

## **THE PAPACY SURVIVES THE GREAT SCHISM AND PUTS DOWN CONCILIARISM**

The scandal of the papacy's seventy-year absence from Rome was followed by the incredible disaster of the forty-year Great Schism, when two and eventually three Popes fought each other for control of the Church. To solve this crisis, an antipapalist theology of Church government—conciliarism—was brought forth. It asserted the supremacy of a council over a Pope and provided the Council of Constance with a way out of the schism. But in the circumstances the conciliar system of Church order proved unworkable, and the Popes were able to re-establish their supremacy over councils. But they were unable to regain their moral and spiritual authority.

A major factor in the origin of the Great Schism was the part played by the people of Rome. Throughout its papal history, the Romans' behavior followed a curious pattern: They were extremely fickle, unpredictable, addicted to petty squabbles, showing little faith or piety, unruly, and in view of Rome's position as the center of the universal Church, strangely narrow-minded. The Popes could never count on their loyalty for long; they would revolt on the slightest pretext and drive their ruler out, only to repent on the morrow and beg him to return. Few scenes were more characteristic or paradoxical in the history of the Middle Ages than the spectacle of the world-ruling Pontiff in headlong flight from his capital with a blaspheming rabble at his heels, a rabble that soon

afterward would piously entreat him to return; for in his absence they would quickly realize that they had lost their major source of revenue, the chief tourist attraction for the mass of pilgrims who streamed into the Eternal City, filling its coffers with their coins.

So one can imagine the intense dismay felt by the Roman populace at the death of Gregory XI: It meant once more a very good chance of their losing the Pope. In view of French predominance in the College of Cardinals, a French Pope might well be elected who would once more move the papacy back to Avignon. Dismay soon gave way to panic as the sixteen cardinals assembled on April 7, 1378. Some of them were assaulted in the street and warned by bullies to elect an Italian. A riotous crowd kept up a great uproar while the cardinals tried to deliberate in conclave. The guard of the conclave told them, "You risk being torn to pieces if you don't hasten to elect an Italian or a Roman."

The cardinals quickly elected an Italian, the archbishop of Bari, Bartholomew Prignano, who was not even one of their number. In the meantime, a mob in ugly mood had seized the papal wine cellars and invaded the Vatican; while waiting for Prignano to arrive, the cardinals dressed up one of their colleagues-Tebaldeschi-who was old and feeble, and they presented him in papal robes to pacify the crowd. Whether the cardinals were really overpowered by fear and hence unfree when they elected Prignano-as they later alleged-will, it seems, remain forever one of the tantalizing but insoluble questions of Church history.

Nevertheless, it should be noted that at first they offered the new Pope their homage and submission and in their correspondence at the time spoke of having "freely and unanimously" elected him Pope.

As vice chancellor of the Curia, Prignano was well known to the cardinals and highly regarded for his dependable character. Hence they were stupefied, to put it mildly, when the new Pope Urban VI suddenly showed himself a tyrant of the worst sort. Seizing any and every occasion, he upbraided them publicly and privately-often in paroxysms of rage-for their vices, their treachery, their luxury, their simony. The personality change was so radical that contemporaries as well as later historians feel that Urban may have been mentally unhinged by his sudden and unexpected election or perhaps by illness. His behavior brought on a terrible catastrophe for the Church-the Great Schism-justly named because of its exceptional duration and scope. Coming on the heels of previous misfortunes afflicting the papacy, it brought the papal office to the utter depths of degradation and did more than any other event to discredit its authority.

The schism began when the cardinals-whose original misgivings were greatly exacerbated by Urban's behavior decided they had had enough. Abandoning Rome, they took refuge at Fondi, and then-thirteen in all-elaborated an encyclical in which they declared Prignano's election invalid and denounced him as anti-Christ, demon, apostate, and tyrant. The first secular ruler to join them was Queen Joan of Naples. Their number was

also enlarged by the three Italian cardinals who soon joined them. On September 20, the dissidents unanimously elected a new Pope, Robert of Geneva, who took the name Clement VII.

