

The course of the Council

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The Council pursued three main objectives: the reconciliation of the Hussites, the reform of the Church and the union with the Greek Church.

The Hussite question was the most urgent. Since the execution of Jan Hus at the Council of Constance in 1415, Bohemia had been in revolt against the Church and the Empire, while the Hussite armies had defeated several crusades sent against them. The Council invited the Hussites to Basel, where a Bohemian delegation arrived in January 1433 and debated with the theologians of the Council for several months. The negotiations led in 1436 to the Compacts of Prague, the *Compactata*, which granted the Hussites communion in both kinds and reintegrated the moderate Hussites into the Church.¹ This was one of the Council's successes, showing the capacity of a representative assembly to negotiate a settlement where military force had failed.

The reform of the Church concerned above all the papal curia and its finances. The Council adopted decrees on the regular holding of synods, on the election of bishops, on the conduct of the clergy and, most importantly for our subject, on the fiscal rights of the papacy. The most radical of these decrees, adopted in 1435, abolished the annates, the payments that newly appointed bishops and abbots had to make to the papal treasury, and other fees levied by the curia on appointments and dispensations.² Because it struck at the heart of the papal finances, the decree became one of the principal causes of the final break between the Council and Eugene IV.

The union with the Greek Church was the question that decided the fate of the Council. The Byzantine Empire, threatened by the Ottoman Turks, sought help from the West and was willing to negotiate a union of the Churches as the price of that help. Both the Council and the pope wanted to host the negotiations, because the union would bring immense prestige to whoever achieved it. The Council proposed Basel, Avignon or a city in Savoy; the pope proposed an Italian city. The Greeks, who could not travel

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to a city north of the Alps and preferred to deal with the pope, accepted the pope's offer. In 1437, Eugene IV transferred the Council to Ferrara, and later to Florence, where the union with the Greeks was proclaimed in 1439.³ A minority of the Basel fathers, including Cardinal Cesarini, followed the pope to Italy. The majority remained in Basel and continued as a council in opposition to the pope.

In 1439, the Council deposed Eugene IV and elected as pope Duke Amadeus VIII of Savoy, who took the name Felix V. The election of a layman and prince, who had retired to a hermitage at Ripaille on Lake Geneva, reflected the Council's need for a protector with political and financial resources. But few princes recognised Felix V, so the Council gradually lost its support. In 1448, the King of the Romans, Frederick III, withdrew his protection and the Council moved to Lausanne. In 1449, Felix V abdicated, the Council dissolved itself after electing the successor of Eugene, Nicholas V, as its own pope, and the schism ended.⁴ With the papacy victorious, the conciliar movement lost its force.

1 Notes

1. On the negotiations with the Hussites at Basel (from January 1433) and the Compacts of Prague/Iglau (Compactata, 1436), see Helmrath, 1987; the literature on the Hussite movement. Dates to be verified. ↩
2. On the decree of the Council of Basel abolishing annates and similar payments (21st session, 9 June 1435), see Helmrath, 1987; the literature on papal finances in the fifteenth century. Date to be verified. ↩
3. On the conflict between the Council of Basel and Eugene IV over the venue of the negotiations with the Greeks, the transfer of the Council to Ferrara (1437/38) and Florence, and the union decree *Laetentur caeli* (6 July 1439), see Helmrath, 1987; the literature on the Council of Ferrara-Florence. ↩
4. On the deposition of Eugene IV (25 June 1439), the election of Felix V (5 November 1439), the transfer of the Council to Lausanne (1448) and the end of the Council and the abdication of Felix V (April 1449), see Helmrath, 1987; HLS, articles "Basler Konzil" and "Felix V.". Dates to be verified. ↩

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