

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

CHAPTER 15. The General Council of Vienne, 1311-12.

The legend dies hard of “the Middle Ages” as the golden age of the Christian faith, the time when popes gave the law to a lovingly acquiescent Christendom. This is to neglect such facts as that in one year out of two, of the two hundred years that followed the accession of Gregory VII--the High Middle Ages as the convention goes--the divine papal authority was fighting for its life with the Catholic princes. As many as four times in eighty years, during this period, the Holy See lay vacant for two and three years at a time, and the popes were nowhere less safe than in Rome, as the witness of their tombs in half a dozen Italian cities testifies to the tourist, in Viterbo, Orvieto, Arezzo, Perugia, and the rest. Never were there wanting, to threaten their freedom, not only warriors of the type of Barbarossa, but such stark and dangerous political princes as Barbarossa’s son, the emperor Henry VI (1190-97), and the hard-faced brother of St. Louis IX, Charles of Anjou, King of Sicily (1265-85) In such contests with ruthlessness itself, it behoved the ecclesiastic to look constantly to what Monsieur Maritain has called “the purification of the means.” Patriotism, so to speak, was not enough and the one hundred per cent righteousness of the cause. Woe to the pope who slipped! He inevitably contracted something of the enemy’s coldheartedness. Such champions of the freedom of religion as Pope Innocent IV and Pope Boniface VIII were by no means *bon papa* all the twenty-four hours of every day. And the thirteenth, “greatest of centuries” in so many respects, ran out in the furious contest between the last-named pope and the most dangerous of all the medieval kings, the grim Philip IV of France (1285-1314), Philippe le Bel to his contemporaries, and the great mystery man of the Middle Ages still to the historians--a contest that culminated in a long blackmail of Boniface VIII’s successor, the unfortunate, cancer-ridden French pope, Clement V. This the setting of the fifteenth General Council, the Council of Vienne.

There is no council about whose history there is more obscurity than this Council of Vienne, summoned by Clement V under pressure from the King of France, in order to bring about the destruction of a great religious order. This is a pretty dreadful indictment--presuming that the order was not guilty of the crimes with which it was charged; and it seems generally agreed that it was innocent. And the story is the more horrible if it be true that, to wring from the pope a consent to the destruction of the Knights Templars, the King of France blackmailed him, holding over the pope the threat to start a campaign for the posthumous trial, for various alleged crimes, of his predecessor Boniface VIII. One of the crimes alleged was the manoeuvring by which Boniface became pope--or as the king would say, pseudo-pope. If Boniface had never been pope, what of the lawfulness of Clement's own election?

And why was the King of France so set on the condemnation of the dead Boniface? It was partly a question of the royal prestige--the king, as might be said nowadays, must not lose face--and partly a question of the binding force of various declarations of Boniface about certain public acts of the king. These were declarations of principle that condemned, in effect, the principles on which the king was reorganising the government of France. Were the condemnations valid? If so they still bound the king, i.e., in the eyes of those Catholics for whom the pope's sentences mattered, these acts of the king had no force.

Of the various causes of friction which, from before the election of Boniface VIII (1294-1303), had disturbed the relations of the king and the Holy See, two may be mentioned: disputes between royal officials and bishops over the frontier between their jurisdictions, and the claim of the king to tax the property of the Church as he chose. These troubles began around the years 1289-90. Boniface was elected in the last days of 1294. England and France being at war, both kings, desperate for money, plundered the Church revenues. There came a strong, general prohibition from Boniface to the clergy, in 1296, to pay these taxes,[1] and soon

retaliation from Philip IV, in the shape of protest at Rome, and intrigues with the discontented factions there--the Colonna cardinals, the little group of Franciscans known as the "Spirituals," and all the Apocalyptic-minded generally who were daily expecting the end of the world and their own triumphant reign over their fellow men, Catholic fanatics for whom Boniface was no pope, but rather Antichrist.