Politics, as one might expect, played a big role. Both Popes received support from civil governments-splitting Western Christendom into two camps. The Holy Roman Emperor, England, the Netherlands, Castille, Hungary, Poland, and Portugal stood behind Urban, while France rallied to Clement VII, who returned to Avignon in 1379 and was soon joined by Scotland, Luxembourg, and Austria. Others, like Aragon, claimed neutrality, at least for a time, while Italy itself was too confused for either side to count on. At first both sides appealed to a decision of arms: Urban proclaimed a crusade against Clement and hired the sanguinary Charles of Durazzo to oust the renegade Queen Joan from Naples. The English invaded France in order to break its allegiance to Clement.

Both Popes found military operations very expensive, and the papal tax collectors were forced to use ever harsher methods to squeeze every penny out of their constituents bringing papal popularity to a new low. Urban turned more violent and savage. Suspecting his own cardinals of plotting against him, he put them to torture, and five of them died shortly afterward, probably thrown overboard from the Pope's warship. After traversing Italy with his army, Pope Urban VI returned to Rome, where he died in 1389. His fourteen cardinals immediately elected a successor, who took the name Boniface IX. He

proclaimed a jubilee year in 1390, and crowds flowed in to gain the plenary indulgence.

This rupture of the Church's unity was a terrible trial for believing Catholics-and all pious souls who loved the Church were shaken to the roots in seeing the papacy made an object of derision. Saints, intellectuals, and bishops on both sides, realizing that recourse to arms was a false avenue, offered several alternatives: arbitration, a general council, or resignation of both Popes. This last idea was the solution favored at the University of Paris, where ten thousand responses were obtained in a poll of general student opinion.

For a time resignation seemed to offer the best chance of ending the schism. Hopes were stirred when the Avignon Pope, Clement VII, died in 1394, and each of the candidates to succeed him swore on oath that if elected he would resign his office. But the one elected, Benedict XIII, a formidable prelate of incredible tenacity and guile, soon showed that he had no intention of honoring his pre-election oath. In disgust, France finally withdrew its obedience officially in 1398, and a long duel began between the Pope at Avignon and the rest of France. The King, cardinals, and bishops tried every means to change Benedict's mind-they even laid siege to his palace-but all in vain. Their indomitable and wily adversary held out behind his battlements at Avignon-even refusing to shave his beard as long as the siege lasted-and after five years he tasted the sweets of victory: France totally capitulated and returned to his obedience.

Hopes were again renewed in 1406 with the election of a new Roman Pope, Gregory XII, a pious and austere churchman who seemed dedicated to restoring the unity of the Church and had sworn to resign if his rival at Avignon would do the same. Benedict for his part was faced with another move by his clergy to withdraw obedience and realized that he could no longer appear less anxious for reunion than his rival.

So finally realistic negotiations seemed about to begin: Both Popes agreed to meet to discuss their joint resignations. But then the insincerity of both men surfaced. Gregory trumped up some feeble excuses for not being able to go to the town chosen for the meeting place: Savona, west of Genoa, near the border of France and Italy. Benedict in the meantime secretly prepared a military expedition against Rome. Then Benedict agreed to go as far east as Porto Venere, while Gregory moved from Siena to Lucca-only a day's walk from a rendezvous acceptable to Benedict. But still the two would come no closer to each other.

Finally, in despair of seeing either Pope resign, the cardinals on both sides decided that a council would be the only solution. This idea of a conciliar solution to the schism was first enunciated in 1380 and had since been taken up by such eminent Parisian theologians as D'Ailly and Gerson. The general theory it involved was called conciliarism and its basic principle was that in case of dire necessity ; council could be called without the Pope's consent or even against his will, and its decrees would be

valid without the Pope's consent. This doctrine of conciliar supremacy, which was to agitate the Church for the next thirty years, was revolutionary; papal supremacy over a council had the huge weight of tradition behind it. But the best minds of Europe agreed that it was the only answer—even if the Canon Law on papal prerogatives had to be sacrificed.

