



A Short Introduction to Pope Gregory VII (Illustrated)

John Lord

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We associate with Hildebrand the great contest of the Middle Ages between spiritual and temporal authority, the triumph of the former, and its supremacy in Europe until the Reformation. What great ideas and events are interwoven with that majestic domination,--not in one age, but for fifteen centuries; not religious merely, but political, embracing as it were the whole progress of European society, from the fall of the Roman Empire to the Protestant Reformation; yea, intimately connected with the condition of Europe to the present day, and not of Europe only, but America itself! What an august power is this Catholic empire, equally great as an institution and as a religion! What lessons of human experience, what great truths of government, what subtle influences, reaching alike the palaces of kings and the hovels of peasants, are indissolubly linked with its marvellous domination, so that whether in its growth or decay it is more suggestive than the rise and fall of any temporal empire. It has produced, probably, more illustrious men than any political State in Europe. It has aimed to accomplish far grander ends. It is invested with more poetic interest. Its policy, its heroes, its saints, its doctors, its dignitaries, its missions, its persecutions, all rise up before us with varied but never-ending interest, when seriously contemplated. It has proved to be the most wonderful fabric of what we call worldly wisdom that our world has seen,--controlling kings, dictating laws to ancient monarchies, and binding the souls of millions with a more perfect despotism than Oriental emperors ever sought or dreamed. And what a marvellous vitality it seems to have! It has survived the attacks of its countless enemies; it has recovered from the shock of the Reformation; it still remains majestic and powerful, extending its arms of paternal love or Briarean terror over half of Christendom. As a temporal government, rivalling kings in the pomps of war and the pride of armies, it may be passing away; but as an organization to diffuse and conserve religious truths,--yea, even to bring a moral pressure on the minds of princes and governors, and reinforce its ranks with the mighty and the noble,--it seems to be as potent as ever. It is still sending its missionaries, its prelates, and its cardinals into the heart of Protestant countries, who anticipate and boast of new victories. It derides the dissensions and the rationalistic speculations of the Protestants, and predicts that they will either become open Pagans or re-enter the fold of Saint Peter. No longer do angry partisans call it the "Beast" or the "Scarlet Mother" or the "predicted Antichrist," since its religious creeds in their vital points are more in harmony with the theology of venerated Fathers than those of some of the progressive and proudest parties which call themselves Protestant. In Germany, in France,--shall I add, in England and America?--it is more in earnest, and more laborious and self-denying than many sects among the Protestants. In Germany--in those very seats of learning and power and fashion which once were kindled into lofty enthusiasm by the voice of Luther--who is it that desert the churches and disregard the sacraments, the Catholics or the Protestants?

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