The Papal Schism:

The War of Mutual Excommunication

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Introduction

Just last year, the nations watched as the leaders of the Catholic Church met at the Vatican to elect a new supreme leader of Christianity—the Pope. People worldwide remained glued to the news for any word from Rome, for they knew the impact of such a decision. When the white smoke was seen from the chimney and a decision reached, there was much excitement and wondering—what would the legacy of this new Pope be? For century upon century, this supreme clerical position of the Church has had a tremendous impact on the spiritual, political, social, and cultural formations of the world. People have looked to the Pope for spiritual guidance since the establishment of the papacy in the times of early Christianity. Hoping for a stable system that would encourage the growth of the Church, people have revered this church leader as the Vicar of Christ himself. However, there have been disruptions in this system. Confidence in the papacy was shattered almost beyond repair in the Papal Schism of 1378. For over thirty years, the Church was in an uproar and in a state of confusion. The disheartening events of the Great Western Schism had a tremendous impact on the world; the confusion, struggling, and eventual reforms and changes have shaped the course of history and left an indelible mark on the world. 

The Papacy up to the Fourteenth Century

The papacy had its ups and downs through the years, but the years leading up to the schism were especially demoralizing. There were times when the Pope was looked up to as a great Church leader, and Christianity flourished under his guidance. However, in the years after 1250, the popes tended toward being worldly political leaders rather than providing for the
spiritual needs of the people. Looking to Rome was no longer a way to spiritual growth. Power and riches became huge issues, causing many previously loyal followers to turn in shame of their leaders. This reaction is seen even in the literature of the day. In Dante’s *Inferno*, Boniface VIII is seen in hell as a result of his simony and impure life.\(^1\) The writer obviously held a strong dislike of the powerful leader, an opinion that was shared by many people of the time. There was much fighting for supreme authority between the papacy and the political rulers of the day. Boniface VIII was especially known for his claims of papal supremacy, such as in his papal bull, *Unum Sanctum*. This states that, “spiritual power surpasses in dignity and in nobility any temporal power…. Furthermore, we declare, we proclaim, we define that it is absolutely necessary for salvation that every human creature be subject to the Roman Pontiff.”\(^2\) People were unsure of what to make of these power quarrels and hypocritical actions of their leaders, especially when they were told that their salvation rested on this institution. Bennett and Hollister explain, “The papacy was still a mighty force in the world, but it failed to satisfy the spiritual hunger of many devoted Christians. Indeed, some people were coming to doubt that papal government was the true spiritual center of the apostolic church.”\(^3\) The doubts would only continue to grow over the difficult phase to come.

**The Avignon Papacy**

Real trouble began for the papacy when Clement V (1305-1314) moved the papal office to Avignon instead of Rome. The growing distrust and disgust of the papacy was only to get


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worse. Joseph Brasher describes an occasion when Clement V fell off his horse while he was going to be crowned. Brasher states, “The crash [from his horse] was a fitting prelude to a reign which began a time of troubles for the papacy.”⁴ During the 70 year stay of the papacy in Avignon, the population was growing ever more frustrated with the superficial motives of the popes. One poem written during the time describes the pope “[striving] to gather wealth as best he may, / Forcing Christ’s people blindly to obey,”⁵ and then later says that “round the church still growing evils fester.”⁶ During this time, the papacy was described as the “Babylon of the West.”⁷ The papacy was not in Rome and was becoming more corrupt and more of a self-serving institution for those in authority. In a letter written by a fourteenth century citizen, the condition of the papacy is described:

Here reign the successors of the poor fishermen of Galilee; they have strangely forgotten their origin…One is stupefied nowadays to hear the lying tongues…worthless parchments…[they are a] criminal host… infamous satellites, [have] licentious banquets…preternatural and foul sloth…slavish luxury…I have been so depressed and overcome that the heaviness of my soul has passed into bodily affliction, so that I am really ill and can only give voice to sighs and groans.⁸

The growing disgust was only intensified by the French dominance of the Church leadership. The popes and most of the cardinals were French-born, causing the people to fear that the papacy was no longer representative of all of Christendom. Duffy claims, “Though the Avignon popes continued to maintain the universalist claims of their predecessors, and to see themselves as the Father of all Christians, this solid identification of the papacy with France


⁶Ibid., 377.


⁸Ibid., 502.

"Ibid" means "in the same place." Use "Ibid." when a footnote has the same source as the one immediately preceding it. Use the page number if it is the same source with a different page number.
affected perceptions of the papacy, and contributed to a growing questioning of its claims to supremacy in the Church.\textsuperscript{9} The prestige of the Church was spiraling downward. The bureaucracy of the papacy was growing, but its spiritual authority was not.\textsuperscript{10} Christians were being further alienated from the church; because the papacy was only French, the people across Europe no longer saw the Pope as a unifying force that was impartial to any one country.\textsuperscript{11} The growing discomfort of having a French Church center was taking its toll on the rest of the international Church. This feeling would soon contribute to the disastrous events that were yet to occur.

**Gregory XI and the Return to Rome**

Gregory XI put an end to the nearly 70 year Avignon Papacy. The pope was a kindhearted man who had a “reputation for goodness and learning...[and was a] man of principle.”\textsuperscript{12} Gregory loved the peace of the French country, but, encouraged by many people to restore the papacy in Rome, Gregory reluctantly agreed to go to the historical city. Though his family nearly convinced him to remain in France, St. Catherine of Siena gave the pope a scolding that convinced him to set a date that the papacy would return to Rome. This date was September 13, 1376.\textsuperscript{13} So, the Pope had returned to Rome, but as expected, peace was not achieved by the move. Much grumbling, anger, and distrust remained. The death of Gregory in 1378 would set off a tragic blow to the stability and prestige of the Catholic Church.


\textsuperscript{10}Bennett and Hollister, 264.

\textsuperscript{11}Ibid., 337.

\textsuperscript{12}Brusher, 398.

\textsuperscript{13}Ibid.

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Full bibliographic information is provided in the footnotes and on the works cited page. However, the formatting is slightly different.
Election of Urban VI in Rome

After Gregory’s death, the cardinals met in Rome to elect a new Pope. There was pressure from all sides concerning who to elect. Bitterness concerning the long French dominance of the papacy meant that people wanted a Roman or Italian in the position. The Council quickly made a compromise, due to the growing hostile mob that was threatening the Council. Thus, Urban VI, an Italian, was elected. However, his election was to create tremendous dissention. A description of the election was written by the dissatisfied cardinals:

[The people] surrounded the palace in a threatening manner and even entered it and almost filled it. To the terror caused by their presence they added threats that unless we should at once elect a Roman or an Italian they would kill us. They gave us no time to deliberate but compelled us unwillingly, through violence and fear, to elect an Italian without delay. In order to escape danger which threatened us from such a mob, we elected Bartholomew, archbishop of Bari, thinking that he would have enough conscience not to accept the election, since every one knew that it was made under such wicked threats. But he was unmindful of his own salvation and burning with ambition, and so, to the great scandal of the clergy and of the Christian people, and contrary to the laws of the church, he accepted this election which was offered him, although not all cardinals were present at the election, and it was extorted from us by the threats and demands of the officials and people of the city. And although such an election is null and void, and the danger from the people still threatened us, [a lying pope] was enthroned and crowned, and called himself pope and apostolic. But according to the holy fathers and to the law, of the church, he should be called apostate, anathema, Antichrist, and the mocker and destroyer of Christianity.14

Thus, the cardinals who had just elected this pope soon overthrew their choice, declaring the election invalid because of the threatening situation. This was also due to the unruly nature of the man that they chose as their pope. To the cardinals, “Urban’s subsequent violent and abusive treatment of the cardinals caused them to fear for their lives and suspect him of insanity.”15

Though he seemed like a great candidate at the time, Urban’s faulty plans and feisty

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temperament caused many problems. So, while those who wanted a non-French ruler got their wish, the choice that was made ended up creating even more difficulties. Urban was not a perfect ruler. His choices and actions led to much bitter conflict. Urban was, “violent, overbearing and probably clinically paranoid.” So, the result would be a schism—a splitting of the entire Catholic Church.

Urban retained his rule in Rome, despite the cardinals’ denunciation of the pope. A new pope, Clement VII, was elected, but both popes now ruled, creating confusion and dissent. Clement was not able to overtake Rome, so he moved to Avignon and ruled from there. The cardinals and people split; loyalties were devoted to one or the other. “France, Castille [a Spanish Kingdom], and Scotland backed Clement. Meanwhile, England and much of the German Empire sided with Urban. As a result, neither of the rival claimants had a decisive edge of power.” The schism thus perpetuated, and even the death of one of the popes did not end it. When Urban died in 1389, the half of the Church loyal to Urban merely elected a new successor, leaving “Europe in turmoil and even [Urban’s] own followers disheartened.” Clement continued to claim supremacy in Avignon; the schism was to continue for many long years.

