It will take time to assess the effects these innovations will have. More immediately apparent is the activity of a group of scholars who have founded the *Rivista di storia della chiesa in Italia.* Since 1946 the new journal has acted as a focus of sophisticated scholarship of a kind long familiar in trans-Alpine lands. Perhaps the erudition of the contributions is over-displayed, their footnotes sometimes vastly exceed their texts, they are still obsessed with bibliography sometimes to the exclusion of reflection. But they are trying to be both wide-ranging in their coverage of the Italian church, and they are trying to bring to their work something like the professionalism expected in other areas of scholarship. This activity is matched by a number of works of excellent scholarship, to some of which I shall refer in the course of these lectures. It may soon be the case that the church of the Italian ‘nation’ so feared by other ‘nations’ at Constance and later can be written about in a manner that will do justice to the importance of the theme, and on the basis of well-founded research.

A concluding complication is the continued political tensions which exist in church-state relations in Italy. The constitutional relationships imposed during the Risorgimento and re-negotiated in the Concordat of 1929[49] are all too obviously falling into fragments, but a whole range of current problems until very lately bedevilled ecclesiastical research, the most conspicuous of them being the return of the law of the Lateran of 1929.[50] Nor can one any longer regard the church at the highest level (pope and Italian cardinals) after the reign of John XXIII (1958–59) as speaking with one voice. Conciliarism, recently regarded as dead as a door-nail, is once more raising its head and some clergy regard this as hopeful and some as anachronistic. Are those who are Italians and who are to any degree devout are often divided between themselves and this is occasionally evident in their work, perhaps even accounting for the excessive documentation to which allusion has just been made.

The upshot of these complicated and interrelated developments must also be seen within the context of a political Italy committed to substantial political devolution and a ‘state’ which, at any rate since the Second World War, has lacked the means for effective central government. Whether the results of all this will be for church historians in the peninsula remains to be seen. Those of us working in most other lands on periods as remote as the Middle Ages and Renaissance must be grateful that we are at present exempt from such confusing uncertainties.

2

**DIOCESAN AND PAROCHIAL ORGANISATION**

**Bishops**

In the course of the previous discussion it was mentioned that Professor Alberigo had written to 100 diocesan archivists and had replies from half of them. This is noted again here not necessarily to justify his conclusion that, since half of the replies suggested that there were no significant pre-Reformation records, a biographical or any other approach based on the systematic use of local church records would be unfruitful – though this may well be true – but to lead the reader to the heart of the matter. Professor Alberigo might, had he so wished, have written to many more archivists. The vast number of bishops in Italy was and is one of the central facts about the Italian church.

How many bishops were there in fifteenth-century Italy? It is a much more difficult question to answer than one might suppose, since lists of bishops as printed for instance in Tangl’s *Kanonordnung*, let alone contemporary early printed *vade mecum* for the clerical visitor to Rome, contain errors and omissions, sometimes of an inexplicable kind. So – perhaps even more alarming in view of the use regularly made of it – does the *Provinciale* printed as an appendix to each volume of Eusbel’s *Hierarchia catholica*. Nor did the number remain invariable: a few bishoprics were created or recreated; a rather larger number were suppressed or united with other bishoprics. At present the occasion for such changes need not detain us, save to note that new sees were created not because of the needs of the faithful but as a sign of honour, the best example, though not the only one, being Pienza in 1453: the elevation of Florence (1420) and Siena (1459) to metropolitan status had a similar intention and was devoid of administrative or, of course, of religious significance. The unions of bishoprics were often due to poverty and depopulation.

