

The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils: 325-1870

Chapter 17. The General Council of Basel Ferrara Florence, 1431-45

Martin V, before he closed the Council of Constance, duly announced that the General Council would meet five years thence, April 23, 1423, at Pavia. And at the appointed time he sent legates to preside at the council there in his name. They found awaiting them two abbots only. Gradually, as the months went by, a handful of bishops and lesser dignitaries straggled in-- the number never exceeded twenty-five. Then the plague came to Pavia, and the council moved to Siena. Its members never got any further than a long- drawn-out discussion about the relation, in law, between the General Council and the papacy. Gradually the bishops began to leave, and just eleven months after its inauguration the council was dissolved. But, once again, the provisions of the decree *Frequens* were carried out. Before the last members of the council had departed it was announced to them that seven years hence, in 1431, the General Council of the Church would come together again, this time at Basel in Switzerland.

By the time that this council met, Martin V was no more. He had found it a very onerous task to set up anew the central administration of the Church in what was little better than a city in ruins. The animosities and personal rivalries of the curiously assorted cardinals who had elected him-- relics of three rival papal regimes--naturally reasserted themselves. He added a fourth group to the Sacred College by his own nominations. Little wonder that this pope ruled his cardinals with a firm hand. Could the possibility ever be far from his mind that the schism would revive? Did he really lament, as he saw the council of Siena turn out a fiasco? There were elements in Rome whom it pleased to assert that Martin V dreaded the very thought of General Councils, and, as the date approached for that of Basel, insulting notices were placarded on St. Peter's, warning the pope of his duty in threatening terms. But death delivered Pope Martin from these anxieties, February 20, 1431.

His successor, elected almost immediately, was not one of the cardinals created since the restoration of unity, not alas the capable Giuliano Cesarini, but a nephew of Pope Gregory XII whose resignation had smoothed the path at Constance, sixteen years before--the cardinal whose creation, in 1408, had been the immediate occasion of Gregory's cardinals deserting him and uniting with the cardinals who had deserted Benedict XIII. The new pope took the name Eugene IV. He was to rule for sixteen years, and to die with the council now summoned, still active if excommunicated and, though long moribund, still rebellious. The history of the reign of Eugene IV is, in one respect, little more than the history of the Council of Basel.

Cesarini, appointed to preside over the council (by Martin V), had also been commissioned as legate to the Catholics of Germany, now engaged in a holy war against the Hussite heretics of Bohemia. The summer of 1431, which should have seen the hosts of bishops converging on Basel, was spent by the legate with the Catholic army. On August 14 it was wiped out, at the bloody battle of Taussig. Ironically, as it proved, the legate had had the new pope's permission to delay the opening of the council until the Hussites had been dealt with! Three weeks after the battle, a very much changed man, Cesarini reached Basel, to find what the other legates had found at Pavia. Almost nowhere, it seemed, were bishops interested in General Councils. The great wave of enthusiasm which had carried the decree *Frequens* had crashed more rapidly than it had risen. The Council of Basel opened on December 14, 1431, with a mere handful of bishops present.

One of the factors in the troubles that now began was the vacillation of the papal will, Pope Eugene reviving, in this, memories of his uncle, Pope Gregory. Another was the geographical distance that separated the pope's city from that of the council--a good seven hundred miles north to the frontier and then across all the mountains of Switzerland, fifteen to twenty days' journey, five centuries ago. In other words, the maximum of

causality to bring about contradictory decisions in an anxiety-ridden superior. Four months after the first session, before the council had really begun its work, the legate received from him the surprising order to dissolve it and send the bishops home (January 10, 1432). The date of this bull was the previous December 18. But, despite the able and conciliatory Cesarini, the bishops refused to budge. They remembered the resolutions of Constance--had they not, at their first session, solemnly reaffirmed the decree *Frequens?*--and they reminded the pope of all this, by renewing the resolutions, and gave him sixty days to withdraw his bull. Otherwise ... This was on February 10, 1432, at the second session of the council.

The pope's reason, given in the bull, was the invitation sent from Basel to the Hussites to attend and state their case. On this important issue, there were now to be two policies, the papal and that of the council. With such a matter in debate, and the acutely critical state of Catholics in Germany and Bohemia, there was no saying how affairs would end--especially under so weak a character as this particular pope.

