



# POPE *vs* KING

Which one had more power during the Middle Ages?



## Thomas a Becket and King Henry II of England

A famous example of conflict between a king and the Medieval Christian Church occurred between King Henry II of England and Thomas a Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury.

King Henry and Becket were onetime friends. Becket had been working as a clerk for the previous Archbishop of Canterbury. This was an important position because the Archbishop of Canterbury was the head of the Christian Church in England. Thomas Becket was such an efficient and dedicated worker he was eventually named Lord Chancellor. The Lord Chancellor was a clerk who worked directly for the king.

In 1162, Theobald of Bec, the Archbishop of Canterbury, died. King Henry saw this as an opportunity to increase his control over the Christian Church in England. He decided to appoint Thomas Becket to be the new Archbishop of Canterbury reasoning that, because of their relationship, Becket would support Henry's policies. He was wrong.

Instead, Becket worked vigorously to protect the interests of the Church even when that meant disagreeing with King Henry. Henry and Becket argued over tax policy and control of church land but the biggest conflict was over legal rights of the clergy. Becket claimed that if a church official was accused of a crime, only the church itself had the ability to put the person on trial. King Henry said that his courts had jurisdiction over anyone accused of a crime in England.

This conflict became increasingly heated until Henry forced many of the English Bishops and Archbishops to agree to the Constitution of



Clarendon. The Constitution of Clarendon was a document that would have given Henry more control of the Church but Becket refused to sign it. Instead he fled to France and sought the protection of King Louis VII of France who was King Henry's bitter enemy.

King Henry harassed Becket's supporters who were still in England and Becket began excommunicating officials who supported the King. He even threatened England with an interdict.

In 1169, Henry had his son crowned King of England. Normally, it was the job of the Archbishop of Canterbury to crown English kings but because of Becket's absence, the Archbishop of York performed the duty. This prompted Becket to return to England and he excommunicated three more of Henry's supporters.

It was then that King Henry was alleged to have cried, "will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four of Henry's knights took this as a direct order and secretly went to Canterbury Cathedral. When Beckett refused to go with the knights, they murdered him in front of the altar of the cathedral.

There was an immediate outcry against both the knights and against Henry himself for his role in the murder. Thomas Beckett was viewed as a martyr, someone who dies for his beliefs. He became an important symbol for those who supported the Christian Church.

King Henry was in a difficult position and so he made an unusual political move. He decided to take responsibility for his role in Beckett's death and pay a public penance. King Henry walked barefoot through the streets of Kent to Canterbury Cathedral wearing a plain wool shirt. There he allowed himself to be struck and whipped by the monks. Through this act, King Henry was able to diffuse much of the political opposition which was growing against him. His reign continued for two more decades. Nevertheless, this was an unusual act for a king!

