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# The Last Bishops: North African Christian Communities under Muslim Rule During the Pontificate of Gregory VII (1073-85)

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## Abstract

Conventionally, historians regard the Muslim conquest of the Maghreb (647–709 AD) as the end of the Latin Church of Africa. Umayyad occupation caused Christians to emigrate en masse from the region, as Muslim occupants established a rule with little toleration for Christian worship, which persisted into the Abbasid Caliphate (750–1258 AD). However, as scholars such as Jack Tannous have shown, Christian communities in Muslim-dominated areas survived in considerable numbers, and even constituted most of the population up until the fourteenth century. The present paper documents the survival and state of Christian communities at Carthage during the late twelfth century. By examining the papal correspondence of Gregory VII (r. 1073–1085) this paper reveals a persistent, yet struggling Church in North Africa, with barely enough bishops to sustain itself. Besides facing pressures from their Islamic overlords, the dire situation of the community generated bitter internal divisions, which caused some Christians to surrender their own bishop to the Muslim authorities for punishment. The principal insight offered by this study concerns the Papacy's relationship with the African Church. The Pope intervenes repeatedly, sending exhortations against division, brokering new episcopal ordinations, and is deeply invested in the Church's survival. Gregory VII even sends diplomatic correspondence to the local prince, Al-Nazir, allowing him to nominate candidates for bishop (a privilege denied even to the Holy Roman Emperor). The Pope even appeals to their mutual belief in "the one God"—a type of rhetoric that is never afforded to a Muslim in the Middle Ages.

**Keywords:** medieval, north Africa, Christianity, church history, Islamic conquest, Gregory VII

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In June of 1076, the papal chancery of St. Gregory VII dispatched a letter to Archbishop Cyriacus of the once-great city of Carthage. Despite its small size and lack of relation to the Investiture Controversy—which had erupted that year and would define Gregory’s papacy—an equally important issue depended on its instructions: the survival of the African Church. “It has reached our ears,” Gregory wrote, “that Africa... which during the times of old Christianity was flourishing... has fallen into such dire straits that it does not have three bishops for the ordination of a bishop.”<sup>1</sup> The Church of Carthage, which had once boasted up to 205 bishops in its councils,<sup>2</sup> was reduced to its bare bones. “We recommend you,” the pontiff elaborated, “to choose some person... and send him to us, provided with a letter from you, so that, with God's help, he may be ordained by us and sent back to you, so that you may be able to relieve the needs of the churches...by ordinations of bishops.”<sup>3</sup> In the years succeeding the fall of Carthage to the Umayyads in 698, the church that once had produced many of Christendom’s great theologians—such as St. Augustine—contracted until it was unable to fulfill the canons of ordination. The situation of the Church of Africa was so desperate that Gregory VII allowed a Muslim prince, al-Nāṣir of Mauretania, to select candidates for the episcopate. When Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor, asserted his right to do the same, he was excommunicated by Gregory no less than three times.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the sweeping wave of Islamization brought by the Umayyad conquest, Christians persisted in the Maghreb well into the eleventh and twelfth centuries. But what was life like in this community? Just how dire was their situation, that it prompted the Roman Pontiff to surrender the *Libertas Ecclesiae* to a Muslim potentate? Papal correspondence reveals that these communities, though small, still sought to maintain their hierarchy, and looked to Rome for guidance on the matter. However, notwithstanding their protected status as *dhimmis*, they did not always live peacefully. Tensions often drove Christians to discord with Muslims and with one another. This delicate situation required Papal diplomacy to adopt a deeply pragmatic approach, eschewing religious differences and making concessions in a way that would typically be unthinkable. The present paper will illustrate these points through an analysis of the letters of Gregory VII. These documents constitute the only surviving textual sources on the Church of Carthage in the eleventh century. These accounts show not only the state of these communities but also their relationship with Rome—a key element of their Catholic identity.

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<sup>1</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 3.19*, ed. E. Caspar, 2 vols., Monumenta Germaniae Historica (MGH) Epistolae Selectae 2 (Berlin, 1920–3), 287-8.

<sup>2</sup> Mohammed Talbi, “Le Christianisme maghrébin de la conquête musulmane à sa disparition: une tentative d’explication,” in *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands, Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Michael Gervers and Ramzi Jibran Bikhazi (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 314.