The King of France summoned his bishops, and they begged him to support the council. The emperor, Sigismund still, took the same line. The council "summoned" the pope to take his proper place at its deliberations, and the cardinals with him--the latter were given three months to appear. More, the council provided for the chance that the pope might die while it was in session, and it forbade him to create any new cardinals until the present crisis ended (June 20). This was the constitution of Constance in action, with a vengeance.

The pope was now all conciliation. In a bull of August 20, he gave the council leave to negotiate with the Hussites, and to make plans for the reformation of abuses in Germany. He had spoken of another council, to meet in Bologna in 1433, and he now left the choice of the place to the council. But the council (three cardinals at the moment, plus thirty-two bishops and abbots, plus a legion of doctors) was resolved that the pope should cry *Peccavi*, explicitly assenting to its doctrine that General

Councils cannot be dissolved without their own consent. They told the pope explicitly that only General Councils are infallible.

The English king, Henry VI--or the regent who ruled in that child's name-- now joined with the emperor and the French. It was quite a combination. The pope, out of his twenty-one cardinals, could only really rely on six, and in December the council gave him sixty days to withdraw his bull of dissolution explicitly, and to approve all it had done so far.

Long before this reached him Eugene had made another conciliatory move--the Bologna council would really be the Basel council continued, only in this sense had he ever dissolved the Basel council. When this decision reached Basel, during the fatal sixty days, it only stiffened the resolution of the little group to extort the fullness of what they insisted were their rights. The discussions with the pope's envoys were long and heated. Then on April 27--it is now 1433, of course--the council promulgated eight new shackling decrees about the papal authority. On July 13, it deprived the Holy See, forever, of all right to appoint bishops and abbots, and ordered that before being installed as pope the newly elect should, for the future, take an oath to observe this enactment--the enactment of a couple of dozen bishops plus a crowd of theologians and canonists. They reminded the pope how patiently they had so far dealt with him, and once more commanded him to withdraw his original bull.

And on August 1 the pope did precisely this.

Even so the council was not satisfied. The pope must admit that he was in the wrong when he issued the bull, and must accept the council as a true General Council and as having been such all through (September 11). And now, at the moment when Eugene IV was preparing a wholesale nullification of the council's antipapal decrees, he suddenly found himself a fugitive from his own state, a distinguished exile enjoying the hospitality of the Florentine republic. A Milanese army had invaded his state, giving out that it had come to punish the pope, and domestic treachery had helped it.

From Florence, December 15, the pope made what was to be his last surrender to the council. This bull acknowledged that the pope's dissolution bull of 1431 had been the cause of all the trouble. Eugene praised the council for the good work it had done, and bade it continue with the reform of the papacy as well as of the rest of the Church. All sentences passed against the council were annulled. This surely was the nadir of papal action.

When the bull was read to the council, February 5, 1434, it declared itself satisfied. Yet once again it renewed the decrees of Constance about the General Council's superiority to the pope, and on June 9, 1435, it abolished the main source of the Curia Romana's revenue, the taxes payable on a bishop's appointment (annates) declaring them to be simony--which was certainly not the case however onerous they might prove.

The council, like its predecessor, now began to take to itself the general administration of the Church. It busied itself with the Jewish question, and legislated against clerical concubinage. It made useful changes in the procedure about excommunications, and about appeals from sentences given in the bishops' courts. In the face of all which, the pope gave not a sign that he knew what was afoot, except to notify the council that the pope is, nonetheless, its superior.

So, the deadlock lasted through 1435 and 1436, by which time a new question had arisen--the Greek emperor, fearing the very days of his state were numbered, had for some years been making approaches to end the centuries-old schism. The council, as well as the pope, sent envoys to Constantinople to treat with him. The Greeks, not surprisingly, preferred to do business with the pope--the juridical position apart, what could the council do for the Greeks but pass resolutions? and how could the Greeks hope to achieve the aim of union with the pope by first making friends of the men who had all but dethroned him? Pope Eugene now had a new birth of courage. He denounced the council to the princes of Christendom for what it really was, arranged with the Greeks that Ferrara would be a

suitable meeting place, and sent to Basel a bull transferring the council to that city (September 18, 1437). The legates left Basel, for Ferrara, in the December following--six years to a month since the council's first session--and many of the bishops left with them. The debris left at Basel was, by this, scarcely visible. Its arrogance and claims and language were, of course, more imperial than ever.

