

Chapter 16

The Decline of the Papal Monarchy

Throughout the history of western civilization, whether in the democracies of ancient Athens or in the centuries of the Roman republic and later the Roman empire, religion and the state have been formally related. Even democratic Athens accused Socrates of ignoring the gods and 1st century Romans considered Christians who refused to honor the gods as guilty of treason and worthy of death. For Athens and Rome it was not a question of believing in the gods - there were no creeds or ethical systems - but whether or not you honored the gods, because the gods were credited with given the nation power and thus success. Not to honor the gods was then an act of treason. The notion of the separation of Church and State is a very modern idea. The union of Church and State is still a reality in modern Poland and many Muslim countries.

Beginning with Constantine in the 4th century A. D., Christianity was on its way to becoming the official religion of the Roman Empire. All agreed that the Empire and the Church were intimately linked together, however, the question remained: Who was in charge, the emperor or the pope? The history of the West was marked by an ongoing power struggle to settle that question. At times the emperors were in complete charge considering themselves as agents of God (the divine right of kings) to direct the State and the Church. At other times the popes were in charge also considering themselves as agents of God (vicars of Christ) to govern the Church and the State.

As we saw in Chapter 13, one of the revivals of the power of the papacy began in the 11th century with Pope Leo IX (1048-54) who successfully fought against the power of the crown to appoint bishops. He was also a Church reformer and fought against simony and clerical marriage. Leo was succeeded by four reformer popes and finally in 1073, Hildebrand became pope Gregory VII, one of the strongest popes in Church history.

The papal claims of supreme authority over the Church and the State were aided by a document known as the *Pseudo-Isidorian Decretals* or the *False Decretals*. These documents, drawn up in 850, contained some authentic materials as well as some forged documents. They gave the impression that the early churches had been ruled by papal decrees down to the minute details of Church life. They asserted the absolute and universal supremacy of the Bishop of Rome. They also contained another important forgery, the *Donation of Constantine*, in which the Emperor Constantine supposedly gave Pope Sylvester (314-35) temporal authority over Italy and other western regions and thus supplied some grounds for the notion of the Papal States.

Using canon law and the *False Decretals*, Gregory VII issued a statement entitled *Dictatus Papae* which set forth his theory of a papal monarchy:

the pope can be judged by no one; the Roman church has never erred and never will err till the end of time; the Roman church was founded by

Christ alone; the pope also can depose and restore bishops; he alone can make new laws, set up new bishoprics, and divide old ones; he alone can translate bishops; he alone can call general councils and authorize canon law; he alone can revise his judgments; his legates, even though in inferior orders, have precedence over all bishops; an appeal to the papal courts inhibits judgment by all inferior courts; a duly ordained pope is undoubtedly made a saint by the merits of St. Peter. (Bokenkotter p. 112, Trans. by R.W. Southern)

Gregory VII's success in establishing a papal monarchy, which dominated the Church and all emperors and kings, was continued by successor popes through the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries.

However, as time went on, the gradual formation of nation states and the power of their kings and emperors would put an end to the concept of a Christendom - the various peoples of the West united by the Church - as established by Charlemagne in the 9th century. Furthermore, the events of the 14th century called into question not only the power of the popes, but their authority and spiritual and moral prestige.

Conflict Between the Popes and the German Kings

Most medieval popes did not claim full authority over the temporal order, but only insofar as the actions of emperors involved the moral order. However, then as now, the fine line between the spiritual and temporal, i.e., the Church and State, was difficult to define.

Most medieval popes held to the "Gelasian theory" of Pope Gelasius I (492-496) who spoke of the temporal powers and spiritual powers as "two swords". According to this theory the pope had superiority over the emperor in matters that pertained to their governance in areas that affected the Church or morality. The popes had the power to command the emperor to rule according to the principles of divine justice. In practice, conflict arose when popes interfered with the operations of the State in such matters as who would control city of Rome - the king or the pope.

The Emperor Frederick - The conflict between the popes and the German kings, the Hohenstaufens, can be traced back to Pope Innocent III (1198-1216), one of the most powerful popes in history. Innocent had deposed the Emperor Otto. In his place he selected Frederick Hohenstaufen. Frederick was to reign from 1211-1250 and become involved in many conflicts with many popes.

In the beginning things were cordial. Frederick issued the Golden Bull of Eger (1213) in which he recognized and guaranteed the integrity of the Papal States and freed the German Church from imperial control by guaranteeing free elections of bishops and giving the right to the pope to decide disputed elections.

Frederick then began to attack some of the Lombard towns north of Rome which Rome saw as a prelude to an attack on the Papal States. Pope Honorius III (1216-27), who had succeeded Innocent and crowned Frederick, was conciliatory, but Honorius' successor, Gregory IX (1227-41) took Frederick head on and excommunicated him in 1227 and declared a holy war against him. However, Gregory had a few problems. He had no army and could not depend on the full support of the bishops or even the cardinals. Furthermore, the populace of Rome was historically undependable. Frederick also had his problems. He was able to field an army of only 15,000 men which was insufficient to storm a fortified city and his German followers only showed weak loyalty.

After a few insignificant battles, peace was declared. However, when Frederick conquered the Lombard town of Cortenuova in 1238, Gregory again excommunicated him. Gregory wrote a sharply worded encyclical letter condemning Frederick and called a council to meet in Rome to deal with the situation. However, Frederick intercepted the cardinals and put them in prison. A few months later Gregory died.

After two years a successor was finally chosen, Pope Innocent IV (1243-54), who had shown friendliness to Frederick. Frederick expected Innocent to lift the excommunication, however Innocent pretended to negotiate and then fled to Lyons, in France, where he called a general council and in 1245 once again excommunicated and deposed Frederick as a sacrilegious, notorious, heretical blasphemer and oppressor of the Church.

Frederick reacted violently. The war that ensued covered all of Italy, spread to Germany and shook Christendom to its foundations. Many violent crimes were committed. Suspected conspirators were blinded with hot irons, dragged to death by horses over stony ground and sewn up in leather sacks with poisonous snakes and tossed into the sea.

The pope fought back with his spiritual weapons of granting indulgences for fighting the holy war, excommunication, and interdict which deprived large parts of the population from reception of any of the sacraments. The war proved to be a disaster for both sides.

Frederick seemed at the point of a military victory when he suffered a terrible defeat in 1248 at Parma, a city he had under siege for many years. While Frederick was off on a hunting expedition, the residents of Parma overran his camp. Frederick recovered from this defeat and seemed poised for victory again, when he took ill and soon died in 1250.

The Sicilian War - After the death of Frederick, the popes were determined to separate the control of Sicily from the Empire. The choice was Charles of Anjou, the brother of the King of France, Louis IX. Charles secured Sicily by two great victories in which Frederick's son Manfred was killed in battle and another victory in 1268 when Conradin, Frederick's sixteen year old grandson, was captured and beheaded in the square at Naples. The popes had again used their spiritual weapons in a political struggle for power and this greatly lowered the prestige of the papacy and its authority in the eyes of the people.

Charles had won the victory, but the Sicilians were a proud, freedom loving people and they resented the French occupation and especially the French soldiers. When some French soldiers made improper advances toward some young girls near the Church at Palermo on Easter Monday, 1282, a riot broke out and there was a wholesale slaughter of French soldiers. These “Sicilian Vespers” effectively marked the end of Charles’ rule in Sicily.

The Pope mounted a crusade against the rebels, but it was unsuccessful. Again, the specter of the Popes using spiritual and temporal weapons in an attempt to subjugate a freedom-loving people was devastating to the image of the Vicar of Christ. The Sicilians had won liberty and the papacy had again experienced a catastrophic loss of authority and prestige. As our author notes: it was a “kind of Vietnam for the papal monarchy”. This was another fateful step in the decline of the papal monarchy.

Conflict between the Popes and the French

Pope Innocent IV had died in 1254. During the next forty years there was a series of twelve popes, some of whom were in office less than two months. Two of the French popes, Urban IV and Clement IV never took up residence in Rome because of civil unrest there. Gregory X was elected in 1271 after a riotous conclave in Viterbo, where the civil authorities locked the cardinals in the papal palace, then removed the roof and threatened them with starvation.

Pope Nicholas IV died in 1292 and for over two years the College of Cardinals was unable to select a successor. Some of the cardinals supported a candidate from the Orsini family, who favored the French descendants of Charles of Anjou. Others supported the Colonna family, favoring the Spanish House of Aragon.

The deadlock was broken by a strange occurrence. Someone shouted the name of Peter Morrone, an uneducated hermit famed for his holiness. All present were said to have felt inspired by the Holy Spirit and Peter was taken from his mountain retreat and crowned Pope Celestine V. Celestine was not fit for the job and resigned in less than a year. The stage was now set for the election of Benedict Caetani as Pope Boniface VIII.

Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) - Boniface was an ambitious and talented administrator with a reported bad temper. He was a papal diplomat to France and England in the 1270’s before being made a cardinal in 1281. He helped effect the resignation of Celestine V and was quickly elected pope by the cardinals in December of 1294.

