

## CRISES AND CHANGES IN THE CHURCH AND RELIGION

8.14 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 papal crisis—the Great Western Schism. Convoked by Antipope John XXIII (1410–1415), the council seemed ready to depose him along with the other two concurrent popes (Antipope Benedict XIII and Pope Gregory XII), 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 carry on. His sermon, excerpted below, brought the vocabulary of scholasticism—his references to the “efficient,” “formal,” and “final” causes come from the language of logic—to bear on the legitimacy 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.”<sup>1</sup> The council deposed the three popes and elected Martin V (1417–1431).

1. How did Gerson reconcile the language of the psalms (especially Ps. 89:7) with the logic of the scholastics?
2. How does the pope fit into the conciliarist notion of the Church?

[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.]

... “Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you.”<sup>2</sup> That light, most distinguished fathers, I repeat once more, that light is God, who is glorified in the council of the saints. As the psalmist says: “God is greatly to be feared in the assembly of the saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are round about him.”<sup>3</sup> We hold to this infallible promise of his: “Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.”<sup>4</sup> The psalmist saw this when he sang: “I will praise the Lord with my whole heart in the assembly of

the upright, and in the congregation.”<sup>5</sup> And we see in this assembly of the upright the unfolding of the mighty work of God, the freely given and scarcely hoped for way of resignation.

So when God has done all things to please himself and that he may be glorified, whose delight is to be with the sons of men, how may he obtain greater glory than in a council of the upright? For his praise is in the Church of the saints. You, fathers and lords, true believers and pleasing to God, are required to behave

<sup>1</sup> *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.

<sup>2</sup> John 12:35.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 89:7; Douay Ps. 88:8.

<sup>4</sup> Matt. 18:20.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 111:1; Douay Ps. 110:1.

so as to constitute a council of saints and upright men. God has placed you in the world as so many true lights. "You are the light of the world," he says.<sup>1</sup> If ever it is your role to purge and illuminate others and to make them perfect, now is it especially so, when this holy convention is met, when the assembly is brought together in one place, when the Church is assembled; as it is written in Maccabees how they prayed and sought God's mercy:<sup>2</sup> that with his aid it might be decided what needed to be done. The spirit immediately rejoices, raising its eyes to take in what is happening, seeing all those who have assembled on your behalf, that is, for your benefit, O Christian people. My spirit observes and rejoices with you, and breaks out into this song of the Church. The citizens of the Apostles and the servants of God are here today, bearing a torch and bringing light to their fatherland to give peace to the peoples and to set the Lord's people free. How will they free them? By urging and crying out: "Walk while ye have the light, lest darkness come upon you;" the darkness of divisions and schism, the darkness of so many errors and heresies, in a word, the horrible darkness of so many vices that pour out of the Church's wretched body on a limitless tide. Walk, therefore, while you have light, that these aspects of the darkness do not come upon you....

The first problem is to keep the sequence of what is to be said clear and short. Because nothing is long if put together in orderly fashion. In the meantime, having broached the theme, let us turn our attention to what has been said: that God is he "who is greatly to be feared in the assembly of saints, and to be had in reverence of all them that are round about him."<sup>3</sup> Let us fix our mind on that text from the psalmist for fear we stray too far afield. If I am not mistaken, we see there the fourfold cause of this holy synod, that is its efficient, formal, final and material cause.<sup>4</sup>

If anyone wants to know the efficient cause, that is clear enough: God, greatly to be feared. It is by his impulse, mercy, inspiration and influence that the

Church is now brought together, just as the psalmist, lifted up by the spirit, prophesied in song: It is God that "gathers together the outcasts of Israel";<sup>5</sup> and gathered his elect from the four winds "from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south."<sup>6</sup> Only let us pray that he who has begun the work perfects it. O sacred assembly "lift up your eyes round about you and see"; "all these are gathered together, they have come to you."<sup>7</sup> May it happen to you as was spoken by the prophet Isaiah: "Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged."<sup>8</sup> And if it is enlarged, surely, will not God fill it with his spirit?

