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Pope Leo IX: A reforming pope?

Andrew Smith

University of Glasgow, Scotland

Correspondence
Andrew Smith, 1 Cochrane Street, Falkirk, Scotland FK1 1QB, UK.
Email: andrew.smith.5@glasgow.ac.uk

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1 | INTRODUCTION

"[Leo] to work for the reform of the Church" (1883)¹ "a great reforming pope" (1889)²
"the first pope who desired reform" (1924)³ "the reformer Leo IX" (1935)⁴
"the great reform pope" (2005)⁵ "the reform minded ... Leo IX" (2015)⁶

These interpretations and descriptions of Pope Leo IX (1049–1054) illustrate clearly the predominant historiographical view of Leo for the last 136 years. During this period, the overriding emphasis has been on Leo as a reform pope and dissenting voices are rare. It is only very recently that the concept of reform, in contextual terms and not necessarily specifically related to Leo, has begun to be re-evaluated; notably by Maureen Miller, Leidulf Melve and currently by the Leverhulme International project Rethinking Reform 900–1150 Conceptualising Change in Medieval Religious Institutions.⁷ However, the specific consensus of interpretation of Leo as a reform pope, which has so far escaped re-evaluation, is unfortunately bedevilled by two crucial factors. Firstly, there has been little historiographical focus on attempting to define what is meant by reform, and secondly, there has been relatively limited systematic evaluation of Leo's pontificate in relation to what he actually did during his 5-year reign. His pontificate has almost always been viewed via the adjective of reform and his actions and policies interpreted accordingly.

Attempts at defining reform in the historiography are, for the most part, conspicuous by their absence. This absence was initially and seriously addressed by Gerhart Ladner as long ago as 1959. His definition, set primarily within a theological context, was as follows:

The idea of reform may now be defined as the idea of free, intentional and ever perfectible, multiple, prolonged and ever repeated efforts to reassert and augment values pre-existent in the spiritual-material compound of the world.⁸

The clarity of his definition was somewhat clouded by a small number of qualifications and caveats which, almost certainly, undermined its future usefulness as a descriptive or analytical tool. However, Ladner did introduce one key...
component into his concept of reform: namely, that reform was about "intention" and the "conscious pursuit of ends."9 Ladner’s ideas have most recently been reconsidered by Bellitto and Flanagin (2012) who additionally argued that "while much has been learned in the last fifty years of reform scholarship, little has made its way into the larger historical discourse, which remains vitiated by over simplification and anachronism."10

However, if Ladner himself expected or hoped that his pioneering definition would be utilised and taken forward in regard to the Gregorian Reform, he was to be sorely disappointed. It was nearly 30 years after Ladner’s original definition that the issue was to be tackled again and even then as a critique rather than a definition. In 1988, Gerd Tellenbach launched a broadside against the lack of definition. He wrote "church reform ... is usually defined so inadequately that one can only describe it as an empty formula."11 He then went on to state that:

The word "reform" has been used to form a whole range of composite words and phrases ... This immense vocabulary is often confusing and conceals more than it reveals because it has no concrete reference and is vague and imprecise as to what is really understood by reform.12

Although Tellenbach’s thinking is very clear, indeed, it is regrettable that he did not follow this up with his own definition. Furthermore, if he had intended his words to act as a wake-up call to his fellow historians, then, like Ladner, he too was to be disappointed. His trenchant opinion appears to have had little discernible impact over the next 20 years, and the concept and definition of reform, as well as its specific usage in relation to Leo, remained elusively imprecise.

However, the concept and definition of reform have recently begun to receive a long overdue measure of scholarly attention. This attention has not, as yet, been focussed on any particular individual and it is to Pope Leo IX that proper scrutiny will now be given. In order to re-evaluate Leo’s pontificate, it is a prerequisite to put forward, for the first time, a new definition of reform. This will remedy the scholarly lacuna relating to the definition of reform which characterises almost all of the historiography pertaining to Leo IX. It will also assist in positioning Leo as a pope in his own right and will enable an analysis of his pontificate without him being perceived under the long interpretational shadow of ill-defined reform.

The new definition is as follows:

A reforming or reform minded individual is one who sets out, with intent, to re-imagine the established order and in so doing to fundamentally change, for the better, organisations and/or society.

This definition is founded on three key principles. It builds upon Ladner’s idea that reform is about intention and the conscious pursuit of ends and not opportunism. It acknowledges the crucial importance of individual responsibility in bringing about change both organisationally and societally. It emphasises that reform is about change and not the establishment of continuity or the maintenance of the status quo and it leaves open, to a certain and arguable extent, the degree to which reform is characterised by backward rather than forward looking perspectives.

This re-evaluation of Leo’s pontificate under the focus of this new definition is founded upon three principal elements of his pontificate: travels, Synods, and governance of the Church. It will lead to a better understanding of the overall concept of reform and it is underpinned by a detailed analysis of a number of Leo’s extant letters. The newly commissioned translations of all 111 of these provide a new perspective and analysis relating to what Leo actually accomplished.13

In relation to the first element, that is, his travels, it is undeniable that Leo travelled widely and often and the summary details of when and where he spent his time are set out in Tables 1 and 2 below. The overall result of these travels is that out of the 5 years of his pontificate, Leo spent only around 8 months in Rome and not too far short of that in his home town of Toul and home region of Alsace. It is, at the very least, a moot point whether or not this was what Emperor Henry III intended when he selected Leo to become pope in late 1048.
The historiography related to Leo’s travels has tended to focus on the process rather than the outcomes. It emphasises that Leo’s itinerant modus operandi was similar to that of major secular rulers of the time. It posits that this itinerant mode was a deliberate policy choice for the operation of the papacy by Leo. It focusses on and emphasises the frequency of Leo’s trans Alpine travels and contrasts this with a comparative lack of such journeys by his predecessors. Finally and above all, it attributes a variety of purposes to these travels, for example, to Europeanise the role of the bishop of Rome and the papacy; to implement his so-called reform agenda; and to extend the reach of his governance of the Church.

The historiographical interpretation of Leo’s itinerant modus operandi is essentially correct. It is also a reasonable assumption that Leo almost certainly learned about the value of travelling for a ruler from his time in the chapel at the court of Emperor Conrad II. Leo’s near contemporary biographer noted how important a role Leo played in that court. From this early experience in his life, it can be safely concluded that, when he became pope, Leo’s decision to travel was a deliberate policy/political choice. Where Leo differed from other 11th century popes was that he travelled considerably more than any of them, up to and including Gregory VII (1073–1085). Notwithstanding this, there remain specific questions relating to the purposes of his travels and in particular of his trans Alpine journeys which need to be reassessed.

The historiographical consensus on his travels is focussed, principally, on the three purposes outlined above i.e. Europeanisation, reform and governance. Having said that, however, the following new analyses of his travels reveal a far more complex and nuanced perspective which calls into question this long held consensus.

### TABLE 1 Leo’s travels, 1049–1054: Summary information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journey</th>
<th>Start</th>
<th>Finish</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Rome: late May/early June 1049</td>
<td>Rome: 27th April 1050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Rome: mid May 1050</td>
<td>Rome: mid March 1051</td>
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<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Rome: late June 1051</td>
<td>Rome: mid April 1052</td>
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<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Rome: late April 1052</td>
<td>Rome: mid March 1053</td>
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<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Rome: mid April 1053</td>
<td>Benevento: late June 1053</td>
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### TABLE 2 Leo's pontificate 1049–1054: Time/location breakdown in weeks

| Time spent on travels | 159 | 64% |
| Time spent in captivity | 36 | 14% |
| Time spent in Rome | 33 | 13% |
| Time spent in Toul/Alsace | 20 | 9% |
| Total for pontificate | 248 weeks (62 months) |

*Sources: Jaffe and PL Full Text Database.
Note. A very small number of minor adjustments have been made to the number of weeks due to the occasionally imprecise nature of the primary source information.*
Leo dealt with a considerable volume of business whilst en route. The great majority of this (over 90% in the first 18 months) was in response to requests for confirmations of possessions and/or privileges (legal rights) for monasteries and churches. Across journeys Two to Five inclusive (see Table 1), Leo issued 61 letters in total. Of this total,
32 were issued to institutions which were on or in close proximity to either the route he travelled or the places where he stayed for more than a few days, that is, Reims, Mainz, and Toul. This locally requested business was far from Leo pursuing reform as defined above or trying to Europeanise the papacy. This was a routine papal workload; dealt with by Leo as sought by the requesters and largely implicitly designed by them to maintain their estates and rights as they stood.
### 3 | TRANS APPENINE CORRIDOR