<sup>3</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 3.19*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:284.

<sup>4</sup> I. S. Robinson, *Henry IV of Germany 1056–1106* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 195-201.

## Muslim Conquest and Islamization (647-1053)

Most of the Maghreb was under Byzantine control immediately before the start of the Muslim conquest in 647.<sup>5</sup> For the next half-century, the Umayyads continually annexed territories in the region, compelling populations to convert to Islam. The destruction of Carthage in 698 by Emir Ḥassān ibn al-Nu'mān marked a pivotal moment in the debilitation of Byzantine rule and the Church of Africa.<sup>6</sup> However, this decisive victory did not bring an end to the conquest, much less to local resistance. When Ḥassān departed for the East in 704, the Berbers rebelled against their Muslim conquerors and apostatized from Islam. This uprising forced Mūsá bin Nuṣayr to subjugate them once more, and compelled him to expand his hold over Mauretania.<sup>7</sup> Despite multiple other Berber insurrections, Umayyad control over the Maghreb was consolidated in 709, when Count Giuliano, the last Byzantine governor in Africa, surrendered Ceuta.<sup>8</sup> The Muslim conquest depopulated the Maghreb considerably, prompting an exodus of Christians that devastated the African Church.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, many Christians that remained converted *en masse* to Islam, with one representative standing as proxy for his entire community, as was typical of the Umayyads.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Christianity did not disappear from the Maghreb—it maintained a significant presence in the region for at least the next five centuries. Even after its fall, Carthage remained at the center of African Christianity. Despite the devastation of the city, Christian communities built numerous villages on top of its ruins.<sup>11</sup> During the 9th century, the Church of Carthage remained alive and well-structured. Its congregations still met, worshiped, and chose bishops, as shown by the election of Archbishop James, who was sent to Rome to be consecrated by Pope Benedict VII (c. 975-84).<sup>12</sup> The Church of Carthage maintained a strong link with Rome, and popes continued to intervene to settle disputes and controversies. In 1053 Pope Leo IX wrote to Thomas, Archbishop of Carthage, to reaffirm his primacy over the African Church after the Bishop of Gummi tried to contest it.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, the active presence of Christian communities living among the Umayyads is attested by funerary inscriptions found in Kairouan, dating from the eleventh century.<sup>14</sup> However, the strength of these congregations, and their leadership, was waning. In the same letter addressed to Thomas, Leo IX commented that Africa possessed only

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan P. Conant, "Sanctity and the Networks of Empire in Byzantine North Africa," in *North Africa under Byzantium and early Islam*, ed. Susan T. Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection), 201.

<sup>6</sup> Susan T. Stevens, "Carthage in Transition: From Late Byzantine City to Medieval Villages," in *North Africa under Byzantium and early Islam*, ed. Susan T. Stevens and Jonathan P. Conant (Washington D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 2015), 89.

<sup>7</sup> Mario Dall'Arche, *Scomparsa del Cristianismo ed Espansione dell'Islam nell'Africa Settentrionale* (Rome: Edizioni Fiamma Nova, 1962), 140.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> Talbi, "Le Christianisme maghrébin," 315.

<sup>10</sup> Dall'Arche, *Scomparsa del Cristianismo*, 152.

<sup>11</sup> Stevens, "Carthage in Transition," 91-103.

<sup>12</sup> Jonathan Conant, *Staying Roman: Conquest and Identity in Africa and the Mediterranean, 439–700* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 367.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 368.

<sup>14</sup> Christian Courtois, "Grégoire VII et l'Afrique du Nord. Remarques sur les Communautés Chrétiennes d'Afrique au XI Siècle (1er Article)," *Revue Historique* 195, no. 2 (1945): 97–122

five bishops, having once held councils that attracted up to 205.<sup>15</sup> During much of Late Antiquity, Africa had an excess of bishoprics, about 534 in Africa Proconsularis, Numidia, and Byzacena, and more than 700 in western North Africa as a whole. In many ways, these numbers were inflated by practices unique to the African Church. Every village and estate could elect a bishop, and Catholics and Donatists competed to have more dioceses.<sup>16</sup> Even so, these figures uncover the drastic reduction that the Church experienced in North Africa under Umayyad rule. The scarcity of bishops would become much more acute in the latter half of the eleventh century, during the pontificate of Gregory VII. The number of prelates became so low that it threatened the ability of the African Church to sustain itself.

