

"The End of the Western Schism"

Week of November 7, 2011

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

With the election of Martin V as pope on November 11, 1417, the feast of St. Martin, the Great Western Schism (1378-1417) finally came to an end.

The Schism began with the election of Urban VI, one of the most unstable popes in all of papal history and the last non-cardinal to be elected to the papacy. So intransigent and unreasonable was Urban VI that the French cardinals, who had seen the last French pope elected with Gregory XI (1371-78), elected an antipope, Clement VII.

As the darker side of the new pope's personality had disclosed itself, the French cardinals asked Urban to abdicate, but he refused. Five days later they sent out a notice to the Christian world that the pope had been deposed as incompetent.

The French cardinals moved to an Italian city, Fondi, where they elected the cousin of the French king, Cardinal Robert of Geneva on September 20. As soon as he was crowned on October 31, the Great Western Schism erupted.

It would not end until almost 40 years later, with the election of Martin V by the Council of Constance (1414-18) and the deposing beforehand of the then-three claimants to the papal throne: Gregory XII, who was in the Roman line and who was allowed to convene the Council of Constance after it had already begun; John XXIII, who was elected by the Council of Pisa in 1409; and Clement VIII, the last of the pretenders to the Avignon papacy.

Oddo Colonna was cardinal-deacon of San Giorgio in Vilabro when unanimously elected pope by the Council of Constance after an unusual three-day conclave at which twenty-two cardinals and thirty representatives of the five nations present at the council participated—and voted. It was the first—and last—papal conclave since 1058 to include lay electors.

Since Colonna was only a deacon at the time of his election, he was immediately ordained a priest and consecrated as Bishop of Rome. He was crowned on November 21 in the cathedral church in the city of Constance.

Just to show how chaotic the situation was during the Schism, the new pope had originally been loyal to Gregory XII, whom the *Annuario Pontificio* recognizes as the duly elected pope at the time, but broke with him in the summer of 1408 and was active in the preparations for the Council of Pisa the following year.

That council elected John XXIII, who, like Clement VIII, is regarded as an antipope. John's election did not prevent another John XXIII from assuming the same name in 1958.

Cardinal Colonna (the future Martin V) remained loyal to the antipope John XXIII until John suddenly fled Pisa in disguise when the Council of Constance asked for his resignation as well as that of the two other claimants to the papal throne.

Martin's election effectively ended the Schism, even though first Benedict XIII (the Avignon antipope) and then his successor, Clement VIII, held out until their supporters dwindled to insignificance.

But Gregory XII's abdication, and then John XXIII's acceptance, under duress, of his own deposition by the Council of Constance cleared the way for almost universal acknowledgment of Martin V as the only legitimate pope.

Clement VIII renounced his claim to the papacy and, along with the few cardinals still supporting him, submitted to Martin V in 1429.

Concerned about the chaos that had developed in the Papal States during the Schism, Martin V

resisted pressures to make his papal residence in Germany. He left Constance for Rome on May 16, 1418, but made intermediate stops in Mantua and Florence, the latter for more than a year!

He arrived in Rome on September 28, 1420. He negotiated an agreement with the Queen of Naples to withdraw her troops from the city and his own papal troops defeated the dominant ruler of central Italy and later crushed a revolt in Bologna.

He was now free to reorganize the Papal States and recover the lost papal treasury, thereby enriching not only the Holy See but also his Colonna relatives.

Although his various diplomatic initiatives in Europe had mixed results, he displayed unusual sensitivity toward Jews, denouncing anti-Jewish preaching and forbidding the compulsory baptism of young Jewish children.

And although he had been unsympathetic with the Council of Constance's decree that councils be held at regular intervals, he did summon one to meet in Pavia in 1423. Because of the outbreak of plague, it was moved to Siena and then dissolved in 1424, ostensibly for poor attendance.

Martin V did announce that the next council would meet in Basel in 1431, but he died before it began.

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"Thanksgiving, 2011"
 Week of November 14, 2011
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
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There was no Thanksgiving column last year because, for the first time since I began writing this weekly column in early July 1966, I had to suspend it for about three months for medical reasons.

In 2009, however, I had done a column in thanksgiving for the greatest single asset to the Catholic Church in the United States (and I almost certainly can include Canada here), the thousands of nuns who have served the Church in so many extraordinary ways: in parishes, in schools, in hospitals, in shelters for women, in prisons, as college and university faculty members, chaplains, and residence hall rectors, and in so many other ministries, too many to count.

It took Vatican actions against religious communities of women to make some Catholics begin to appreciate the nuns' contributions to the Church in America. But whatever it took, many Catholics came to appreciate the good that the sisters have done for so many of us over many years.

Fortunately, the investigative atmosphere has taken a turn for the better in recent months, first with the resignation because of age of Cardinal Franc Rodé as prefect of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life and then with the appointment of Archbishop João Braz de Aviz of Brazil as Cardinal Rodé's successor, and of Archbishop Joseph W. Tobin as Secretary of the Congregation. Both appointments represent distinct improvements over their predecessors.

Of course, there is a second investigation hovering over the first, namely, the one conducted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), led by Cardinal William Levada. This one is an investigation of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious (LCWR), which represents some 95% of religious communities of women in the United States.

The recent change of top personnel in the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life augurs well for the eventual outcome of that particular "visitation," but unfortunately there has been no comparable change in the CDF, nor is there likely to be.

However, the reaction to both investigations has been so negative that our hope is that the two procedures will simply die on the vine, much like the investigation of U.S. seminaries.

But as we look forward to the Thanksgiving holiday in the United States (in Canada Thanksgiving was celebrated on October 10), we need to focus on the positive.

The religious women in the United States have been targeted by the Vatican because the U.S. Catholic Church is the most important in the world and the American sisters are the most important organized group of religious women in the world.

My November 2009 column happily appeared soon after Sister Sandra Schneiders' excellent article on ministerial religious life was published in the October 2nd issue of the *National Catholic Reporter*.

As her article pointed out, it was not until 1900 that noncloistered apostolic congregations of women were formally recognized as an authentic form of religious life. Pope Leo XIII did this.

However, this papal action did not create a new form of religious life. It was simply the official recognition of a *fait accompli* that had been in existence for nearly 400 years.

Before 1900 and even up to the Second Vatican Council in 1962 the sisters were forced to live a kind of hybrid life: virtually the whole of monastic life in the convent and full-time ministerial life at work, including teaching in parish schools.

Some Catholics were at least vaguely familiar with that hybrid life; most were completely unaware of it.

The typical nonstop 17-hour-day (5 A.M. to 10 at night) required nuns to be dressed at all times

in habit, attend daily Mass (sometimes followed by Benediction), fit in meditation, devotional exercises (e.g., the Rosary and Stations of the Cross), some form of the Divine Office, spiritual reading from assigned books, daily manual work assignments in the convent, three meals in common, often in silence, and an hour of “recreation,” which usually included handwork or mending, schoolwork, or parish and community tasks.

On the same day, the nuns prepared classes and had a full days’ professional schedule in school, hospital, or other Catholic institutions.

In short, they were, as noted above, monastics at home and apostles abroad. It was Pope Pius XII who launched the process of renewal that would be taken up by Vatican II more than a decade later.

No wonder they were often called “the good sisters”! We can never tire of singing their praises—in thanksgiving for all that they have done, and continue to do, for the People of God.

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