He had an exalted sense of the authority of the papal office. One of his goals was to restore the authority of Rome. To do this he made his presence felt throughout the Church by constant intervention in local dioceses. He proclaimed his own Canon Law and proclaimed the first papal jubilee, in 1300, which drew a million pilgrims to Rome. He also established legislation for the education of the clergy and reinstated the Vatican Library and the Vatican Archives.

He also had wider interests which brought him into conflict with civil rulers. He began by defending the independence of the Papal States through wars and alliances. With the powerful Hohenstaufen family gone, Boniface then tried to reinstate papal control over Christendom. However, a new phenomenon was on the European scene - nationalism. Various rulers were trying to establish their authority over their own people and break the overreaching authority of the Pope of Rome. This growing nationalism and Boniface's attempt to establish papal rule within the old concept of Christendom naturally resulted in conflicts between the pope and national monarchs.

In 1296, Boniface ordered the kings of England and France, who needed money to fund their wars against each other, to cease taxing their clergy without papal authorization. To implement this policy, in 1296, Boniface issued a bull entitled *Clericis Laicos Infestos* ("The laity hostile to the clergy"). This bull disputed any royal jurisdiction over the clergy and threatened excommunication on anyone, e.g., the rulers of France and England, taxing clerical property without authorization from Rome.

Philip the Fair of France was outraged at this challenge to his authority, especially to levy taxes within his country. In response, he stopped the flow of much needed church contributions from France to Rome and prohibited French exports and expelled foreign merchants. This had grave consequences for Boniface because of the economic needs of the Papal States for French commerce. Boniface tempered his position and a tenuous peace ensued.

The next challenge to papal authority came from Philip in 1301 when he disregarded Church law and tried a French bishop in a royal court. This was a violation of clerical immunity. Without even reviewing the case, Boniface sent word to Philip that he must repent or there would be dire consequences. These consequences were spelled out in the bull *Ausculda Fili* which listed Philip's crimes and summoned the French bishops to a council in Rome.

Philip responded by making an appeal to the rising nationalism of the French people. He circulated a false bull that said that Boniface claimed direct temporal power over Philip. By this tactic, most of the French people and nearly half of the clergy gave their support to Philip.

Boniface had called the French bishops to a council in Rome in 1302, but only half of the bishops responded. Nevertheless, at the council, Boniface issued the famous bull *Unam Sanctam* which reiterated in strong language the traditional claim of the papacy to ultimate sovereignty over Christendom. This position set the spiritual powers of the popes over the temporal powers of the rulers. It said that this power was given to St. Peter by Jesus and thus was an ordinance established by God and must be obeyed. It further claimed that no earthly power can judge the pope or be independent of him. In all acts of moral judgment the papal authority is final. In a final sweeping statement the bull demanded that "every human creature be subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff".

Philip held his ground and denounced the pope. Philip called for a general council of the Church and drew up a damning indictment of Boniface, which included charges of heresy, simony, and every form of sexual misconduct. In response, Boniface, now in residence in his native city of Anagni, prepared a papal bull that would excommunicate Philip and release Christians from obedience to him.

However, Philip through his councilor Nogaret, on September 7, 1303 led a thousand men to Anagni to capture Boniface and bring him to France and force the calling of a council that would depose him as pope. The attack was unsuccessful, but a month later the eighty-five year old pope died.

Boniface had failed to reestablish papal power within his concept of Christendom. And the entire concept of a papal monarchy within the concept of Christendom had perhaps seen its day and rightly so. In his *Divine Comedy*, Dante condemned Boniface to hell and again in his political confession, *De monarchia*, Dante questioned whether the papacy could or should exercise any worldly rule. For this observation, the Church placed Dante's work on the *Index of Forbidden Books* until 1908.

In any event, Philip had won and the decline of the papal monarchy continued. The next pope Benedict XI died soon after election. Then Clement V was elected by pro-French cardinals and was detained in France by Philip. In 1305 Clement transferred the papal court to the French town of Avignon, near the Italian border, and thus began the so-called "Babylonian Captivity" of the popes in Avignon, which lasted seventy-three years until 1378.

The Avignon Popes (1305-78) - The Babylonian Captivity

When Clement moved the papal court to Avignon in 1305 he envisioned it as a temporary residence, however, it was to remain there for seventy-three years. During that time seven popes, all of French origin, held the Chair of Peter and under their administration the papal monarchy fell into further decline.

Many factors kept the popes in Avignon. There was constant war and unrest in Italy; the French kings found ways to use the popes for their own interests; most of the curia cardinals who elected the various popes were French and the papacy's struggles with the Holy Roman Emperors kept them dependent on the French kings.

By the time Clement died in 1314, the papacy was in trouble. The Curia was disorganized, the treasury was depleted and the Papal States were engulfed in constant war. It would take a great effort to restore the papacy as the chief spiritual power in Christendom.

