

The finances of the Council itself

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A general council was an expensive institution. It had to pay for its chancery, its courts, its envoys and its administration. Its members had to finance their own stay, which was a heavy burden for bishops and abbots from distant regions. And the Council's reforms, in particular the abolition of the annates, deprived it of the revenues that might have financed its work.

The Council developed a complete administration modelled on the papal curia: a chancery that issued documents under the Council's seal, a court, the Rota, that judged ecclesiastical disputes, a penitentiary that granted absolutions and dispensations, and a financial office, the camera, that collected revenues. These institutions charged fees for their services, as the curia did. Once the Council had become, in effect, a rival curia, the fees it collected flowed partly into its own treasury and partly into the pockets of its officials.¹

The most important financial operation of the Council was the indulgence for the union with the Greeks. In 1436, the Council proclaimed an indulgence whose proceeds were to finance the transport of the Greek delegation to the West and the costs of the union council. Because the indulgence was preached throughout Europe, its collection required a network of collectors, depositaries and bankers capable of transferring the proceeds to the Council.² The competition between the Council and the pope over the venue of the union negotiations was also a competition for money: the cities that offered to host the negotiations, among them Avignon, offered loans to the Council to finance the transport of the Greeks, and the pope countered with the resources of the Italian cities.

The financial dimension of the Council's failure deserves emphasis. The Council tried to reform the papal finances by abolishing the fees on which the curia depended, but it could not replace them with an alternative source of revenue. When it deposed Eugene IV and elected Felix V, it relied on

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the wealth of the house of Savoy to finance its operations. The burden of the antipapacy weighed heavily on Savoy's finances. The pope, by contrast, had the support of the Italian bankers, above all the Medici, who managed the papal finances and could advance funds when needed. In the end, the side with better access to credit prevailed.

1 Notes

1. On the institutions of the Council of Basel (chancery, Rota, penitentiary, camera) modelled on the papal curia, see Helmrath, 1987. To be verified. ↩
2. On the indulgence proclaimed by the Council of Basel in 1436 to finance the union with the Greeks, and its collection, see Helmrath, 1987; the literature on the relations between the Council and the Greeks. To be verified. ↩

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