The resulting picture (if we exclude the island bishoprics) can
be set out as in the appendix to this book (below pp. 110–2) and summarised as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>1400</th>
<th>1500</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central Italy</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southern Italy</td>
<td>157</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Italy</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td>283</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When one recalls that there were only 131 sees in France, only 67 in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland (34 of them in Ireland) one can see how imposing the numbers of Italian prelates were.\(^3\) If we include sees on the Italian islands and in the Italian controlled parts of the Levant and if, for good measure, we add the Italian bishops in partibus, Italian bishops were unquestionably more numerous than all the others put together. This for long haunted the consciences of sensitive Italians. Cardinal de Luca writing in 1675 his *Vescovo pratico* is at pains to point out that this is not the result of a dastardly papal plot but a product of history: *for the most part they are ancient foundations*.\(^4\) This was of course the case, and there is no need here to rehearse the way in which the bishops of the early church established themselves in the towns of the Roman world, which were especially numerous in the south of Italy. Romans and later Italians (one thinks of Flavio Biondo\(^5\) and succeeding historiographers) reckoned the prosperity of Italy by counting the numbers of her cities and regarded a multiplicity of bishops as a very healthy sign. It did, however, raise problems in church government unlike those encountered in the other provinces obedient to Rome.

One immediate consequence of Italy having so many bishoprics was that most of them were extremely poor. Presumably this was always the case, many of the earliest sees in Italy simply withering away. When some sort of comparative figures become available with the imposition of papal taxation in the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (the tax known as common services, originally a third of the original gross annual income of a see) we can measure the situation with a little more confidence. The average assessment of a see in England and Wales was 4,000 florins; of a see in Italy it was not quite 400 florins, and it would not have been as high as that save for a handful of rich sees in the north.\(^6\) The break-up is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Region</th>
<th>Median Assessment</th>
<th>Highest</th>
<th>Lowest</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>North</td>
<td>852 fl.</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>33 1/2 (two)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre</td>
<td>328</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>40 (one)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>2,000</td>
<td>25 (Rossano)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overall poverty of Italian bishoprics is crudely reflected in these figures. One can argue that to use the level of common services as an index of relative prosperity is unreal and in exact terms this is certainly the case, for it is hard to know how the original estimates were arrived at in the thirteenth century, and, since the taxes hardly changed in centuries, it is obvious that in some cases they would overvalue a consistorial benefit (i.e. bishops and abbeys) and in some cases undervalue it as time went on. So far as the fifteenth century is concerned it was likely to be the case that the taxes in general were burdensome, since the thirteenth century had been a period of economic prosperity and in many places, including many parts of Italy, the fifteenth century was still a period of regression. Since virtually all of the common-service revenue came into the curia directly it was a tax which curial officials were most reluctant to diminish though this was occasionally done, notably of course in the concordats after Constanza, but also in respect of individual bishoprics. An Italian example is provided by the wretched diocese of Dragonara, in the province of Benevento, where a plea for help was made on grounds of ‘Guerram, turbines, mortalitem, pestes’, and the bishop was given the income of Lesina as well, i.e. he held *Lesina in administrationem* (see below p. 19); apparently this did not succeed for Dragonara, like one or two other southern sees, was reduced to an archpriestry in the next century. Thus there were in Italy many bishoprics who were often not much better endowed than those with titular sees although, however tiny their diocese, it involved in theory pastoral responsibility. The large number of needy prelates in the south is particularly notable, and partly explains why the pope of the period disposed so readily of promotion in what was often enemy territory; no ambitious Aragonese cleric bothered much about such a shabby reward. Popes were able to fill unimpeded sees ‘immediately subject’, where the rights of the metropolitan had been suspended. All the sees of central Italy (save two) were in this convenient category. So were a surprisingly large number of sees in the kingdom of Naples. It is only in north Italy that this was as rare as it was in the rest of Christendom. Far the greatest number of
was installed in his cathedral. Would this have happened so smoothly if there had been a pope? For in January 1417 there was no pope: John XXIII had been deposited and so had Benedict XIII; Gregory XII had resigned. In November of that year Martin V was elected at Constance as a result of proceedings even more unusual than those which had just occurred at Bologna, for he had been elected in a conclave where the 'nations' had representatives sitting alongside the cardinals who were in the council. There are other late medieval capitular elections in Italy, but they are less remarkable than Albergati's. We may take as an example what happened at Verona in 1453. There Dom Gregorio Correr was elected by the canons in chapter and supported by representatives of the commune, as well as by the signoria at Venice. But Nicholas V had already translated Ermolao Barbaro from Treviso and this was reluctantly accepted by Venice; Verona and its chapter had no real choice in the matter. Pius II was no different from other popes in insisting on his rights to provide to all Italian sees. He nevertheless insisted on capitular elections in the foundation of his own new bishopric of Pienza.

A similar provision is to be found in the bull (1433) uniting the sees of Nepi and Sutri, and in that (1437) uniting Civita Castellana with Orte. Detailed studies are needed to penetrate through theory to practice.

In the area dominated by a powerful family or commune provision by the pope was tempered by pressure of a political kind. This was what happened, of course, everywhere in Christendom, but the results in Italy were less predictable and the whole process often became intricate beyond belief. The duke of Milan (who normally sent two names to the pope but instructed his ambassador at the curia which one he was to press for) succeeded in getting his brother Gabriele provided to the archiepiscopal see of Milan in 1454; and three years later he was successful in nominating Carlo da Porto; but in 1461 he failed and had to accept a curialist - albeit a very distinguished one - Stefano Nardini, provided by Pius II, and the first of a series of non-residents. Nor were the Venetians uniformly victorious in their dealings with the popes, even with the Venetian popes, perhaps especially with the Venetian popes.

The Venetians had felt obliged to devise formal machinery for filling vacant benefices, in the optimistic hope that rules and regulations would obviate all that was needed to produce clear answers and avoid lobbying or chicanery. In the senate candidates for vacant prelacies were voted on and the successful candidate was then supported by the signory in a letter to the pope. It was an offence for a Venetian
great Milanese convent of Chiaravalle and refusing to allow the Venetian Paul II to add it to the papal patrimony, as another Montecassino. The upshot of this affair was that Sforza’s son Ascanio was made a clerk and given the house: it was hard for the pope to refuse to provide the duke’s son. (This set Ascanio on a career which nearly gave him the tiara.) Much the fiercest competition between the dukes and the pope came with the first Borgia pope, Calixtus III (1455–8), when lavish grants of expectations and commendam were made to Borgia cardinals in Milanese territory—treating Milanese territory with the vacuity displayed in Spain itself and the Regno. In 1454 Alfonso V wanted Cardinal Scarampo (to whom he was in debt) to have Montecassino in commendam; when Calixtus at first demurred, Alfonso threatened to send troops in to flatten the monastery, and the pope complied.

Even where a strong tradition of Gaël loyalty to the papacy conditioned public action, the need to control senior church appointments manifested itself. This is clearly evident in the Florentine story, which is odd and interesting. Here it had been decided at the end of the fourteenth century not to have a Florentine as bishop, but rather to treat the office as on a par with those magistrates (such as the podestà) which went to strangers. This lofty attitude was maintained well into the fifteenth century. Palladini (1410) came from Teramo, and Zabarella (1410–11) from Padua, Corsini, it is true, was a Florentine (1411–35), but he was followed by Vitelleschi (from Corneto – now called Tarquinia – in the Papal States, 1435–7) and another dubious claimant, Scarampo, who was born in Venice (1437–9). Scarampo was followed by another stranger, Zabarella (Bartolomeo, 1439–45). Nearly all these men were non-resident. At this point there seems to have been a change in the attitude of the government. The signoria nominated to Eugenius IV a short list of five names, all Florentine. These citizens were passed over but Eugenius listened instead (it seems) to Fra Angelico and appointed another Florentine, Antonio Forcelloni, the future saint. On Antonino’s death the government again tried to get its way. Pius II was in the town at the time that Antonino lay dying and the petition presented to him by the gonfalonier Bernardo Gherardini asked the pope to provide Gianozzo Pandolfo – or at any rate a Florentine. The pope chose a Florentine curialist called Orlando Borlani, who was succeeded by the Neroni who had been Florentine favourite in 1455. Neroni died in 1473, expelled from the city for his part in the abortive conspiracy of 1466 against Piero di Cosimo. In the 1470s Sixtus IV’s ambitions for his family often outweighed considerations...
of prudence and when Neroni died the pope’s nephew, young Cardinal Pietro Riario, was made archbishop of Florence. However, in January 1474, when Riario died, the next archbishop, though a Roman, was the choice of Lorenzo de’ Medici. This was Rinaldo degli Orsini, Lorenzo’s brother-in-law. He was followed by Cosimo de’ Pazzi, who had been bishop of Arezzo since 1497. Cosimo died in May 1513 and Leo X then made his cousin Giulio de’ Medici bishop who was later, as pope, to secure an even more permanent Medici victory in Florence. But it is my impression that both republican and later princely Florence was more anxious to secure obedient bishops in the domino than in the capital itself; hence the fuss when Sixtus IV promised Francesco Salviati to the archbishopric of Pisa in 1474.

