



Mirator 2/25 (2025)

eISSN 1457-2362

Glossa ry - Keskiajan tutkimuksen seura / Sällskapet för medeltidsforskning /

Society for Medieval studies in Finland

<https://journal.fi/mirator>

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## Book review

Bénédicte Sère

Inventing the Church: The Pull of the Past in Ecclesial Politics

Transl. Caroline Wazer

New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. 328 pp.

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To cite this book review: Reima Välimäki, 'Book review: Inventing the Church: The Pull of the Past in Ecclesial Politics, Bénédicte Sère', *Mirator* 2/25 (2025), 54–56.

Bénédicte Sère

## Inventing the Church: The Pull of the Past in Ecclesial Politics

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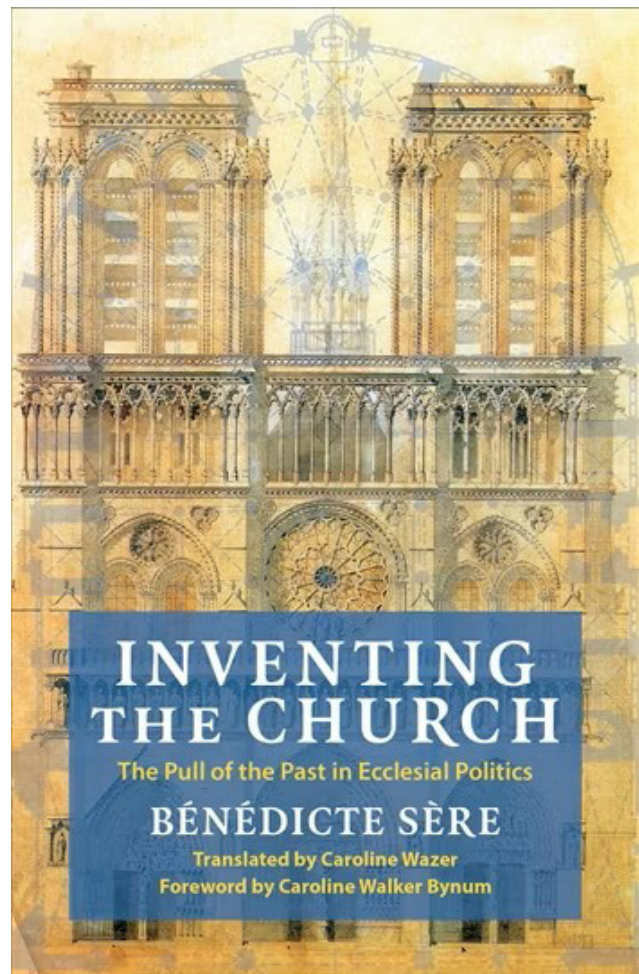
New York: Columbia University Press, 2025. 328 pp.

*Inventing the Church* is an important and extraordinary book. Bénédicte Sère explores seven grand themes of ecclesiastic history, each with a gigantic tradition of scholarship, and she does so with admirable erudition, mastering Anglophone, French, German and Italian historiographies. The book was born out of Sère's observation that the official narrative of the Catholic Church, and the one that appears in general histories and university-level textbooks, does not correspond to the messy reality of late medieval archives. For example, papal infallibility as defined in the nineteenth century was legitimised with the arguments of medieval canonists and theologians, but the medieval idea of infallibility was almost opposite to the modern one: it was a limitation of the popes' powers to revoke the decrees of their predecessors.

It would be too narrow to describe Sère's book as historiography. Indeed, she demands that we go beyond historiographical surveys. *Inventing the Church* is a history of knowledge,

not only tracing the emergence, confrontation and forgetting of ideas, but also the conditions of knowledge production. Sère is sensitive to academic lineages and to personal conflicts among participants in debates, both medieval and modern. Although Michel Foucault is named only in the Conclusions, there is more than a hint of Foucault in Sère's history of knowledge, and it is visible in concepts such as genealogy and 'an archaeology of infallibilism' (p. 176).

The book is divided into seven chapters according to the themes surveyed: conciliarism, constitutionalism, collegialism, reform, anti-Romanism, modernism and infallibilism. Mostly, they form a coherent whole, cumulating evidence for the book's main argument: to maintain an image of the unerring Church and to legitimise papal monarchy, ecclesiastical history has suppressed some



memories while inventing traditions where they do not exist.

The first, and longest, chapter on conciliarism is the key to Sère's other chapters. *Inventing the Church* is a book to be read as a whole, and I therefore strongly recommend those interested in a particular theme, such as reform, to start with the chapter on conciliarism. For example, *reformatio*, in the late medieval sense of the word, was fixed to mean the limitation of absolutist pontifical centralism at the Council of Constance (p. 120–121). Sère guides the reader through the binary history of conciliarism from the fifteenth century to the twenty-first. There is a clear introduction to the suppression of conciliar memory in the Church's history, the emergence of conciliar counter-memory in the works of scholars such as Paul De Vooght, Brian Tierney and Francis Oakley, and the papalist or curialist counter-reaction, above all by Joseph Gill and Walter Brandmüller.