The French were successful in bringing the pope to his knees, for a time. Then, about the year 1300, weary of being "an obliging agent for the schemes of Philip the Fair,"[2] the pope in Boniface triumphed over the politician. The king's recent violation of all law in the arrest and trial of one of the French bishops, without any reference to the pope, moved him to renew his stand against the movement to make religion subservient to the state. In a series of private letters he seriously warned the king that what he was doing was mortally sinful, and that to continue was to risk the salvation of his soul. The pope asked that the bishop should be released, and sent to Rome, and he suspended all the privileges granted to the king allowing him to tax the Church. Moreover, he summoned a council of all the bishops of France, to meet in Rome in November 1302, The king's reply was to organise the nation against the pope by a great propaganda campaign. This culminated in a national council--a parliament of an unprecedented kind--of clergy, nobles, and plebeians at Notre Dame, Paris, in April 1302. The king's case was put, and strong speeches made by his ministers about the pope's tyranny and usurpations, and how (thanks to the pope) true religion was in danger. Finally it was decided to send a national protest to the cardinals, setting down all the charges against the pope; "he who at this moment occupies the seat of government in the Church" is how they described him; and the word Antichrist was used.

Three months packed with drama followed. When the delegates from Paris presented to Boniface the letters from the clergy, in which they begged him to cancel the council, and spoke of the king's anger and the

national feeling, the pope warned them that Philip was the most hated man in Europe, and that he was facing disaster. The king was, at this moment, at war with the communes of Flanders. Only thirteen days after that audience the French were unexpectedly routed, with great slaughter, at the Battle of the Golden Spurs,[8] and the three counsellors of the king whom the pope had denounced by name were among the slain. Whereupon a great change on Philip's part, permissions to the bishops to go to Rome for the council and an embassy to represent himself. There was not, at the council, any "trial" of Philip the Fair, nor sentence against him. All that happened, publicly, was the issue of a reasoned declaration about the pope's authority to correct what is morally wrong in a ruler's conduct as ruler. This is the famous bull called Unam Sanctam (1302).[4] Privately, the pope again warned the king, and sent him some kind of ultimatum to mend his ways.

In reply the king planned to arrest the pope and bring him before a council; and to prepare public opinion for this he organised a nation-wide propaganda, depicting Boniface as a heretic, an idolater, a man who worshipped the devil, and a man of evil life, whom the cardinals and bishops ought to bring to trial. There were, once again, great public meetings in Paris, where all estates were represented. The assembly adjured the king to bring about a council which should try this great criminal. And the king solemnly accepted this duty. Only one of the twenty-six bishops present refused to set his seal to the act. From Paris royal commissioners toured the country, organising like demonstrations everywhere.

As the news came in of what was afoot in France the pope began to prepare the bull excommunicating the king and threatening his deposition. But the king's chief executive advisor, William de Nogaret, with an armed troop broke into the papal palace at Anagni,[5] on the eve of the day appointed for publication of the bull. They found the old man seated on his throne robed, holding his crucifix. They demanded he should

withdraw his sentence and submit himself to judgment. He replied that he would rather die. One of the Colonna offered to kill him, but was restrained. He then hit the pope in the face. And now the townsfolk broke into the palace and drove out the French. From this shock, the pope never recovered. Three weeks later he was dead (October 11, 1303).

There was only one way in which Philip the Fair could clear himself of a general reprobation that would last as long as life itself--have it proved in legal form that all the things charged against Boniface were true. And when he had succeeded in that, he would have brought low, not the dead man's memory only, but every shred of prestige that clung to his successors in the office. Such was the man and the mind whose political needs brought on the fifteenth General Council, which met just eight years after the death of Pope Boniface.

The truly saintly Dominican next elected pope, Benedict XI, reigned for eight months only. The conclave that followed lasted for all but a year, and it then elected, from outside the college of cardinals, a French subject of the English king, the Archbishop of Bordeaux. He called himself Clement V (June 5, 1305). This is the pope who summoned and presided at the Council of Vienne. Nothing would have more surprised him, as the news was brought to him from Italy, than to learn that he was destined never to see Italy as pope, and that his successors for the next seventy years and more would rule the universal church from France. For the so-called Avignon captivity of the papacy, it is now known, was not the outcome of any willed policy of this pope, but rather of a series of accidents. In the critical years of Boniface VIII, Clement had been one of the minority loyal to that pope, and he had taken part in the Roman council whence came the *Unam Sanctam*. He was an accomplished canonist and a man of long practical experience in church administration. But he was something of a ditherer by nature, vacillating to put it more formally, and in no way a match for the arts of Philip the Fair.

When the king and the pope met, at the pope's coronation at Lyons, it was suggested to Clement that he remain in France until a great scandal--now revealed to the pope for the first time--was investigated and dealt with. The scandal was the alleged condition of the military order of the Knights Templars.

