Primary Sources

Attack on the Papacy: The Conciliar Movement

From 1378 to 1417 the Catholic Church was divided, with competing popes reigning simultaneously, each claiming authority. In an effort to end this schism, Church councils met at Pisa (1409) and then at Constance (1414–1417). These councils constituted the high point of a developing Conciliar Movement—an effort to place ultimate authority in the hands of a general Church council and diminish the powers of the pope. The council at Pisa worsened the situation by installing a third pope, but at Constance the schism was ended with the election of a single pope, Martin V. He and his successors repudiated the Conciliar Movement over the next few decades. Yet the Conciliar Movement represented a strong current of opinion within the Church and revealed the depth of the problems facing the Church. The following two documents are decrees passed during the Council of Constance at the height of this movement.

CONSIDER: *The intent of the Decree Sacrosancta; why the council felt it necessary also to pass the Decree Frequens; how the council justified its authority.*

DECREE SACROSANCTA

In the name of the Holy and indivisible Trinity; of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Amen.

This holy synod of Constance, forming a general council for the extirpation of the present schism and the union and reformation, in head and members, of the church of God, legitimately assembled in the Holy Ghost, to the praise of Omnipotent God, in order that it may the more easily, safely, effectively and freely bring about the union and reformation of the church of God, hereby determines, decrees, ordains and declares what follows:—

It first declares that this same council, legitimately assembled in the Holy Ghost, forming a general council and representing the Catholic Church militant, has its power immediately from Christ, and everyone, whatever his state or position, even if it be the Papal dignity itself, is bound to obey it in all those things which pertain to the faith and the healing of the said schism, and to the general reformation of the Church of God, in head and members.

It further declares that anyone, whatever his condition, station or rank, even if it be the Papal, who shall contumaciously refuse to obey the mandates, decrees, ordinances or instructions which have been, or shall be issued by this holy council, or by any other general council, legitimately summoned, which concern, or in any way relate to the above mentioned objects, shall, unless he repudiate his conduct, be subjected to condign penance and be suitably punished, having recourse, if necessary, to the other resources of the law.

DECREE FREQUENS

A frequent celebration of general councils is an especial means for cultivating the field of the Lord and effecting the destruction of briars, thorns, and thistles, to-wit, heresies, errors and schism, and of bringing forth a most abundant harvest. The neglect to summon these, fosters and develops all these evils, as may be plainly seen from a recollection of the past and a consideration of existing conditions. Therefore, by a perpetual edict, we sanction, decree, establish and ordain that general councils shall be celebrated in the following manner, so that the next one shall follow the close of this present council at the end of five years. The second shall follow the close of that, at the end of seven years and councils shall thereafter be celebrated every ten years in such places as the Pope shall be required

SOURCE: From James Harvey Robinson, ed., "The Pre-Reformation Period," in *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, vol. III, no. 6, ed. Department of History of the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1898), pp. 30–31.

to designate and assign, with the consent and approbation of the council, one month before the close of the council in question, or which, in his absence, the council itself shall designate. Thus, with a certain continuity, a council will always be either in session, or be expected at the expiration of a definite time.

Manual of the Inquisitor

Bernard Gui

Heresy, always a concern for the Church, had by the fourteenth century become such a serious problem that the Church turned to formal institutions such as the Inquisition to deal with it. One of the best-known and longest-lasting heretical movements was that of the Waldensians in southern France and northern Italy. Originally, they were followers of Peter Waldo, who pursued a life of piety and religious belief. The Waldensians were officially condemned in the thirteenth century but survived to be persecuted in the fourteenth century. The following is a selection from the Manual of the Inquisitor, compiled by Bernard Gui, a Dominican monk and bishop who became a zealous inquisitor in southern France from 1307 to 1324.

CONSIDER: *The main crimes of the Waldensians according to Gui; the nature of the threat posed by these crimes; the similarities and differences between the threats posed by this heresy and those of the Conciliar Movement.*

Disdain for ecclesiastical authority was and still is the prime heresy of the Waldenses. Excommunicated for this reason and delivered over to Satan, they have fallen into innumerable errors, and have blended the errors of earlier heretics with their own concoctions.

The misled believers and sacrilegious masters of this sect hold and teach that they are in no way subject to the lord Pope or Roman Pontiff, or to the other prelates of the Roman Church, and that the latter persecute and condemn them unjustly and improperly. Moreover, they declare that they cannot be excommunicated by this Roman Pontiff and these prelates, and that obedience is owed to none of them when they order and summon the followers and masters of the said sect to abandon or abjure this sect, although this sect be condemned as heretical by the Roman Church. . . .

Moreover, the sect does not accept canonical authority, or the decretals or constitutions of the Sovereign Pontiff, any more than the regulations concerning fasts and the observance of the feasts or the decrees of the Fathers. Straying from the straight road, they recognize no authority therein, scorn them, reject and condemn them.

Moreover, the followers of the sect are even more perniciously mistaken concerning the sacrament of penance and the power of the keys. They declare they have received—this is their doctrine and their teaching—from God and none other, like the apostles who held it of Christ, the power of hearing the confessions of men and women who desire to confess to them, of granting them absolution and of prescribing penance. Thus they hear confessions, grant absolution and prescribe penance, although they have not been ordained as priests or clerics by a bishop of the Roman Church and although they are just laymen. They in no way claim to hold this power from the Roman Church, on the contrary, they deny it; and in fact, they hold it neither from God nor from His Church, since they have been cast out from the Church by this very Church, outside which there is neither true penance nor salvation.

Moreover, this same sect hold up to ridicule the indulgences established and granted by the prelates of the Church, saying they are worthless.

Moreover, they are in error with respect to the sacrament of the Eucharist. They claim, not publicly but secretly, that in the sacrament of the altar the bread and wine do not become body and blood of Christ when the priest who celebrates or consecrates is a sinner; and by sinner they mean any man who does not belong to their sect. Moreover, they claim, on the contrary, that any upright man, even a layman, without having received priestly ordination from the hands of a Catholic bishop, may consecrate the body and blood of Christ, provided he be of their sect. They believe that women too can do this, subject to the same condition. Thus they hold that any holy man is a priest.

SOURCE: Bernard Gui, *Manual of the Inquisitor,* in *Introduction to Contemporary Civilization in the West,* vol. I, 3d ed., ed. Contemporary Civilization Staff of Columbia College, Columbia University (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), pp. 198–202, 204. Reprinted by permission.