As the fifteenth century progressed there is little doubt that the attitude of Italian governments hardened. The papacy was now a medium-sized Italian government itself and, as we shall see, this had significant consequences for papal policy. It became important to the other powers in the peninsula to have a loud voice in the curia and a vote in the concile. We are, after all, on the eve of the French invasion when a prince entered Italy who had behind him three centuries of almost total mastery over his prelates; and he was to be chased out by Charles V who, from his Burgundian and Spanish background, was equally determined to get his way in senior church appointments in his territories. Papal liberty of action by the 1530s was effectively limited to the Papal States – and even in those there were sometimes intransigent princelings, whose vassalage to the Holy See was not allowed to conflict with family interests. Indeed it was from hungry members of this group that many senior members of the Roman curia were drawn.

Within the framework described above the Italian episcopate, while in certain fundamental matters similar to the episcopate elsewhere, was subjected to unusual pressures and responded in curious ways. In the south were a multitude of impoverished bishoprics, often held by friars who lived as the vicars in spirituals of their comparatively wealthier brethren in the north; and in the centre and north were sees which habitually went to swell the income of curiales or courtiers. The oddities to be seen in Italy to which some allowance should be paid are: the exchanges of bishoprics, the treatment of office as a property and (related to this) the dominant role of certain families in some sees for several generations.

Exchanges of benefices were, of course, not a new thing. The ‘chop-churches’ of late fourteenth-century England attracted the censure of Archbishop Courtenay; Italian priests also followed this practice from time to time. But outside Italy were there many cases of bishops exchanging their dioceses? A careful survey of the personnel of rather more than half the bishoprics of the fifteenth century yields the following examples of such changes:

1400 Termoli – Monte Corvino
1406 Pisa – Taranto
1438 Mondovì – Belley
1443 Gallipoli – Motula
1449 Sarzana – Forlì
1454 Orvieto – Penne and Atri
1463 Parma – Modena
1493 Penne and Atri – Telesse
1494 Sutri – Negrì-Binotto
1497 Telesse – Lavello
1497 Enna – Taranto
1503 Città di Castello – Rossano (see below)
1502 Bologna – Vercelli

‘Chop-churches’ in England were men who were trading in their revenues: a well-beneficed man who was heavily in debt could raise the wind by selling his lush living for cash to a purchaser who had a poorer living but some ready money. This process, ‘resignatio ex causa perpetuationis’, in cases where there was a marked disparity of income, suggested a presumption of fraud, according to the great canonist Felini Sandeo. Some of the above oddities may be explained in this way, but this can scarcely be proved since we have no figures for real income but only the assessments of the camera regarding common services. We can, however, hardly doubt that the brokers who trafficked in the sale of offices at the curia acted as intermediaries in some of the episcopal shifts and changes. Some cases are clearly due to straight political adjustments, negotiated between governments and curia. With this collection of exchanges may be associated the curious career of Nicolò Ippolito, a clerk of the diocese of Ariano who became bishop of the small place in 1480. The next year he was translated to the impertinent archbishopric of Rossano (assessed at 25 florins and with no suffragans in his so-called province). Thence Ippolito moved in 1493 to the better-off see of Città di Castello, being compensated for the loss of his status as archbishop by promotion at the same time to the titular metropolitan dignity of Caesarea. Finally our archbishop in paribus returned to Ariano whence he had started, in 1498, holding it until his death in 1511.
Together with the practice of granting the income of a benefice without residence, termed in the case of a monastery commendam (technically in the case of a bishopric the grant was in administration), the right of 'regress' and the reserving of pensions, the way was open for the creation of what Clergeac described as 'les véritables apanages', what Tacchi-Venturi called 'tiefs'.