Next, the formal cause is this very bringing together or association of the council of holy men formed and modeled in the Holy Spirit, the form and exemplar of our acts, who is the bond and connection linking separate members of the saints, making them one. The Church recognizes this when it asks in its own behalf that, gathered in the Holy Spirit, it may not be disturbed by the assault of any adversary.

If anyone goes further to ask for the final cause of this holy assembly, that, surely, is that God, greatly to be feared, should be glorified, as it is said in the words of the Apostle: "Do all to the glory of God."<sup>9</sup> This is the straight and effective path to obtaining all that we wish, so long as we first seek his glory. He gave this to be understood, when he said: "Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added unto you."<sup>10</sup>

Finally, all those who are round about God can be taken as the material cause, of itself unformed. For just as men by falling into schism, as a result, deform in some way or other God's creation, since, according to Plato and Aristotle, man is the end of all things, so it is necessary that all things are modified according to the requirements of their end. Thus, by the contrary argument, everything should be reformed by this council of holy men, the Lord beginning and shaping the work and bringing it to its final conclusion. For thus does the Church sing about

<sup>1</sup> Matt. 5:14.

<sup>2</sup> See 1 Macc. 3:44.

<sup>3</sup> Ps. 89:7; Douay Ps. 88:8.

<sup>4</sup> The idea of the four causes derives from Aristotle's logic.

<sup>5</sup> Ps. 147:2; Douay Ps. 146:2.

<sup>6</sup> Ps. 107:3; Douay Ps. 106:3.

<sup>7</sup> Isa. 60:5 and 49:18.

<sup>8</sup> Isa. 60:5.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Cor. 10:31.

<sup>10</sup> Matt. 6:33.

Christ's precious blood: "The earth, sea, stars and heavens are washed in that flood."<sup>1</sup> ...

[Thus] God, greatly to be feared, is glorified in this council of holy men, because he offers it sufficient and infallible authority as its efficient cause. That is the first foundation. Again for the second conclusion: God, greatly to be feared, guides and attracts all Christians in common to the unity of one true head, as the formative and model cause. That is the second foundation and the first basis of reform. Further, for the third conclusion: God, greatly to be feared, wills to be glorified thus in this council of holy men that all things may turn particularly to the honor and preservation of his law and faith, without which no one can please him. That is the third foundation and the second basis of reform. Last of all, the fourth conclusion: God, greatly to be feared, is prepared to grant through this council of holy men to all creation, and especially to mankind, a measure of the beauty, glory, order and dignity of reform, with suitable provision against those who continue, not in upright behavior but on the treadmill of vice. And that is the fourth conclusion on the last foundation, and the third basis of reform....

Twelve considerations are to be derived from the light of this teaching in the Creed and the Apostle,<sup>2</sup> like so many rays of the brilliant truth.

- 1 The unity of the Church consists in one head, Christ. It is bound fast together by the loving bond of the Holy Spirit by means of divine gifts, by qualities and attitudes, so to speak, which render the constitution of the mystical body harmonious, lively, and seemly, so as to undertake effectively the exercise of the spiritual aspects of life.
- 2 The unity of the Church consists in one secondary head, who is called supreme pontiff, vicar of Christ. And it is more creative, more various, more plentiful, and greater than the assembly of the synagogue was and than a civil assembly under one ruler, king, or emperor, is.
- 3 By the life-giving seed instilled into it by the Holy Spirit the Church has the power and capacity to be able to preserve itself in the integrity and unity of its parts, both essential or formal and material and changing.

4 The Church has in Christ a bridegroom who will not fail it. Thus, as the law stands, neither can Christ give the bride, his Church, a bill of divorce, nor the other way round.

5 The Church is not so bound by the bond of marriage to the vicar of her indefectible bridegroom that they are unable to agree on a dissolution of the tie and give a bill of divorce.

