

Council of Vienne (1311-12)

Pope Clement V, by the Bull “Regnans in coelis” of 12 Aug. 1308, called a general council to meet on 1 Oct., 1310, at Vienne in France for the purpose “of making provision in regard to the Order of Knights Templar, both the individual members and its lands, and in regard to other things in reference to the Catholic Faith, the Holy Land, and the improvement of the Church and of ecclesiastical persons”. The Bull was sent to the kings of the respective Christian countries and to the archbishops of the various church provinces. The archbishops of every church province with two or three bishops, as designated in the individual Bulls, were to appear in person at the council, the bishops remaining at home were to transfer their rights to their colleagues who had been personally called. The bishops and prelates of all kinds were also to bring to the council proposals and motions in writing concerning the points to be improved in church life. A special Bull of 8 Aug. 1308, directed the Order of Knights Templar to send suitable defensores to the council, before which the grand master and the other chief officials had been commanded to appear in person. The council, however, could not open at the appointed time, on account of the trials of the Templars which were begun in the various countries, and the process respecting Boniface VIII which Clement V had undertaken at the appeal of the French king Philip the Fair. The Bull “Alma mater” of 4 April 1310, postponed the opening of the council until 1 Oct. 1311, on account of the investigation of the Templars that was not yet finished. In September, the pope went to Vienne with the cardinals and on 16 Oct. 1311, the first formal session of the council was held in the cathedral there. This was the Fifteenth Ecumenical Council. In his opening address the pope again designated the three following points as the main tasks of the council: the matter of the Templars; the assistance to be given the Holy Land; and the reform of the clerical order and of morals.

The Acts of the council have disappeared, with the exception of a fragment which Father Ehrle, S.J., found in a manuscript in the National Library at Paris (see below). Consequently there is no positive certainty as to the course of the synod. The number of its members is also variously stated by the authorities. Villiani ("Chron.", IX, XXII, ed. Muratori, "Script", XIII, 454) enumerates 300 bishops, while other authorities whose testimony is more probable give 114 bishops, to which should be added a number of abbots and proxies. The best known proceedings of the council are those respecting the Templars. A commission was appointed to examine the official records concerning the order, in which commission the various classes of participants in the council and the different countries were represented. From the members of this commission was formed a smaller committee of archbishops and bishops presided over by the Archbishop of Aquileia, which was to examine exhaustively the official records and the abstracts of these. The pope and the cardinals negotiated with the members of this commission respecting the matter. The majority of the cardinals and nearly all the members of the commission were of the opinion that the Order of Knights Templar should be granted the right to defend itself, and that no proof collected up to then was sufficient to condemn the order of the heresy of which it was accused without straining the law. As early as the beginning of December 1311, the cardinals and commission had voted to this effect. The pope was in a difficult position, on account of the insistence of the powerful French king. In February 1312, the king himself appeared with a great retinue before the gates of the city of Vienne, and vehemently demanded the suppression of the Templars in a letter of 2 March, addressed to the pope. Clement now adopted the expedient of suppressing the Order of Knights Templar, not by legal method (*de jure*), but on the plea of solicitude for the Church and by Apostolic ordinance (*per modum provisionis sen ordinationis apostolicae*). The pope announced this decision in an assembly of the cardinals, on 22 March 1312. On 3 April, the second formal session of the council was held; the French king and his three sons were present, and the

decision respecting the suppression of the Templars was promulgated. The Bull of Suppression “*Vox clamantis*” is dated 22 March 1312. The pope had retained for himself the decision as to the persons and the lands of the Templars; two further Bulls were issued to cover these points on 2 and 6 May. During the council, apparently at this second session, Boniface VIII was declared to have been a lawful pope, and absolved from the accusations brought against him. Nevertheless, an earlier Decree issued by Clement V was renewed, whereby the King of France was absolved from all responsibility for what he had done against Boniface and the Church.

The synod also took up the question of the Holy Land. In the third formal session, held 6 May, a letter from the King of France was read aloud, in which he promised to take the cross, together with his sons and large numbers of the nobility, and to begin the Crusade within six years. If he should die before this time his eldest son would undertake the expedition. Upon this, it was decided to lay a church tithe for six years for this purpose, which was to be raised throughout Christendom for the Holy Land. Concerning the raising of this tithe, cf. Kirsch, “*Die papstlichen Killektorien in Deutschland*” (Paderborn, 1894), 18. In France the revenues drawn from the tithe for six years were given to the king, who used the money for the war against Flanders. The Crusade never took place, although both the Kings of England and of Navarre had agreed to it at the council.

As already mentioned, the bishops were directed before the meeting of the council to bring with them written suggestions as to the reform of the Church. The pope renewed this demand at the opening of the council. Only three of the proposals sent in are known up to now, namely the treatise of William Durandus, Bishop of Mende, on the holding of the council (“*De modo celebrandi generalis concilii*”), that of Major, Bishop of Angers [in “*Collection des documents inedits sur l’hist. de France. Melanges historiques*”; II (1877), 471 sqq.], and that of James Dueze, later

Pope John XXII [published by Verlaque, "Jean XXII" (Paris, 1883), 522 sqq.]. This material was divided into two parts for discussion by the council: improvement of morals and protection of the independence of the Church. The countless complaints, opinions, and suggestions that were handed in by prelates as well as by secular nobles were systematically arranged and treated. Still it is not known what decrees on these questions resulted from the discussions of the council itself and were promulgated in the third and last session. All that is certain is that a number of decrees on these subjects were proclaimed. These were issued later on 25 October 1317, by John XXII, together with other decrees of Clement V, which the latter had been prevented by death from promulgating. John published them as the collection of the laws of the Church, the Clementines, "Corpus Juris Canonici". The decrees passed at the council which are found in this collection refer to the disputes concerning the Franciscan Spirituals (condemnation of the three propositions attributed to Petrus Johannes Olivi), the dispute about poverty among the Minorites, the mendicants, the visitation of convents by the bishops, the Beguines, the observance of the ecclesiastical hours, administration of religious foundations, matters relating to benefices, the founding of professorships for the Oriental languages at the Curia and at the four chief universities, the management of the Inquisition, and various ordinances respecting the clergy. The council closed with the third formal session, 6 May 1312.