On the bright side, many, if not most, of the Avignon popes tried to strengthen the Church spiritually and economically. They attempted to combat heresy, reform clerical abuses, exercise control over the appointment of bishops, propagate the Gospel and,

unfortunately, proclaim new Crusades.

With the Papal States in disarray, the popes were hard pressed for money. Over time, the medieval Church had established an elaborate and effective tax system. Taxes were levied on bishops, pastors and abbots. Sometimes the tax collectors used harsh methods and were strongly resisted to the point of being imprisoned, mutilated and even killed by irate debtors. The popes used their spiritual powers to support the collection effort. Church records in 1328 record that one patriarch, five archbishops, thirty bishops and forty-six abbots were excommunicated for default on their taxes.

The work to maintain or restore the prestige and power of the papacy took place within a difficult environment. Nations were forming and rival kings kept the war drums beating. The Papal States were in disarray and the popes were no longer living in Rome. Another disastrous event that made all organizational and reform efforts most difficult was the Black Death which started in 1348 and came back again and again.

The Black Death depopulated the ranks of the clergy and the monastic orders. Agricultural and business life was also deeply affected. This was especially true in the growing cities where the disease spread quickly.

While papal power, prestige and moral authority was diminishing, it was hard to tell from the extravagant life style of the Avignon popes. From their lavish robes, their bevy of attendants, complex ceremonials and their lavish papal palace, the Avignon popes put on a show of wealth and arrogance that belied the real state of affairs - the decline of the papal monarchy.

Return of the Papacy to Rome

The first attempt to return the papacy to Rome was made by a French pope, Pope Innocent VI (1352-62). Innocent was determined to return the papacy to Rome. To this end he enlisted the aid of Gil Albornoz. Albornoz was a skilled military general and a reform minded cleric. Born in Spain, he studied law and entered the clergy. He was made archbishop of Toledo in 1338. He assisted the Spanish king in his war against the Moors. He later called two synods to advance reforms in the Church.

He fled Spain after criticizing the new king, Pedro the Cruel. He fled to Avignon where he was received by Clement who made him a cardinal in 1350. In 1352 Clement gave him the difficult task of restoring papal authority and political order in the Papal States. In 1354, with few men and resources, Albornoz defeated Giovanni di Vico, the Prefect of Rome, who had seized part of the papal lands. He forced him into a treaty of submission.

By 1356, virtually all of the Papal States had been restored. On his return to Avignon Pope Innocent made him *Pater Ecclesiae* (a Father of the Church). Albornoz was largely responsible for the military and political recovery of the papal position in Italy that made possible the return of the popes to Rome in 1377. However, death overtook Clement before he could return the papacy to Rome.

The next pope, Pope Urban V (1362-70) briefly took the papacy back to Rome. He entered Rome with a small army in 1367. Rome was in terrible condition, politically and materially. Urban set about to rebuild Rome which included the renovation of St. John Lateran Church which had burned down in 1360. When civil disturbances arose again in Rome, Urban retreated back to Avignon just before his death in 1370.

Gregory XI (1370-78), the last French pope, was elected to the papacy in 1370 and was to be the last of the Avignon popes. Gregory was uncertain about returning to Rome, because of the continuing political instability. However, he judged the fate of the Papal States to depend largely on the return of the papacy to Rome. Urged on by St. Catherine of Siena and after two failed attempts, Gregory entered Rome in 1377. Soon after returning to Rome, Gregory died in March of 1378.

The Avignon papacy was in many ways a disaster. The prestige and authority of the popes degraded further. In addition to this decline in the papacy, the years of absence from Rome and the divisions in the hierarchy, set the scene for the next disaster, known as the Great Schism. The papacy had indeed returned to Rome, the question now was: who is the real pope?

Chapter 17

The Papacy Survives the Great Schism and Puts Down Conciliarism

A combination of the end of Christendom, the rise of national kingdoms, the loss of moral and spiritual authority of the popes, and the long absence of the papacy from Rome all contributed to the circumstances in which the disaster known as the Great Schism could take place. It lasted nearly forty years (1378-1417) and plunged the Church into a crisis of authority out of which the papacy barely survived as an institution of supreme authority, even in the Church. It is sometimes referred to as the Great Western Schism to distinguish it from the schism of 1054 which created a lasting division between the Christians in the West and Christians in the East - now known as the Orthodox.

The Great Schism (1378-1417)

There was a great deal of concern among the people of Rome when Gregory XI died in 1378, soon after moving the papacy back to Rome. This concern was based upon the fact that the College of Cardinals was still predominately French and there was the real possibility that the new pope would be a Frenchman and might well return to Avignon.

