

The Avignon Papacy and Western Schism

During the eleventh through the mid-thirteenth century the Church was growing in influence and the papacy was at the height of its prestige. By the late Middle Ages, however, the integrity of both Church and the papacy suffered serious decline. Some of the causes are:

- The growth in power and wealth of European nations, and the attendant luxury of living.
- The disrepute into which the Papacy fell in consequence of disputes regarding succession.
- The spread of erroneous opinions on faith and morals.
- Civil wars in Italy that politicized the papacy.

Philip the Fair vs. Boniface VIII and the Knights Templars

Even before the Avignon Papacy and Western Schism brought the Papacy to an intolerable state, the office had become corrupted and a number of 13th century popes brought scandal upon the office. Pope Boniface VIII, (for example) whose feud with Philip the Fair resulted in the removal of the Papal court to Avignon, became pope only after the forced resignation and subsequent murder of his predecessor, Celestine V. Because the conflict between Philip and Boniface resulted in a century of confusion regarding legitimacy of the Papacy, it is worth looking at the events leading up to the schism.

Philip the Fair was a strong-will monarch who sought to centralize power in his realm and taxed Church property to strengthen the state. Boniface, while always striving to increase his own temporal power in Italy, objected to the king's interference in Church affairs in France, and issued a number of Bulls against Philip including Unum Sanctum declaring the power of the Church to be superior to all secular power, which was of course ignored by Philip, who considered the Pope to be a scoundrel. The following year French soldiers attacked Boniface at his palace in Anagni and he died a month later.

With Boniface out of the way, Philip was able to help orchestrate the election of a French pope, Clement V. But his feud with Boniface was still not over. Boniface had many enemies and detractors (not without reason), and after his death they sought to have him posthumously denounced for heresy, murder, simony, sodomy and other crimes. Pope Clement V postponed dealing with the issue until the he could call an Ecumenical council. When the **Council of Vienne** was convened in 1311 the charges against Boniface were discussed, but he was defended by members of the Knights Templars and the matter was dropped. At the same council however, the order itself was officially disbanded after being accused of many of the same crimes attributed to Boniface. The charges against both Boniface VIII and the Knights Templars have been controversial ever since, and it is difficult to know with certainty what occurred at the Council because proceedings were stolen or destroyed.

Defenders of the Knights Templar's usually claim that Philip's accusations against them were motivated by greed and the desire to confiscate Templar property. They sometimes point to a document "discovered" in 2001 that supposedly exonerates the Knights. However, documents that are "lost" for 700 years and then "rediscovered" just in time to coincide with a sensational Dan Brown novel, should probably be viewed with some suspicion. On the other hand there is considerable evidence that some Templars were guilty as charged. Dozens of the Knights made

very similar confessions involving lurid, heretical ceremonies and perverse activities. All were accused of sodomy, a common problem within corrupt religious orders, and it is somewhat questionable why men motivated primarily by authentic Christian witness would be drawn to an order known for best legendary wealth, secret rituals, and fortified castles.

Another disturbing consideration that casts doubt on the Templar order is the suspicious deaths of both Clement V and Philip the Fair within a year of the suppression of the order and execution of its last Grandmaster, Jacques de Molay in 1314. Within 14 years of the death of their father in a tragic "hunting accident", all three of Philip's healthy and vigorous sons succeeded to the throne of France and all died shortly thereafter. As a result the Capet line of French kings was brought to an end after 300 years, and France was embroiled in Succession Wars for over a century. Supposedly the extermination of the Capet dynasty was caused by the "Curse" of Jacques de Molay, but it was more likely due to the efforts of a well-organized network of spies and assassins bent on revenge for disbanding the most powerful order in Europe.

There are other interesting facts and legends regarding the Knights Templars and their relationship to medieval bankers, the Reformation, and Freemasons. When the order was dissolved many members are said to have fled to Switzerland and Scotland with their riches, and it is interesting that both countries were important, well-funded centers of Protestant resistance during the Reformation. It is also instructive that the Freemasons, known as notorious enemies of the Catholic Church, employ Templar symbolism in their ceremonies and it seems unlikely that such a diabolical organization would align its symbolism with a "falsely accused" order.