These knights of the military orders, of which there were several, were religious in the full technical sense of the word, i.e., professed with the vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, bound to a strict monastic round of prayer and penance, and to protect pilgrims and defend the Christian possessions in the Holy Land. Their monasteries were fortresses, and down to the time of the capture of St. Jean d'Acre, when the master-general of the Templars fell sword in hand (1291), they had been, along with the contemporary order of the Knights Hospitallers, the main defence, for 150 years, of what had been won from the Mohammedans.

Since the disaster of 1291 there had been no Christian forces at all in the East. The Templars, what remained of them, were lodged in their commanderies, in the various countries of western Europe. Their principal occupation had been finance. Their European castles had, for many years, been the places where princes, merchants, and the wealthy generally, could be certain their money was safe. And from being guardians of these deposits this international order had developed into something like an international bank, saving this nascent commercial world of the Middle Ages the dangerous necessity of transmitting boxes of coin from one country to another. The profits the Templars made were, it was alleged, enormous. It seems agreed that what really moved the King of France, at this moment, was the prospect of laying his hands on vast landed properties and a fortune in ready cash. The pope was told that it was being said everywhere that the Templars were utterly corrupt. They had long lost the faith, for they worshipped in their monasteries an idol, and this with obscene rites, formally denying Christ at their professions and spitting on the crucifix. In their masses the priest-members of the order--

the knights' chaplains--always left out the words of consecration, and (the reader will be expecting this) unnatural vice was systematised as a kind of ritual. The pope was in no way impressed by this horrendous tale-- no more than the King of Aragon had been impressed when it was told to him.

The French king set himself to "find" evidence which should bring the pope to order the suppression of the knights, and the confiscation of their property. This "evidence," from Templars already imprisoned for various offences, still left Clement V unmoved, but the menace of the campaign provoked the Grand Master of the order to beg the pope to order an enquiry (August, 1307) . Seven weeks later the king regained the initiative when, on a single day, October 13, every Templar in France[6] was arrested by his orders and there began that systematic torturing to wring from them confessions of guilt that is still so sickening to read about, after six hundred years and more. The royal formula was simple--pardon and liberty for those who, self-confessed, were guilty of crime; death for all who maintained they were innocent. From the French Revolution until recently, evidence obtained by torture was what no man would consider seriously. But, just as universally, in the days of Clement V, torture was thought a reasonable and legitimate way of obtaining reliable evidence.[7] The pope was so impressed that he took the whole business into his own hands, and set up special courts throughout the church for the investigation: a court in each diocese where there was a house of the order, with the final authority to judge the knights left to the provincial council of the bishops; and a papal commission to consider what to do with the order itself; finally, the whole affair would be brought before a specially summoned General Council, which would meet at Vienne on October 1, 1310--two years and a half hence.

One feature was common to all these trials: whenever, in France, the knights, free of the king's jurisdiction, appeared before the bishops they immediately revoked their confessions. Describing the tortures they had

endured they declared they would have sworn to anything, and that if the horrors were renewed they would again admit whatever their tormentors demanded. This revocation, of course, could be dangerous--among the charges was heresy, the worship of an idol. The punishment for heresy could be death, and for the heretics who, once self-convicted, retracted their confessions, death was certain. And so, in May 1310, fifty-four Templars were burnt in a single execution at Paris, on the sentence of the bishops of the Provincial Council. And, by a violent personal act of the king, the Grand Master himself was burnt, only a few hours after the ecclesiastical court had sentenced him to life imprisonment, because in his relief at the thought that his life was safe he solemnly retracted all his confessions, and vouched for the innocence of the order as such.

Outside France the Templars were everywhere acquitted, in Aragon, Castile, England, Scotland, the Empire. In Provence, Sicily, and the States of the Church, there were a number of condemnations but not many. As the date fixed for the meeting of the council drew near the order might, legitimately, have felt hopeful.

What, meanwhile, of the French king's other line of attack, his determination to blast the good name of his dead adversary Boniface VIII? He had first showed what he had in mind in one of his interviews with Clement V at Poitiers in the spring of 1307, eighteen months or so after the pope's coronation. Boniface VIII must be tried for his "crimes." All attempts to still the threats failed. The king demanded that the body of Boniface should be dug up and burned as that of a heretic, and that Celestine V--his alleged victim--should be canonised. In the end the pope pledged himself that the trial should take place, and fixed a provisional date two years hence, February 1309.