So at the behest of the cardinals of both allegiances, an imposing Assembly of churchmen gathered at Pisa on March 25, 1409, including most of the dignitaries of the Church. Several officials even appeared on the cathedral steps and acted out a ceremony of summoning the absent Popes to present themselves. After a brief pause, the Popes were then declared contumacious and schismatical, notorious heretics, guilty of scandalizing the universal Church and therefore deposed. The townspeople reacted with wild joy and burned the old Popes in effigy. A new Pope was elected: Peter Philargi, cardinal of Milan, a seventy-year-old Venetian with an excellent reputation as a theologian, canonist, and diplomat. He took the name of Alexander V.

The miracle was premature. By their haste in electing a Pope the cardinals only aggravated the sickness, for the other Popes still commanded the allegiances of large parts of the Church. Moreover, the Council of Pisa did nothing for the reform of the Church except draw up a list of grievances that excoriated the prevalent abuses: the frequent moving of bishops from see to see, the extravagances of the

papal taxation system, and the tendency of the papal court to infringe on lower jurisdictions.

The new Pope, Alexander V, did not even manage to reach his see of Rome before dying at Bologna on May 3, 1410. His successor, who took the name John XXIII, was an odd choice: Baldassare Cossa, who had made his reputation as a kind of ecclesiastical conquistador during the wars of the Great Schism and who had taken the lead in calling the Council of Pisa but who, according to many, perhaps libelous reports of the time, was a moral and spiritual cipher. In any case, John entered Rome behind an army on April 12, 1411, and as one of his first acts summoned a council to meet at Rome. According to a chronicle of the time, a screech owl settled on John's head at the opening of the council as he intoned the invocation "Come, Holy Spirit," and he was supposed to have muttered, "a strange shape for the Holy Spirit!" In any case, the council had to be suspended for lack of participants. Moreover, John's unscrupulous financial expedients and brazen nepotism alienated many of his supporters. It was soon rather obvious that if Christendom was to be restored to unity, John was not the man to do it. But then a new personality entered the picture: Sigismund of Luxembourg, recently elected Holy Roman Emperor and dedicated heart and soul to the unity of both the Church and of Europe. After some arm twisting he secured John's agreement to his decree calling for a universal council of the Church to be held November 1, 1414, at

Constance-an imperial city chosen for its location and salubrious climate.

And so, on October 28, 1414, John XXIII-with fatalistic forebodings-entered the town of Constance on a white horse clad in the vestments of the liturgy under a golden canopy followed by his cardinals amid the hosannas of a jubilant fanfare. A huge crowd of ecclesiastics from all over Europe filled the streets, and some thirty-six thousand beds, according to one chronicle, had to be found for the visitors, with two to a bed. Once again, as at Pisa, virtually the whole of Western Christendom was represented including five patriarchs, twenty-nine cardinals, thirty-three archbishops, more than five hundred bishops, a hundred abbots, three hundred doctors of sacred science, and eighteen thousand other clerics.

In his opening address, John defined the objectives of the council as union and reform. But it was only with the arrival of Sigismund on December 24 that serious work could begin. The assembly was divided into conservative and liberal wings.

The latter was made up of liberal reformers led by Gerson and D'Ailly, who were highly regarded for their writings in favor of conciliarism.

The first question facing the fathers was the momentous one presented by John himself. The liberals agreed that he must first be put down if unity was to be restored. All three Popes would then be persuaded, and if necessary forced, to resign. But the objective could hardly be attained by the traditional method of voting, which

allowed one vote to each bishop. John had deliberately stacked the episcopate with his supporters, and he controlled a large bloc of votes, mainly Italian. A radical change in voting method was therefore imperative. The idea of voting by nations was proposed, with men like Cardinal D'Ailly, Philastre, and Robert Hallam leading the discussion. With the support of Sigismund, it was decided that the council should be organized into nations and vote accordingly. In addition, in the general wave of democratic enthusiasm, the right to vote was extended to doctors of theology and law and even to some laymen. Matters would therefore first be treated and voted on in the individual assemblies of each nation (eventually five were recognized: Italy, France, Germany, England, and Spain), and then after agreement was reached in the assemblies, each nation, acting as a unit, would cast its one vote.