In these uncertain circumstances, the people of Rome, as was their custom, became violent and even physically assaulted some of the sixteen cardinals assembling to elect a new pope. They demanded an Italian pope. With a riotous crowd outside their conclave, the cardinals were warned that their lives were in danger if they did not elect a Roman or an Italian.

In response, in a somewhat unusual move, the thirteen assembled cardinals elected someone outside their College, Bartholomew Prignano, the archbishop of Bari. He became Pope Urban VI (1378-1389). In light of the catastrophe that followed, there has been some question as to whether or not the cardinals were “forced” to make this election. It remains one of the unsolved mysteries of history. However, historians have noted that the cardinals did offer Urban public homage and submission and in their correspondence at the time they spoke of having “freely and unanimously” elected him Pope.

Urban had been vice chancellor of the Curia and was well known and respected by the cardinals. They were understandably shocked when Urban soon showed himself as a tyrant of the worst sort. In outrages of temper, he criticized them publicly and privately for their vices, treachery, luxury and simony. Later historians described him as mentally unstable, volatile, and abusive.

Two Popes --Reacting in dismay to his violent change in personality, the cardinals left Rome and traveled to Fondi. There they issued an encyclical which declared Urban’s election invalid and denounced him as anti-Christ, demon, apostate and tyrant. With the

support of Queen Joan of Naples and three Italian cardinals who joined them, they set about to elect a new pope. They elected Robert of Geneva to be Pope Clement VII. There were now two popes each contending to be legitimate. Western Christendom was now split into two camps. Urban was supported by the Holy Roman Emperor, England, the Netherlands, Castille, Hungary, Poland and Portugal. Clement, who now had returned to Avignon, was supported by France Scotland, Luxembourg and Austria. Aragon remained neutral for a time and Italy was split and undefined.

The first response was war. Urban hired Charles of Durasso to expel Queen Joan from Naples for her support of Clement, which he did. The cost of these wars great and both popes sent the tax collectors out again using harsh measures and alienating most of the Christian population. Urban then turned on his cardinals putting some to torture and others he took with him on his warship and most historians judge that he threw five of them overboard to their death. Urban continued to travel throughout Italy with his army and on returning to Rome in 1389, he died. The next Roman pope elected by the cardinals was Boniface IX.

Needless to say, the Christian community was in disarray and the prestige and authority of the office of pope hit a new low. Forsaking more violence, a new solution was needed to heal the schism. Parties from both sides offered several alternatives: arbitration, a general council or the resignation of both popes. The intellectuals at the University of Paris held an unusual "vote" where sealed ballots were stuffed into a large bag and counted later. The report was that, by a large margin, they recommended that both popes resign. Years later these ballots were found and counted again, the real count was much closer than reported at the time, but still in favor of dual resignation.

Dual resignation seemed the best alternative and when Clement VII died in 1394, each of the candidates to replace him swore an oath to resign if elected. However, the next French pope to be elected, Benedict XIII failed to honor his oath. Given this dismal state of affairs the French government removed its support from Benedict and the two became adversaries. Many attempts were made to make Benedict change his mind, even a siege of his palace at Avignon, but they all failed. After five years of struggle the French government gave up and for political reasons again supported Benedict.

Now the scene shifted to Rome when Boniface died in 1404. The next Roman pope was Innocent VII. During his short tenure, he promised to work toward healing the schism, but, in fact, failed to respond to any overtures for settlement offered by Benedict. After a two year reign Innocent died in 1406.

The next Roman pope was elected immediately after the death of Innocent. Gregory XII was a pious man in his eighties who professed to be willing to heal the schism. He too swore an oath before his election to resign his office if Benedict, still in Avignon, would do the same. Both popes agreed to meet to negotiate a settlement, but they both proved insincere in their desire to meet. Benedict had even planned a military expedition to capture Rome. Gregory for his part enraged his cardinals by breaking another promise

when he appointed more cardinals who favored him, including two of his nephews.

Out of total frustration, cardinals on both sides agreed that a general council would be the only solution. The idea of a general council had been discussed for years by some intellectuals. It was a theory called conciliarism. This theory had been suggested by the University of Paris to the French King in 1380. According to this theory, given the crisis in authority, it would be possible, for the cardinals to call a council without the permission of the pope and to make decisions that would be binding even without the pope's consent.

Of course, such a theory was against centuries of tradition and Canon Law, but at this point it seemed reasonable, since no one was sure who indeed was pope. After some thirty years of schism it was almost impossible to determine who was the true pope. Both Urban VI and Clement VII, who started the whole affair, had been elected pope five months apart by the very same group of cardinals. However, all parties agreed on two things, the schism had to be resolved and the rival popes were not going to make it happen.