### **The Letters of Gregory VII to the Churches of Carthage and Bougie (1073-9)**

By the time Gregory VII ascended to the papacy, the number of bishops in Africa had decreased from five to just two—with one of them having been consecrated by Gregory himself earlier in his reign. The absence of other prelates had put Cyriacus, the Archbishop of Carthage, under immense strain, having “so few workmen laboring in so vast a field.” Gregory urged him to choose a candidate for the episcopacy “according to the process laid down by the Holy Fathers” so that he could be sent to Rome for consecration. Ordaining someone externally was the only option, as the canons stipulated that three bishops were needed to consecrate a new prelate. At that point, the Church of Africa was one bishop short. Gregory saw this arrangement, which involved a perilous journey, as the only way to allow the African Christians to “rejoice and benefit from pastoral oversight,” and to alleviate the labor that oppressed Cyriacus “beyond [his] strength.”<sup>17</sup> This document is one of five surviving letters sent by Gregory VII to the Churches of North Africa. It is the shortest of these messages, containing just a brief paragraph in modern editions. While it includes some formalities—such as an elaborate salutation—when compared to the other four letters it is strikingly straightforward.<sup>18</sup> After the salutation, it gravitates directly to its main request, skipping any embellishments and not even containing a benediction or any closing statement. The language and the note’s brevity indicate the pope’s urgency in the matter. There was no time to lose—even in writing. If both African bishops were to suddenly die, the integrity of the Church in Africa could be lost forever, as it was unlikely that a foreigner would accept being posted in Muslim territory. But how did the Church of Africa—despite its small hierarchy in the preceding years—allow itself to reach such a critically low level of bishops? While it could have been an accident of circumstance, hostile conditions may have dissuaded some from seeking the episcopate. Cyriacus himself had earlier been a victim of this bitter climate.

Three years earlier, in September of 1073, Gregory VII wrote to the Christian people of Carthage, who had turned against their archbishop and had accused him before the Umayyad rulers:

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<sup>15</sup> Conant, *Staying Roman*, 367-8.

<sup>16</sup> Leslie Dossey, *Peasant and Empire in Christian North Africa*, 1st ed (University of California Press, 2010), 125-6.

<sup>17</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 3.19*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:284.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Homer Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1927), 140-45. The salutation, along with other formalities such as the *captatio benevolentiae*, the narration, and the conclusion had become standard in the art of epistolary at the time. Gregory’s break with this convention is, therefore, highly unusual.

Most beloved sons, I groan as I think of these things; I write them weeping; I send them to you with inner grief of heart. For it has come to our ears that, impiously towards the law of Christ and in opposition to Christ, certain of you have so accused Cyriacus our venerable brother and your archbishop and master—no, indeed, your anointed—before the Saracens, and have so assailed him by back-biting allegations, that he has been numbered with robbers and beaten as one worthy of stripes.<sup>19</sup>

If the letter to Cyriacus was notable for its succinct and modest tone, the present letter to the people of Carthage is remarkable for its length, evocative language, and numerous references to scripture. Throughout the letter, Gregory portrays himself as a father injured by the treason of his children. He shows himself as merciful, full of “fatherly love,” but also condemns them in the strongest terms. The consequences faced by Cyriacus—his beating and humiliation—were so grave that they prompted the Roman Pontiff to compare the people’s betrayal against Cyriacus to the suffering of Christ himself:

Oh! What an evil example, an example of shame to your own Church and to the whole of the Holy Church! Christ is captured again; he is condemned by false accusers and witnesses; being numbered with robbers, he is beaten with stripes. By whom? Those who are said to believe in his incarnation and also to venerate his passion and to embrace by faith his other holy mysteries.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the parallel between Cyriacus and Christ is made more evident through the wordplay used by Gregory. The title he uses to describe the archbishop, “your anointed” (*vestri christum*), can alternatively be translated as “your Christ.” This comparison is present throughout the whole letter, as the pope repeatedly urges the congregation to “Be obedient as a matter of duty to him who has the place of Christ over you.” While communities in the Church of Africa had historically held considerable sway over the actions of their bishops, this strong papal reprimand highlights the extraordinary character of this rebellion.<sup>21</sup> Gregory began his letter by quoting the apostolic epistles extensively, urging them to “be imitators of [Christ],” but concluded with a fiery threat: “If you shall not do this, I shall justly smite you with the sword of anathema, and I shall release over you St Peter's and our own malediction.”<sup>22</sup>