These probably became much more prominent in the sixteenth century than in earlier periods, despite the legislation of the Council of Trent and the continued criticism of abuses in the resignation procedure. But one is struck in looking at Ugelli or Eubel at the regularity with which members of the same family follow each other in office even in the fifteenth century in Italy. Self-indulgent popes set an example. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini who became bishop of Siena in 1450 retained it when he was promoted cardinal in 1456. When he became pope two years later he was succeeded as bishop (archbishop the next year) by his nephew Antonio; and Antonio was followed by Pius II's sister's child Francesco, whose brief pontificate as Pius III was to come in 1503. Pienza from its foundation in 1456 was a Piccolomini preserve, and from 1467 the same clan collared Sovana. Of these bishoprics for which detailed notes have been made for this study there is one (Alba) in the hands of the Carretto family for eighty years. Marsi and Trevico (both near Benevento) remained under families that did not change for respectively 70 and nearly 60 years; while the list of sees where one family reigned for 40 or 50 years is too long to rehearse. These 'proprietary' churches existed from time to time all over Italy. Certainly many additional family connections existed which are not self-evident to the researcher who is unfamiliar with the locality and its history, and the varied nomenclature within a given dynasty.

What sort of men were Italian bishops? The prominent ones jump to mind - the ambitious men, the scions of great families, the important pluralist cardinals. But, numerous as such bishops are, they are only a fraction of the total. Below that level a much larger group is formed by the sizeable number of what Ugelli calls 'well-born' or 'of gentle birth' - lesser gentry and nobility from town and country, but mainly of urban origin. Often, of course, such men were also members of the papal curia and their ability to gain promotion was partly due to their being favourably placed. It is sometimes staggering how short an interval elapses between an incumbent resigning and another being provided. There is no doubt that on very many occasions two Italians - even if not habitually resident in Rome - paraded together in the offices of the chancery to get their
bulls and in the offices of the camera to pay or pledge their common services; often the same day is given for resignation and new appointment. And below this numerous and avid band lies perhaps an equal number of regular clergy, especially friars and, among friars, especially Dominicans. This impressive number of regulars is, I believe, in marked contrast with the rest of Europe where regular bishops become rarer after the thirteenth century. It represents further evidence of the relative poverty of the majority of Italian sees. The bishop's endowment or *mena* did not attract men of substance, who might accept provision to a poor see but only for the title and honour it carried in Rome or at some prince's court—and they really wanted the latter see anyway. So the mendicants stepped in, and often eked out their meagre stipend by acting as vicars for richer bishops. Mendicants also constitute the overwhelming majority of bishops with sees in *paribus*, and Italian mendicants also filled most of the shadowy Italian-controlled bishoprics in the Levant, to which reference has been made above.

Thus it is, in a way, somewhat irrelevant to ask who the bishops were, since most of them did not reside in their bishoprics. In the bigger centres they usually took possession by proctor fairly rapidly, at any rate within six months of the provision. Then at some time in the next six months or so the new bishop might make a ceremonial entry, which was an occasion for much ritualistic pomp, civic processions and bad temper. After that the bishop often withdrew permanently to his normal area of operations—Milan, Naples, Rome—drawing his stipend and hiring deputies as necessary. Frequently the poorer cities never set eyes at all on their shepherds, only on their proctors.

If one had endless space one could illustrate the bishops of Italy in considerable detail for this period, and catalogue those that were bad and—for there were some, as we shall see later on—those that were good. In fact, even in Italy the bishops remain a significant cog in the machine of church government and they will crop up in subsequent chapters. A very good survey of the quality of the Italian episcopate at a slightly later date (the early sessions of the council of Trent) is provided in Professor Giuseppe Albergico's book.  

