

The conciliar movement and the choice of Basel

*Dr Alexander Ressos, TEP
Attorney-at-Law (Switzerland), Solicitor (Hong Kong),
Solicitor (England & Wales)*

The Council of Basel was the product of the conciliar movement, which had emerged from the crisis of the Great Western Schism. From 1378 to 1417, two and later three rival popes claimed the see of Peter, each with his own college of cardinals, his own curia and his own supporters among the princes of Europe. The schism was ended by the Council of Constance, which met from 1414 to 1418, deposed or obtained the resignation of the rival popes and elected Martin V in 1417. The Council of Constance also adopted two decrees that defined the conciliar movement. The decree *Haec sancta* of 1415 declared that a general council held its power directly from Christ and that everyone, including the pope, was bound to obey it in matters of faith, the ending of the schism and the reform of the Church. The decree *Frequens* of 1417 required the pope to convene general councils at regular intervals.¹

In accordance with *Frequens*, Martin V convened a council at Pavia in 1423, which moved to Siena and was dissolved in 1424 without significant results. The next council was fixed for Basel, seven years later. The choice of Basel reflected several considerations: the city lay within the Empire, whose ruler, Sigismund, was the principal protector of the conciliar movement; it was accessible from Italy, France, Germany and Burgundy; it had a bishop and a cathedral chapter that could host the assembly; and it was a free city whose government could guarantee the safety of the participants.² Martin V died in February 1431, shortly before the Council was due to open. His successor, Eugene IV, confirmed the convocation and appointed Cardinal Giuliano Cesarini as his legate to preside over the assembly.

The Council opened in July 1431 with a small number of participants. Eugene IV, distrustful of an assembly that could challenge his authority, tried to dissolve it in December 1431 and to transfer it to Bologna. The Council refused, reaffirmed the decree *Haec sancta* and continued its work.

The conciliar movement and the choice of Basel

Supported by Sigismund, by most of the princes and by public opinion in much of Europe, it forced Eugene to withdraw his dissolution in 1433 and to recognise the Council's legitimacy. The following years were the high point of the Council, when it attracted the largest number of participants and adopted its most important decrees.

1 Notes

1. Council of Constance, decrees *Haec sancta synodus* (6 April 1415) and *Frequens* (9 October 1417). See the standard editions of conciliar decrees; Helmrath, 1987. ↩
2. On the convocation of the Council at Basel by Martin V and the confirmation by Eugene IV, and the reasons for the choice of Basel, see Helmrath, 1987; HLS, article "Basler Konzil". ↩

For general information only. This article does not constitute legal or tax advice, does not replace advice on an individual case and creates no lawyer-client relationship. It reflects the legal position as of September 2026.

Online version: helveticaregister.com/basel-the-conciliar-movement-and-the-choice-of-basel