What circumstances could have driven the small Christian community at Carthage to rebel against their only spiritual leader? What could prompt them to surrender their bishop to rulers of a different faith, which had devastated their own Church? While the letters do not reveal what exactly Cyriacus was accused of, they do illustrate some motivations for conflict within the community. Gregory’s messages present a congregation struggling to survive, showing cracks as they faced pressure from their Muslim overlords. These tensions created factions and infighting among the Christians, who were urged by the pope to “avoid like poison strifes and contentions” and “put aside all malice, pretexts and jealousies, and all slanderings.” Gregory was aware of the congregation’s struggle with their Muslim rulers, as he told them to “not be afraid” of “being set in the midst of the panoply of the Saracens.” He could offer no relief to their strife, however, as he told them that “as often as you suffer for Christ, revel that at his coming in glory you may

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<sup>19</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 1.22*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:38.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Dossey, *Peasant and Empire*, 126.

<sup>22</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 1.22*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:39.

rejoice and exult.”<sup>23</sup> It is evident by these exhortations that several disagreements existed among the Christians of Carthage about how they should conduct life under Muslim rule. Leaders such as Archbishop Cyriacus and other presbyters might have been content with the Pope’s promise of the kingdom to come, but a sizable portion of the congregation was not. While it is unknown what exactly the community might have had to gain from accusing Cyriacus, any show of deference to the Umayyads could be interpreted as an effort to gain their favor. Although Christians were protected as *dhimmis*—a status that was extended to them as “people of the book,” i.e., followers of an Abrahamic faith—this right was not constant and was frequently violated. Despite the existence of protection agreements such as the “Pact of ‘Umar” —which allowed Christians to keep their churches and way of life—these rights were often threatened with destruction. In reality, any agreement was typically made *ad hoc* at the discretion of local rulers in response to pragmatic needs. The “Pact of ‘Umar” was a post-facto juridical construct used to justify the protection of *dhimmis* whenever it was needed.<sup>24</sup> Given the uncertain status of their protection, some members of the Christian community at Carthage may have sought self-preservation by all means possible—including betraying their own Archbishop.

The extent of the Christians’ plight is also attested by a letter addressed to Cyriacus, which accompanied the Pope’s exhortation of the people. It contains mainly a message of encouragement, praising the archbishop for his perseverance in the face of adversity, and urging him to keep his mission. Clearly, the difficulties that assailed Christian at Carthage affected everyone no matter their place in the hierarchy. In fact, the suffering of prelates could be greater, as they faced their own people’s anger in addition to threats from Muslim rulers. Such was the case of Archbishop Cyriacus:

For we judge that you are being assailed by a twofold struggle, in that you both are suffering the hidden attacks of Christians and are also wretchedly under duress by the persecution of the Saracens to lose not only the support for human frailty but the faith itself. For what else is it for a priest to break the law of God at the behest of the earthly power except to deny the faith? But thanks be to God, that in the midst of a crooked and perverse people the constancy of your faith like a veritable lamp has become so manifest to all that when brought before a royal audience you were resolved rather to be afflicted by various torments than at the king’s command to perform ordinations against the holy canons.<sup>25</sup>

The events that unfolded in Carthage were so critical—and the state of its church was so dire—that the Pope called the Muslims’ attitudes toward Cyriacus and his congregation “persecution” (*persecutione*). The accusation against Cyriacus must have been severe indeed, as Gregory wrote of him being presented in front of a “king” (*rege*). The mistreatment that Cyriacus suffered demonstrates the Muslim rulers’ willingness to show disrespect to the religion and customs of Christians under their rule. According to the letter, Cyriacus was subjected to excruciating torture—including beating and lashing—for refusing to perform actions contrary to the canons when prompted by Muslim authorities. While corporal punishment could be used to chastise a

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Brian A. Catlos, *Muslims of Medieval Latin Christendom, C.1050–1614* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 1.23*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:39-40.