**Parishes**

This chapter will conclude with some remarks on the secular diocesan clergy. If this were to be done thoroughly it would require some elaborate analysis of the cathedrals and their chapters. These contained, in Italy as elsewhere, large numbers of often rather litigious clerics, whose quarrels occupied much of the time of bishops and their officials: one or two wretched bishops were especially unfortunate, like the bishop of Bergamo who suffered from two warring co-cathedrals each with its own chapter.  

Capitular organisation was in many cases very different from what one is familiar with in England and other parts of northern Europe. This partly reflected the smaller size of most dioceses (markedly tiny in the south of the peninsula), and the dominant position in public life of the baptistery and the cathedral. But two important differences seem independent of this: the rarity—in effect the non-existence—of the monastic cathedral in Italy; and the relationship of archdeacon, dean and provost in capitular importance. Monastic cathedrals were, it may be supposed, commoner in areas of more recent conversion and the vicissitudes of Montecassino, a bishopric for a short time in the fourteenth century, reminds us that arrangements, if temporary, such as are found at Canterbury or Durham, were not entirely unknown in Italy. But Montecassino did not survive long as a bishopric, and only one Benedictine house in our period remained a see—Nardò (near Lecce), permanently from 1413; Cava, near Montecassino, reverted to monastic status in 1471.

As for the chapter in Italy the archdeacon tended to have the most seniority, whereas in the north of Europe this dignity went to the dean. The dean in many Italian churches was even less grand than the provost, sometimes even lower than the cantor (or precentor). On the other hand, since the diocese was small the archdeacon never acquired territorial responsibility, whereas parochial duties had to be attributed to a chapter member, usually the archpriest. Here are a few not untypical chapters, one big, one small (both being old) and one small but recent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ferrara</th>
<th>Brescia</th>
<th>Montefiascone</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archpriest</td>
<td>Archdeacon</td>
<td>Dean</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provost</td>
<td>Archpriest</td>
<td>Sacristan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archdeacon</td>
<td>Provost</td>
<td>6 canons</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Primicerius</em></td>
<td><em>Vice-dominius</em></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custos</td>
<td>Precentor</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Treasurer</td>
<td>Dean</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14 canons</td>
<td>17 canons</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 prebendaries</td>
<td>Penitentiary</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(one the penitentiary, one the theologian)</td>
<td>Theologian</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
parish in Italy took two main forms. In the north and centre it was associated with the pieve, an area or district in late Roman antiquity; in the south the term used was the Greek word parochia. To some extent the terms became interchangeable by the later Middle Ages, pieve and parochia meaning more or less the northern ‘parish’, although the pievano still retained (sometimes still retains) precedence over local clergy. In both the pieve and, to a lesser extent the parochia, we are dealing with a group of priests living collegialiter, centred on a church with a font and serving subordinate chapels and churches which had no baptismal rights. This is a brief and very inadequate account of the complicated situation, still evolving in the later Middle Ages, evolving (that is to say) towards more baptismal churches, and consequently to a lessening in the number and importance of the pievani or archpriests. In any case, having at one time been elected by the clergy and people of the pieve, more were now being appointed by the bishop, especially who had the insignia of canons and had the right to be nominated as canons when vacancies arose in the ordinari, but who meantime drew no income. The Brescian clergy, besides 6 mansionarii, or residents, included 11 chaplains and 150 other clerks.

It will be evident from the previous remarks that the bigger (and probably the smaller) cathedrals had difficulty over non-residence, pluralism and a combination of both; and that, despite the number of men technically qualified as cathedral canons, it was difficult to have adequate choir service as required by law. Various remedies were attempted. The ‘canon in residence’ and the vicar-choral (to use English terminology) make their appearance. What is quite overwhelming is the number of chierici, ‘priestlings’, found in some northern dioceses, clustered in vague collegial fashion around, drawing tiny stipends from some ancient foundation. This invoked the wrath of Eugenius IV in 1440 when he found ‘769 ecclesiastical benefices called chierici’ in the diocese of Verona, held by separate individuals who took their small stipends but performed no services, however small. Eugenius took sharp action. The ‘benefices’ were reduced to 190, and the saving thus attained was to be devoted to providing a teacher of grammar and music in Verona cathedral. This was bitterly resented by the Veronese. The council sent a deputation to explain that the chierici were post clerks, who had drawn small sums from parochial revenue from time immemorial; and in fact Eugenius climbed a long way down, allowing the bulk of the chierici to fade out.