John saw that he had been outmaneuvered, and at first, it seems, he decided to accept the inevitable. On March 1, 1418, he personally read before the council his solemn promise to abdicate whenever the other two Popes did so. Since it was felt they would soon follow suit, John's act was greeted with jubilation; Sigismund knelt and kissed the Pope's feet, while the church bells of Constance echoed the universal joy. But once again, bitter deception lay in store. On March 20, under cover of night, John, disguised as a groom, escaped from Constance, followed by a considerable number of council dignitaries from his entourage, and found refuge with his protector, the Duke of

Austria. A great commotion broke out in the city when the news broke; a mob pillaged the papal palace, and the whole Council might have dispersed at that point had it not been for the presence of mind of Sigismund, who rode through the streets urging all to remain and to keep the peace.

Feelings were still running high, however, when Cardinal Zabarella addressed the full assembly on March 26. It was resolved that the departure of Pope John changed nothing. The Council decided to stay in session until the schism was healed and the Church reformed in head and members. Nor were the fathers dissuaded by conciliatory messages from John. They went ahead in a violent mood, and with Gerson and the University of Paris doctors leading the debate, passed a number of sweeping decrees, climaxed by the famous *Sacro sancta* of April 6, 1415—the most revolutionary of all conciliar decrees. It asserted the superiority of the council over the Pope declaring that it had "its power directly from Christ and that all persons of whatever rank or dignity, even Pope, are bound to obey it in matters relating to faith and the end of the Schism and the general reformation of the Church of God in head and members . . . and that any person . . . even a Pope who contumaciously refuses to obey . . . regulations enacted . . . by this holy synod, or by other general council lawfully assembled . . . shall . . . be subject to condign penalty . . .,"<sup>1</sup>

Great indeed now was the humiliation of the papacy in all three of its claimants. But most wretched was John,

who soon found himself deserted by his protector and forced to surrender his papal seal and throw himself on the mercy of the council. He was taken back to Constance, tried by the council, found guilty of numerous crimes, and deposed. The Pope of the Roman line, Gregory XII, chose a more dignified end: he voluntarily resigned after officially convoking the council in order to formalize its legitimacy. The last member of the trio, the Avignon Pope, resisted the most heroic efforts of Sigismund, however, and remained adamant in his refusal to resign. Tried in absentia by the council and deposed, he took refuge in the impregnable fortress of Peñíscola on the coast of Spain, and there his line came to an end years later after an ignominious charade, when his last surviving cardinal elected himself Pope.

In the midst of all the furor over John, another event of immense significance took place: John Hus, the Prague reformer, was burned at the stake on July 6, 1415.

The next question facing the council was whether to elect the Pope immediately or to postpone this election until it first accomplished its other great objective: the reform of the Church. Many, including Emperor Sigismund, feared reform might be jeopardized if a Pope were elected first, since he would be able to block it. Finally a compromise was reached: The churchmen would first proceed with election of the Pope, but in order to guarantee that any Pope elected would carry out the reform, the decree *Etsi quatenus* was first passed on October 9,

1417, obliging all future Popes to call regular councils at stipulated intervals.

A new method of electing the Pope also reflected the radical spirit of the council: Six delegates of each nation-thirty in all-joined with the cardinals to choose the new Pope. On November 11, 1417, while a huge procession of clergy and laity chanted hymns outside-so sweetly and devoutly, one observer said, that it stirred many of the electors to tears they chose Oddo Colonna, a prelate honored by all for his piety, moderation, and wisdom. Around this Pope, Martin V, Christendom was once again reunited. The Great Schism was over.

Successful as it was in attaining the first of its two major objectives-unity-the council failed tragically in regard to the second-reform. And yet everyone was conscious of the evil state of affairs caused by the Great Schism: the degradation of the papacy; the exorbitant demands of the rival papal tax collectors; the breakdown of the Church courts; the absenteeism of bishops; the ignorance and immorality of the clergy, and the simony everywhere-most blatantly in the Roman Curia, whose excessive dispensations and indulgences were the scandal of Europe.

Recognizing these abuses was one thing; getting the various interest groups to agree on their eradication was another.

As it turned out; each interest group wanted to reform its rival but was reluctant to begin by reforming itself. Moreover and paradoxically, the very system of organizing

the council into nations, which had enabled the council to repair the schism, was the cause of the failure to complete its other task—the reform of the Church; for this system pitted nation against nation, and their conflicting interests prevented them from agreeing on specific reform measures. As a result, the reform decree finally passed on March 21, 1418, was of the most vague and general kind: it limited papal powers, condemned simony, and called for regularity in clerical conduct. Other reforms were left for the Pope to carry out by means of concordats with the individual nations, the German Concordat of May 2, 1418, serving as a model. But this strategy proved woefully inadequate.

The liberals, however, still had hopes of carrying out a thoroughgoing reform of the Church by means of future councils as prescribed by *Erequis*. But for this to happen, Pope and council would have to work together harmoniously in the new relationship set up by Constance. But what if this failed to happen? What if, as some pessimists predicted, conflict and rivalry between Pope and council were to render the work of reform impossible? As happens too often, history vindicated the gloomy forebodings of the pessimists.

The newly elected Pope wisely decided to return to Rome, but it took two years before he could enter the capital of the world, which had fallen into a wretched, desolate condition its inhabitants a prey to the wolves that roamed its streets. Martin proved himself a true Roman by the dauntless energy he showed in restoring and repairing

the city's crumbling bridges, walls, and churches. And he once more secured papal rule over the states of the Church by the traditional system of family alliances. But unfortunately, preoccupation with this Italian game of war and intrigue forced him as well as his successors before the Reformation to subordinate the interests of the universal Church to the necessities of peninsular politics.

So while successful on the Italian political stage, Martin failed to lead the Church to the complete reformation that was so sorely needed. Had he been able to do so, the bitter conflict of Pope and council during the next pontificate might have been averted, as well as its long-term consequence: the Protestant Reformation. Some historians put most of the blame on Martin, whom they accuse of sabotaging the council of Pavia-Siena after dutifully convoking it in 1423, as he was obliged to do by *Ftequens*. Two things should be kept in mind, however: First, Martin wanted to restore papal monarchy within the framework of a moderate conciliarism; second, his lack of enthusiasm for the council might be justified by the contentious spirit it manifested and which seemed to be a carryover from the bad days of Constance. In any case, the council was dissolved by his legates in 1424, with no accomplishments.

It was up to his successor, Eugenius IV, a tall, dignified Venetian, pious, austere, and learned-but lacking intact and gentleness-to make the next attempt. Possibly from the beginning, he was opposed to the conciliarism that would turn the absolutely sovereign papacy into a

limited monarchy. In any case, he soon found reasons to dislike the new council at Basel, whose convocation he had ratified and which had opened on July 23, 1431. Within a few months he and the council were at dagger's point. Shortly after the council opened, Eugenius began to receive tendentious reports about its character and circumstances. There were few prelates in attendance, it was asserted; there was disorder in the neighborhood of Basel; pro-Hussite sympathies were manifesting themselves. The Pope's poor state of health and the fighting going on around Rome lessened his interest in what was happening beyond the Alps. Moreover, the Greeks had showed some interest in a council of union, and Eugenius didn't want to have two councils running at the same time. So he decided to dissolve the council at Basel, and he gave orders to that effect in a bull to his legate, Cesarini.

It was a mistake, for, as Cesarini explained to him in a strong letter, the bishops at Basel were determined to deal with the tragic situation in Germany, where the low standard of the clergy cried out for immediate reform before new heresies could erupt. The members of the council therefore would not even entertain the idea of dissolution and would certainly defy the Pope, even if it meant a schism. But the Pope remained adamant and rejected Cesarini's plea. As Cesarini predicted, the council refused to accept the Pope's bull. While carrying on with considerable success its negotiations with the followers of John Hus, it advanced from a simple refusal to obey the

Pope to a flat assertion of its conciliarist position: It declared itself superior to the Pope and insisted that it could not be adjourned or transferred, even by the Pope. Two months later it even ordered Eugenius to appear before it.

This was the culmination of a struggle against papal absolutism that began with Pisa's deposition of the two reigning Popes. But in proclaiming their authority over a legitimate and universally recognized Pope, the bishops at Basel carried their conciliarism to the point of absolute revolution.