Clement V, like his namesake who had to deal with King Henry VIII two centuries later, had not the strength to say no to these requests to cooperate in a crime. He assented outwardly, and hoped the day would never come when he had to keep his promise. It was not until March 1310 that

the misery began anew for him, when there appeared at Avignon to represent the king a team of lawyers headed by Nogaret, the hero of Anagni. All through that summer the lawyers fought, with the pope in person presiding and using every expedient possible to adjourn the court, finally deciding that both the “prosecutors” and the defence should state their case in writing and that the oral proceedings should cease. He also called politics to his aid, and the news that there was in contemplation the creation of a new kingdom on the eastern frontier of France--all the lands east of the Rhone, from the Mediterranean up to Besancon--now halted the French king. In February 1311, seven months before the General Council was due to meet, he agreed to call off his team. The order of Knights Templars, it was understood, would definitely be destroyed at the Council,[8] and Philip the Fair would drop the case against Boniface VIII. On April 27, Clement V issued a series of bulls. Philip the Fair was cleared of any complicity in the Anagni incident, and praised for his good intentions. All the papal acts directed against him from November 1, 1300, to the end of the reign of Benedict XI were cancelled. Nogaret, too, was absolved, with the penance that he must go on pilgrimage to the Holy Land at the next crusade, and spend the rest of his days there, unless dispensed by the Holy See.

Even so, Clement V was to hear yet more of the case against his predecessor.

The General Council of Vienne was opened on October 16, 1311. The original convocation had been for 1310, but by a bull of April 4 of that year the pope postponed the opening. This second bull of convocation did something else. It made the singular innovation that not every bishop was summoned to the council, but only a chosen 231. And from these, 66 names were struck out by the French king. In the end there assembled 20 cardinals, 122 bishops, 38 abbots, with proxies, representatives of chapters and others that brought the number “assisting” at the council to around 300. The bishops had had ample time to prepare, as the pope

following the precedent of 1274 had asked, reports on matters that called for reform. They found a new conciliar procedure awaiting them. For each of the main problems before the council a commission was named, representative of all ranks, and charged to find a solution. The solution then came before the pope and cardinals in consistory and, if they accepted it, it was presented to the council as a whole in the shape of a papal bull to be accepted and signed. There were to be no general debates in which the whole council took part.

The commission on the matter of the Templars reported in December. The knights should be heard before the council, it decided, and by a large majority. The pope, for the moment, set this embarrassing act aside. The bishops occupied themselves with schemes for the crusade and for various reforms, while the pope gave no sign of holding the next public session. Philip's representatives had only one comment to make, in all these discussions, "It must wait until our master arrives." The new year 1312 brought the king to Lyons--a mere twenty miles away, where the States-General of the realm were meeting (January to March). And from Lyons he played upon the unhappy pope with threats to revive the campaign against Boniface VIII. Towards the end of March he came in person to the council, and brought it about that the Templars commission revoked their recommendation, and voted, by 4 to 1, that the order should be suppressed (March 22, 1312). Two weeks went by, while Clement struggled with the king about the order's vast properties. Then, on April 3, the second public session of the council was held. It began with yet another procedural novelty--the pope forbade any member of the council to speak, under pain of excommunication. There was then read his bull, *Vox in excelso*, suppressing the order. The pope gave no judgment about the crimes alleged--the question, Guilty or innocent? was ignored. The bull explained that Clement V was acting not as judge at a trial, but as an administrator in the fullness of his apostolic authority. On May 3, the decision about the Templars' property was announced. The pope had found the courage to resist the king. The vast fortune was to go to the order of the Knights

Hospitallers, except in Spain where the beneficiaries were the three Spanish military orders.

Three days later, May 6, the council came to an end with its third public session.

There is in the corpus of Canon Law a mass of legislation attributed to this council, laws headed Clement V at the Council of Vienne. It is by no means certain that all of this was there enacted, nor do we know at what stage of the council what was certainly its work was actually enacted. Of the official records of the council, we have hardly a trace. And these laws of Clement V were not promulgated until the reign of his successor, John XXII, in 1317.