**Urban’s Successors in Rome: Boniface IX, Innocent VII, Gregory XII**

Boniface IX succeeded Urban in 1389; though he tried, his reign did nothing to stop the growing schism in the church. Boniface was a pleasant fellow, and his charming personality immensely helped to restore some of the lost prestige of the papacy that was caused by Urban’s

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16 Brusher, 400.  
17 Ibid.  
18 Duffy, 127.  
19 Oakley, 2.  
20 Brusher, 400.  

Footnotes are citations placed at the bottom of each page. Endnotes utilize the same format except that they appear at the end of the paper. If you use endnotes you will still need a full works cited.
Despite his good nature, threats and excommunications continued to be hurled about between Rome and Avignon. Loyalties remained split, and with the death of Boniface in 1404, merely another pope was elected in his stead. The Church was steadily losing any hold of the feeble confidence it had from the people. With all the confusion and splits, people did not know what to think of the circumstances. The infallible papacy was failing—even the saints had split loyalties.

Innocent VII was the next Roman Pontiff. During his short reign, he tried to enforce many changes. During a more peaceful time, perhaps his ideas and reforms would have been better received. He tried to reform the curia and the University of Rome. Brusher states, “That he was unable to end the agony of the schism is due more to the stormy circumstances of his reign than to any bad will on his part.” The Church was genuinely trying to absolve the problem of the schism during the time, but the stubbornness and power hunger of those in leadership would not allow for complete cooperation from everyone. A council was held in Rome in 1404, but the efforts of the pope yielded nothing due to the angry Roman Mob. The cardinals in Rome even took an oath that, “if elected, he would do everything possible, even abdicate, to end the schism” However, Innocent died in 1406, ending his rule as pope, and doing nothing to cure the ailing church of its schism.

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21Ibid., 402.
22Ibid.
23Brusher, 400.
24Ibid., 404.
26Brusher, 404.
In 1406, Gregory XII took over as the Roman Pope. The Pope was known as a pious man, and he really wanted to do all that he could to bring healing to the Church. He tried making negotiations with Benedict XIII (Clement VII’s successor) in Avignon, saying he would abdicate if Benedict would. However, relatives of Gregory convinced him not to, causing much strife among even his loyal Roman followers. His loyalty to his family was greater than that of his loyalty to the church. He even created four new cardinals in the church—all four were nephews of his. The fed-up cardinals went and “began negotiations with equally disgusted Avignon cardinals.” These cardinals came together and decided to hold a council at Pisa in an attempt to restore the flailing papacy. However, the Council of Pisa in 1409 would not do anything to help the situation, either.

Meanwhile, in Avignon, Benedict XIII had replaced Clement in 1394. At first, Benedict had been a supporter of Urban, but his loyalty switched over to Clement, thus giving him grounds to be elected as the successor of Avignon. He was a stubborn man, and held on to his claims on the papacy until his death, despite dwindling support and being deposed twice, once at the ineffective Council of Pisa and again at the later Council of Constance.

The Council of Pisa

The Council of Pisa did nothing to help matters—it merely further entrenched the current popes in their position and created another pope. When neither one of the popes showed up in Pisa for the Council, it was decided to depose them both and elect a new, single pope in their stead. Thus Alexander V (soon after succeeded by John XXIII) was crowned as yet another

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27 This show of favoritism did not, in fact, lead to the American Revolution. It did, however, outrage the public and lead to further discontent.

28 Ibid., 406.

29 Bunson, 70.
pope. However, when neither Benedict nor Gregory was willing to yield to the Council and give up their position, Alexander was left to rule from Pisa. So now there was a pope in Rome, a pope in Avignon, and a pope in Pisa—confusion was at its height. Duffy explains the difficulties the schism created for the church: “For the Church at large it was a trauma. The practical effects of the Great Schism were disastrous, for the rival popes created rival colleges of cardinals and appointed competing bishops and abbots to the same dioceses and monasteries. The spiraling expenses of the papacy now had to be met from a divided constituency.”

Despite efforts, the Church was being ripped apart.

