unrivalled peak of power: religious and political. The Pope had before him the sparkling example of Innocent III, a pope highly skilled at imposing his will upon emperors and kings. Therefore, Boniface

thought he could continue in the same way of action but unfortunately the reverse was the case.

However, the prominent characters in the crises, Philip IV represented a stringent new voice in the Christendom. For him, Jesus Christ gave the church no temporary authority. He was proud, arrogant and seriously determined that the king would have his way. Philip IV had no respect of tradition or rights and was greedy and unscrupulous. In order to enforce his will, he surrounded himself with those well trained in Roman law and who also believed in royal supremacy. On the other hand, Pope Boniface VIII was in some ways a man of similar temper and ambitious like Philip IV. He sees the pope as a clerical monarch and being a trained lawyer, he used the law as an effective weapon to get what he wanted.

He was stubborn, intelligent and believed deeply that the pope was literally the Vicar of Christ on earth. In his view, opposing the papacy is opposing God who instituted him. No wonder that he was quoted to have said that he would rather be a dog than a Frenchman. In one incident, he kicked royal envoy in the head as the man bowed at the papal throne because he was angry with him. No doubt this was not the sort of fellow to sit by while the French king claimed powers over the Gallic but unknowingly, the storm was gathering.

The conflict

The question of who has the absolute power in secular matters became a burning issue at the inception of the fourteenth century. The king claimed absolute power in all secular matters while on the other hand; the Pope was claiming absolute power in all segments of the human society. Who then will bail the cat from the impending danger? Is it the trouble empire or the papacy? For already the long internal dispute between the two most powerful families in Rome: the Colonna and Orsini were seriously affecting the papacy and the empire. These families had for some period tended to monopolize the papacy, since most of the dozen of cardinals were Italians.

In 1294, to break the deadlock between the families, a pious monk unconnected with either clan was elected to succeed Pope Celestine. That monk later became Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303). Pope Boniface VIII alienated both families and got into a dispute with Philip IV. The era of monopoly in the church and state was no longer acceptable. The stroke that breaks the camels back was the decision of Philip IV to tax the clergy.

In response, Pope Boniface in his *clericos laicos* 1296 issued a decree prohibiting any taxation on Church property except by the papacy permission to do so on emergency. The bull warned:

Likewise, emperors, kings or princes, dukes, counts or barons, podestats, captains or officials or rectors by whatever name they are called, whether

of cities, castles or any places whatever, wherever situated and any other persons of whatever pre-eminence, condition or standing who shall impose, exact or receive such payments or shall any where arrest, seize or presume to take possession of the belonging of church, ecclesiastical persons which are deposited in the sacred buildings or shall order them to be arrested seize or taken possession of shall receive them when taken possession of, seize or arrested; also all who shall knowingly give aid, counsel or favor in the aforesaid things: whether publicly or secretly shall incur, by the act itself the sentence of excommunication. (Retrieved from medieval sourcebook: BonifaceVIII, clericis laicos 1296 <http://www.forham.edu/halsall/source/68-clericos.asp>)

Philip IV in utter disgust to the above bull imprisoned the bishop of Pamires on charges of treason in 1301. The Pope ordered for the official release but the king ignored the papacy. In the midst of such power struggle, the Pope issued the bull *salvator mundi* retracting all privileges granted to the French king by previous Popes. But since the king was bent not to obey the order of the papacy, the Pope issued another bull *Auscultator fili* with charges against the king thereby summoning him before a council to Rome. Reacting further, the papacy declared: “God has placed us over the kings and kingdoms”. In response, Philip IV wrote “Your Venerable conceitedness may know that we are nobody's vassal in t e m p o r a r y m a t t e r s ” (retrieved,http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/avignon_papacy). The king summon a meeting of the Estate Generals, a counsel of the Lords of France and after consultations issued charge of sodomy, simony, sorcery and heresy against the Pope and summoned him before the counsel in France.

In retaliation, the papacy released the strongest affirmation to date of papal sovereignty in *unam sanctam* on November 18, 1302 where he decreed thus: “it is necessary to salvation that every human creation be subject to the Roman pontiff”. For historians, this is one of the most extreme statements of papal spiritual supremacy ever made. The bull lays claims on the dogmatic proposition on the unity of the catholic church, the necessity of belonging to it for eternal salvation, the position of the Pope as supreme head of the Church, and the duty arising of submission to the Pope in order to belong to the Church and thus attain salvation.

Boniface VIII categorically maintained that outside the Church there is neither salvation nor the remission of sins. Some scholars were of the view that it is an extreme form of the concept known as “*plenitudo potestates*” which declares that those who resist the Roman pontiff are resisting God's ordination. No wonder that the bull also declares that the Church must be united, that the Pope

was the sole and absolute head of the church: “therefore, of the one and only Church there is one body and one head not two heads like a monster”.

