

Will The Real Pope Please Stand Up?

By Donita R McWilliams (adapted)

In the year 1378, the Roman Catholic Church split when the King of France decided that he did not like the Italian Pope and elected one of his own. The Great Schism, as it has been called, lasted for about 68 years, during which time there were two popes, or even three, claiming authority over the Catholic Church.

The so-called "Babylonian Captivity" was one of the main factors causing the split, sometimes referred to as the "Great Schism" (not to be confused with the East-West Schism between Orthodox and Catholic). In 1309, Pope Clement V moved the papacy and his residence from its traditional location in Rome to Avignon, a city just outside French territory on the Rhone River. This allowed Phillip IV (or Philip the Fair), King of France, to exert a great deal of influence over the pope. In 1377, Pope Gregory XI made a significant move and returned the papacy to Rome.



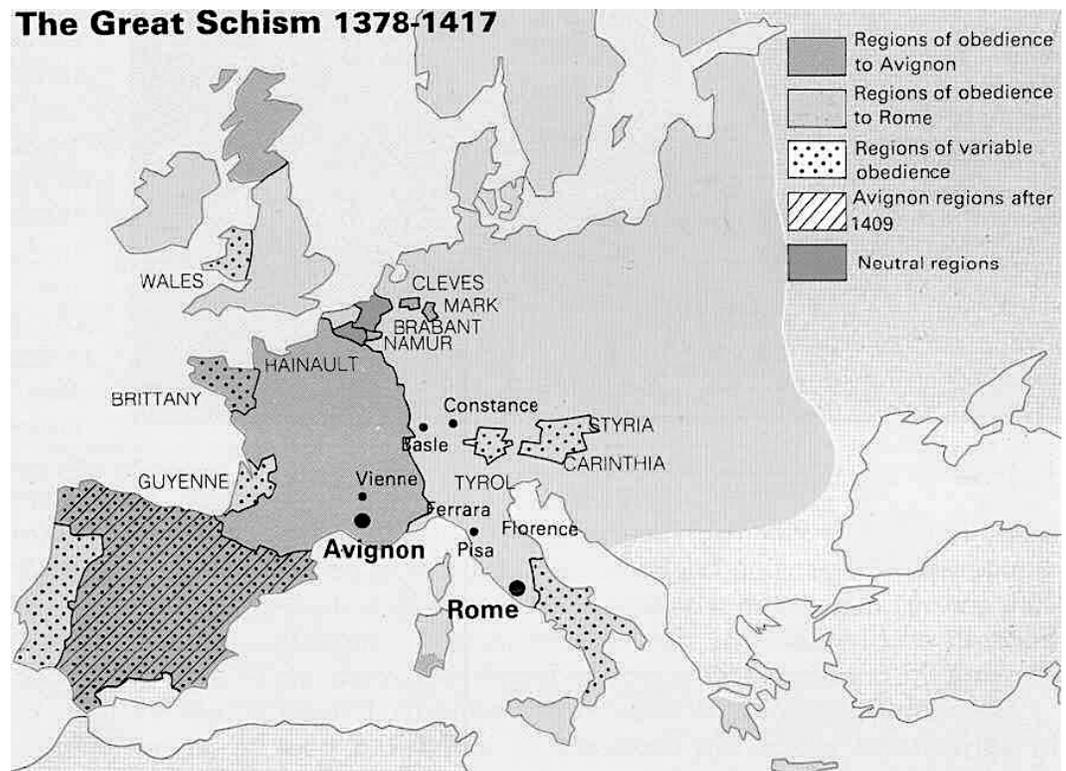
After Pope Gregory XI died, a new Italian Pope was elected. However, the French did not like him. Therefore, they elected their own pope who ruled from Avignon where the pope had been during the Avignon Papacy. This was also regarded by many as a location that worked well in centralizing leadership. As a result of this, Western Christendom split, with two popes and two accompanying papal structures.

Now Western Europe was politically divided over which pope to support. Of course France supported the Avignon pope. Along with France were Sicily, Scotland, Castile, Aragon, and Portugal. On the other side, Rome supported the Roman pope, as did Flanders, Poland, Hungary and Germany. Many citizens were confused over this split, but those who understood the situation

decided to take advantage of it. The two popes were constant rivals. It was common to hear each calling the other the anti-pope and also trying to get him out of a position of leadership. Their main motive for these actions was to gain allies for themselves. There were very few people who actually took the claims of these so-called spiritual leaders seriously because of the fact that they were competing constantly with one another just like anyone dealing with secular politics. The effects of this split on the general population can be summarized as follows, "The papal office suffered the most; the pope's authority diminished as pious Christians became bewildered and disgusted."

Following the split, the papal offices began to lose authority. For a time conditions improved, but they did not stay favorable. Finally, the cardinals of both popes decided that an ecumenical council of godly men could collectively possess more divine authority

The Great Schism 1378-1417



that just one pope. So, in 1409 they asked the church council in Pisa to elect a new pope that could unite the sides. The Pisan council did elect a new pope, but neither one of the other two popes was willing to give up his power. Thus, there were now three popes vying for authority over the church.

Finally between 1414 and 1418, the Council of Constance was successful in healing the Schism. The removal of the Avignon Pope led to the resignation of the Roman Pope. Therefore, the schism was healed and there was room for the election of a single pope, Pope Martin V, who reigned from 1417-1431. There would not be another papal resignation until 2013, when Pope Benedict XVI retired from the position.

QUESTIONS:

1. Why did the King of France want to move the Pope's residence from Rome to Avignon?
2. How did Pope Gregory XI's death cause division in the Church? Explain in detail.
3. What effect did this conflict have on the way people viewed the Papacy?
4. What does Papal Supremacy mean? How did the actions of the cardinals conflict with it?
5. Was the Pisan council successful in solving the problem? Explain.
6. How was the problem finally solved?
7. **How do you think this controversy might have influenced the way Western Europeans viewed the Church?**