

Conciliarism

Essentially, 'Conciliarism' or the Conciliar Theory is the belief that a general council has authority over a pope. The 'foundations' of the movement have been traced back to speculations by thirteenth century canon lawyers. To put this in context, they speculated in the same kind of way about the answerability of the pope to the college of cardinals. It was the Great Schism of 1378 that put wind into the sails of the idea. When a breakaway group of cardinals appointed a rival pope and many Christians found it hard to decide who was the true successor of St Peter. The Schism continued after the deaths of the original rival popes as their respective cardinals elected successors, based in Rome and in Avignon (where an infrastructure had been available for the original breakaways because the papacy had only just moved from there back to Rome.) In this context, the theory that a General Council could take command without requiring a pope to convene it seemed very attractive. In this new practical context Conrad of Gelnhausen (the first Chancellor of Heidelberg University) developed the idea that sovereignty resided in the whole community of the faithful rather than with the pope or the Roman Church per se. This line of thinking was helped by parallel developments in the secular political sphere, where control of kings by representative institutions was an idea in the air. Conciliarism was accepted as the model for Church government by Jean Gerson, probably the most influential intellectual of the age. University academic that he was, he gave professors a major role alongside bishops in the ideal governing body that he envisaged.

Practice followed theory at the Council of Pisa in 1409, which deposed both claimants to the papacy and appointed its own pope. Instead of resolving the situation, however, this left the Church with three claimants rather than two. It was not until 1417 that the Schism was finally ended, with the election of Martin V in the context of the Council of Constance, where the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund showed that there was still life in his office by creating the required consensus. The Catholic Church has traditionally regarded the Roman line in the the Great Schism, so the fact that the Roman pope voluntarily resigned before his successor was appointed made the later rejection of conciliarist principles possible without inconsistency (the 'Pisan' and 'Avignon' contenders were both deposed by the Council of Constance).

Before Martin V's election the Council of Constance had published decrees in a conciliarist spirit, but he showed no enthusiasm for leading the Church in that direction. He did convene a new Council before his death, but it quickly spun out of control under his successor Eugenius IV. Eugenius tried to dissolve it, was forced to change his mind, and then denounced it when it had become clear that it was trying to take over as the sovereign body in the Church, without him. At first the Council of Basle seemed to show that Conciliarism could be translated into a functioning system of governance. It went so far as to elect its own pope in 1439.

The enthusiasm Conciliarism at Basle is well captured in a text written by Aeneas Silvius Piccolomini, long after, when he was himself Pope Pius II. As a young man on the make he went with the strong Conciliarist current, and then gradually sensed its weakening, listened to the arguments against the theory, and changed his mind. In 1460 he condemned it in the Bull *Execrabilis*.

The Council of Basle has revealed some theoretical and practical weaknesses in Conciliarism. Obviously, the Council was not elected by all the faithful - no such system was remotely practicable. Nor however was it in essence council of bishops. They did not have a majority against other clerics. Moreover university academics played a central role in its deliberations. The legitimation of the Council as decision making body for the Church was arguably rather shaky: why should priests and university professors stand for all the faithful. Then, on a more practical level, the academics (perhaps predictably) turned out to be better at talking than making

things happen. The Council ultimately fizzled out after a Council called at Florence by Pope Eugenius IV achieved a reunion with the Greek Church - in the same year as Basle's appointment of its rival pope. It was the pope who looked the more credible as a leader of the Church.

Conciliarism was defeated but it was not forgotten and remained a weapon to be used against papal power. Notably, it was a strand in Gallicanism, where it fitted with a model of Catholicism which kept the hands-on power of the papacy at a distance. In modern times Conciliarism has clearly appealed personally to some of its modern Catholic historians, whose studies, while scholarly, would seem to have a distinct apologetic intent. The Second Vatican Council seemed to many to represent something like a Conciliarist term, but its documents tell a different story. While emphasizing episcopal authority, both individual and collegial, this is always presented as conjoined with papal authority rather than as over it. The model of popular sovereignty delegating power to elected representatives which is prevalent in the modern West is ultimately difficult to combine not only with the papal role but also with the emphasis on specifically episcopal, that is, sacramentally hierarchical authority, in the Council documents. Conciliarism flourished in specific historical circumstances and its heyday ended as the circumstances changed.

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