This indicates that the Pope is not willing to relent his powers to any temporary or secular authority. As if King Philip was still reluctant, he set in motion a bull that would excommunicate the king of France and put the interdict over France. Interdict is popes order that denial those that disobey the pope from participating in the sacraments. To overturn the Pope's plan, Bruce (2008) echoed:

The king's countermove was no less drastic. He prepared to have Boniface deposed on the ground that his election has been illegal. To execute this plan, he chose William of Nogaret, a shrewd lawyer who was helping him build the foundations of his nation. (p.218)

In self defense, the king ordered for the arrest of the Pope and his trial before the council in France. On September 1303, William Nogaret led a delegation of Italian soldiers to Rome with an intention to bring the Pope, if necessary by force before a council to rule on charges brought against him. What a disgraceful event? However, the mission would not succeed but the Pope being 86 years old, the ordeal shattered him that he died few weeks latter. Describing the episode, Bruce (2008) quoted his contemporaries as saying that the Pope crept in like a fox, reigned like a lion and died like a dog. What an irony?

The Papacy in Captivity

The death of Pope Boniface VIII deprived the Church of his most able politician who would hold his ground against the secular power of the kings. Following the strife between Boniface VIII and Philip IV of France, and the death of after eight months of Benedict XI, the successor of Boniface, a deadlocked conclave elected Clement V, a French man as Pope in 1305. After his election, the new pope declined to move to Rome and in 1309 moved his court to the papal enclave at Avignon. Subsequently, six other successive popes all of French origin chose to reside in a little town called Avignon which was located on the Rhone River just across from the borders of Philip's territory.

During this period of 1305-1312, Clement helped France to dominate the College of Cardinals and because of this, the following successive popes in captivity were French men. Was it the will of the papacy or the king of France? Considering the political circumstances, it would be observed that the king wanted to strengthen French influence in Europe by using the power of the Church. For the Europeans, Rome , the Eternal City, stood not only for the idea of the apostolic succession of the Church founded by Peter, but also the concept of western universality and in their thought Avignon was surrounded on all sides by French kingdom which made the Church vulnerable in the hands of one nation: the power hungry French. The following Popes resided in the papal enclave of Avignon:

Pope Clement V	1303 – 1314
Pope John XXII	1316 - 1334
Pope Benedict XII	1334 – 1342
Pope Clement VI	1342 – 1352
Pope Innocent VI	1352 – 1362
Pope Urban V	1362 – 1370
Pope Gregory XI	1370 – 1378

It is important to note that after the death of Clement V in 1314, conclave could not elect a new pope for over two years. Ironically the papal conclave from May 1, 1314 to August 7, 1316 held in the apostolic palace of Carpentras and then the Dominican house in Lyon was one of the longest concave in the history of the Roman Catholic Church and the first conclave of the Avignon papacy. This was due the division of the Cardinals into three factions: Italians, Gascon and Provençal. The Italians faction wished to return the papacy to Rome, the Gascon faction mostly composed of the relatives of the previous pope Clement wished to retain the privileges and powers they had enjoyed during his rule while the Provençal opposed these aims of Italian and Gascon factions. (Retrieved http://www.en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/papalconclave_1314-1316).

By 1360, there was an outcry in Italy over the Papal States and French domination of the papacy. As a result, in 1363 Pope Urban V went to Rome to observe the state of affairs. He discovered that the streets were quite, great houses were shuttered and empty while many historic Churches were in need of repairs. The Pope felt pitied but could not afford to leave the luxurious courts of Avignon. No wonder that the splendor in which the Pope and Cardinals were living in Avignon led to a strong criticism against the papacy. The Italian poet, Petrarch in Jackson (2008) expressed that feeling when he wrote:

Here reign the successors of the poor fisherman of Galilee; they have strangely forgotten their origin. I am astounded...to see these men loaded with gold, and clad in purple, boasting of spoils of princes and nations (p.337).

However, perceiving the decline in papal honour and dignity, Pope Gregory XI really makes the break on January 17, 1377 by returning to Rome. What an amazing return from exile? But unfortunately, this return to Rome complicated the problem of the Church for a long time in what is known as the great schism that lasted for 39 years.

Implications

Regardless of its effects towards the image of the church, its contribution towards the development of the contemporary church cannot be denied. Although it gave the church a blow; however, it could be seen as the fulfillment of the prophecy of Jeremiah in Jeremiah 25:11. In other words, it reminds the present church that no

matter what happen God's word must surely come to pass. It was evidently seen that it helped the church to look at its lapses thereby seeking an appropriate means to remedy the ugly situation.