But would they succeed? At first, it seemed likely. Fifteen out of twenty-one of the cardinals stood with the bishops at Basel. The number of bishops present continued to grow, and the greater part of Christendom's rulers rallied to their side. Eugenius himself was hard pressed by his enemies in Italy; he was even forced to escape in disguise in a boat down the Tiber. With much interior repugnance he finally capitulated, and in the bull *Dudum Sacrum* of December 1433, he retracted his previous acts against the council and recognized its rights without any reservation.

Basel then took up the great challenge of reform of the Church. Once again, as at Constance, insuperable difficulties began to crop up. Each interest group, it seemed, was expert in what was wrong with everyone else-as interminable discourses indicated-but each was loath to admit its own faults. One thing all could agree on, however: the papacy's need of reform. And the council went to work with a vengeance on the fiscal abuses prevalent in the Curia.

But the bishops went too far when they swept away completely the Pope's right to tax the clergy, to collect the annates, and to promulgate indulgences. This was to make him a penniless figurehead and reduce him and the Curia to complete financial dependence on the council. They could hardly expect any Pope to agree to such a radical turnabout.

These measures completely alienated the Pope, and he only waited his chance to regain the upper hand. His opportunity came with the matter of reunion with the Greeks.

After centuries of abortive efforts, the time seemed ripe for reunion of the Eastern Church and the Western Church. The Eastern Emperor, besieged by the advancing Turks, was anxious to have Western support, and he opened negotiations with both the Pope and the council.

The choice of the place to meet with the Greeks took on a decisive significance: The Pope wanted an Italian location; the council wanted a non-Italian location, lest a move to Italy be interpreted as a victory for the Pope. A three-cornered discussion then began among Greeks, Basel, and papacy, which lasted two years. Finally the Greeks accepted the Pope's suggestion and decided on an Italian city.

The decision produced a grave crisis for the council at Basel, where a split into factions occurred when a majority voted against moving to Italy, while a minority favored the papal plan. The vote on the question took place at the twenty-fifth session, on May 7, 1437, amid wild scenes of disorder as the leaders of both groups fought hand to hand

to seize the rostrum, while their followers during the Mass faced each other like two armies. To confound the confusion, the decrees of both groups were read aloud at the same time. Many wept at the sight of the ugly commotion, and as one participant, Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, later Pope Pius II, remarked, one would not have deserved the name Christian if he did not grieve at such a spectacle.

It marked the beginning of the end for the council at Basel. Many bishops left in disgust and joined the Pope, who now being in a much stronger position transferred the council to Ferrara, Italy. By 1439 only a remnant still stood its ground at Basel; Cesarini deserted it on June 2, 1439. In defiance, the bishops at Basel deposed Eugenius, and on November 2, 1439, they elected their own pope, Felix V, history's last anti-Pope.

But by this time the triumph of Eugenius was assured. While the rump at Basel carried on its verbose wrangling, the Pope at Florence, surrounded by the majority of bishops, solemnly concluded the reunion of the Eastern Church and the Western Church on July 6, 1439, and was recognized by the Greeks as the true Vicar of Christ and head of the universal Church. It was hailed throughout Europe as a tremendous feat (although it was soon nullified by the refusal of the Eastern Church to ratify it), and it consummated the victory of the Pope over the conciliarists.

The council at Basel, however, stubbornly lingered on though the great powers-one by one-deserted it; France, after passing the pro-Gallican Pragmatic Sanction of

Bourges ( 1438), first declared itself neutral but soon declared in favor of Eugenius; Aragon and Scotland did likewise in 1443. Finally the Concordat of Vienna, signed in 1448 by the Holy See with Emperor Frederick and the German princes, gave the death blow to the Basel assembly. Its members were ordered by the Emperor to quit Basel. Felix resigned in 1449, and the council dissolved. The papacy had triumphed over conciliarism, but it failed to re-establish its moral and spiritual leadership over Christendom. In many ways the real victor of the crisis was the modern state, which exploited the quarrel between Pope and council in order to expand its authority over the Church. In England, France, and Spain, at least, national Churches were rapidly arising.