The attendance at the first eight General Councils had been all but wholly Greek--the legates of the pope the only Latins in the assembly. At the rest of the series, the attendance had been just as exclusively Latin. Only at the Ferrara-Florence sessions of this council of Eugene IV, did Constantinople and Naples, Milan and Ephesus ever sit down together. And the doctrinal business that brought them together was not the usual business of the condemnation of some new erroneous interpretation of the Christian faith, but Reunion, the demonstration--on the part of the Latins--that the Latin theology meant precisely the same as the Greek in matters where, for centuries now, the Greeks had been shunning the Latins as heretics.

Behind this interest in theological questions there lay, on both sides, the very urgent matter of the new Mohammedan threat to Constantinople, almost the sole remnant of the ancient empire still in Christian hands. These particular Mohammedans, the Ottoman Turks, had built up their vast power in the last eighty years or so, conquering various minor sultanates in Asia Minor, driving the Byzantines from the southern shores of the Black Sea, and from all that classic land of western Asia Minor where, of old, were such cities as Nicaea and Nicomedia and Chalcedon and Ephesus--occupying the countries that nowadays are Greece and Bulgaria and southern Yugoslavia. Constantinople was by this time a small island in a sea of Mohammedan territory. The population, 1,000,000 or so in the great days, had shrunk to a mere 50,000. The frontier was but a two days' ride from the walls.

It had at last been driven home to the great Christian state likely to be the next to be attacked, Venice, that it had been folly to allow the Turks to conquer so much almost unhindered, and, like any good state whose one real interest is commerce, to trust for its own security to good diplomatic and trade relations with them. And so the Latin power that had inflicted the death blow of 1204, was now coming forward, anxious to save the remnants. And in 1431, to quicken the chances of a new kind of understanding, a Venetian patrician had been elected pope--Eugene IV, cast for other roles than the duel with the ridiculo-serious Council of Basel.

The Greeks themselves were divided, politically no less than theologically. The long-standing hatred of the Latins, burnt into their very nature by the crime of 1204, was as active as ever with many. The feeling of religious distrust--Latin help must mean Latinisation--was general. As to the imminence of the danger, no doubt, as with the imminent danger of secession a century ago, people were too used to the menace to realise it was a fact. When, finally, the papal envoys and the emperor John VIII and the patriarch of Constantinople came to an understanding, and the bishops were chosen, in a synod, to accompany them to the council, and all set off on the long ten weeks' sea voyage to Venice, they left behind them a city very largely hostile to their journey and its objectives. And the pro-Reunion emperor knew this only too well. And when, the great reconciliation effected, he returned to Constantinople he did not dare to publish the fact. Nor did his brother, the last of the successors of Justinian, Constantine XII, until 1452, the very eve of the final catastrophe.

The ceremonial splendour of the Venetian reception of the Greeks (February 8, 1438), the liturgical wonders at Ferrara, are in almost shocking contrast to the realities. They did not, for the emperor, mask the realities. He had come to do what lay in him for the religious reunion of the East and West, expecting then to discuss for the common salvation of Christendom, a united military project. But not one of the kings of Europe,

not a single leading prince, ever came to the council. To the hostile people awaiting his return, John VIII could not show a single treaty of alliance.

