

## POPES, ANTI-POPES AND CONCILIARISM: CONSTANCE AND THE GREAT SCHISM

Looking for a sure “win” in a “Catholic” bar bet? Here’s the perfect intro: “I’ll bet you \$50 that you can’t produce the name of the ecumenical Council first called by Pope John XXIII.” The rival patron instantly accepts the wager, exclaiming, “Vatican II” while extending a hand for payment. “Not so fast,” you reply. Invite them to **produce** a 75% cotton, 25% linen piece of paper sporting **the visage of President Ulysses S. Grant** because they just **lost!** Okay, it is a bit of a **trick** question, but all is fair in friendly wagers. In fact, Pope John XXIII convened the ecumenical **Council of Constance** in 1414. Trouble is— he was judged to be an anti-pope. So, when Angelo Cardinal Roncalli chose the name “John XXIII” in 1958, it turned heads! You see, “Pope” John XXIII was one of **three** rival claimants to the papacy. Confused? The Council sought to end the Great Schism, but who would emerge as pope?

It is more accurate to speak of the councils of Constance, rather than a **singular** council. True, John XXIII convoked a council and yes, the same participants later met after having been convened by the “rightful” pope. Effectively, the parties (whether pope or anti-popes) desired the same outcome— clarity and an **end to schism**. The Avignon Papacy ended in 1377 with Gregory XI’s return to Rome. When he died a year later, some pledged allegiance to a Roman pope, others to the Avignon (French) claimant and still others to the Neapolitan John XXIII. Chaos! History owes a debt of gratitude to John XXIII, who **initiated** a process resulting in his own demise! He agreed at first to abdicate, but the specter of a Council gaining **too much** power over a pope led him to change his mind. He escaped Constance— in disguise, no less! But the Council still **deposed** him, clearing the deck for a conclave. His tomb is in the baptistry of the Duomo in Florence. The inscription (IOAN<sup>n</sup>ES QVON<sup>n</sup>DAM PAPA XXIII) reads “John, the **former** pope.” Who had the last laugh? (See side bar)

On 11 November 1417, the council elected Pope Martin V, thus ending the schism. The Church set out to clean up the mess left behind. Constance (alt. **Konstanz**, pop. 85,000) is a German university town nestled at the Swiss border, where the **Rhine River** flows out of Lake Constance on its meandering path to the North Sea. Once the papacy question was settled, the Council turned its attention to the heresies spread by **John Wyclif** in Britain and Jan Hus in Prague. Among Wyclif’s teachings: the “material substance of bread, and similarly the material substance of wine, remain in the sacrament of the altar; if a bishop or a priest is in mortal sin, he does not ordain or confect or consecrate or baptize; if a person is duly contrite, all exterior confession is superfluous and useless for him.” Inexplicably, he also **despised** religious orders, claiming, “Augustine, Benedict and Bernard are damned, unless they **repented** of having owned property and of having founded and entered religious orders.” Wow—this man was **crazed!**

The case of **Jan Hus** (pronounced Yon Hoos) is notably different. He preached sermons in the vernacular (not Latin), with the support of the powers to be. But when he **denounced** the methods being used to **sell indulgences**, everything changed. Others who took up the mantle were far more radical, attributing their teachings to his influence. And he was lumped in with Wyclif— classic **guilt by association**. Out of principle, Hus refused to recant teachings he insisted he never taught. The Council is **short on** specifics and long on harsh language. Hus was described as rash, scandalous, and obstinate. Given a last chance to recant, he refused. At the **behest** of the Council of Constance and by **order** of the German emperor, Hus was burned at the stake. Fully 584 years after Hus’ **cruel death**, Pope John Paul II **apologized** while addressing participants at a 1999

international congress at Rome's Lateran University. Rather than gloss over these tragic events, instead we learn from our mistakes.

A major challenge emanating from Constance was its teaching (some of which was **never** accepted as valid by later popes) about the **authority** of a Council, over and against the pope. Bishops were concerned about the **factionalism** that resulted in multiple cardinals being "elected" as pope. And yet, some decrees could be interpreted as **limiting** the scope and power of the Papacy, making it **inferior** to councils. To avoid schism (and future anti-popes), the Council called for more regular councils in the future. The Council stated: "The disturbance caused by fear or pressure at a papal election corrodes and divides, in a lamentable way, the whole of Christianity."

It required of future popes a profession of faith that includes these words: "I, N., elected pope, with both heart and mouth confess and profess to almighty God, whose church I undertake with his assistance to govern, and to blessed Peter, prince of the apostles, that as long as I am in this fragile life I will firmly believe and hold the catholic faith, according to the **traditions** of the apostles, of the general councils and of other holy **fathers**..." The question of **conciliarism** was a thorny one—when can (if ever!) a Council overrule a pope? Vatican I would offer definitive clarification centuries later. But the **schism was over**—at least for now!

- Pray for our **U.S. Catholic bishops** as they **meet in person** for the first time in two years. The November 15-18 meeting will include discussion of hosting a national **Eucharistic Congress** in **2024**—a move spearheaded by our own Bishop Cozzens! **Hint:** Let's hold it somewhere, say, in the **middle of the country**. People can join us from all directions! Recall, we hosted in 1941!
- Atlanta Braves shortstop **Dansby Swanson** grew up in Marietta, GA, just 10 miles from the Braves stadium. Traded to the Braves from Arizona in 2015, he was instrumental in helping the Braves to a World Series championship. He said of the trade: "But **God's** always got a **plan** and if I've learned one thing is having faith in that plan will never fail you." Bravo—couldn't say it better myself!
- Rogue bells! Sometimes it's **not just** people who have a **mind** of their own! Electrical problems led to **bell #3** tolling intermittently, despite the system being shut down in the control room. The good folks from **Packard Bell Foundry** (Charleston, SC) had to make a return trip, both to adjust and ensure that the correct notes were ringing for the Westminster chimes. This time, we think it's good to go!
- Speaking of bells— I am honored to speak at a **Veterans Day** event sponsored by "City of Bells," a local nonprofit working to emphasize the importance of bronze bell installations. It will take place at the State Capitol, 20 West 12th Street, on Thursday Nov. 11 at 10:50 a.m. and will include the **ringing** of a replica **Liberty Bell**. We pray for all our deceased veterans, those brave men and women who made the ultimate sacrifice for our nation. Join us at the State Capitol grounds!
- United we stand! The city of St. Paul **backed off** quickly at last week's Zoning Commission meeting. Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and Muslim leaders all spoke compellingly about the **city's overreach** in dictating "accessory use" for places of worship.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector