

Simoniaca Heresis

Jean Leclercq, OSB

Translated by W. L. North from the French original in *Studi Gregoriani* I (Rome, 1947), pp. 523-530. The translator has modified some of the references in the notes to indicate English language translations of some of the sources cited there.



Saint Gregory VII and his contemporaries often used the expression *simoniaca heresis* [simoniacal heresy or the heresy of simony]. In our own time, “heresy” is defined as a doctrine which is opposed to the revealed truth:¹ it is therefore an erroneous judgment of the intellect.² But simony is an action, a practice: it concerns the category of acting, not the category of knowing. Some are also tempted to conclude that simony is not a heresy. They are likewise constrained to submit to an interpretation that permits one to dismiss Gregory VII’s manner of speaking and that of many others. According to this hypothesis, rather than admit that the popes, theologians, and canonists knew neither what heresy was nor what simony was, we would be reduced to thinking that, under their pen, the word *heresis*, when applied to simony, is only a vague metaphor, equivalent to *pestis*, *morbus*, or *pravitas*, which medieval writers themselves pair with the epithet *simoniacus*, though much less frequently. If one wishes to appreciate the value of the expression *simoniaca heresis*, and if one wishes to assess its conformity to tradition, it is important to retrace the main steps of its history.

At the top of the most ancient catalogues of heretics appears Simon the Magician, whom the account of the Acts of the Apostles describes.³ Such is the case, for example, in Pseudo-Tertullian’s *Libellus adversus omnes hereses* (Pamphlet against all hereses), which goes back probably to the first half of the third century;⁴ in this text, in which Simon’s errors are enumerated, there is no allusion to the fact that he wished to obtain the Holy Spirit for a payment of silver. To contrary, mention is made of a lineage of apostles “who were saying the same things as he.” Simon is therefore considered as the founder of a true sect. Some time later, Saint Jerome also said that “[Simon] created a

¹ The elements of this definition are borrowed from the substantial article by A. Michel, “Hérésie, Hérétique,” in the *Dictionnaire de théologie catholique* VI, col. 2211.

² *Ibid.* col. 2222.

³ Acts 8: 19.

⁴ Edited following *De prescriptione hereticorum*, in *PL* 2, col. 61. On the date and the sources, see O. Bardenhewer, *Geschichte der altchristlichen Literatur* II (1903), 431, and III (1912), 663.

heresy,”⁵ since [heresy] at that time was generally used as a synonym for “sect”.⁶ Already between 383 and 391, Philastrius of Brescia, inspired by the most ancient catalogues [of heresies], placed Simon and his disciples at the beginning of their list of heretics after the Passion of Christ.⁷ He, too, does not speak of Simon’s desire to buy the Holy Spirit. But this latter complaint will be the complaint with which, around 428, Saint Augustine reproaches Simon in the first place.⁸

With Gregory the Great (pope, 590–604) the expression *simoniaca heresis* becomes a frequently used phrase. Saint Gregory employs it in one of his homilies on a text in which he expresses the full essence of his thought on the subject. Those who impose the Holy Spirit only on condition of receiving money are just as guilty as the sellers whom Jesus chased from the Temple. They are the ruin of the priesthood, and it was for this reason that the Redeemer destroyed their counting tables: “from there it comes about that the holy canons condemn the simoniacal heresy.”⁹ Saint Gregory speaks here of simony without alluding to Simon. In another homily, he evokes the account of the Acts of the Apostles and places it in dialogue with the same scene from the Gospels, and then he rises up against simony, but does not name it or characterize it as heretical.¹⁰ In these two texts, he accuses Simon of none of the doctrinal errors that the ancient catalogues attribute to him: he accuses him only of having wished to put the gift of God up for sale.

When in his letters Saint Gregory mentions “the simoniacal heresy”, he always assumes that this expression has the sense that he gives it in his homilies. Sometimes he contents himself with alluding to it;¹¹ on other occasions he characterizes the “heresy of simony” as “contrary to the holy and universal church.”¹² “It has risen up against the holy Church”¹³ and has even raised itself up to become the first of all heresies.¹⁴ Therefore whoever allows himself to become a priest by means of money thereby becomes without question a heretic.¹⁵ Simony must therefore be extirpated just like

⁵ Epistle 133, 4.1, in *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 56, 248: *Simon magus heresin condidit Helenae meretricis auxilio*. [Simon the magician founded the heresy with the help of the prostitute Helena.]