The princes had remained fixed in that indifference to the fate of the East that had been theirs ever since the fall of Acre in 1291. The pope's appeal was but sounding brass to them, as in all the last hundred and fifty years. Is there ever a time when political situations are hopeless? If so, this was certainly one of them. Let a contemporary speak, a shrewd, professional diplomatist, later to be a pope and to organise the last of the crusades. "The titles of pope and emperor are now no more than empty words, brilliant images. Each state has its own prince, and each prince his own special interests. Who can speak so eloquently as to persuade to unity under a single flag so many powers, discordant and even hostile? And even should they unite their forces, who will be so bold as to undertake to command them? What rules of discipline will he lay down? How will he ensure obedience? Where is the man who can understand so many languages that differ so widely, or who can reconcile characters and customs that so conflict? What mortal power could bring into harmony English and French, Genoese and Aragonese, Germans, Hungarians and Bohemians? If the holy war is undertaken with an army that is small, it will be wiped out by unbelievers; if the army is of any great size, it will court disaster just as infallibly through the insoluble problems of manoeuvre and the confusion that must follow. To whatever side one turns, one sees the same chaos." [1]

Such was the atmosphere in which, at Ferrara and at Florence, whither in January 1439 the pope transferred the council, the bishops discussed the theological matters that had divided East and West these many centuries.

The emperor John's disappointment at the council is understandable. That theological topics, once brought to the fore by the pressure of political necessity, would have so dominated the event that nothing but theology was spoken of in the council--who would have expected this? There was not a reference to the plight of the East, so far as we know, and not even

the palest imitation of that papal speech at another council which had launched the First Crusade.[2] Most surprisingly, even to us, yet so it was.

In the first joint session, April 9, 1438, the council (117 Latins and 31 Greeks)[3] decreed, without any trouble, that this was a General Council. And then the theological tourney began. Despite the emperor--for so apprehensive was he that differences here would speedily end the council, that he had meant the plight of the East to be first discussed, and the means to remedy this. It was with the greatest difficulty that the Easterns were brought to the point of stating why they thought the Latins were heretics, and to a discussion of the Latin reply. The main dividing questions were the orthodoxy of the Latin theology about the relation of the Holy Spirit to the Father and the Son (the Filioque question), of the Latin theology about the purification of souls after death (Purgatory), of the Latin use of unleavened bread in the Holy Eucharist (the Greeks used ordinary bread), and of the Latin claim that the pope is, by God's ruling, the supreme earthly ruler of the whole Church of Christ.

As to procedure, the pope's plan was that a joint commission of ten Greeks and ten Latins should first study each topic and then their report be discussed. But the emperor's objection to all and any discussion of theology held up this plan. At last he agreed to the Purgatory question being debated. After two months of this (June-July 1438) the Greeks agreed that what the Latins taught was what they too believed. There was then a lull for a good three months, and finally the emperor was brought round to consent to a discussion of the Filioque. This proved the most lengthy of the council's tasks--a thorough investigation and criticism of all the old writers, the champions of orthodoxy at Nicaea, and Ephesus and Chalcedon, Athanasius, Gregory of Nazianzen, Cyril, and the rest. By June 8, 1439, the Greeks had been satisfied that the Latins, despite their use of the words "and from the Son" (i.e., Filioque), did not hold a doctrine other than their own, and that the addition of the word Filioque to the original creed had been lawful since, at the time it was made, it was

the sole means of warding off an heretical interpretation of the original text.

The question which, of all others, we might expect to have caused storms-- the claim of the popes that their see is the mistress-see in fact, and not a mere primacy of honour--went through with comparatively little trouble, in little more than a week.

It took a week to draft the text of the decree setting forth the agreement-- this took the form of a papal bull, *Laetentur Coeli*--and then on July 5 the 133 Latins and the 33 Greeks signed it, the pope also and the emperor. On July 6, 1439, it was promulgated in a solemn session of the council.

The definition about the kind of thing the pope's authority is, runs as follows: "In the name of the Holy Trinity ... We, with the assent of the holy and General Council of Florence, define, in like manner, that the holy Apostolic See and the Bishop of Rome, have a primacy [*tenerè primatum*] throughout the whole world, and that the Bishop of Rome himself is the successor of St. Peter and the prince of the Apostles, and that he is the true vicar of Christ, and the head of the whole Church, and the father and teacher of all Christians; and that to him in St. Peter there was committed by Our Lord Jesus Christ full power to pasture, to rule and to guide the whole Church; as is also contained in the acts of the General Councils and in the sacred canons." [4]