6 The Church, or a general council representing it, is so regulated by the direction of the Holy Spirit under authority from Christ that everyone of whatsoever rank, even papal, is obliged to hearken to and obey it. If anyone does not, he is to be reckoned a gentile and a publican. That is clear from the unchanging law of God set out in Matt. 18 [at v. 17]. A general council can be described in this way: a general council is an assembly called under lawful authority at any place, drawn from every hierarchical rank of the whole catholic Church, none of the faithful who requires to be heard being excluded, for the wholesome discussion and ordering of those things which affect the proper regulation of the same Church in faith and morals.

7 When the Church or general council lays anything down concerning the regulation of the Church, the pope is not superior to those laws, even positive laws. So he is not able, at his choice, to dissolve such legislation of the Church contrary to the manner and sense in which it was laid down and agreed.

8 Although the Church and general council cannot take away the pope's plenitude of power, which has been granted by Christ supernaturally and of his mercy, it can, however, limit his use of it by known rules and laws for the edification of the Church. For it was on the Church's behalf that papal and other human authority was granted. And on this rests the sure foundation of the whole reform of the Church.

9 In many circumstances the Church or general council has been and is able to assemble without the explicit consent or mandate of a pope, even duly elected and alive. One instance among others is if a pope is accused

<sup>1</sup> See Luke 21:25.

<sup>2</sup> The part of the Apostles' Creed that Gerson quotes is, "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the giver of life." The apostle that he quotes is St. Paul in Eph. 4, where he speaks of the unity of the Church.

and is summoned to hear, as a party to the dispute, the decision of the Church under the law of the Gospel, to which law he is subject, and he contumaciously<sup>1</sup> refuses to bring the Church together. Another case is where serious matters concerning the regulation of the Church fall to be decided by a general council and the pope contumaciously refuses to summon it. Another, if it has been laid down by a general council that it should be brought together from time to time. The other kind of situation is where there is reasonable doubt about the disputes of several claimants to the papacy.

10 If the Church or general council agrees on any way or lays down that one way is to be accepted by the pope to end schism, he is obliged to accept it. Thus he is obliged to resign, if that is the prevailing opinion, and when he

goes further and offers resignation and anticipates the demand, more especially is he to be commended.

11 The Church or general council ought to be particularly dedicated to the prosecution of perfect unity, the eradication of errors, and the correction of the erring, without acceptance of persons.<sup>2</sup> Likewise to this: that the Church's hierarchical order of prelates and curates should be reformed from its seriously disturbed state to a likeness to God's heavenly hierarchy and in conformity to rules instituted in early times.

12 The Church has no more effective means to its own general reformation than to establish a continuous sequence of general councils, not forgetting the holding of provincial councils.

## 8.15 The Hussite program: *The Four Articles of Prague* (1420). Original in Czech.

Inspired by the English priest and scholar John Wyclif to call for a reformed Church, the Bohemian Jan Hus (1369/1371–1415) was burned at the stake by the Council of Constance. But in Bohemia his followers took up his cause, calling for a moral and less materialistic clergy and asking that even lay people be allowed full participation in both forms of the Eucharist—the bread *and* the wine. The Hussites were declared heretics, and the pope called a crusade against them. The first battles led the Hussites to articulate their views, which they summed up in four articles, frequently repeated in Hussite writings thereafter.

1. How did the Hussites answer the charge of being heretical?
2. What is radical about the four articles?

[Source: *The Crusade against Heretics in Bohemia, 1418–1437: Sources and Documents of the Hussite Crusades*, trans. and ed. Thomas A. Fudge (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 83–84.]

[First] ... throughout the Kingdom of Bohemia the word of God shall be freely preached and proclaimed by Christian priests.... [Second] the holy sacrament of the body and blood of the Lord, in both kinds of bread and wine, shall be freely given to all true Christians who are not prohibited on account of some deadly sin just as our Savior did in the beginning and so commanded it.... [Third] numerous

priests and monks, supported by temporal law possess worldly goods in opposition to the commandments of Christ. This is to the detriment of their office and is also harmful to the lords of the secular estates. These priests shall be deprived of such power, which is unlawful, and in keeping with the Scriptures shall live lives of good repute in accordance with the pattern of Christ and the apos-

<sup>1</sup> I.e., with obstinate disobedience.

<sup>2</sup> "Acceptance of persons" means "partiality."