Chierici (indeed those at Verona) were not solely the product of city churches but are found also in rural communities. The rural
proud of the people in the area of the chapel or oratory. Sometimes they had a relic of a saint, always they were dedicated to one; often they had one or more confraternities associated with their church. Pride and a love of independence ensured pressure from the ‘sons of the church’, the laymen of the congregation, the filii ecclesiae, for a fuller autonomy and for greater splendour of services. In the rural piève there was at least a Sunday mass – sometimes even daily masses, some occasionally sung. We have an excellent account of the emergence of the baptismal church in the case of the chapel of Sa Margherita in a parish which depended on the Benedictine nunnery of S. Lorenzo in Padua. The people began to identify with it; it was where they went to mass, where they (occasionally) confessed. The process was perhaps accelerated because the priest in charge of S. Lorenzo also had charge of a rural piève (S. Broia). A further aspect of the popular pressure for baptismal churches was the general custom of electing the parish clergy, often by a two-thirds majority. This (which in northern Europe – certainly in England – had become very rare by the later Middle Ages) was found up and down the peninsula.

Of course the lead in such developments obviously lay with the important members of the new parish and in this way men of means could and did secure the effective and legal patronage of benefices with due of souls. That this trend was increasingly noticeable in the later fifteenth century seems highly probable; and likewise episcopal intervention is also more often to be seen. But, even if the impulse came from the well-to-do in the community, it met a general need. It is important to remember that this multiplication of parishes from the thirteenth century was not due to their having, as they did after Tuxt, major administrative functions (i.e. keeping of registers of baptism, of numbers of communicants, etc.). It was popular demand that ultimately made the difference.

The result was certainly large numbers of parishes. In Verona there were 52 by the thirteenth century, a number which almost but did not quite correspond with the 55 contrade or administrative subdivisions of the town, so that a citizen could describe himself as ‘living in the contrada of S. Tomio as to temporal matters, and in the contrada of S. Marco as to spiritual matters’ – a remarkable confusion of loyalties. In Cremona there were 73 parishes recorded in the fifteenth century. This multiplicity of baptismal churches is mainly a phenomenon of the centre and north of Italy, for the tiny bishoprics of the south were little more than parochial in size. It would, however, be a mistake to suppose that the great cathedrals had lost their prestige, or that baptism as such did not remain probably the most important sacrament for ordinary men and women. It afforded a visible link with the church and had a concrete reality, unlike marriage, where a priest was (and remains) a mere witness of espousal, and not by any means essential to the contract. Mass had, and this must be referred to later, acquired a mystical significance but was often in practice perfunctory; the annual confession and communion was also often either omitted or not very significant for the majority. But baptism was a great occasion (like death) when the family was united. And baptism, with proliferating god-parents, was a moment when kinship could be extended and acted therefore as an important unifying element in society. This had canonical complications since when children acted as god-parents it could later be an impediment to marriage if they were related in this way to their betrothed. But the habit of having several god-parents, sometimes many, persisted and nowhere more than in Italy, where the earliest baptismal registers have survived.

Nor does the evidence that there were more baptismal churches indicate that there were enough ordained priests, or enough priests willing to undertake parochial duty. We shall see in a later chapter that many churches were in a ruinous state. It probably was the case that there were proportionately more clergy, regular and secular, in Italy than elsewhere in Christendom and, of course, there were vastly more bishops. All in some sense looked to the pope as their leader, especially in the fifteenth century and later, and the papacy must be the subject of the next two chapters, as far as possible in connection with the ‘Italian nation’, the clergy and people of the peninsula.