And now the Greeks went home. The first of them left, for Venice, within the fortnight; the last--the emperor John--on August 26. They sailed from Venice October 19. Not until February 1 did they reach Constantinople. Most of them were still in Florence when there arrived another group of Orientals seeking reunion with the Roman see. These were Armenians from Constantinople and the Genoese colony of Caffa in the Crimea, but commissioned by their patriarch. They were Monophysites, their churches relics of the reaction that had followed the Council of Chalcedon, now a thousand years ago. We have come to you our head," they said to the pope. "You are the foundation of the Church. Every member that has left you is

sick, and wild beasts have devoured the flock that has separated itself from you.... You who have the power of the heavenly keys, open to us the gates of eternal life.”[5] After weeks of daily conferences with the cardinals whom the pope appointed, an understanding was reached and the bull commonly called the Decree for the Armenians was promulgated, November 22, 1439.

It is of vast length, and begins with the verbatim repetition of the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople (381). Next comes, also word for word, the definition of faith of the Council of Chalcedon, (the two natures of Christ our Lord) and of the General Council of 680-81 (the two wills and the two operations). There is also, for the acceptance of these Armenians, a specific declaration that Chalcedon is a true General Council and that St. Leo’s teaching--the Tome--is authoritative. We know all too little of the later history of this group, but apparently they were still in communion with Rome when, thirty years later, the Turkish advance wiped out the colony of Caffa.[6]

Eugene IV had begun his negotiations with the Armenians somewhere around 1434. But it was only during the council that he made his first approach to the Monophysites of Egypt and Abyssinia (August 22, 1439), in the first weeks of the talks with the Armenians, The Franciscans who carried the pope’s letters to “the Emperor of the Ethiopians,” and also to “the Emperor of the Indians,” were many months on the road. In Cairo they delivered to the successor of St. Cyril his copy of the reunion bull *Laetentur Coeli*, who, acknowledging this, wrote to the pope that whoever did not accept what the holy synod at Florence had decreed should be held as a heretic. And in the same city these envoys met the Monophysite rival who also claimed to be the successor of St. Cyril--and of “St Dioscoros” too. This personage, the patriarch of the Copts, was no less pleased at the message the Franciscans brought, and he appointed one of his monks, the abbot Andrew, to return with them to the pope. It was on August 31, 1441, that Andrew made his appearance in the council.

The Copt and the Latin bishops had no language in common. Andrew spoke in Arabic, which was translated first into Italian, and then into Latin. The gist of his address was a plea that the pope who had brought back the Greeks and the Armenians into communion with himself would do as much for the Copts. All the traditional complimentary language about the pope is brought into use--those compliments which are yet so much more, since they are made up of the popes' own descriptions of their unique rank; and since, also, they are never used by these Easterns to anyone but the popes. Eugene IV is here described as God's earthly vicar, St. Peter's successor, "head and teacher of the universal church"[7] At the same time another Coptic dignitary presented himself, sent by the Abyssinian abbot Nicodemus, from Jerusalem.

The linguistic difficulties, it may be imagined, caused much delay, and no doubt not all misunderstandings were cleared up. The bull of reunion (February 4, 1442) was, again, immensely long.[8] Once again the teaching of Chalcedon is verbally repeated--but, this time, with an explicit condemnation of Dioscoros. Of "the Emperor of the Indians" we know nothing at all; and of "the Emperor of the Ethiopians" only this that, eighty years later than the Council of Florence, Clement VII received a letter from his successor saying that in the royal archives there was a letter from pope Eugene IV to the emperor Jacob, and naming the Abyssinian monk who had brought it.[9]

Two years later than the reconciliation of the Copts, when the Council had been translated (for the third time) to Rome,[10] the ghosts of yet another ancient council reappeared, when the Nestorian archbishop of Edessa, in the name of his patriarch, accepted the faith of the Council of Ephesus (431). Once again, what now bore fruit was the zeal of Franciscan missionaries, some of whom in the fourteenth century had made the long overland journey as far as the Nestorians of China.

Finally, in the same Lateran period of the council, two schismatic bodies from Cyprus were reunited--the Chaldeans (so-called) who were Nestorians, and the Maronites who were Monophysites (August 7, 1445).

This is our last date in connection with the council. At what date the pope formally brought it to an end, and why, we do not know. It is a most singular thing that no record has survived of a public act of this importance, in the history of the papacy, and in a century so well known to us.