Therefore, it was not unusual for the papal court to have left Rome for short period of time in order to escape the political turmoil prevailing. This escape inspired the papal court to overhaul its spiritual, legal and financial machinery allowing it to become far more efficient and effective to the mission of Jesus Christ in establishing the church. Sequel to this event, the church has become worldly that it loosed its focus of serving God holistically but this trouble period helped the church tremendously to renew its mandate and mission.

In the same, absolute power intoxicates and corrupts as seen in the papal decree issued on November 18, 1302 that it is necessary to salvation that every human creation be subject to the Roman pontiff. This is evidence that if this power was not checked by the secular rulers the church would have gone through the wrong track. In the light of the contemporary events in the 21st century where the church is battling with the state in matters relating to same-sex marriage, abortion, total abstinence from sex for unmarried or the use of condom, Islamic banking among others, caution must be used to avoid the total collapse of the moral values of the society. Dialogue and understanding would be a better tool rather than use of religious force to oppose such move.

Undoubtedly, these series of events were sowing a seed towards the reformation of the church. One thing is certain; the church is a dire need of reformation due to abuses and neglects coupled with the worldly nature that characterized its activities. All these are indications that European Christian no longer accepted papal interference in what they regarded purely political matters. Distinction must be made between religious matters and political matters. Although, during this period, no one could say what a political matter was, but a king's power within his own country was a generally accepted fact. It shows a shift from sacred or religious controlled society to a secular controlled society on secular matters.

The fourteen century also witnessed an increase in the nationalistic interest among Christians. People were becoming conscious for national freedom politically, culturally and economically. Such consciousness was as a result of an increase in learning and technological known how. So they thought it more importantly to see their state functioning without any direct papal guidance. Europe was slowly moving away from its feudal past due to the advance in the technological capabilities sowing the seed for the industrial revolution. Land was becoming less important whereas hard cash was the new thing. Secular powers thought it right that to control the state, you would control the revenue. In this

direction, it required a broader authority to tax the church which the papal authority sees it as detrimental to its power

Undeniably, this is an indication that for the church to position itself relevantly in the society, it must understand the political, religious, cultural and socio-economic development of each period. Its leaders must work in line with the undertones of each time. Also Boniface was not a beloved Pope; he was a target of widespread criticism. No wonder Dante, the Italian genius in Bruce (2008) in his divine comedy reserved a place in hell for him yet he was the Vicar of Christ. His character, interest and will collided with that of Philip which made the two incompatible. This calls for a re-appraisal in the 21st century church in regards to the type of personalities appointed or elected to lead the church. Criticism against the church of our time is a result of the sort of their leaders. Therefore, it is necessary for the church to review its stand on certain issues like celibacy of priest in the light of the recent sexually abuse and scandals against priests, same-sex marriage, ordination of women, qualification for ordination and bishopric among others.

The aftermath of the captivity was very severe to the church and Europe at large. Such was because, ending over 70 year's crises is without offence to some people and nations. That was why Urban IV was ruling from Rome and Clement from Avignon. What a divided house? The problem lies in the personal, national and socio-cultural cum economic interest. For 39 years two papal offices were in existence; each Pope with his own choice of Cardinals in order to secure the papal succession of its own choice.

In addition, it created political confrontation between France, Rome, England and their allies. Thus, the image of the church leadership was negatively portrayed. The pope believed to be the true leader of the church worldwide now were two; each side denouncing the other as the anti- Christ thereby making people to undermine the papacy. In reaction, tumults and riots broke out. Property was burned and crusades were preached. To redeem the church, God raised reformers like Wycliffe who denounced the immoral activities of the church authorities of his time. Therefore, the spirit of reformation that took over the church in latter times was a reaction to these series of neglect, abuses and excesses of the church contrary to God's plan. In the same vein, church of our time would know that the upsurge in the new religious movements Africa was as results of such neglect and abuses by the traditional or mainline churches. It is high time for the church to recognize that the era of religious monopoly has gone.

Conclusion

History is meant to remind us of the achievements, successes, failures and mistakes of the past in order to improve on their gains and on the other hand, not repeat their mistakes. In this vein, the captivity of the church has a great volume of lessons for the present church to avoid such spiritual decline from taking over the church. It shows that political power and religious power are two separate powers that work for the well being of mankind if well handled but to the detriment of humanity if abused and misused. In our present society, what the church would do is to act as checks and balances on the excess of those in political powers in order to alleviate the numerous problems of insecurity, unemployment, decay in morality, lack of infrastructure, corruption among others. The church ought to find out pro-active measures to tackle these numerous challenges to improve in a holistic salvation of man. However, for the church to actualize this, his ranks must unite and avoid ecclesiastical favoritism, corruption, indecency, dishonesty among others that has bedeviled the church of our time.

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