The importance of this corridor to Leo can be gauged by the fact that he criss-crossed it in every year of his pontificate. In 1 year in particular (June 1051–April 1052: Journey Four), he did not travel outside the corridor at all (save for one brief excursion to Osimo). On Journey Four, he issued seven letters whilst en route of which four were to institutions close to his route, and on Journey Five, he issued seven letters whilst in the corridor of which four were close to his route. The density and frequency of his journeys across the corridor illustrates markedly the importance of this area to Leo and the papacy and the amount of time and energy he devoted or was forced to devote to the issues which arose within it. It is also worth noting that Leo's propensity to travel in the corridor was in significant contrast to all preceding 11th century popes who, if they travelled at all, travelled infrequently in this corridor. The principal issues Leo dealt with were the role of the Normans, the role of Constantinople, the strategic importance of the monastery of Monte Cassino, the similar importance attached to Benevento, and the ceaseless political machinations of a number of local secular rulers, notably Pandulf IV. The business conducted by Leo in the corridor had little to do with reform or Europeanising the papacy and everything to do with the balance of political power and the perceived safety of the papacy in Rome. The fact that Leo's policy in the corridor ended disastrously in defeat at the hands of the Normans at the battle of Civitate in June 1053 should not detract from the considerable skill and energy he devoted to it prior to that.

### 4 | TOUL AND ALSACE

Leo spent around 20 weeks in Toul and Alsace which were his home town and local region, respectively. It is crucial to note that Leo was elected bishop of Toul in May 1026 and demitted office in January 1051. During the time he spent here when he was pope, he took care, by confirming possessions and/or privileges, to protect and maintain his own family's interests in their monasteries and nunneries. Leo also used Toul as a base for around 3 months (October 1050–January 1051) when he issued 10 letters, seven of which were to institutions in or close to Toul itself. This retention of his bishopric, his frequent visits to Toul/Alsace (which were noted by contemporaries), his use of Toul as a base, and his protection of his own family's interests reflect, to a great extent, Leo's desire to retain power and authority in his home town/region. His actions here did not amount to reform or Europeanisation but were more to do with consolidation and maintenance of his own family's and his own episcopal interests.

Leo also used his travels for a number of other important purposes. He met with Emperor Henry III five times, with two of these meetings during Synods (Mainz: October 1049 and Bamberg: October 1052). He performed significant ecclesiastical ceremonies; for instance, the consecration of the church and translation of relics at Reims (October 1049), the translation of the relics of Gerard at Toul (October 1050), and the Purification of St. Mary at Augsburg (February 1053). He undertook a diplomatic mission on behalf of Henry III to Bratislava (summer 1052), and lastly and fatefully, he travelled to take military action against the Normans at Civitate in June 1053.

It will be evident from the foregoing analysis that the purposes of Leo's travels were very complex and that he undertook his peregrinations for different reasons, at different times, and to a multitude of different places. This very complexity precludes the use of any "single interpretive lens" to explain them. Whilst the analysis does not rule out entirely the purposes of reform, Europeanisation, and the reach of papal governance, it does provide a much needed and long overdue re-balancing of the prevailing historiography and, crucially, it focusses on the outcomes and not the process of his travels.

The second element of his pontificate concerns his Synods. Leo held 14 of these and the details are set out in Table 3. The Synod at Bamberg is a new addition to the usual number following analysis of Leo's letters XXII and LXXV. The predominant theme of the historiography concerning his Synods emphasises their role in relation to his so-called reform agenda, Europeanisation of the papacy, and alleged radical approach to church governance, for example, simony (improper payment of money for church office). Historians have focussed on a small group of
Synods because of the limitations of extant information but even given that it is still possible to question the orthodox view. The following new analysis faces similar source constraints but highlights a more nuanced and less straightforward perspective. For instance, in terms of their location, Leo only held three Synods north of the Alps: two in October 1049 (Reims and Mainz) and the third in Bamberg (October 1052). Given that three quarters of his Synods were held in Italy, it is hard to accept that they were an integral part of a coordinated and planned policy of Europeanisation. Furthermore, Leo’s choice of locations was not new and thus cannot be seen as part of an attempt to reform this aspect of papal policy, Pope Benedict VIII had held a Synod north of the Alps in 1020 and many previous popes had held Synods in Italy both in and outside Rome.23

Leo used his Synods as an instrument of church governance and in particular to resolve internal ecclesiastical disputes which were dealt with at five Synods.24 At these Synods, Leo used an approach consistent with contemporary contexts, that is, neither radical nor reform based. For instance, he allowed the disputants to present their case with legal representation, there was a collegiate style of decision making with Leo ensuring that the full Synod arrived at its judgement, and finally, Leo ensured that the decision was recorded in writing and in most cases attested by those present.25 It is pertinent to observe that although Leo clearly attached great importance to resolving disputes at Synods, this was not a new, reforming departure and that he was merely following the well-worn practice of previous popes.26

