

CRISES AND CHANGES IN THE CHURCH AND RELIGION

8.14 The humiliation of Avignon: St. Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Pope Gregory XI* (1376). Original in Latin.

A SAINT WITH A PUBLIC FACE, CATHERINE OF SIENA (1347–1380), a mystic and dedicated servant to the poor was also so committed to seeing the pope return to Rome that she herself went to Avignon to prod him. Her numerous letters, dictated in Italian but often translated into Latin, were sent to comfort, reform, upbraid, and encourage people in all walks of life, especially rulers, city magistrates, and the pope. In the letter below she shows no patience with those who were counseling Gregory XI to delay his decision to move to Rome. For Catherine, the pope's "proper throne" was Rome. Putting together Catherine's letter to the pope with Jeanne d'Arc's *Letter to the English* (above, p. 517) how would you characterize the attitude of women—or, at least, some exceptional ones—toward power and authority in this period?

[Source: *The Letters of Catherine of Siena*, trans. Suzanne Noffke, 2 vols. (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), pp. 215–17 (notes modified).]

In the name of Jesus Christ crucified and of gentle Mary.

Most holy father in Christ gentle Jesus,

Your poor unworthy daughter Caterina sends you greetings in the precious blood of the Lamb of God. I long to see you strong and firm as a rock in the good holy resolution you have already taken up, so that all the contrary winds beating against you won't hurt you.¹ They come from human enemies, rising up out of malice through the devil's ministry and satanic furies, who want to prevent all the good that will follow from your going [to Rome].

I understood from the note you sent me that you are being harassed by the enemies of all good, who never stop tempting you. And to persuade you the more convincingly of the evil they want, they are claiming that Pope Clement IV, whenever he had to do anything, never wanted to act without the advice of his brother cardinals. True, he usually preferred

their intentions and pronouncements to his own, even when he saw that his own were materially better, just as you yourself see what is right. Oimé!² Most holy father, what malice and how much evil are arising because of the devil! These men cite Clement IV, plenty concerned about themselves and what is theirs, but much less concerned about the universal good to which everything else ought to be subordinate. Why don't these pious men also cite Pope Urban [V], who sought the cardinals' advice when he was in doubt as to whether or not to act, but who, when the matter was clear and obvious to him—as is your going [to Rome] to you, of which you are certain—didn't feel bound by their opinion even though they might all be against him. Let your enemies direct your attention to *him*³—but they can't, because they are your enemies.

What sane person doesn't see that the holiest thing is for the lord of all the world to be seated on his proper throne? Surely, unless they are blind, they will admit this easily. And this is what the counsel of the good will always tell you. It seems to me the advice of

1 See the parable of the house built on rock, Matt. 7: 24–25: "Anyone who hears my words and puts them into practice is like the wise man who built his house on rock. When the rainy season set in, the torrents came and the winds blew and buffeted the house. It did not collapse; it had been solidly set on rock."

2 "Woe is me."

3 That is, to Urban V.

X good people is concerned only with God's honor, the salvation of souls, and the reform of holy Church, and not with their own selfish love for themselves. The advice of such people should be followed, I'm saying, but not the advice of those who love only their own life, honor, status, and pleasure—for their advice goes where their love is.

I beg you in the name of Christ crucified: let it please your holiness to hurry! Make use of a holy trick. I mean, let it look as if you are going to take a few more days, and then all of a sudden go! For the sooner you act, the sooner you will escape these tormenting anxieties. In fact, it seems to me their malice is becoming much more astute. Now they want to instruct you by giving you the example of the wild animals who, once they escape from a trap, never go back to it!¹ But I am begging you to follow with complete commitment [my] sound advice. The blessed God freed you once from their wicked counsel when they

interrupted your journey last year. The devil had in fact laid a trap on their tongues. You were caught, and holy counsel was taken captive. Evil and harm followed because of it—indeed the worst evil and harm we have suffered until now! So now that you're the wiser, with the Holy Spirit's guidance you *won't* fall back into it.

Let's go quickly, my dear *babbo*, and fearlessly! If God is for you, no one will be against you.² God himself will move you; God himself will be your guide, your helmsman, and your sailor. So God *is* with you. Go quickly to your bride, who is all pale, and is waiting for you to bring back her color.³ And the moment you arrive she will be more beautiful than any other. I don't want to burden you with more words, for I would have much to say.

Keep living in God's holy and tender love. I am presumptuous: forgive me. I humbly ask your blessing.

Gentle Jesus! Jesus love!

8.15 The conciliarist movement: Jean Gerson, *Sermon at the Council of Constance* (1415). Original in Latin.

JEAN GERSON (1363-1429), CHANCELLOR OF THE University of Paris and a public intellectual of wide-ranging interests and influence, was called upon to address the Council of Constance (1414-1418) at a moment of crisis. Originally held under the auspices of John XXIII, the council seemed ready to depose him along with other popes, prompting John to flee in disguise in March 1415. His leaving—and calling on everyone else to follow him—threw the remaining prelates into a crisis of conscience: should they continue with the council without a papal sponsor? Gerson, a conservative who came to the conciliarist position only slowly, thought they could and must. His sermon, excerpted below, brought the logical vocabulary of scholasticism to bear on the meaning of a council. His speech was the turning point at Constance, leading the assembly to declare, about a month later in the decree known as *Haec sancta*, that “This holy synod . . . holds power directly from Christ; and . . . everyone of whatever estate or dignity he be, even papal, is obliged to obey it in those things which belong to the faith.”⁴ The Council deposed John and elected Martin V.

[Source: *Unity, Heresy and Reform, 1378-1460: The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism*, ed. C.M.D. Crowder (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1986), pp. 76-82.]

1 The sense of the Latin seems to be that the cardinals are using the example of animals once trapped to convince the pope not to return to the “trap” of Rome.

2 See Rom. 8: 31. *Babbo* is equivalent to Daddy.

3 The “bride” is the Church.

4 *Haec sancta* in *Unity, Heresy and Reform, 1378-1460: The Conciliar Response to the Great Schism*, ed. C.M.D. Crowder (Kingston, ON: Limestone Press, 1986), p. 83.