



Origin

Since 1309, by decision of [Pope Clement V](#), the papacy had resided in Avignon, a papal [enclave](#) surrounded by France. The [Avignon Papacy](#) had developed a reputation for corruption that estranged major parts of Western [Christendom](#). This reputation can be attributed to perceptions of predominant French influence, and to the papal [curia](#)'s efforts to extend its powers of patronage and increase its revenues. The last undisputed Avignon pope, [Gregory XI](#), decided to return to [Rome](#) on 17 January 1377. However, Pope Gregory XI announced his intention to return to Avignon just after the Easter celebrations of 1378. This was at the entreaty of his relatives, his friends, and nearly everyone in his retinue. Before he could leave, Gregory XI died in the Vatican palace on 27 March 1378. The Romans put into operation a plan to use intimidation and violence (*impressio et metus*) to ensure the election of a Roman pope. The pope and his Curia were back in Rome after seventy years in Avignon, and the Romans were prepared to do everything in their power to keep them there.^[7] On 8 April 1378, he [cardinals](#) elected Bartolomeo Prignano, the [archbishop of Bari](#), as [Pope Urban VI](#). Urban had been a respected administrator in the papal [chancery](#) at Avignon, but as pope he proved suspicious, reformist, and prone to violent outbursts of temper.

Two popes: Map showing support for Avignon (red) and Rome (blue) during the Western Schism; this breakdown is accurate until the [Council of Pisa](#) (1409), which created a third line of claimants. Most of the cardinals who had elected Urban VI soon regretted their decision and removed themselves to [Anagni](#). Meeting at [Fondi](#), the College of Cardinals elected Robert of Geneva as [Pope Clement VII](#) on 20 September 1378. The cardinals argued that the election of Urban VI was invalid because it had been done for fear of the rioting Roman crowds. Unable to maintain himself in Italy, Clement VII reestablished a papal court in Avignon. Clement had the immediate support of Queen [Joanna I of Naples](#) and of several of the Italian barons. [Charles V of France](#), who seems to have been sounded out beforehand on the choice of the Roman pontiff, soon became his warmest protector. Clement eventually succeeded in winning to his cause Castile, Aragon, Navarre, a great part of the Latin East, Flanders, and Scotland. The pair of elections threw the Church into turmoil. There had been [antipope](#) claimants to the papacy before, but most of them had been appointed by various rival factions. In this case, the College of Cardinals had elected both the pope and the antipope. The conflicts quickly escalated from a church problem to a diplomatic crisis that divided Europe. Secular leaders had to decide which claimant they would recognize. In the Iberian Peninsula there were the [Fernandine Wars](#) (*Guerras fernandinas*) and the [1383–1385 Crisis in Portugal](#), during

which dynastic opponents supported rival claimants to the papal office. [Owain Glyndŵr](#)'s rebellion in [Wales](#) recognized the Avignon antipope, while England recognized the Roman pope.

Consequences: Sustained by such national and factional rivalries throughout Catholic Christianity, the schism continued after the deaths of both Urban VI in 1389 and Clement VII in 1394. [Boniface IX](#), who was crowned at Rome in 1389, and [Benedict XIII](#), who reigned in Avignon from 1394, maintained their rival courts. When Pope Boniface died in 1404, the eight cardinals of the Roman conclave offered to refrain from electing a new pope if Benedict would resign; but when Benedict's legates refused on his behalf, the Roman party then proceeded to elect Pope [Innocent VII](#). In the intense partisanship characteristic of the Middle Ages, the schism engendered a fanatical hatred noted by [Johan Huizinga](#):^[15] when the town of [Bruges](#) went over to the "obedience" of Avignon, a great number of people left to follow their trade in a city of Urbanist allegiance; in the 1382 [Battle of Roosebeke](#), the [oriflamme](#), which might only be unfurled in a holy cause, was taken up against the [Flemings](#), because they were Urbanists and thus viewed by the French as schismatics. Efforts were made to end the Schism through force or diplomacy. The French crown even tried to coerce Benedict XIII, whom it supported, into resigning. None of these remedies worked. The suggestion that a [church council](#) should resolve the Schism, first made in 1378, was not adopted at first, because [canon law](#) required that a pope call a council. Eventually theologians like [Pierre d'Ailly](#) and Jean Gerson, as well as canon lawyers like [Francesco Zabarella](#), adopted arguments that equity permitted the Church to act for its own welfare in defiance of the [letter of the law](#).

Three popes: Eventually the cardinals of both factions secured an agreement that the Roman pope [Gregory XII](#) and the Avignon antipope [Benedict XIII](#) would meet at [Savona](#). They balked at the last moment, and both groups of cardinals abandoned their preferred leaders. The [Council of Pisa](#) met in 1409 under the auspices of the cardinals to try solving the dispute. At the fifteenth session, 5 June 1409, the Council of Pisa attempted to depose both the Roman pope and Avignon antipope as schismatical, heretical, perjured and scandalous,^[16] but it then added to the problem by electing a second antipope, [Alexander V](#). He reigned briefly in Pisa from June 26, 1409, to his death in 1410, when he was succeeded by [John XXIII](#), who won some but not universal support.