*dhimmi* for misconduct, prompting someone to apostatize or otherwise violate tenets of their religion had never been an accepted means of retribution in any pact. In fact, most covenants between Muslims and Christians were meant to provide the latter with a means to practice their faith. Although Cyriacus seems to have been strong enough to withstand this cruel treatment without abandoning his faith, not many would be keen to emulate his example. The possibility of becoming a victim of internal conflict and oppressive rule may have dissuaded most educated individuals from seeking the episcopate, causing the number of bishops to dwindle. As closure to the letter, Gregory VII tries to motivate Cyriacus further by exhorting him to “as often as opportunity permits, continue in mutual consolation by means of letters.”<sup>26</sup>

Papal communication with the Church of Africa persisted throughout the eleventh century as shown by the letters of Leo IX and Gregory VII. The pope kept a keen interest in developments in the region, and was preoccupied with ensuring the survival of the Church. He concerned himself not only with Carthage, but with other nearby communities such as the Bishopric of Bougie, located west of Carthage in present-day Algeria. To this region he also sent letters concerning the consecration of a new bishop: Servandus. He was to assume the See of Bougie (not Hippo Regius, as incorrectly pointed out by a gloss in the manuscript and several scholars thereafter).<sup>27</sup> However, instead of appealing to a Christian leader for a nomination—as he had done with Cyriacus—the pope accepted the recommendation of al-Nāṣir, the Muslim ruler of Mauretania, whom he highly exalts:

Your highness has this year sent a letter to us asking that we would ordain the priest Servandus as bishop according to the Christian dispensation. Because your request appeared right and for the best, we have been happy to do this. Furthermore, you sent presents to us and out of reverence for blessed Peter, the prince of the apostles, and of love for yourself you have freed Christians who were being held captive amongst your people; and you further promised that you would free other prisoners. Indeed, God, the creator of all, without whom we cannot do or even think anything that is good, has inspired this generosity in your heart; he who enlightens every man coming into this world has enlightened your mind in this undertaking.<sup>28</sup>

It would be an understatement to say that the pope’s receptive attitude toward an episcopal nomination by a Muslim prince was anything but extraordinary. Pope Gregory VII’s papacy was defined by his campaign to reclaim the *Libertas Ecclesiae*, the Church’s right to conduct its affairs without the meddling of secular rulers. He codified in the *Dictatus Papae* that kings and princes should defer to the Papacy in matters of spiritual authority, including the naming of bishops.<sup>29</sup> His quest for ecclesiastical autonomy even led him to excommunicate Henry IV, Holy Roman Emperor, the most powerful man in western Christendom, no less than three times. The emperor had refused to surrender his prerogative to appoint bishops, which caused both men and their successors to feud throughout the “Investiture Controversy.”<sup>30</sup> The fact that Gregory would allow

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>27</sup> Conant, *Staying Roman*, 362. Conant incorrectly insists that the see in question was Hippo Regius, the see of Augustine.

<sup>28</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 3.21*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:287-8.

<sup>29</sup> Gregorius VII, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:202-4.

<sup>30</sup> William Chester Jordan, *Europe in the High Middle Ages* (London: Penguin Random House, 2001), 85-99.

a Muslim potentate to recommend a bishop—which, given the balance of power in the region, was practically a command—attests the dire needs of the Church of Africa at the time. The language of the letter, as well as its concessions, also show Gregory’s ability to be a skillful diplomat. He recognized the need to be pragmatic with such a delicate cause, even when dealing with individuals outside of his faith.

Papal diplomacy with leaders of other religions was not uncommon in Africa, and would continue into the Late Middle Ages and the Early Modern Period, mostly directed toward the Church and rulers of Ethiopia.<sup>31</sup> However, the Pope’s non-Catholic African correspondents tended to be other Christians, not Muslim rulers like al-Nāṣir. Despite the ruler’s faith, Gregory was keen to exchange gifts and pleasantries with him. He knew that his success at maintaining the Church of Africa alive depended on good relations with the prince. Gregory seems to have been quite successful, receiving gifts and securing the freedom of many Christians who had been enslaved in Mauretania. For this benevolent gesture, the pope praised al-Nāṣir, insisting that God himself had moved his will toward that act. But Gregory went further with his laudatory language, as he asserted that both he and the Muslim prince “believe in and confess, albeit in a different way, the one God.”<sup>32</sup> This is another remarkable statement, with no parallel throughout medieval papal rhetoric.