The vexed question of simony was also dealt with by Leo in his Synods. The first occasion was at his opening Synod in Rome in April 1049. Here, Leo set out his initial policy position very clearly, that is, “he rendered all simoniacal ordinations null and void.”27 This was followed by uproar from those present who argued that if this policy were to be followed, then “nearly all major churches would be without episcopal services.”28 At this point, Leo executed a rapid reversal of policy and decided after “long and voluminous discussion” that simoniacs would have to do 40 days penance and then, crucially, “function in the office of orders he had received.”29 In other words, no one found guilty of simony would lose their job in the church. This policy turnaround can hardly be seen as the action of a pope intending to vigorously pursue reform as defined above and that the approach which he originally intended was fatally compromised less than 3 months into his pontificate. This policy was also adopted at the Synod of Reims in October 1049. It is sufficient to note that of the five clerics who confessed to simony in this Synod, four were

<table>
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<th>Table 3: Leo’s Synods 1049–1054</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Place</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pavia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reims</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mainz</td>
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<td>Salerno</td>
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<td>Siponto</td>
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<td>Rome</td>
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<td>Vercelli</td>
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<td>Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bamberg</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mantua</td>
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<td>Rome</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rome</td>
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reinstated in their office and only one was demoted to the priesthood. In short, the policy set out at Rome was followed at Reims. There would, of course, have been a degree of principally individual reputational damage, which should not be underestimated, but it is argued that this would have been significantly outweighed by the advantages of retention of office.

The issue of church practices and beliefs was dealt with by Leo at his first two Synods in 1049 (Rome and Reims). In Rome, his biographer noted that he set out, in unequivocal language, his belief in respecting the precedent set by previous decisions:

He [Leo] demonstrated how great was the wisdom that he devoted to preserving the catholic laws in the first Roman council that he held, in the company of many bishops, where in his discourse he restated the decisions of the four principal synods and confirmed that the decrees of all preceding popes were to be respected.30

The biographer additionally wrote that "He [Leo] also strove to restate very many other chapters of the canons."31 For the Synod at Reims, the references are slightly less direct but, even so, they still convey Leo's determination to continue to adhere to previous decrees and decisions. A letter was issued to "his catholic brothers and sons established through the whole kingdom of the Franks" shortly after the Synod.32 In this, Leo wrote that the Synod "confirmed very many things that were necessary for the benefit of Christian religion" and made references to matters which were "all contained in the chapter books which we had ordered to be held among the canons and afterwards in all the synods that we held took care to confirm."33 The fact that Leo confirmed his intentions on these issues at his first two Synods indicates their importance to him. They are set forth within the framework of ecclesiastical tradition and decisions dating back many centuries. Leo's approach emphasised continuity and maintenance and did not envisage any change or reform as defined earlier. In short, Leo did not use his Synods, in relation to the new definition of reform above, to reform or change: the emphasis was on continuity and maintenance.

The final element of his pontificate concerns his governance of the church. This new analysis focusses on the business he conducted, primarily through the medium of his letters, in his first 18 months in office. This period is when his Chancellor Peter held office, he died in September 1050, and this allows a consistent analysis which is unaffected by the potential influence of a change of Chancellor. In this period, Leo issued 43 letters of which 37 were to monasteries and churches as set out in Table 4 below.

A number of analytical issues arise specifically from this table and in relation to Leo's letters more generally. A strand of the prevailing historiography highlights that when he became pope, Leo is thought to have begun, intentionally, to Europeanise the role of the papacy. However, from Table 4, it is evident that Leo's sphere of reach was significantly less than Euro-wide and was primarily focussed on France and Italy; with nearly 80% of his letters issued to these two areas. The letters to monasteries and churches in this period were largely in response to requests (over 90%) and nearly 80% of these were for the confirmation of existing possessions and/or privileges. This indicates that Leo was operating a principally reactive office or rescript government and not taking the initiative in relation to

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monastery and church</th>
<th>Monastery Count</th>
<th>Church Count</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>54%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lower Lotharingia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td></td>
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Source: PL Full Text Database.
where he exercised his influence and authority. These letters were specific and routine responses to requests which did not in themselves bear witness to a papal desire to reform matters in respect of these 37 monasteries and churches.