Three Popes -- Thus in March of 1409, cardinals from both sides and a great number of Church dignitaries met at Pisa, some five hundred eligible to vote. There were even ambassadors from seventeen reigning princes. On the cathedral steps a ceremony was enacted summoning the rival popes to present themselves. They did not come forward, because they were not present. Therefore, both popes were declared schismatical, notorious heretics, guilty of scandalizing the universal Church and therefore deposed.

Remarkably the huge assembly was of one mind, there were no debates, they knew what they had to do. They elected the cardinal of Milan, a seventy-year-old theologian, canonist and diplomat who took the name Alexander V. Alexander died within a year without ever returning to Rome.

The cardinals then elected one of the instigators and strong member of the council of Pisa, Baldassare Cossa, who took the now familiar name John XXIII. John entered Rome with an army and immediately called for a council to meet at Rome. By that time John had earned a bad reputation for his financial schemes and his nepotism. The council in Rome met, but almost no one attended, and after a short time it was adjourned. Soon all realized that John was not up to the task of healing the schism.

The Council of Constance

The incompetence and evil reputation of John enraged many, especially the King of Naples who now moved to attack Rome. John fled to Florence and appealed for help to the Emperor Sigismund. The Emperor was committed to the unity of the Church and the unity of Europe. In response to John, Sigismund forced the pope to call a general council, this time in Constance.

Again, the attendance was massive with some six hundred voting members and some eighteen thousand other clerics. While John had officially called the Council, all assembled agreed that John must be neutralized. To complicate matters, John had brought enough of his bishops with him from Italy to out vote the rest, if the traditional voting system was retained. Thus a new system was devised. The Council would be organized by nations, as the University of Paris was organized -- Italians, French, Germans and English. Each nation should have only one vote and each nation would conduct their own meetings to determine their vote. In a rare democratic moment for the Church, voting was extended to doctors of theology and law and even to some laymen.

John seemed to see the handwriting on the wall and before the assembled council he promised to abdicate whenever the other two popes did so. However, in one last effort to subvert the council, John escaped from his quarters in Constance and fled to the protection of Frederick of Hapsburg. His hope was that the council could not continue without his presence.

It almost worked. Many bishops were ready to return home when the Emperor stepped in and persuaded the bishops to remain. Now in a very anti-papal mood, the council resolved that John's absence would not affect the council's status or authority and that they would remain until the schism was healed and the Church reformed in "head and members".

Their anti-papal mood was made most clear in the famous decree *Sacrosancta* which said in part:

This holy Council of Constance...declares, in the first place, that, lawfully come together in the Holy Spirit, being a General Council and representing the Catholic Church, it holds an authority directly (derived) from Christ, which authority everyone, of whatever status or dignity, even the pope, is bound to obey in those matters concerning the faith, the extirpation of the said schism, and the reformation of the Church in head and members. It declares, furthermore, that whoever scorns to obey the commands and the laws of this holy council, or of any other General Council lawfully assembled -- (commands, etcl, referring to the matters stated) -- he is to be duly punished, whatever his status or dignity, even though he is the pope.
(Session 5, April 6, 1415)

This was the heart of the conciliar theory - the superiority of the General Council over the pope. An interesting idea that was not to last. This certainly marked the historical low point for the authority of the popes. Long gone were the days of popes like Gregory VII and, especially, Innocent III who claimed authority over the whole Church and the whole world as well.

At first John offered to resign at a price - the red hat, control of Italy and Avignon and thirty thousand gold coins. However, the Council had lost its patience. John was arrested

and deposed by the Council for the crime of his flight from Constance, for simony and for an immoral life.

With the Pisa pope gone, this still left the Roman pope, Gregory, and the Avignon pope, Benedict. In an interesting twist, Gregory agreed to resign voluntarily, however, he first formally convoked the Council of Constance to guarantee its legitimacy.

It was Benedict, the French pope, who was the most difficult. He was deposed by the Council, but he fled to his fortress in Peniscola, Spain. The Emperor paid him a visit, but without any resolution. Finally, with the only person now claiming to be pope supported only by his family and servants, the Council again deposed him in absentia.

With all three “popes” deposed, the next issue was Church reform. The important question was whether to elect a new pope now or proceed with the difficult work of reform while the Holy See was vacant. Since the major reforms were aimed at the abuse of papal authority - tax collection, intervention in diocesan affairs and appointment of bishops - many felt that a newly elected pope might be an obstacle to such reforms.

