

The Church and the Rise of Universities *

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THE earliest universities which are generally recognised as those of Bologna and Paris, as we have seen, grew "ex consuetudine". They were not founded in virtue of a papal or imperial charter. Out of these others developed, by migration, or by formal establishment. As the universities, at first, had no buildings like our modern halls and laboratories, it was very easy for the students and professors, when they found fault with one "studium", to go and seek another. Conflicts between the "studium" and the townsmen, or the City Commune often led to such migrations: hence the exodus from Bologna to Vicenza in 1204 and to Arezzo in 1213. In 1222, a similar dispute with the citizens of Bologna led to the departure of nearly all the teachers and scholars to Padua, where there was already a small school. Of these "conflicts between town and gown" we have also the "great dispersion" from Paris (1229), and the migration from Oxford to Cambridge in 1209. Moreover, disputes among the students led to the migration of a body, and sometimes a professor took offence for some reason or other and withdrew with his supporters to another centre of learning. But causes of a less violent sort were not lacking. The special privileges bestowed upon the first universities were a great inducement to other cities to seek similar advantages in order to keep their own students at home, and at the same time attract scholars from all over Europe. Paris and Bologna served as models for the new institutions, and the privileges were earnestly sought from pope or king. Oxford and Cambridge in England, and St. Andrews and Aberdeen in Scotland, were for the most part modelled on the Parisian university, and Glasgow on that of Bologna. Likewise, the system of the earliest German universities of Prague, Vienna, Erfurt and Heidelberg was conformed to that of Paris. Similar causes can be traced in the origin of the other universities which rose up all over Europe in the Middle Ages.

But now one may ask: "What was the part played by the Church in the rise and development of universities?" Remembering that the history of Europe cannot be severed from the

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history of the Catholic Church during the first fifteen centuries of the Christian era, we are prepared to find the Church taking an active part in the foundation of these great universities of Europe. The Church which has always fostered the cultivation and development of the higher human faculties contributed greatly to the institution and development of the medieval universities. This action on the part of the Church consists in her share in the foundation of these centres of learning and in her noble contribution to the development and progress of the same.

With regard to the foundation of medieval universities there has been an endless discussion and controversy. On the one hand, it has been maintained that only the pope could establish a university, on the other hand, it has been held that the institution of universities was the exclusive right of emperor or king. In point of fact, however, these are extreme views and they are evidently based on a study of particular universities. And what is more, they reveal an utter failure to realise the relations of Church and State in the Middle Ages (1). From these opposite views erroneous conclusions have been drawn with regard to the origin of universities and the policy of the papacy towards these institutions. Because, once it is maintained that a university could be founded only by the pope, it is quite easily inferred that any similar centre of learning instituted by emperor or king, or any initiative taken by a City Commune was a symptom of hostility to the Holy See and a step towards that secularization of universities, which eventually came to pass with the Reformation. Likewise, it is interpreted that the popes felt resentment at the granting of charters by the civil authority, and opposed all endeavours on the part of the universities to free themselves from ecclesiastical supervision. To understand the falsity of these views and to see the origin of the universities in its true light, it is sufficient to consider the various modes of foundation. Up to the Reformation 81 universities were founded in all. Of these 13 had neither papal nor imperial charter; they grew spontaneously. "ex consuetudine", as some historians put it; 33 had only the papal charter; 15 were founded by emperor or king and 20 were established by both papal and imperial bulls.

(1) Cfr. E. Pacc, *The Cath. Enc.* (special ed. 1921), art. "Universities", p. 191.

When the earliest universities, especially Paris and Bologna, had grown to reputation and prestige so that their graduates had the "ius ubique docendi", the notion began to prevail among the jurists that the very essence of the "studium generale" was this "ius" or "licentia", and that no new "studium" could acquire that position without an imperial or papal bull. Thus St. Thomas says: "Ordinare de studio pertinet ad eum qui praeest reipublicae, et praecipue ad auctoritatem apostolicae sedis qua universalis ecclesia gubernatur, cui per generale studium providetur" (2). The reason for this papal or imperial authorization is the very nature of the "studium generale". This institution was intended for the students of all Christendom; it was a place of instruction for all. It was not of a merely local or even national character but its teachings and degrees were to be recognized by all the Christian states. Therefore, the universities because of their international character, so to say, sought the authorization of the supreme authority, i.e. of the pope as head of the Church or of the emperor as protector of all Christendom.

It cannot be at all maintained, then, that the Holy See only could found a university, and that the founding of universities by the civil power was a sign of antagonism to the Church. We have seen that it was not the exclusive prerogative of the popes, that the emperor could, in virtue of his position as temporal head of the Christian world, grant charters for the founding of universities and, in fact, did exercise this right, as the various universities established by imperial authority amply show. But to demonstrate how far it is from the truth to say that the popes resented the action of the emperor, it is sufficient to observe that the imperial charters were recognised and fully approved and that, whenever necessary, additional privileges were conferred. By way of illustration, the Emperor Charles IV, at the petition of the citizens of Siena, granted a charter to the "studium" in that city in 1357. It was founded as a "studium generale" in law, arts and medicine. The imperial charter was confirmed by Pope Gregory XII in 1408. Likewise, the foundation of the university of Prague shows clearly that the relation between Church and State in the Middle Ages was one of cooperation in a common cause.

With regard to the foundation of universities on the part of kings one must realize that the kings had not the same rights as

(2) St. Thomas, Op. contra inapug. relig., c. iii.

the emperor. They could, indeed, found a university, nominate a chancellor, and grant him the right to confer degrees, but they could not establish a "studium generale" in the true sense of the term. The "studium" they founded was merely a university, so to say, "respectu regni", i.e. the degrees it conferred were recognised only within their kingdom. The establishment of these "studia" was far from being a sign of hostility to the Holy See, and an attempt at emancipation from Spiritual Authority. So much so that the kings fully realizing their limited powers in this respect, asked for the papal sanction in order to raise their "studia" to the rank of Paris, Bologna and other privileged universities. The popes, on the other hand, far from resenting this royal action, recognised the royal charters and elevated these centres of learning to true "studia generalia". Thus King Alfonso of Leon transformed the "studium" of Salamanca to a university and some years later it was granted a bull by Pope Alexander IV.

In some cases the papal authorization was required and sought, not merely to sanction what the king had founded, but to save and give life to the university. We see this papal intervention to revive universities in the measures taken by Honorius III for Palencia in 1220, and by Julius II for Huesca in 1464. These "studia" founded by royal charters made no headway and were in no way progressive until the pope gave them his support and aid.

The power of the City Communes was, naturally, still more limited. They could, indeed, take the initiative themselves, but sooner or later they had to seek the papal authorization. This was the case in Italy where free and prosperous cities as Treviso, Pisa, Florence and Siena, on the example of Bologna, attempted to found universities of their own. At Siena, it seemed, at first, that the attempt to dispense with a papal or imperial charter would be successful, yet in 1325 the "studium" well-nigh collapsed and its very existence was saved by special privileges granted by Charles IV in 1357 and by grants from Pope Gregory XII in 1404.

Facts, therefore, do not accord with the views of those who maintain that the founding of universities by civil power was a sign of hostility to the papacy and that it was resented by the Holy See. On the contrary, they sufficiently prove that the popes fully supported the designs of the State and cooperated wholeheartedly with it in the development of these centres of learning.

We have said above that 33 universities were founded in virtue of a papal charter. We now, therefore, try to enumerate the chief universities which owed their institution to the pope. The university of Toulouse is to be noted as the first founded in any country by a papal charter. It was founded to suppress the Albigensian heresy which was widespread in Southern France. It acquired its full privileges as a "studium generale" in virtue of a charter given by Gregory IX. The "Studium" of Piacenza obtained from Pope Innocent IV a bull, which raised it to the privileged rank of Paris and Bologna. It is considered by Denifle as the earliest university in Italy founded by a papal charter. The university of Rome knew its foundation to Boniface VIII (1303) and was specially designed for the benefit of poor foreign students in the capital. The university of Perugia received its charter as a "studium generale" from Clement V in 1308. And so with those of Avignon, Grenoble and others founded by the granting of a papal charter.

Moreover, the origin of some universities can clearly be traced back to the cathedral and monastic schools which preserved classical literature and promoted learning and study. In these schools which attained such a high degree of influence and reputation in the Middle Ages, we find the germ of some of the future universities. On the authority of Denifle the cradle of the University of Paris was the cathedral-school of Notre-Dame. The University of Cambridge had its rise in the "studium" which was gradually developed by the canons of the Church of St. Giles. Likewise, the "Studium Generale" of Angers in France, clearly goes back to the cathedral-school of the 11th century, founded by Fulbert, bishop of Chartres.

Besides authorizing the establishment of universities by the granting of charters, the popes contributed in various ways to the development and progress of the "studia generalia". They granted great privileges to the professors and scholars. Clerics who had benefices were dispensed from the obligation of residence if they absented themselves to attend the universities. Both lay and ecclesiastical students enjoyed special privileges. Thus they were exempted from taxation, from military service and from the jurisdiction of ordinary law-courts. The pope always appointed a Conservator Apostolic, usually a bishop, an archbishop or some other prelate whose duty was to see that these immunities and

privileges were duly respected. Hence we find Innocent III in 1212 checking the chancellor of the University of Paris, when he claimed from the masters the oath of obedience to himself, and his powers were consequently restricted by the action of later popes.

The popes, in several cases, found it necessary to intervene to defend the scholars in their conflicts with the civil authorities. In 1220, by way of example, we find the students of Bologna appealing to Honorius III in a dispute with the authorities of the City. The Pope took up their side against the authorities who had drawn up statutes that encroached on their rights. So, Nicholas IV in 1288 threatened to dissolve the university of Padua unless the authorities repealed the ordinances they had formulated against the interests of the teachers and students. Hence it became quite usual for the universities to appeal to and lay their grievances before the Holy See, and in this they were generally successful.

