

Theo 101, Session #07: The Avignon Papacy & The Great Western Schism

The University of St. Francis

At the beginning of the 14th century, following political unrest between Pope Boniface VIII and King Philip the Fair of France, a French pope was elected to bring peace to the Church (Clement V). Subsequent to that election, civil unrest in Rome and riots between rival factions drove Clement V to take shelter into his home country, living with a Dominican order in **Avignon**, France.

The move to Avignon was intended to be temporary, but a number of factors combined to make it a longer sojourn. Avignon adjoined church land and belonged to Charles II of Anjou, a faithful ally. Equally important, after the separation of the Roman and Eastern (or “orthodox”) churches in 1054, the city of Avignon actually was closer than Rome to the center of Catholic Europe. Thus, Avignon’s primacy as a papal city eventually lasted over 70 years. During that time, despite being twice decimated by plague, the city grew from a population of about 4,000 to more than 40,000, becoming one of the largest and most cosmopolitan centers in Europe.

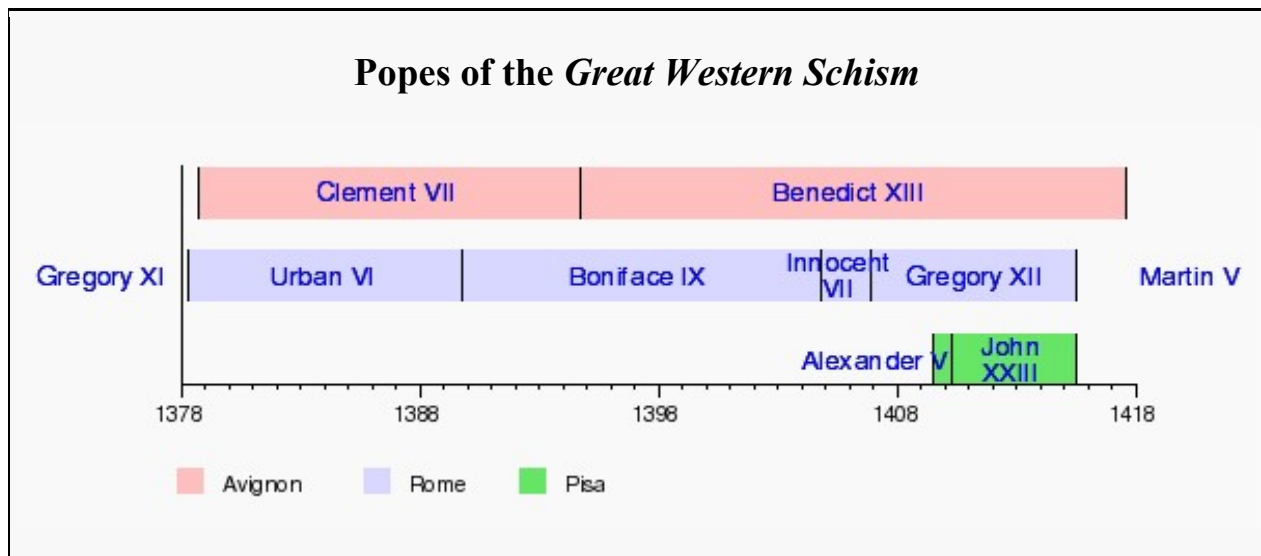
Popes Who Served Under the Avignon Papacy

- | | |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Pope Clement V: 1305–1314 | 5. Pope Innocent VI: 1352–1362 |
| 2. Pope John XXII: 1316–1334 | 6. Pope Urban V: 1362–1370 |
| 3. Pope Benedict XII: 1334–1342 | 7. Pope Gregory XI: 1370–1378 |
| 4. Pope Clement VI: 1342–1352 | |

The most remarkable episode in the story of the Avignon popes was the “*Great Western Schism*” that followed these seventy years and the period of the anti-popes that subsequently took place. Towards the end of Pope Gregory XI’s pontificate in 1377, the Holy Father attempted to quell the turmoil that plagued Rome and Italy in general by moving the pontificate back to Rome and establishing peace in that region. To protect himself, Gregory XI moved his residence from the traditional location of the Basilica of St. John Lateran to his current residence at St. Peter’s Basilica. Ultimately Gregory XI (the last of the French popes of Avignon) died in Rome, unable to resolve the divisions between the cardinals that held power in France and those who were living in Italy.

Following Gregory's death, the College of Cardinals in Rome choose one of their own as his successor, Pope Urban VI (1378-1389). Meanwhile in France, the French cardinals revolted over this election and chose their own French pope at the same time, Clement VII (1378-1394), followed by Benedict XIII (1394-1409), both of whom resided in Avignon. For the next 30 years, Rome and Avignon each supported its own pope, dividing the Church into warring factions.

Meanwhile, some misguided faithful within the Catholic Church realized that the authority of the Church was being torn apart by two men who claimed to be the "pope" of the Church at the same time. Thus, badly thinking that they could resolve the issue themselves, a group of faithful convened in the city of Pisa, Italy in 1400, elected Alexander V as pope (1409-1410) and subsequently John XXIII (1400-1415), thus adding confusion to the papal crisis of the time, increasing the number of popes who claimed the throne of Peter to THREE AT THE SAME TIME!



Meanwhile, to resolve this schism within the Church, the cardinals, bishops, theologians and many of the faithful throughout the world convened at The Council of Constance (a city in southwest Germany), convened by new emperor Sigismund in 1414. By the end of this council in 1418, those in attendance succeeded (among other things) in ending the schism by declaring the pontificate of Benedict XIII as invalid, by forcing John XXIII to abdicate the papacy and by accepting the voluntary resignation of Gregory XII. Subsequently, the College of Cardinals and a group of faithful believers convened to elect Martin V as the new pope and the unity of the Roman Catholic Church was reestablished.