Thus, there was disagreement on this issue of when to elect the pope. In the meantime, without a pope in office and the Curia in disarray, the daily administrative business of the Church swamped the members of the Council. Therefore, a compromise was reached -- a new pope would be elected, but to guarantee the needed reforms the Council passed a decree entitled *Frequens*, which obliged all future popes to call frequent councils at stipulated intervals. If the popes refused, the council could convene without his permission. It read in part:

The frequent celebration of General Councils is the best of all methods for tilling the Lord's field and for extirpating the weeds and thorns of heresy, schisms and errors....Therefore, by this perpetual law, we command that, from this time on, General Councils shall be held as follows: The first within five years....; the second within seven years....and ever afterwards thenceforward every then years....Should the pope fail to do this, then the council itself is to choose the place and time.

It is easy to see what a revolution in the government of the Church this attempted.

A scheme for the election of the new pope was also adopted. For this time, and for this time only, said the council, there were to be added as voters to the cardinals, six deputies for each of the five nations. On November 11, 1417, Cardinal Odo Colonna was elected and took the name Martin V. The Great Schism had come to an end.

With Martin V now in office, the Council passed seven reform decrees to treat long-standing financial grievances of the bishops and the question of appointments to benefices. To these decrees Martin V gave his consent.

There were other grave matters of church reform that desperately needed attention -- simony, clerical education, absentee bishops -- but the council members could not agree on how to handle them. The “nations” of the council had conflicting interests. Therefore, other reforms were left to the pope and to the next councils as scheduled in *Frequens*. Sadly enough, true and thorough reform did not take place and the Council of Constance closed exactly one hundred years before Martin Luther posted his theses on the door of the Wittenburg Church.

The Papacy defeats Conciliarism

With the Council of Constance now adjourned, Pope Martin V now turned his attention to Rome and Italian affairs. When Martin finally returned to Rome the city was in desperate circumstances. Thus, Martin set about the task of restoring public order and rebuilding the infrastructure of the city, especially churches and public buildings. He also renewed the system of traditional family alliances that brought some order to the Papal States. While Martin gave all his energies to solving the problems of Rome and Italy, the wider issues of Church reform were not addressed.

Martin did call a council at Pavia-Siena in 1423 per the directives of the Council of Constance in its decree *Frequens*. However, Martin’s intentions to craft a more moderate form of conciliarism and the strict conciliarism of the council members caused a stalemate. Moreover, only a few bishops attended the Council, the number never exceeded twenty-five. When the plague broke out in Pavia, the Council was moved to Siena. As the debates over the relationship of the pope to councils wore on, many of the bishops began to leave for home and finally Martin dissolved the council one year later in 1424. Church reform was going nowhere.

Martin died in 1431 and was succeeded by Pope Eugenius IV. Eugenius had reservations about conciliarism that would have reduced the papacy from an absolute monarchy into a limited monarchy. As we shall see, the ongoing battle between the pope and the councils came to a head at the Council of Basel and in the end the pope again reigned supreme. Conciliarism was defeated.

The Council of Basel (1431-45) - Immediately after his election, Eugenius convoked the Council of Basel. From the outset various factors were present that eventually doomed the council: 1) Only a handful of bishops showed up for the opening session at Basel, 2) the enthusiasm for conciliarism was diminishing among the majority of bishops, 3) those who did attend were fairly anti-papal, 4) the Greek Orthodox Churches, who had finally split from the West in 1054, were making overtures for reunion and had suggested a council between East and West, thus Eugenius did not want to have two councils running at the same time and 4) fallout from the execution of John Hus and the Hussite War was still a problem.

NOTE: Jon Hus (1369-1415) was a Czech priest/theologian and rector of the University of Prague. He was a radical reformer with a large band of followers. They rejected

transubstantiation, demanded Communion under both kinds and claimed that reprobate priests, including popes, forfeit their authority within the Church. He was excommunicated in 1410 and 1412. He agreed to submit himself to the Council of Constance. On arrival at Constance, despite a guarantee of safe conduct from the Emperor Sigismund, he was incarcerated by the Dominicans, condemned and burned at the stake on July 6, 1415. This infuriated his followers in Bohemia and they initiated the Hussite War between Hussites and Catholic Germans which lasted from 1419-36.

Given all these factors, four months after the Council convened, a papal legate delivered an order from the pope to dissolve the Council. The bishops refused stating that the Council was superior to the pope and thus he could not dissolve the Council. Two months later they summoned the pope to appear before the Council. Eugenius relented and retracted his Bull.

The Council now turned itself to the problems of Church reform. They focused on papal taxes and took away the right of the pope to tax the clergy which would leave the pope and the curia at the financial mercy of the councils. This alienated Eugenius again and he sought for a way to get the upper hand on the Council. The proposed meeting with the Greek Orthodox provided him that opportunity.

The Eastern emperor was being threatened by the Turks and he needed Western support. Therefore, he opened negotiations with both the pope and the council. The battle was on to decide where to hold the meeting. The pope wanted an Italian site, but the Council would not grant the pope this “victory”. In the end the Greeks accepted the pope’s suggestion for an Italian site.

The bishops at Basel became divided on this issue and it was the beginning of the end for the Council of Basel. Many bishops left to join the pope and the remnant stayed, deposed Eugenius and elected history’s last anti-pope. (there had been 39 anti-popes beginning with Hippolitus in 217)

With the pope’s authority reestablished, Eugenius presided over the reunion of the East and West at Florence in 1439 in which the East declared the pope as universal head of the Church. This reunion was short lived and never ratified by the Eastern Church.

The Council Basel lost all political support and was dissolved in 1449. The real winners in all of this were the modern national states who never again would come under the temporal power of the pope in Rome. Conciliarism was dead, but the prestige and authority of the popes was a mere shadow of what it had been under the likes of Innocent III. The American experiment of the separation of Church and State was still in the distant future, but the first steps had been taken.

Papal monarchy, Conciliarism and the authority structure of the Church

As we have seen, the way that authority functions in the Christian community has

changed over time. Early on the Western Church adopted a concept of papal monarchy, while the Eastern Church retained as less hierarchical model. Is there any right way or definitive model for the exercise of authority in the Church? My sense is that there is not nor ever will be any final answer to that question. Perhaps an attitude of “what works best at the time” should be our guide, understanding that no model will be “perfect”. Perhaps the best question to ask is: “What would Jesus want?”

To approach an answer to that question we must return to the Gospels. First and foremost, Jesus did not form a Church in His lifetime nor did he lay out a detailed blueprint for a church in the future, complete with offices of authority. In fact, the word “church” is only referenced twice in the four Gospels, both times in Matthew and there without any explanation. Written between 80 and 85 A.D., the author of Matthew probably was simply giving justification to the churches that had sprung up since Pentecost. *However, Jesus did leave his disciples with a mission - to live out and proclaim the Good News of the Kingdom of God.*

It is in support of the Church and its mission that offices of authority exist in the Church. Exactly how those in authority exercise this authority in the daily life of the Church is part of the mystery of the Church which Pope Paul VI said by its nature is “always open to new and greater exploration”. The Church is a living organism and thus it is of the essence of the Church to change. The mission of Church remains the same, but the offices of authority and the way they function in support of this mission have changed throughout history and are open to change in the future. The sole criterion for evaluating the need for change in the exercise of authority in the Church is its effectiveness in supporting the mission of the Church -- to proclaim and make present the Kingdom in this world.

If Jesus was not definite about the form of the ministry of authority, He made certain there was no doubt about the manner in which the special ministry of authority was exercised. He was the model of authority and instructed His disciples to imitate His example, as we see in the following accounts:

But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be your slave; even as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”. (Mt. 20:25-28 and Mk. 10: 42-45)

A dispute also arose among them, which of them was to be regarded as the greatest. And he said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you; rather let the greatest among you become the youngest, and the leader as one who serves. For which is the greater, one who sits at table, or one who serves? Is it not the one who sits at table? But I am

among you as one who serves". (Lk 22:24-27)

Any consideration of authority and structure within a human community is a sticky business. Without some authority and structure a human community cannot preserve its unity, it cannot preserve its existence. However, once authority is established and structures are created, there are bound to be problems. Authority and structure in a human community involve people, and typically include offices, rules, beliefs, customs, common activities, etc.. In other words, authority and structure create human institutions and human institutions, with all that goes with them, are not perfect. They are in constant need of reform and, unfortunately, by their very nature they resist reform. It makes for interesting history as we have seen.

The theory and the brief historical implementation of Conciliarism left its mark on the Church. Certainly, Conciliarism went too far, but some kind of response was demanded of the bishops by the complete collapse of the papal monarchy and the scandal of the Great Schism. Furthermore, the triumph of the papacy that followed failed to address the much needed reforms in the Church and paved the way for the Reformation.

Echoes of Conciliarism were heard in the Second Vatican Council, when the notion of collegiality was introduced. This doctrine surfaces in many of the council documents and envisions the bishops of the Church as a college with responsibilities not only for their own particular churches, but for the whole Church. Furthermore, the Church is seen as not primarily hierarchical, but as the People of God and as such the pope and the bishops must engage the entire Church in their mission to live out and spread the Gospel.

At the present time we again see the papacy again consolidating its power and engaging in a micro-management of the Church. Will the challenge of collegiality be taken seriously and reflected in the way authority is exercised in the Church? Only time will tell.