The Popes at Avignon (1309-1376)

The event which led up to the Schism of the West was the removal of the Papal residence and Curia from Rome to Avignon. When Clement V became pope moved his court to Avignon rather than return to Rome. His decision was partly due both to pressure by Philip IV, but also due to exceedingly difficult conditions in Rome. (The civil war between Guelfs and Ghibellines was still raging and many Popes of the late 13th century had short pontificates and suspicious deaths.)

Six popes in succession, all Frenchmen by birth, followed his example, and as the majority of the Cardinals were natives of France, French influence prevailed in the Papal court. This period lasted for seventy years and was called by the Italians the 'Babylonian exile'. The six Popes who lived at Avignon were:

- **Clement V** — Suppressed the Knights Templars.
- **John XXII** — Published a crusade against the Ghibellines.
- **Benedict XII** — Built the famous palace of the Popes.
- **Clement VI** — Purchased Avignon from the Queen of Naples.
- **Innocent VI** — Opposed the heresy of Wickliffe.
- **Blessed Urban V** — Endeavored to reform the clergy.
- **Gregory XI** — Returned the Papal Court to Rome.

In 1378 Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome in answer to the demand of the Romans and the desire of the Christian world, and especially to the pleadings of St. Catherine of Sienna, but he died shortly thereafter.

The Western Schism (1378-1417)

When Gregory XI died, the College of Cardinals numbered only twenty-three; seven were at Avignon, and of the sixteen who formed the conclave at Rome, eleven were Frenchmen. The inhabitants of Rome, fearing lest a French Pope might return to Avignon, clamored for a Roman, or at least an Italian Pope. The Archbishop of Bari was elected and assumed the name of Urban VI. Dissatisfied with his rule and claiming that the election had been forced, the French cardinals seceded and chose an anti-pope, Clement VII, who fled to Avignon.

France became the chief support of Clement VII, who gradually won the obedience of the Paris University, Spain, Scotland, Savoy, Naples, and Cyprus. England, Brittany, and Portugal, the greater part of Italy, Germany, Hungary, Poland, Flanders, Sweden, Norway, and the Catholic Orient remained true to Urban VI. These alliances stayed roughly the same throughout the Schism, although many partisans on both sides acknowledged the problem of two popes and earnestly sought a resolution.

Urban VI died in 1389, and the fourteen cardinals who had adhered to him elected his successor, Boniface IX. At the death of the latter the legitimate Roman line was continued by Innocent VII and Gregory XII. After the schism had lasted thirty years, during which time two anti-popes had been chosen by the cardinals at Avignon, several cardinals convened a synod at Pisa to end the schism. They declared the elections both in Rome and in Avignon null and void, and named Alexander V as pope. Three popes now claimed the recognition of the Christian world.

At the solicitation of the Emperor Sigismund, John XXIII, the successor of Alexander V, called a general **Council at Constance**, 1414. It was decided to demand the abdication of all three popes. Pope Gregory freely resigned, John XXIII and Benedict XIII were deposed. Cardinal Otto Colonna was then elected, with the title of **Martin V**. The schism lowered the prestige of papal authority, destroyed the fervor of the faithful, and greatly contributed to the apostasy of the sixteenth century.

General Councils of the 14th and 15th centuries

- **Council of Vienne** (1311–1312) — Disbanded the Knights Templar, condemned errors against faith, and enacted disciplinary canons for the better Church government.
- **Council of Pisa** (1409) — attempted to solve the Great Western Schism but failed. The council is not numbered because it was not convened by a pope and its outcome was repudiated at Constance.
- **Council of Constance** (1414–1418) — Resolved the Great Western Schism and condemned John Hus. Also began conciliarism.
- **Council of Florence** (1431-1449) — Convened by Pope Martin V. Attempted to resolve the East-West Schism but broke down over issues of Papal supremacy vs. Conciliarism.