⁶ For example, in St Augustine’s *Epistula* 222.2, *CSEL* 7, cols. 447–448. Augustine nonetheless proclaims in the same context that is very difficult to define heresy. See J. de Guibert, “La notion d’hérésie dans S. Augustin,” *Bulletin de littérature ecclésiastique* (1920), 368–382.

⁷ *Liber de heresibus* 29, in *PL* 12, col. 1137.

⁸ *De heresibus* 1, in *PL* 42, col. 25.

⁹ *Homily XVIII on the Gospels* 13, in *PL* 76, col. 1145.

¹⁰ *Homily V on the Gospels* 4, in *PL* 76, 1001.

¹¹ *Registrum* V.16, VI.3, IX.218, and others.

¹² *Registrum* V.60.

¹³ *Registrum* V.58; V.62; V.63.

¹⁴ *Registrum* XIII.44.

¹⁵ *Registrum* VI.7: Et cum prima contra sanctam ecclesiam simoniaca heresis sit exorta, cur non perpenditur, cur non uidetur, quia eum quem quisque cum pretio ordinat provehendo agit, ut hereticus fiat? [And since the simoniacal heresy

all other heresies which oppose the faith and destroy the unity of the Church.¹⁶ In fact, it was condemned by Christ,¹⁷ by the Apostles,¹⁸ and by the Fathers.¹⁹

After Gregory the Great, the phrase *simoniaca heresis* appears more and more. We find it, for example, in the *Capitularia* [of the Carolingians]²⁰ and in the decrees of the councils, whence it will pass into collections of canon law.²¹ But it is above all at the time of what is called the Gregorian Reform that one makes the content of it more precise. Gregory VII uses it as a formula which speaks for itself and requires no explanation.²² But in this form, it is not a cliché because, on occasion, it justifies the association of the two words simony and heresy: to soil a church “with the simoniacal heresy” is to try to separate it from the catholic faith.²³ Long ago, the Fathers condemned the “simoniacal heresy” and the recent councils confirm this condemnation.²⁴ A simoniacal bishop—that is, a bishop who occupies his see thanks to simony or who confers ecclesiastical offices for payment—can therefore not exercise his office in conformity to the will of the Church; to follow such a bishop is to commit the crime of the “*simoniacal heresy*”, since union with Christ in his Church is only guaranteed through obedience to a “legitimate bishop”.²⁵ Gregory VII therefore admits that the simoniacal heresy is simultaneously contrary to the faith and to the unity of the Church.

He affirms the fact. The writers who participated in the polemics which preceded, accompanied, and followed the reform to which his name is linked offered the rationale for this fact. In their writings, as well, the assimilation of simony to heresy is explicit; the expression *simoniaca heresis* is not a formula devoid of meaning and that one uses without thinking. The equivalence it expresses corresponds to a reality. Gerhoh of Reichersberg (1093–1169) says it sometimes in passing but

first arose against the holy Church, why is it not adjudged, why does it not seem right that by advancing someone whom another ordains for payment, he acts so as to become a heretic?

¹⁶ *Registrum* XIII.44.

¹⁷ Texts indicated in *PL* 78, col. 1578.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Registrum* VIII.4.

²⁰ For example, in those of the Capitulary of Attigny in 822 [*MGH Leges, Capitularia* I, 357, 11 n. 6].

²¹ For example, in the *Decretum* I.21 of Burchard of Worms (composed between 1007 and 1014), in *PL* 140, col. 555; in this decree from the council of Meaux of 845 (Mansi, XIV, 828), it is said that simony had brought about the destruction of the priesthood and stripped away by itself every guarantee of communion with the true Church.

²² For example, *Register* I.11, I. 27, I.35, and II.10 [ed. E. Caspar, *MGH Epistolae Selectae*], in which Gregory reports the words of others.

²³ Gregory VII, *Registrum* I.15.

²⁴ Gregory VII, *Registrum* II.67.