**Public Reaction to the Schism**

The public reaction was justifiably one of tumultuous anxiety and perplexity. No one knew whom to follow. The papacy was supposed to be the supreme, infallible authority in the world, but everything was coming crashing down. Brusher describes the confusion: “It was doubtful to many just who was the legitimate pope. This caused frightful desolation in the Church…In short, the Great Western Schism was a stark disaster.” Nothing seemed to be working to fix the problems. Councils failed, pride and desire for power remained, and tempers flared. Duffy explains, “Men began to ask themselves how it could be ended. Could it be that Christ had left his Church with no means of solving the problem of being a body with two heads?” The already dwindling trust and security in the Church had reached an all-time low.

From the early days of complete dependence on the papacy, to the mistrust of the Avignon papacy, to the current state of the divisive schism, the role of the Pope had changed significantly in the eyes of the public whom he was supposed to serve. Oakley describes the results of such

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30 Duffy, 127.
31 Brusher, 402.
32 Duffy, 127.
events: “The understandable results were widespread administrative confusion and jurisdic- 
tional conflict, as well as mounting and debilitating spiritual anxiety.”  

It would be a long, hard road to any type of recovery.

The Council of Constance

Finally, after years of circular arguing, worthless excommunications, and bitter hearts, 

things were finally to come to an end. The Council of Constance was called in 1415 and lasted 

until 1418.  

Emperor Sigismund called the Council; he was considered one of the heroes of the 

schism’s ending.  

The results of the Council of Constance got rid of all three popes and elected a new one. Gregory, the pope in Rome, abdicated, and the other two were deposed by the Council. Gregory took the first step in 1415, when he abdicated and gave over his ambitions for the good of the Church. The Roman pope was thus considered the legitimate pope through history, since, “The council accepted Gregory’s convocation, thus implicitly recognizing his legitimacy.”  

John conceded to the decision of the Council, but Benedict did not. However, support dwindled, and he could not maintain the power that he desired. The stubborn pope refused to acknowledge the choice of the council, retaining his role of pope. His cardinals even elected a successor when he died, but the support of the people had dwindled so much that the schism ended, despite Benedict’s attempt to hold on to the power of the papacy.  

Benedict moved to Pensicola, “still declaring his legitimacy on his death.”

33 Oakley, 2.
34 Bennett and Hollister, 338.
35 Bunson, 407.
36 Brusher, 406.
37 Duffy, 129.
38 Bunson, 70.
Once the multiple popes were straightened out, the Council elected Martin V as the new pope. This was a relief to people all over Europe, for, “Christendom once more recognized the same pope.”\textsuperscript{39} Known as “the second founder of the papal monarchy and the restorer of Rome,”\textsuperscript{40} Martin went to work to try and undo the dreadful mess that the schism had made, for it had left “a rich legacy of evils…[Rome was] in dreadful shape.”\textsuperscript{41} However, Martin’s work was somewhat limited due to his fear of a council such as the one at Constance, for the Conciliar Movement, which emphasized the power of a council over a single pope, had gained much strength. Thus, it was expected that Martin organize councils to check the status of the papacy regularly. This plan did not go through well, however. The first attempt at Pavia in 1423 was disrupted and dissolved due to the incoming plague.\textsuperscript{42} All in all, though, the reign of Martin was a much needed peaceful relief for the entirety of Christendom.

\textbf{The Conciliar Movement}

The Conciliar Movement gained incredible momentum during the schism; however, its history was not always so bright. The supremacy of the pope alone had for so long been such a critical point in the Church’s philosophy. Boniface VIII stated this in \textit{Unum Sanctum} when he said, “if the terrestrial power err, it will be judged by the spiritual power; but if a minor spiritual power err, it will be judged by a superior spiritual power; but if the highest power of all err, it can be judged only by God, and not by man.”\textsuperscript{43} This clearly combated conciliarism, which called for a council to check the authority of the pope and to have the ultimate say in issues.

\textsuperscript{39}Brusher, 408.
\textsuperscript{40}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{41}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{42}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{43}Halsall, \textit{Unum Sanctum}, 23.
However, the use of councils proved necessary in the schism. Without conciliarism, the papacy would have faltered for longer than it did. Avis states that, “The very office (that of the papacy) that was intended to maintain the Church’s unity had become the cause of its fragmentation. As d’Ailly put it: ‘A community is not sufficiently ordered if it cannot resist its own ruin.’”

Conciliarism was a movement that tried to fix the severed Church and find a way for it to work together as a whole once again. For, “the central conviction of conciliarism…appealed to the common good of the whole Church, elevating the well-being of the whole over that of the constituent parts.” The changes made through the conciliar movement show a shift in perspective of the government of Europe; the theory and ideas that were developed were evidence of a move toward a representative government system in Europe. This was perhaps the starting point of much thought on alternate methods of ruling in Europe.

