Great Events from History: The Middle Ages, 477-1453

Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism

**DATE** 1305-1417  
**LOCATE** Medieval Europe  
**CATEGORY** Religion

The Avignon Papacy (1305-1378) and Great Schism (1378-1417) inaugurated the crisis of the Catholic Church that culminated in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century.

**SUMMARY OF EVENT**

The power of the Church grew considerably during the central Middle Ages. The reform programs that revitalized the spiritual life of the Church in the eleventh and twelfth centuries dramatically exalted the authority of the Papacy. By the time of the mighty Innocent III (1198-1216), the pope had eclipsed the Holy Roman Emperor as the acknowledged head of western Christendom, ruling a vast administrative “state” that extended throughout the kingdoms of Europe. After 1250, however, the “papal monarchy” began to falter. The popes lost some of the reforming zeal that had won the Papacy such prestige, and they underestimated the growth of royal power in Europe’s emerging “national kingdoms.” When Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) attempted to defend ecclesiastical liberties from royal encroachment in France, Philip IV the Fair (r. 1285-1314) sent royal agents to arrest the pope; their mistreatment of the pope contributed to his death a few weeks later.

Boniface’s pontificate provoked such fierce conflicts in Italy that his successors were unable to remain in Rome. After the brief pontificate of Benedict XI (1303-1304), the cardinals—themselves divided between pro- and anti-Bonifacian factions—elected the archbishop of Bordeaux, Bertrand de Got, as Clement V (1305-1314). Clement’s neutrality and Gallic background made him an attractive compromise candidate, but they also left him vulnerable. He knew little of Italian affairs and had no experience with the political machinations of the Sacred College of Cardinals. Seeking refuge from the Italian storm, he turned to the familiar territory of the Midi, establishing the Papal Curia (the governmental body of the pope and Church) at Avignon in 1309. He also built up a loyal faction in the Sacred College, traditionally dominated by Italians, raising up twenty-three Gallic cardinals, most of whom came, like Clement himself, from Languedoc (in modern-day France).

Clement’s death left the cardinals deeply divided. The new Gallic majority had no desire to hurry back to war-torn Rome; the Italians hoped to return as soon as possible. The factions feuded for more than two years before electing Cardinal Jacques Duèse as John XXII (1316-1334). Though elderly, John proved a forceful, capable pope. Professing his desire to return to Rome, he sent Cardinals Bertrand du Poujet (d. 1352) and Giovanni Orsini (d. 1336) as legates to Italy and took vigorous action against Emperor Louis IV (1314-1347), also called Ludwig IV, who sought to reassert imperial authority in Italy during the Papacy’s absence. The legates drove Louis and his feeble antipope, Nicholas V (1328-1330; d. 1333), from Italy, but failed to pacify Italy. Yet even as he worked toward return, John undertook sweeping bureaucratic reforms that transformed Avignon into an administrative hub capable of governing the international Church indefinitely. Moreover, most of John’s new cardinals were Gallic and thus unlikely to advocate prompt return to Rome. By John’s death, the Papacy was no nearer to Rome than it had been at the time of his election.

In 1337, the Hundred Years’ War between France and England began. Believing that they could negotiate peace more effectively in Avignon than in Rome, Benedict XII (1334-1342) and Clement VI (1342-1352) prepared to remain in Avignon indefinitely. Benedict began construction of the papal palace there and Clement bought the rights to the town from the countess of Provence in 1348. Innocent VI (1352-1362) and Urban V (1362-1370) were more energetic in pursuing return. Their remarkable legate, Cardinal Gil Albornoz, pacified Italy enough that Urban V could come to Rome, albeit briefly, in 1367. In the end, it fell to Gregory XI (1370-1378)—nephew of
Clement VI—to return for good. Ignoring the pleas of the French king and his own cardinals, Gregory returned to Rome in 1377.

Gregory’s premature death from malaria in 1378 engendered a more serious problem. Fearing that another Gallic pope would return to Avignon, the Roman people forced the cardinals to elect the archbishop of Bari, Bartolomeo Prignani, as Urban VI (1378-1389). When Urban became mentally unstable, the Gallic cardinals nullified his election (though they did not have the legal power to do so) and withdrew to Avignon, where they elected Cardinal Robert of Geneva as Pope Clement VII (1378-1394). Urban refused to step down; now Christendom had two rival popes, one in Rome and one in Avignon. The Great Schism had begun.

Nor did it end with the deaths of the two principals. When Urban died, his cardinals elected first Boniface IX (1389-1404), then Innocent VII (1404-1406) and Gregory XII (1406-1415); in Avignon, Clement’s cardinals elected Benedict XIII (1394-1423). Hoping to end the schism, a group of Roman and Avignonese cardinals met at Pisa in 1409. After boldly but vainly declaring Gregory XII and Benedict XIII deposed, they elected a new pope, Alexander V (1409-1410). Now, three popes contested the throne of Saint Peter. The division of the Church seemed more hopeless than ever.

The schism finally ended at the Council of Constance (1414-1418), summoned by the Holy Roman Emperor from Hungary, Sigismund (r. 1433-1437), and attended by representatives from all over western Christendom. Gregory XII and the Pisan pope, John XXIII (1409-1415), reluctantly agreed to abdicate; Benedict XIII was deposed in absentia, and Cardinal Oddo Colonna was elected as Pope Martin V (1417-1431). The defiance of the now marginal Benedict XIII was at worst an inconvenience. The Great Schism was over; now the work of rebuilding the Church could begin.

The Avignon Papacy and the Great Schism did great damage to the later medieval Church. Saint Brigit of Sweden (c. 1303-1373) and Saint Catherine of Siena (c. 1347-1380) spoke for many when they lamented the Papacy’s abandonment of its rightful seat in Rome. The view that the Avignon popes were indifferent to Church reform is incorrect, but the largely bureaucratic nature of their reform initiatives left unaddressed the contemporary yearning for significant moral and spiritual regeneration. The continued emergence of new heresies, John XXII’s fierce battles with the Franciscans, and the growth of lay religious movements like the devotio moderna (a pietistic movement) all suggest that the Papacy had lost touch with new spiritual impulses at work in Christian society. Moreover, the lavishness of the Avignonese court, especially under Clement VI, was widely condemned. Not surprisingly, many contemporaries regarded the terrible Black Death (1347-1352) as divine punishment for a sinful society under the direction of a corrupted Church.

Still, the excesses attributed to the Avignon popes were exaggerated. Many of the Avignon Papacy’s leading detractors—such as the Florentine poet Petrarch (1304-1374), who dubbed the Avignon Papacy the Babylonian Captivity of the Church—were Italians who resented what they saw as a Gallic appropriation of an institution that had been culturally Italian for time immemorial. Even the “Frenchness” of the Avignon Papacy was more apparent than real. Though they often favored the kings of France, the Avignon popes were by no means puppets of the French crown. Avignon itself was not part of French territory, and the popes (and most of their cardinals) were Languedocians who differed in language and culture from the French to the north.

SIGNIFICANCE

If the Avignon Papacy was chiefly a “public relations” disaster, the Great Schism was an unmitigated catastrophe. Its roots lay in the cultural tensions that the Avignon Papacy spawned, but its immediate causes and
consequences evince a genuine institutional collapse. The spectacle of multiple popes hurling anathemas at one another accelerated the decline in papal prestige and prompted new challenges to the Papacy’s authority. One such challenge, conciliarism, advocated the use of general councils as a means of ending the schism, arguing that the authority of a council was superior to that of the pope. Although most fifteenth century councils were dismal failures, conciliarism remained influential in intellectual circles until the 1460s.

The schism was devastating to the Church’s administrative machinery, forcing Martin V and his successors to rebuild it from the ground up. Meanwhile, the power and effectiveness of secular governments grew steadily. The schism also intensified divisions within Christendom as rival powers aligned themselves with competing papal obediences to provide religious justification for ongoing conflicts. Broad-based movements such as Lollardy in England and the Hussite heresy in Bohemia, which denied the legitimacy of the Papacy, reveal the extent to which the schism eroded the notion of papal indispensability. Thus, the Catholic controversies of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries contributed directly to the religious climate in which the Protestant Reformation was born.

FURTHER READING


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