²⁵ Gregory VII, *Registrum* I.80.

clearly;²⁶ elsewhere he insists on it in a manner that leaves no doubt.²⁷ Saint Peter Damian (1007-1072) places on the same level the “simoniacal heresy” and Arianism, about which he says that it was a sect opposed to catholic teaching” but he does not characterize it as a heresy.²⁸ Cardinal Humbert speaks more clearly still: if someone doubts that simoniacs are heretics, he explains, he should consult the catalogues of heresies, and there, in the works of all the Fathers, he will find them right next to the Arians.²⁹ Not only is simony a heresy on the same grounds as all those which place the faith in peril and which the Church forbids, but it is even the greatest of the heresies: it was the first of them all and “raised itself up against the rule of the nascent Church,”³⁰ and it is the most serious.³¹

In what did this “heresy” consist? It is an error in a matter of faith. Cardinal Humbert announces this without hesitation.³² Simoniacs “believe” that they can receive the Holy Spirit for money.³³ What Simon had only “thought” or “judged”, according to the wording of the Acts of the Apostles, they “believed”: in such a case, “they are clearly heretics”.³⁴ This error bears not only on the gratuity of the gift of God but also on the true character of ecclesiastical property: they are owned in common by the Church and no one can dispose of them as if they belonged properly to him. To consider them personal, human property when they belong to God and to all his church, is an act of idolatry.³⁵

In order to justify applying the label of heresy to simony and lay investiture, Geoffrey of Vendôme pushes the analyse of the error of Simon Magus and his imitators very far indeed. In his opinion,

²⁶ *De aedificio Dei* 13, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 142: Hereticos, uidelicet simoniacos, nicolaitas necnon clericos proprietarios. [Heretics, that is to say, simoniacs, nicolaitists, and clerics who own private property.]

²⁷ *Ad cardinales*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 404: Talis venditor sine dubio est simoniacus et hereticus. [Such a seller is without question simoniacal and heretical.]

²⁸ *Liber Gratissimus* 38, MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 72 (=

²⁹ *Adversus Simoniacos* I, 7, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 111.

³⁰ Peter Damian, Op. 30: *De sacramentis per improbos administratis* proemium, in PL 145, col. 523: Simoniacam heresim, primam omnium hereseorum ex imis diaboli uisceribus erumpentem seseque aduersus nascentis ecclesie regulam exitialiter extollentem ... Quapropter omnes huius negandae hereseos peste corruptos hereticos esse indubitanter asserimus. [the simoniacal heresy, the first of all heresies bursting forth from the deepest bowels of the devil and raising itself up in a deadly manner against the rule of the nascent church... Therefore, we assert without a doubt that all those corrupted by the pestilence of this foul heresy are heretics.]

³¹ *Widonis Epistola*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 7.

³² *Adversus Simoniacos* I, 20, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 134: Manifestum est simoniacos per cupiditatem a fide aberrasse uel potius apostatasse et circa fidem naufragasse. [It is evident that simoniacs have wandered away or, better, apostasized, from the faith because of their greed and gotten shipwrecked regarding the faith.]

³³ *Adversus Simoniacos* I, 3, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 106; see also Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Libellus VIII*, MGH *Libelli de Lite* II, 699.

³⁴ Humbert, *Adversus Simoniacos* I, 3, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 107: Si autem credunt, manifeste heretici sunt. The same argument appears a bit later (*Adversus Simoniacos* I.7, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 111, and in Gerhoch of Reichersberg, *Liber de simoniaco*, MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 246.

³⁵ Gerhoch of Reichersberg, *Epistola ad Innocentium papam*, in MGH III, 212-213.

heresy, in the proper sense of term, is “nothing other than the act of separating the Son or the Holy Spirit from the unity of the Father or of affirming that one of the persons [of the Trinity] is more or less great than the others.” On this basis, it turns out that,

“Simon Magus was the first and the worst of heretics. Not only did he believe that he could separate the Holy Spirit from the equality of the Father but he tried presumptuously to be, himself, greater than the Holy Spirit. In effect, when he thought that he could possess the Holy Spirit for money, what did he really desire if not to be greater than the Holy Spirit, since the possessor is superior to the thing possessed?”

Now then, the layman who confers the investiture without which the sacraments cannot be administered, usurps the right and power of Christ and, in a certain way, says that he is superior to the Son of God: “there is therefore good reason that he is given the name ‘heretic’ and that his investiture is called ‘heresy’.” These authors, one can see, are not at a loss for arguments to establish that the *simoniacal heresy* supposes a grave error or, more precisely, a complex of errors.³⁶

Simony is the conscious persistence in this error. A simple “error in faith”, passing and unconscious, is not enough to merit the title of heretic for the one who was the victim of it. For there to be heresy, it remains necessary that there be present this condition which tradition has characterized with the word “pertinacity”. The same holds on the subject of simony. Simoniacs and nicolaitists are only called heretics if they are “hardened in the error of their sect”.³⁷ This is why, Gerhoch of Reichersberg says elsewhere, “the title of simoniak can be avoided thanks to repentance.”³⁸ What makes a simoniak a heretic is not the fact of receiving or giving the sacraments for payment, but the firm and deliberate conviction that such conduct implies.