Gregory’s affirmation of a common God between Muslims and Christians went against the prevailing discourse of the time surrounding the beliefs of Islam. Works like the eleventh-century *Chanson de Roland* denigrated Muslims as idolaters and pagans, who worshipped not God but Mahomet, Tervagant, and Apollo.<sup>33</sup> This portrayal, while popular, did not reflect what learned individuals such as Gregory actually believed. Educated churchmen were already aware of the tenets of Islam, and the first translation of the Qur’an would soon be completed in 1143 at the abbey of Cluny.<sup>34</sup> However, even these learned men would not establish a commonality between the Christian and Muslim God, as Islam denied the Trinity. Gregory’s seemingly unique view on Islam has led some scholars to pose that he had a “special understanding” of the faith, considering it a distinct religion and not a corruption of Christian belief.<sup>35</sup> The Second Vatican Council even used Gregory’s quotation to support the twentieth-century Church’s tolerance of all faiths in the declaration *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>36</sup> Both of these interpretations, however, are no more than wishful thinking at best. When examining other letters concerning the Muslims, Gregory’s tone is consistently harsh and full of condemnation. In a note addressed to Kings Alphonso VI of Castille and León and Sancho IV of Navarre he describes Spain as “corrupted... by the invading Saracens.”<sup>37</sup> In another pastoral letter to kings and lay magnates of Spain he equates the Saracens

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<sup>31</sup> Verena Krebs, *Medieval Ethiopian Kingship, Craft, and Diplomacy with Latin Europe* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 3.21*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:287-8.

<sup>33</sup> Gerard J. Brault, *The Song of Roland: An Analytical Edition* (University Park, Penn State University Press, 2010).

<sup>34</sup> Jordan, *High Middle Ages*, 116.

<sup>35</sup> Bernard Hamilton, “Knowing the Enemy: Western Understanding of Islam at the Time of the Crusades.” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 7, no. 3 (1997): 380.

<sup>36</sup> Paul VI, *Nostra Aetate: Declaration on the Relation of the Church to non-Christian Religions*, Second Vatican Council, 1965.

<sup>37</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula 1.64*, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:93.

to pagans.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, in a commission given to Bishop Berengar of Gerona he refers to Muslims as “impious Saracens.”<sup>39</sup> Evidently, although Gregory may have had a more complete understanding of Islam than most of his contemporaries, he did not harbor any special regard for it, and despised not only the Muslims’ presence in Europe and Africa, but also the nature of their beliefs.

Gregory’s conciliatory language, therefore, is best interpreted as shrewd diplomatic thinking on his part. The pontiff knows what Muslim leaders expect of Christians: openly hostile language and the denunciation of their beliefs as heretical and pagan. Gregory knew well enough to move away from this approach. His considerations when engaging in this type of diplomacy were purely pragmatic. His orthodoxy as the leader of western Christendom did not seem to stop him from equating the God of both religions. Such a statement would surely be considered heretical if directed toward another Christian. Nevertheless, Gregory knew well that to succeed he had to use every rhetorical and diplomatic tool at his disposal, even if it meant misrepresenting his beliefs. In the end, his audience was not Christian and would not condemn him. On the contrary, he stood to gain much from this calculated mood, which would allow him to keep the Church of Africa alive and orthodox. Furthermore, Gregory did not speak only of himself in his letter to al-Nāṣir, but also of his fellow clerics and noblemen in Rome. He insisted that the Roman nobles “are aware through us that this grace has been granted to you by God and admire and voice abroad your generosity and virtues.”<sup>40</sup> In this statement Gregory was keen to portray himself, and also the other Christians of Rome, as admirers of the prince. This declaration not only added to the list of pleasantries, but was potentially aimed to encourage al-Nāṣir to favor Christians as a people. The pope furthered this point by informing the Muslim ruler that a delegation of Romans had been sent to inform him personally of their admiration.<sup>41</sup> Whether such a delegation was sent, or whether Romans really did think highly of the potentate, is not known. Nonetheless, Gregory’s diplomatic exchanges with al-Nāṣir reveal the need for drastic action to preserve the Church of Africa, and the pope’s willingness to undertake it.