The popes, besides, always granted the universities ecclesiastical benefices for the maintenance of professors and scholars. In many cases, especially in Germany, the universities were endowed for the greater part, if not entirely, with the revenues of chapters and monasteries. The emperor or the king in like manner granted financial aid to these institutions, but, generally, the first endowment was drawn from ecclesiastical benefices (3). In the University of Salamanca the payment of its professors was, at first, so poor that in 1298, they suspended their lectures, in consequence of their scanty remuneration. A remedy for this difficulty was provided by the appropriation of some ecclesiastical revenues of the diocese for the purpose of increasing the professors' salaries. In nearly all the German universities the professors were partly remunerated by the appropriation of prebends of neighbouring churches. The popes for the sake of peace intervened on several occasions and insisted on the payment of salaries to the professors: Boniface VIII (1301) and Clement V (1313) at Salamanca, Clement VI (1346) at Valladolid, and Gregory IX at Toulouse, where Count Raymond had refused to pay the salaries.

The action of the Church is also seen in the institution and endowment of "colleges". At first no provision was made for the

(3) Cfr. E. Brück, *Manuale di Storia Ecclesiastica*, (Italian translation by C. Castelletti), 5th edition, p. 458.

maintenance and discipline of the students who resorted in great numbers to the centres of learning for the purposes of study. To remedy this deficiency, or rather to help and protect the poor foreign students residing in these centres and to preserve all from the dangers of university life, houses of residence were established. Thus Robert of Sorbonne, chaplain to Louis IX, founded at Paris the establishment named after him—the College of Sorbonne. Of similar character was that instituted by Zoen, Bishop of Avignon, in 1256. From these houses of residence which became, in time, the chief financial support of the universities, developed later the college-system of the university. And here also, as we have said, one sees the beneficial hand of the Church. The popes themselves set the example of endowing these colleges, and revenues of monasteries and chapters were appropriated to serve for the same purpose. As for the part played by churchmen in the institution of these colleges, besides the already mentioned famous **College of Sorbonne**, which, in the words of F. X. Funk, “in course of time achieved such fame that it became identified at first with the faculty of theology, and finally with the whole university” (4), we may mention: the College of Brescia founded by William of Brescia, archdeacon of Bologna, in 1326; the foundation at Cambridge by Hugh de Balsham, Bishop of Ely, in which we see the origin of Peterhouse, its oldest college; the institution of New College by William of Wykeham, bishop of Winchester, and the famous College of Spain founded by Egidio Albornoz, Cardinal Archbishop of Toledo.

Finally, in our appreciation of the work of the Church in the development of medieval universities, we cannot fail to bring into relief the contribution of the Religious Orders to the entire life of the university. The ideal of the friar as contrasted with that of a monk was that instead of withdrawing from the ordinary life of men, he should take part in their pursuits and activities and thereby sanctify them. Accordingly, the friars began at once to share in the “fever of learning” which marked the beginning of the 13th century. The Franciscans were early to be found among the hearers at the “studia” and presently among the masters. So the Dominicans whose ideal was, above all, intellectual activity, were soon to be found in every great centre of Europe attending

(4)F. X. Funk, *A History of the Church* (English translation by C. Perciballi) Vol. I, p. 422.

the "studia" as listeners and disputants. In Italy where the friars had, for a long time, been recognised as teachers of theology, the professors and the majority of students were drawn, for the greater part, from the newly-founded Orders, when the faculty of theology was established at Bologna in 1260. The Dominicans had from the first attended the lectures in theology at Paris, so that when St. Albert and his illustrious pupil went there, the one to teach and the other to continue his studies for the licentiate, the connection of the Order of Preachers with the University of Paris was of long standing. At Cambridge and Oxford the religious orders were admitted to degrees, a privilege which until the year 1337, was granted to them at no other university, save that of Paris. Hence, J. B. Mullinger concludes: "Their interest in and influence at these three centres was consequently **proportionably great**" (5). The friars, therefore, especially the Dominicans and Franciscans who were the most active promoters of learning at the time, were an important element in the student-body and in the teaching-body of the universities and distinguished themselves as scholars and teachers.

The part played by the Church, therefore, in the foundation and development of universities was great and generous. Through her initiative, support, aid and protection She led the universities to that height of splendour and dignity in learning which characterizes medieval Europe. For the medieval university was an important factor in the enlightenment and social progress of the times. Its studies and training elevated the human mind and at the same time recognised reason as the handmaid of faith. It was the centre in which the philosophy of the ancients and the **jurisprudence of the Romans** were revived and developed to meet the requirements and demands of the times. "From it the **modern university** has inherited the essential elements of corporate teaching, faculty organization, courses of study and academic degrees" (6). So that we do not wonder at all at the lofty claim made by Bl. Jordanus of Saxony, fourth Master-General of the Order of Preachers, who saw in the Papacy, the Empire and the Universities a "trinity of mysterious virtue" whose co-operation sustained the temporal and spiritual well-being of the people of Christendom."

(5) J. B. Mullinger, The Enc. Brit. (11th ed.) art. "Universities", p. 755.

(6) E. Pacc, The Cath. Enc., i.e., p. 194.