But at Basel the little rump continued to sit, and for yet another four years.

The Basel reaction to the opening celebrations at Ferrara in 1438 had been to “suspend” the pope from the exercise of his functions. Eugene replied by an excommunication. The Baselites now proclaimed that the Constance decree, *Sacrosancta*,^[11] about the autonomy of General Councils, was an article of the Catholic faith, and because of Eugene’s ignoring this decree they deposed him (July 25, 1439).^[11a] And then, once the complicated business of the reunion with the Greeks was settled, the pope, in the bull “*Moyses vir Dei*” (September 4, 1439), delivered judgment on these revolutionary acts of 1415. They were utterly null and void, he said, because they were the work of a “council” that represented not the Church but the “obedience” of “John XXIII, as he was called in that obedience,”^[12] done at a time when, at Constance, the schism was still dominant.

Various European princes had seized the opportunity of the scandal to take sides with the Baselites (Aragon) or to declare themselves neutral (France and the Emperor)--always with the hope of “concessions” as the price of support, whether of church revenues or rights of jurisdiction. This was the beginning of a quiet blackmailing of the Holy See that went on for centuries, a permanent feature of international life indeed, whose greatest achievement was the supremely wicked suppression of the Society of Jesus, on the eve of the French Revolution.

At Basel the sacrilegious farce moved logically to the furthest depths. The assembly elected a “successor” to Eugene, the widowed Duke of Savoy. He called himself Felix V (November 5, 1439) As there was but one cardinal at Basel, the legal problems of securing a clearly valid election will be obvious. They were solved by the expedient of creating, from the body of the council, an electoral college: the solitary cardinal, 11 bishops, 7 abbots, 13 theologians, and a licentiate of Canon Law; 33 in all.

Felix and his supporters were soon at loggerheads, about the simple, crude business of cash. And soon he had left them, to return to his princely solitude at Ripaille. The council found it had less and less work to do. When, after the death of Eugene IV (February 23, 1447) the emperor abandoned his pretence of neutrality, and came out on the side of his successor, Nicholas V, Basel asked the council to find another home. When Felix made his submission to the new pope, the council also gave in, going through a formal motion of accepting the “abdication” of Felix, and of “electing” Nicholas V, pope of course ever since the conclave two years before. Nicholas, once a poor scholar and now a princely-minded humanistic pope, was generous to these clerical pests in the hour of his triumph. He made Felix a cardinal and gave him a pension, and he restored the red hat to the late president of the council, who had crowned Felix and given him episcopal consecration, the archbishop of Arles, Louis d’Aleman.

NOTES

1. Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini (Pius II, 1458-64). Epist. CXXXVII.
2. Urban II, at the Council of Clermont, 1095.
3. The figures are from Gill, *The Council of Florence*, 110-111. There were 10 cardinals, 74 Latin archbishops and bishops, 20 Greek archbishops (i.e. metropolitans), and 2 Armenian archbishops.

4. Denzinger, no. 694, prints the Latin text. Especially in England was the reunion joyously celebrated. The papal envoy wrote from London of the processions of thanksgiving in all parts of the city and in other towns, and of sermons preached everywhere explaining what it was that was being celebrated (Gill, 299) Eighty years later, on the eve of Henry VIII's repudiation of the papal authority, Thomas More is quoting this passage of the decree of Florence in his reply to Luther's tract against Henry (1523) and referring Luther to John Fisher's book where it is all set out. May I refer to my own Reformation in England, 1, 204.
5. Gill, 306; i.e., my translation of texts quoted by Gill, as in subsequent quotations.
6. Denzinger, nos. 695-702, prints only the summary about the seven sacraments.
7. Gill, 323.
8. Denzinger, nos. 703-15, gives a generous extract which is a synopsis of the condemnations of all the heresies from Cerinthus in the first century down to the Monothelites of 680.
9. Ibid., 327.
10. The bull translating the council is dated February 24, 1443.
11. See p. 265 supra.
- 11a. Barry, no. 85, prints a translation of this document.
12. Italics mine. The sentence is a quotation from the bull, Gill, 312.