**Continuing Legacy, Changes Made**

The Great Schism had a tremendous impact on the European world, enforcing changes and shifting thought patterns that would indelibly leave a mark in history and shape the future. For example, the distrust that was brewed and the confidence that was shattered in the supreme pope created tension among the people, making them more willing to face change when it would come later. People began to feel that the Church, in all of its confusion, did not care for the spiritual needs, an idea that would continue to grow as the reformation approached.

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45 Ibid., 105.


Protestant Reformation that was just around the corner was shaped significantly by the Conciliar Movement.

The events of the Great Schism affected the future of the Church; the happenings at the Council of Constance created many changes. Not only did the major decisions made there affect the papacy to the core, it also paved the way for new reforms and new ideas to take hold. For example, John Hus, a notable reformer, was condemned and executed at this council, and it was this event that “caused Luther to question the infallibility of councils. From that moment of truth for Luther it was a comparatively short step to challenging the infallibility of the pope.”

Luther, as the major proponent of the Protestant Reformation, was greatly affected by these historical events, and his choices in turn later shaped Christianity immensely. So later, “When… Martin Luther began to publicize his objections to some Church policies, Europeans were by no means prepared to abandon Christianity, but they were willing, in large numbers, to desert tarnished Rome.” Thus, the Church as it is known today has its roots of change grounded in the happenings of the Great Schism.

The negative results of the Schism are hard to fully grasp. As Avis says, “The almost metaphysical vertigo induced in many responsible churchmen by this implosion of the pivotal medieval principle of unity can scarcely be imagined at this cultural distance.” The unified Church, which Boniface XIII declared as “the one and only Church [where] there is one body and one head, not two heads like a monster,” was no longer unified. There were not only two

\[\text{Avis, 105.}\]
\[\text{Ibid., 106-107.}\]
\[\text{Bennett and Hollister, 339.}\]
\[\text{Avis, 106.}\]
\[\text{Halsall, } Unum Sanctum, 23.\]
heads at one time, but three. The people lacked confidence in the supremacy that the papacy claimed, an idea that would be hard to overcome given the circumstances.

There were also some positive changes that resulted from the tumultuous time. Holmes lists several of these:

Ideas of reform were in the air and in England, France, and Germany reforming circles grew up inside the Church which were not without influence. Improved clerical education was undertaken in England…diocesan and provincial councils valiantly strove to check abuses in Germany…the late fifteenth-century humanist reformers…contributed to the Church’s development as a many-faceted institution which comprehended a remarkable diversity of pastoral, intellectual, and devotional styles.53

So, the Church benefited in many ways in the long run. The schism caused the realization that change was needed to come to life. Thus, the Church came to understand that they had to take action or else watch the papacy fall to destruction. In addition, the Church was to now have a more effective system to check the authority of others. The Council of Constance was meant to create a better system of balancing and limiting power for the popes. The Council insisted that another be held in the future to ensure that these reforms were executed.54 Therefore, councils were more regularly established, which would bring further unity to the Church as they were required to act together as a group rather than blindly following a supreme leader. As the foundation of much of the cultural life in Europe, this idea of testing and checking authority would soon permeate more areas of life.

The need for reform would continue to be an issue in the future. People saw many things that needed changes, and would later voice their opinions. As Harrison says, “The voices clamoring for reform in the church grew ever louder and more insistent. In 1517 the long delayed explosion shattered the unity of the Church when a young, unassuming monk nailed

53Holmes, 334.
54Duffy, 130.
ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg Church door.” The continual realization of the need for change would eventually change the world.

**Conclusion**

The Papal Schism of 1378 was indeed a horrible incident that caused quite a disruptive and startling uproar. However, the arduous circumstances brought about much needed changes and induced the events that would further shape the future. Despite hard times such as this, the papacy still survives today and is a foundational aspect of faith for many Catholics today. Also, despite the many ways that humankind fails, no matter what earthly institutions are put into place or what problems are encountered, God always remains sovereign, and his Truth will always win out. The Bible says, “For by [Christ] all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by Him and for Him. He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. And He is the head of the body, the church … so that in everything he might have the supremacy.” Though the world must face the corruption that comes from sin, all is redeemed through the saving power of Christ, and He can be trusted to restore his Church and His children to Himself.

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55 Harrison.

56 Col. 1:16-18 (New International Version).
Bibliography