The final letter sent by Gregory VII to North Africa also concerned the consecration of Servandus. This time, it was addressed to the Christians of Bougie, his see, and exhorted them “to show towards him all the obedience proper to the divine law.”<sup>42</sup> Despite the intervention of al-Nāṣir, he asserted that Servandus was elected by them, possibly reflecting their approval of the prince’s choice, but also serving as a way to reaffirm the bishop’s legitimacy. Gregory’s exhortation of the people toward obedience to their new bishop seemed to recall the betrayal of Cyriacus by the Christians of Carthage. The pope, continuing with his thorough diplomatic strategy, sought to be on good terms not only with al-Nāṣir, but also with the community that he rules over, in order that such an uprising does not happen again. However, Gregory has another, more explicit purpose in mind. He encourages them to show their obedience to their new bishop “so that the people of the Saracens who are round about you may see the sincerity of your faith... and by your good works may be aroused to the emulation rather than to the scorning of the

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<sup>38</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula* 4.28, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:344-345.

<sup>39</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula* 6.16, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:421.

<sup>40</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula* 3.21, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:287-8.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Gregorius VII, *Epistula* 3.20, MGH Epis. Sel. 2, 1:286-7.

Christian faith."<sup>43</sup> Gregory's hope seemed to be that by behaving like good Christians, the people of North Africa may have been able to inspire Muslims that lived among them to convert. Given the enormous disadvantages faced by Christians, and the illegality of proselytizing the religion, this desire appears to be little more than misguided optimism. Nonetheless, the dwindling numbers of the African Church were so dire and apparent that Gregory was willing to entertain every possibility for its survival. These efforts almost surely failed. Although the *Liber Censuum* of the Roman Church records there still being an archbishop in Carthage in 1192, no evidence of the see's continuous operation exists beyond that time. The Almohads (1147-1269) are conventionally credited with the final disappearance of African Christianity.<sup>44</sup>

### **Conclusion: A Complicated End of African Christianity**

The last pieces of papal correspondence with the Church of Africa reveal a dire, yet much more complicated view of the life of its faithful. It is true that they faced dwindling numbers of both believers and leaders, yet efforts to expand the Church and its leadership continued zealously until the very end. Communities and their bishops did suffer extensively under Muslim rule, with their personal and religious freedom constantly under the threat of rulers who sought to enslave and convert them to Islam. However, oppression by Islamic authorities was not the only source of conflict. The Church could at times be bitterly divided against itself. Internal struggles could cause bishops to suffer greatly, and could contribute to the further debilitation and fracturing of an ailing Church. Yet despite the Church's seemingly impending demise, Rome kept a keen interest in its affairs, as popes continued to correspond with African congregations and intervened both to solve controversies and to negotiate better treatment with the Abbasids.

The insights of these letters reveal living conditions and attitudes toward religious differences that have been neglected or oversimplified by scholars in the past. While Christian orthodoxy predisposed most clerics to condemn Islam and to justify violence against its believers, it posed no absolute obstacle to communication between powerful figures of both faiths. It cannot be assumed that the only considerations conceived by actors in this period were purely religious. This shows the final moments of the African Church to have been dominated by a confluence of religious and pragmatic factors. While faith was a sincere and strong motivator for Christians and Muslims alike to be averse to one another, material conditions could drive even the most faithful Christian to their breaking point, leading them to betray their community and their bishop to secure a better life. Similarly, Muslim pacts with Christian communities are shown to not be at all consistent. They heavily depend on the circumstances of each community, and the liberties of Christians would frequently be violated due to the *ad hoc* nature of these agreements. While relying on Latin letters from the Papacy presents an apparent pro-Christian bias, their writing had to be prompted by real, tangible circumstances. A critical approach to these accounts can be of great value to the scholarship of the period, given the lack of surviving material. The scarcity of sources may tempt scholars to draw abrupt conclusions, but their close reading and cross-examination of other documents of the time show a much more complicated

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., in reference to Matthew 5:16.

<sup>44</sup> Talbi, "Le Christianisme maghrébin," 325.

scenario. It was Muslim oppression, internal struggle, and a determined diplomatic effort toward survival that defined Christian life in Africa under the last bishops.

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