The letters do, though, provide a fascinating insight into how the operation of Leo’s office evolved in one specific way. In his first letter (March 1049), Leo wrote that “it befits us to give assent, and not to recoil from such desires [to grant requests].” This open and unqualified response was tempered in October 1049 when Leo wrote he would only give assent to “just petitions.” This more cautious stance was followed up in April 1050 when he wrote that requests would be granted where they “reflect good reason.” The word “just” and phrase “good reason” are not defined but their usage undoubtedly reflected the fact that the complexities of governance and of operating a busy papal office were beginning to bite. It is a debatable point whether or not any requests were refused because they were not seen to be “just” or reflected “good reason.” It should be noted that none of Leo’s surviving letters record a refusal.

Leo’s first 18 months were characterised by a quite remarkable upsurge in papal business. Figure 1 illustrates the scale of this workload which was five times the annual average for any preceding 11th century pope and well above that for those who came shortly afterwards. The sheer scale of this activity could be taken to represent a pope anxious to make his mark, pushing reform, and extending his power and influence across Europe. However, as can be seen from the analyses above, this was not entirely the case and leaves open the question of what might have caused this escalation of workload. It is difficult to be certain from the extant letters and his biography but three interlinked factors may have had an impact. Firstly, that Leo’s pontificate was perceived as a new era and thus the papacy was seen as somewhere you could safely go to do business, in contrast to the brief and sometimes chaotic preceding pontificates. Secondly, that Leo was seen as the man to go to based on his long and arguably distinguished track record as bishop of Toul. Thirdly and finally, that the upsurge, in particular requests for confirmations, represented a kind of implicit, positive, collective judgement on Leo and the papacy by many monasteries and churches across some, albeit limited, areas of Europe.

This new analysis of Pope Leo IX’s pontificate is founded on a number of key considerations. In the first instance, there is the new definition of reform which emphasises change over continuity and intent over opportunism and which complements recent arguments from John Howe that “reform… has acquired so much dysfunctional baggage that perhaps it ought to be abandoned as a research paradigm” and from Steven Vanderputten that “reform remains something of a black hole.” This definition forms the framework for the new analyses of his travels, Synods, and governance of the church. These lead to a fresh perspective on Leo set within the context of the new definition of reform. From this viewpoint, Leo can no longer be accurately described as a reform pope. He should be seen as a traditionalist and conservative, largely intent on trying to continue things as they had always been. He was
also a pope who did not, for the most part, propose new ideas but he did have an uncanny ability to bring together and energise a constituency behind the old ones. Having said this, Leo is not to be underestimated as he can, and should be, perceived as an important pope in his own right. Leo was not, as he was formerly understood, simply a precursor for the so-called Gregorian reform movement later in the 11th century. He was an undoubtedly energetic pope who undertook multiple roles at the same time; as a pope attempting to exert his authority, in a traditional manner, across parts of western Europe; as the bishop of Rome; as bishop of Toul for part of his pontificate; and as a local and partly European political leader.

The long held historiographical practice of seeing Leo through the single prism of reform does not illuminate or enlighten or lead to a richer understanding of his pontificate. The long interpretational shadows of reform hang heavily over Leo. Thus, the question arises as to how to dispel these shadows. It is axiomatic that to replace one adjective with another would simply replace one single interpretive lens with another and would not take us further forward. The sheer complexity of Leo's political, ecclesiastical, and operational environment rules out any other single adjective. Furthermore, having uncoupled Leo from the yoke of reform, there remains the question of how this affects the broader narrative of the history of 11th century Europe. There is a need to reconsider the very notion of reform with a new focus on change and intent. There is an equal need to consider, as the label of reform is lifted from Leo, where the impetus for reform came from that inspired Pope Gregory VII. Finally, there is a need to think afresh, therefore, about the role of the other actors in the early to mid-11th century and to think again about Leo’s legacy, his achievements, and whether his style of leadership changed the papacy.

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ENDNOTES

1 Delarc, Les Normands en Italie depuis les Premieres Invasions jusqu’a l’avenement de S.Gregoire VII, p. 188.
3 Fliche, La reforme Gregorienne, Vol.1, La Formation des Ideas Gregorienne, p. 158.
4 Kolmel, Rom und Kirchenstaat im 10 und 11 Jahrhundert bis in der Anfange der Reform, pp. 35–36.
8 Ladner, The Idea of Reform, p. 35.
10 Bellitto and Flanagan, Reassessing Reform p.12.
12 Tellenbach, The Church in Western Europe, p. 158.
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**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**

Andrew Smith was awarded an MA First Class in History in 2013 at Glasgow University and has completed his PhD "Pope Leo IX 1049-54 A Study of his Pontificate" in November 2018 also at Glasgow. He is now an Affiliate of that University and teaches, part time, Scottish and Medieval European History.