We can be certain of three decrees about the faith, definitions of dogma. In one of these it is defined that the rational or intellectual soul is per se and essentially the form of the human body.[9] A second condemns as heresy the statement that usury is not a sin.[10] Thirdly, there is a decree listing various heresies of the people known, if men, as Beghards, and, if women, as Beguines; theories about what spiritual perfection is, and the obligations of those who are perfect. Man can attain to such perfection in this life that it is not possible for him to commit sin. Once he has achieved this a man is not bound to fast or to pray, his body being so spiritualised that he can freely grant it whatever he chooses. The perfect are not bound to obey any other human being, nor to keep the commandments of the Church, for--so they argue--where the spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom. Man can attain, in this life, to that perfection of happiness that he will enjoy in the life of the blessed. To kiss a woman, unless our nature prompts the act, is a mortal sin. But carnal acts are not sins, if done from the movements of our nature, and especially if done under temptation. No special act of reverence should be made at the elevation of the body of Jesus Christ [i.e., at mass], for it would be an imperfection in a man if he so descended from the pure heights of his contemplation to attend to the sacrament of the Eucharist or the passion of Christ's humanity.[11]

All these odd ideas are specimens of that false, self-taught mysticism that is ageless, and in every generation lurks in corners here and there. With these wandering, unauthorised, semi-religious[12] people the propagation of such notions could become a real social plague.[13] The severe prohibitions of General Councils to would-be founders of new religious orders are not unrelated to the fear that they would prove a breeding ground for cranks and fanatics.

The disciplinary decrees of the Council of Vienne take up, I suppose, a good thirty pages of the text of Fr. Schroeder's book. From the twenty-one certain decrees, and the eighteen less certain,[14] I select for notice the famous decree *Exivi de Paradiso*,[15] by which the council hoped to put an end to the disputes that were tearing the order of Franciscans apart, disputes as to the meaning of St. Francis' teaching about poverty. But the bulk of the decrees are what we have already met, rules about the duties of bishops, about the layman's usurpation of church jurisdiction and attempts to make church property his own, principles to settle disputes about rights of presentation to benefices and the like. The historical interest of these lengthy (and tedious) repetitions is that they are the outcome of the reports, brought in by the bishops and the religious orders from all over, on the state of the Church. As we read these decrees there is scarcely one of the disorders that troubled the generation upon which the Reformation came, two hundred years later, that is not to be seen already mischievously active. The remedies provided in the decrees are all admirable, if only they had been generally obeyed, and if, in those centuries of such miserable communications, there had been some way of enforcing obedience. What the decrees chiefly lack is any sense that the ills of the time call for new methods and new institutions. To read, in canon 15, the thirty complaints of the religious against episcopal oppression, or, in canon 16, the seven complaints of bishops and prelates against the religious, is to become aware of chronic weaknesses bound to drain away vitality like a running sore.

There is a story that as the Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, was fastened to the stake on that island in the Seine where he was done to death, he lifted up his voice and by name summoned his three oppressors to the judgment seat of God. Certainly they died within the year, the pope, the king, and William de Nogaret. Philip the Fair left three sons, young men, healthy, vigorous, well married. But not one of them had a son, and within fourteen years of his death the direct line of descent was extinct.

NOTES

1. This bull, *Clericis Laicos*, is printed in translation by Barry, no. 80A.
2. *Un executeur complaisant des calculs de Philippe le Bel--Digard's phrase, Philippe le Bel et le. Saint-Siege (1936), I, 345.*
3. Outside the city of Courtrai.
4. Denzinger, nos. 468-69, prints the defining clauses of this bull, Barry, no. 80B the whole, in translation.
5. Seventy miles or so southeast of Rome, the centre of the countryside whence Boniface (Benedict Gaetani) came.
6. There were, it is thought, about 2,000, of all ranks, knights, sergeants, chaplains.
7. An effect of the revival of Roman Law doctrines and procedures, not an invention of the Church.
8. Of this "understanding" there is no proof, nor is it (in the nature of things) provable. The Abbe Mollat professor of History at the University of Strasbourg, says, "Bien que la condition n'eut pas ete explicitement exprimee dans les lettres royales, il fut convenu que le sort des Templiers serait regle au Concile de Vienne," p. 260. But, surely, the pope had already arranged this in the bulls regulating the enquiries in 1308? The work quoted is Mollat's indispensable, *Les Papes d'Avignon*, 5me edition, 1924. Pages 229-56 of this book, *Le Proces des Templiers*, is the

best of all short-documented accounts, and it is the one generally followed in this chapter.

9. Denzinger, no. 481.

10. Ibid., no. 479.

11. Ibid., nos. 471-78.

12. I.e., popularly regarded as a kind of monk or nun.

13. See Cohn, Norman, *The Quest of the Millennium*, 1957.

14. All the 39 passed into the Canon Law.

15. For a translation of this (slightly abbreviated) see Schroeder, 407-13.