Because it is such a serious sin against the faith, simony is necessarily a rupture with the Church: it is a sin “against the Church of God”.³⁹ Like all heresies, it separates from the Church, guardian of the faith.⁴⁰ If, for example, a bishop demands from an abbot, in order to bless him, “a so-called profession contrary to the Christian faith”, this engagement does not deserve to be called a

³⁶ Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Libellus IV: De simonia et investitura laicorum, quare utraque dicatur heresis*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* II, 690.

³⁷ Gerhoch of Reichersberg, *Liber de simoniaco*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 244.

³⁸ *Commentarius in Psalmum LXIV*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 488.

³⁹ Hesso, *De concilio Remensi*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 24: *Simoniaca heresis que maxime per inuestituras contra legem Dei innouata est*. [The simoniacal heresy which has been renewed against the law of God especially through investitures...]

⁴⁰ *Widonis Epistola*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* I, 7.

profession of the sacred faith; it is, to the contrary, an damnable promise: it attempts to seize from the Church the power of the keys and to violate the unique portal through which one enters into the Church.⁴¹

Simoniacs also fall under the same condemnations as “all other heretics”:⁴² they are to be avoided as having already been condemned by Saint Peter,⁴³ and one must treat them like heretics,⁴⁴ save that the procedure that one uses against them and against nicolaitists is more severe than that which one generally uses against heretics.⁴⁵

The texts accumulated during the patristic period and in the era of the Gregorian Reform entered, in the twelfth century, into the theological⁴⁶ and canonical compilations. One reads in the *Decretum* of Gratian that “simoniacs do not have the integrity of the faith”⁴⁷, that they are “infidels”⁴⁸, and that their heresy is more damnable than all the rest.”⁴⁹ “Just like other heretics,” writes Gratian, “simoniacs separate themselves from the faith, and therefore it is necessary to apply to them what has been decreed regarding other heretics.”⁵⁰ In the XIIIth century, from the first words of his *Summa de Penitentia*, Saint Raymond de Peñaforte—whose influence over later canonical legislation was great—affirms that “among the ecclesiastical crimes, the simoniacal heresy occupies the first rank.”⁵¹ Saint Thomas Aquinas will bring to bear the decisive light in his *Summa Theologica*: simony, he says in effect, is a vice opposed to the virtue of religion. Now, since religion is an expression of faith, the vices opposed to the faith contain within themselves a certain expression of infidelity. Simony is, in this sense, called heresy: he who sells the gift of the Holy Spirit proclaims himself, in a certain way, master of the spiritual gift, and this is heretical.⁵²

Is simony a heresy? Long ago, this question was often posed, particularly in the XIth and XIIth centuries, and it was answered in the affirmative. In our own day, we prefer to say that simony implies a heresy or engenders a heresy. But the ancients were not afraid to claim that simony was

⁴¹ Geoffrey of Vendôme, *Libellus VII*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* II, 697.

⁴² Gerhoch of Reichersberg, *Liber de simonia*, in MGH *Libelli de Lite* III, 263.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 245.

⁴⁴ Ivo of Chartres, *Epistola XXVII*, PL 162, col. 39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, col. 40.

⁴⁶ For example, Alger of Liège, *De misericordia et justitia* chapter 32ff, in PL 180, cols. 945ff.

⁴⁷ c.19, C.I, q.1, ed. Emil Friedberg, col. 364.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* c.20.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, c.21.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, c.22, col. 366.

⁵¹ C. 1, ed. Verona 1744, p. 1.

⁵² *Summa theologia* II.2, q. 100, a.1, ad 1.

properly called a heresy. It is with their ideas, and not with those of today, that we must interpret their texts and their vocabulary.

Focusing on this philological point is more than just quibbling over words. It serves to reveal the sense behind the conduct pursued by the popes with regard to simoniacs. If simony was only a practice detrimental to the immediate interests of the papacy, we could ask if the attitude of Gregory VII and his followers were not simply responding to temporal considerations. But if simony involved what was most sacred in the church—the integrity of the faith and unity in love—then one understands that to oppose it was not just a matter of politics.