

## **MEDIAEVAL PRIESTS, BISHOPS, CARDINALS ETC**

The more research I do the more confused I become about the very basic differences in the role of Ordained people in the Middle ages compared with the situation in the 21st century.

In mediaeval times, it was not unknown for a teenager to be nominated as a Cardinal. This happened in the case of Giovanni Medici, who subsequently became Pope Leo X. When he was elected Pope he was a Cardinal, but only a Deacon in priestly orders. So before being enthroned as Pope he had to be ordained as Priest, and then be consecrated as Bishop - all in the space of a very short time, because the Cardinals who elected him were in a hurry to get back to their other duties, but wanted to stay for the enthronement of the person they had recently elected Pope !

This was not an uncommon situation. Things were done differently then! By the same token it is very difficult today to disentangle ecclesiastical eminence from political power, because the two tended to go together in mediaeval times.

The key to this paradox lies in education. Most people in those days were illiterate. Those who were educated tended - naturally enough - to run the show, be it church, village, cathedral, diocese or country! So, if you were literate and clever enough to get a University degree, there were few employment opportunities open to you. Basically you either became an Academic or entered Holy Orders (and many academics were priests already!). The idea that to become a vicar implied having a vocation, and resigning yourself to perpetual poverty came very much later. You also had access to money, and as a result often became a land-owner, which produced even more money. And that was the talent pool from which the monarch chose his courtiers. So when a bishop's see fell vacant, the monarch took both political and spiritual matters into consideration, when deciding who should get the job. Quite apart from anything else, the Church was the greatest political power in Christendom, so it was impossible to separate the two criteria from each other.

The monarch also had considerable powers of patronage. Many courtiers acquired the role of parish priest from the King, together with the stipend which went with the job. That didn't mean that they had to leave court and become a vicar instead. If they were conscientious they would appoint someone to do the job for them and pay them a portion of the stipend, whilst they waited for the next Living to come along, at which stage they repeated the process.

To say that this was undemocratic is an under-statement, but it also falls into the trap of applying today's norms of what is acceptable behaviour to a far-gone era. That also applied to the vow of priestly chastity, which was treated much less seriously in the Middle Ages than it is today. Many Popes promoted their illegitimate sons to positions of power. Thomas Cranmer (Archbishop of Canterbury to King Henry VIII ) had a wife, about whom he kept quiet - mainly because to acknowledge her existence would have put his academic position in jeopardy, not his ecclesiastical position.

In short you could say that the Mediaeval Church was an organisation in its own right, which had little to do with God and lots to do with Temporal Power. That is a harsh judgement, but not far wide of the mark. No wonder the Reformation happened !