Chapter 2 on constitutionalism borders on political history, tackling the question of whether (secular) constitutionalism has a) medieval and b) ecclesiastical roots. Chapter 3 on collegialism returns to twentieth-century Church politics, and to Vatican II's discussions on episcopal collegialism, that is, the bishops as a collective body in the Church. Here, Sère demonstrates that not only conservative but also progressive parties within the Catholic Church have used history for their own purposes, distorting medieval practices to serve modern political programmes. There were collegial ideals in the medieval Church, but they were to be found in local practices (cathedral chapters and other collegiate churches), or in the College of Cardinals. However, collegialism was absent in the self-understanding of medieval bishops. In this chapter, Sère makes polemical but justified arguments against theological and institutional church history, demanding a history of practices and archives (pp. 98–99).

Chapter 4 on reform traces the Church's uneasy relationship with the concepts of reform and reformation. For a long time, these concepts were understood exclusively in relation to Luther's reform, but in the twentieth century there have been attempts (Hubert Jedin) to reclaim the reform as a constant in the history of the Catholic Church. While this view prevails in modern scholarship, Sère's chapter is a good reminder that the twentieth-century Church was ambivalent towards *reformatio*, and that Vatican II preferred the concept of *aggiornamento* to reform.

Unlike for reform, conciliarism or constitutionalism, previous scholarship has not sought medieval roots for anti-Romanism (Chapter 5), that is, for early modern and modern Catholic opposition to papal centralism. Sère, however, sees the Middle Ages as a crucial incubation period even for anti-Romanism: 'Medieval premodernity seems to have gathered and organised a vast amount of material carried over from previous centuries [--] which was bequeathed to the modern era' (p. 153). In this chapter, I found Sère's argumentation somewhat less convincing than regarding other concepts. It is true that the French opposition in 1398–1403 to both popes of the Great Western Schism, but particularly to Benedict XIII, shares characteristics and arguments with early modern anti-Romanism. Nevertheless, I find the concept problematic in the context of the Schism, as it creates an image of opposition to the Roman papacy, while the theologians and canonists Sère quotes were – as she herself points out – actually anti-Avignonists. That said, the chapter's merit lies in demonstrating that modern anti-Romanism did not emerge out of thin air.

Chapter 6 on the modernist crisis of the Catholic Church and its relation to the Middle Ages somewhat breaks the arch of the argumentation, as modernism is not a concept with medieval roots – although Sère sees a parallel in the controversy over Aristotle in the 1260s and 1270s and the

late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Church's struggle with modern science. However, the chapter illuminates the modern Church's relationship with the medieval past and thus defends its place in the book.

As said, the concepts, ideologies and political programmes Sère explores are highly interrelated, and they come together in Chapter 7 on infallibilism. The party opposing the doctrine of papal infallibility in Vatican I in 1870 has been described not only as anti-infallibilism but also as conciliarism and anti-Romanism (p. 178). Sère's remarkable achievement is precisely to master, and to offer to the reader in clear academic prose, the entangled and complex history of the various ideas defending the centralist, even absolutist idea of papacy, as well as voices critical to such a conception of the Church.

In the Conclusion, Sère suggests her programme to get past the unresolved debate on the legacy of the Middle Ages for the modern Church: 1) the return to the archives and original sources, a movement that has begun in specialist studies; 2) the history of knowledge that moves beyond historiography; and, more tentatively, 3) Foucauldian inquiry of the clergy and pastoral care, 'the proliferation of the arts of governing', instead of the history of institutions.

The volume's shortcomings are insignificant compared to its achievements. As far as a non-native speaker can estimate, the translator Caroline Wazer has done an excellent job in translating Sère's French into English. Occasional slips are very minor. I spotted two cases where Jan Hus was Jean, and one instance of Pierre instead of Peter (the Apostle). It is good to keep in mind that Sère wrote the French original between 2016 and 2018, and it was published in 2019. Therefore, the book does not engage with the latest literature on the topics it covers. Of those relevant to the questions of conciliarism and reform, one must mention Florian Eßer's extensive study on the Council of Pisa.<sup>1</sup>

I strongly endorse this book and wish I had had it to guide me when I first started studying the Great Western Schism, the councils, and the reform of the late Middle Ages. I hope the book finds its place in the reading lists of study programmes for medieval history and church history. Experts, too, will find the book extremely inspiring. Beyond medieval studies and church history, *Inventing the Church* is recommended to anyone interested in the uses of history, the history of institutions versus history of practices, and modernity's ambivalent relationship with tradition and the premodern.

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<sup>1</sup> Florian Eßer, *Schisma als Deutungskonflikt: das Konzil von Pisa und die Lösung des Großen Abendländischen Schismas (1378-1409)* (Papsttum im mittelalterlichen Europa 8), Böhlau: Wien 2019.