Resolution: *Habemus Papam* at the Council of Constance

The [Council of Constance](#) was convened by the Pisan antipope [John XXIII](#) in 1414 to resolve the issue. The council was also endorsed by the Roman pope [Gregory XII](#), giving it greater legitimacy. The council, advised by the theologian [Jean Gerson](#), secured the resignations of both Gregory XII and John XXIII, while isolating the Avignon antipope [Benedict XIII](#), who refused to step down. The Council elected [Pope Martin V](#) in 1417, essentially ending the schism. The Crown of Aragon did not recognize Pope Martin V and continued to recognize Benedict XIII. To succeed him, in 1423 three cardinals elected [Antipope Clement VIII](#), while another, Bernard Garnier, elected himself as [Antipope Benedict XIV](#). Clement VIII resigned in 1429 and apparently recognized Martin V. Gregory XII's abdication in 1415 was the last papal resignation until [Benedict XVI](#) in 2013.

Aftermath: After its resolution, the Western Schism still affected the Catholic Church for years to come. One of the most significant of these involved the emergence of the theory called [conciliarism](#), founded on the success of the [Council of Constance](#), which effectively ended the conflict. This new reform movement held that a general council is superior to the pope on the strength of its capability to settle things even in the early church such as the case in 681 when [Pope Honorius](#) was condemned by a council called Constantinople III. There are theorists such as [John Gerson](#) who explained that the priests and the church itself are the sources of the papal power and, thus, the church should be able to correct, punish, and, if necessary, depose a pope. For years, the so-called *conciliarists* have challenged the authority of the pope and they became more relevant after a convened council also known as the [Council of Florence](#) (1439–1445) became instrumental in achieving ecclesial union between the Catholic Church and the churches of the East. [Pope Pius II](#) (r. 1458–1464) settled the issue by decreeing that no appeal could be made from pope to council. Thus, a papal election could not be overturned by anyone but the elected pope himself. No such crisis has arisen since the 15th century, and so there has been no need to revisit this decision. There was also a marked decline in morality and discipline within the church. Scholars note that although the Western Schism did not directly cause such a phenomenon, it was a gradual development rooted in the conflict, effectively eroding the church authority and its capacity to proclaim the gospel. This was further aggravated by the dissension caused by the [Protestant Reformation](#), which created a lot of unrest.

For the next five centuries, the Catholic Church recognized the Roman popes as the legitimate line from 1378 to 1409, followed by the Pisan popes from 1409 to 1415. All Avignon popes after 1378 are considered to be antipopes. This recognition is reflected in the numbering of popes [Alexander VI](#), [VII](#), and [VIII](#), who numbered themselves consecutively after their Pisan namesake Alexander V.

The recognition of the Pisan popes made the continued legitimacy of the Roman pope Gregory XII doubtful for 1409–1415. The *Annuario Pontificio* for 1860 listed the Pisan popes as true popes from 1409 to 1415, but it acknowledged that Gregory XII's reign ended in either 1409 or 1415. The *Annuario Pontificio* for 1864 eliminated

the overlapping period by ending Gregory XII's reign in 1409, listing the last three popes of the schism as [Gregory XII](#) (1406–1409), [Alexander V](#) (1409–1410), and [John XXIII](#) (1410–1415). This remained the official chronology of popes through the mid-20th century. The Western Schism was reinterpreted in 1958 when [Pope John XXIII](#) chose to reuse the ordinal XXIII, citing "twenty-two [sic] Johns of indisputable legitimacy." (There had actually been nineteen undisputed Johns due to [antipopes and numbering errors](#).) The Pisan popes Alexander V and John XXIII are now considered to be antipopes. This reinterpretation is reflected in modern editions of the *Annuario Pontificio*, which extend Gregory XII's reign to 1415. The line of Roman popes is now retroactively recognized by the Catholic Church as the sole legitimate line during the Western Schism. However, Popes Alexander VI through VIII have not been renumbered, leaving a gap in the numbering sequence.

According to Broderick (1987):

Doubt still shrouds the validity of the three rival lines of pontiffs during the four decades subsequent to the still disputed papal election of 1378. This makes suspect the credentials of the cardinals created by the Roman, Avignon, and Pisan claimants to the Apostolic See. Unity was finally restored without a definitive solution to the question; for the *Council of Constance* succeeded in terminating the Western Schism, not by declaring which of the three claimants was the rightful one, but by eliminating all of them by forcing their abdication or deposition, and then setting up a novel arrangement for choosing a new pope acceptable to all sides. To this day the Church has never made any official, authoritative pronouncement about the papal lines of succession for this confusing period; nor has Martin V or any of his successors. Modern scholars are not agreed in their solutions, although they tend to favor the Roman line.