

## STUMBLES, MISSTEPS AND REUNION: COUNCIL OF BASEL-FERRARA-FLORENCE

Ever try to imagine daily life in 15th century **Florence**? For starters, your currency (the **florin**) was marked with an image of John the Baptist (patron saint of the city) on one side, and a lily (city emblem) on the back. Your family could have been silk merchants or farmers. For entertainment, you may have learned to play the **lute**, a plucked instrument held vertically on the lap, complete with **six strings** made of **animal** intestine. **Sorry!** In well-educated families, the children could read and write **Italian, Latin and Greek!** No time for video games here– the kids played **chess** or backgammon. Outdoors, they tested their luck at croquet and archery. Life was hard, yet cohesive and predictable. By the end of the 15th century, Florence had more **woodcarvers** than butchers! **Art** ruled the day, with patrons such as the Medici family. To this day, the Duomo (Cathedral) in Florence, completed in 1436, boasts the largest brick dome ever constructed!

What about ecclesial life? Look no further than the church's 17th ecumenical council for evidence. Begun in **Basel**, it transferred to **Ferrara** briefly before ending up in **Florence**. Yes, it's complicated! Valiant efforts were made to effect reunion between East (i.e. the Orthodox) and West, yet these efforts fell short. It sought: (a) "banishment of the darkness of all heresies" (b) promotion of a "peaceful and tranquil state" following many wars and finally (c) due to the "thistles and thorns of vice," the promotion of "the fruits of virtue." Inaugurated in 1431, **attendance** in Basel (Switzerland) was **sparse**. It dealt with a heretical movement from Prague led by Jan Hus, whom we have earlier discussed. His execution did not stop his followers from continuing his movement. As the Council was fizzling, Pope Eugenius IV felt **prospects** for a **reunion** with the Greeks were better in Ferrara. Some bishops were furious, remained at Basel and elected another anti-pope! Evidently, "popes" were a dime a dozen in those days!

Though this anti-pope "ruled" for ten years, he never gained traction and his "court" dissolved. Church life went on with the real pope. On Jan. 10, 1439, the council was moved again, this time from Ferrara to Florence when a **plague** ravaged Ferrara. Perhaps they also relocated there because in 1436 a **brand-new** Cathedral opened, with a **376-foot-tall** dome soaring to the heavens. There, the **pesky** question of the *filioque* clause of the Creed was discussed yet again, all in hopes of a tranquil peace in the Church. Sadly, it was an imposed union. In 1439, a decree of "union" was signed, and yet after the return of leaders to Constantinople, many of the Greek Catholics **rejected** it. It did not enjoy their support. It did though highlight some key doctrinal areas of agreement: "Also that the body of the Lord is effected in leavened or unleavened wheat bread; and what is to be believed about the pains of purgatory and hell, about the life of the blessed and about suffrages offered for the dead." (Session 8, 1439) This represented progress, providing greater clarity on theological questions.

Key doctrinal **clarifications** included the Catholic teaching on **purgatory** and the nature of the **seven sacraments**. For example, it highlights the three principal components of Penance, including: (1) **contrition** of heart, (2) oral **confession**, which implies integral confession to the priest of all sins that are remembered, and finally (3) **satisfaction for sins** in accordance with the judgment of the priest which is ordinarily done by prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Regarding the priesthood, the Council decreed that "the priesthood is bestowed by the handing over of a chalice with wine and a paten with bread." This is odd, considering that Scripture clearly describes the "laying on of hands." It took until **1947** before **Pope Pius XII** definitively clarified that the "laying on of hands and the prayer of the bishop" are the absolutely necessary components. This is an example of the development of doctrine, a clarification of an earlier one.

Of Baptism, the Council taught: “it should be conferred as soon as it conveniently can; and if there is imminent danger of death, the child should be baptized straightaway without any delay, even by a lay man or a woman in the form of the church, if there is no priest.” We teach **exactly the same** today! One key compromise between East and West merits particular mention. The Greeks accepted the added phrase “and the Son” to the Creed, but were **not obliged** to include it in their creed. Each side “saved face.” But since these agreements with the East were in fact discussed with only a very small contingent, the words did not carry lasting impact, because not enough key players were involved.

The good emerging from this peripatetic council is reflected in mature and detailed teachings on **key aspects** of Catholic **sacramental** theology. Some **legitimate diversity** was embraced, such as the use of leavened (in the East) or unleavened bread in the Holy Eucharist. Regarding liturgy or spirituality, the Catholic Church needn’t insist on absolute uniformity, provided the essentials are the same. That is one of the Church’s greatest gifts– her “catholicity” and variety. The Council of Florence tried to embrace this reality. When Constantinople fell in 1453 A.D. to the Turks, effectively all **communication** between Rome and the Christian East halted, abruptly ending any substantive progress. (To be continued.)

- Mulligan! Following an earlier meeting at which St. Paul religious leaders across the spectrum **objected** to the city’s intrusion into defining what constitutes “accessory use” for religious buildings, we reacted last week to their proposed revisions. The city took a mulligan, with the new wording **much improved**. Government **can** work, but it requires **vigilant citizens** to keep an eye on what is transpiring.
- Brrr! I am not acting like a hearty Minnesotan lately– I’ve been **cold**! It’s November and I can feel it in my hands. Perhaps you too? We try to maintain a **comfortable** temperature in Church, while acknowledging the **increased costs** of heating fuel. Please be **generous** in this our first **heat collection** of the year. Envelopes may be found in the pews and placed in the drop boxes by the exits. Thank you!
- In his first assignment (1997) out of the seminary, **Bishop Andrew Cozzens** served right here at the Cathedral. He will officially **end his formal ministry** in this Archdiocese with a Mass of Thanksgiving **next Sunday** November 28 at **Noon**, prior to his installation as the Bishop of Crookston on December 6th. A reception will follow in Hayden Hall to which you are all invited.
- Out of sight, out of mind? In Minnesota, following upon a guilty verdict, **9,381 adults** are in prison, 613 of whom are “lifers.” Sadly, I’ll admit that **I do not pray** for them or even call them to mind often enough. **We should**. All human beings have God-given dignity and let us remember them as well as all prison personnel in our prayers.
- Our **Divine Mercy Cenacle** has resumed in-person meetings each **Friday at 1:30 p.m.** in the Ryan Room, concluding with the Chaplet at 3:00 p.m. in the Cana Chapel. Access is via the lower-level door on Dayton Avenue. I encourage your participation.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector