Lesson X (1978-1979)

THE CONCILIAR MOVEMENT AND THE REFORMING COUNCILS (Con.)--
THE COUNCILS OF BASEL AND FERRARA-FLORENCE

Prayer
Scripture: Ephesians 4:1-6
Hymn: 504 "The Church's One Foundation"

THE AFTERMATH OF THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE:

The Council of Constance (1414-1418) in its decree "Sacrosancta" declared the superiority of the council over the Pope: "This Synod, lawfully assembled in the Holy Ghost, forming a general council representing the Catholic Church Militant, has its power immediately from Christ, and all men, of every rank and dignity, even the pope, are bound to obey it in matters pertaining to the faith and the extirpation of the present schism and general reformation of the Church of God in head and members." The council had ended the schism by getting rid of the three popes. Before Cardinal Odo Colonna was elected Pope Martin V he vaguely promised to abide by the councils, to carry out the program of reform laid out by the council, and to carry out the council's decree, "Frequens", which prescribed councils at frequent intervals. Once Martin V was in office he denied that a council was superior to the pope and that the whole question of reform must be left to him. He declared: "No one may appeal from the supreme judge, that is, the apostolic see or the Roman pontiff, vicar on earth of Jesus Christ, or may decline his authority in matters of faith." Instead of carrying out reforms Martin diligently set to work to restore the power and wealth the pope. He renewed the abuses that had brought the church into such a sad condition. Instead of reform he negotiated concordats with the separate nations so that the secular powers no longer backed reforms. Disagreements had greatly weakened enthusiasm for reform making it possible for the pope to adjourn the council.

The crusade against Bohemia and the Hussites dragged on for a generation with little success. First, under the Hussite general, Zizka, and then under the priest, Prokop, the Bohemians defeated the emperor's troops and drove them back.

THE COUNCIL OF PAVIA-SIENA:

Public opinion forced Pope Martin V to call a council at Pavia in 1423 to end the Hussite heresy and to carry out reforms. Martin did not want the council and his supporters worked to discourage and defeat it. Only a handful of bishops came. Sessions were delayed. An outbreak of plague led to the moving of the council to Siena. After boring debates on the authority of a council it was dissolved in March, 1424, with the announcement that the next council would meet in Basel in 1431. Martin V died in February, 1431. A venetian cardinal, Gabriele Condulmaro, was elected Pope Eugene IV. Martin had appointed Cardinal Cesarini to lead a new crusade against the Hussites and to conduct the council. Eugene confirmed both commissions, giving Cesarini authority to dissolve the council and to announce a new council in Bologna in 1433.

THE COUNCIL OF BASEL: Despite papal opposition this council would drag on from 1431 to 1449.

Attendance at the date set for the opening of the council was very small but it steadily grew until it was a representative council.

After suffering a terrible defeat at the hands of the Hussites at Taussig, Cesarini decided on a policy of inviting them to participate in the Council of Basel. The Hussites accepted the
invitation.

Pope Eugene's plans to dissolve the council as soon as it met failed when the members of the council refused to obey the pope and began its work. The council declared its superiority to the pope. The negotiations with the Hussites were long and difficult. The council sent a commission to Bohemia to try to work out an agreement. Finally a treaty known as "The Compactata" was worked out in November, 1433. Catholics and moderate Hussites, the Utraquists, united to crush the radical Taborites. Utraquists were granted communion in both kinds but the priest was to explain that communion in one kind was equally valid. Once the Taborites had been crushed the Catholics turned on the Utraquists since the church did not have to keep faith with heretics.

When the council learned that Pope Eugene had ordered the council dissolved and called for a new council to meet at Bologna, the council declared itself superior to the pope, ordered the pope to withdraw his decrees, and citations to the pope and the cardinals were nailed to the door of St. Peter's in Rome giving pope and cardinals three months to appear at Basel. The pope was forbidden to chose any new cardinals. The pope tried to explain that the council at Bologna would be a continuation of Basel. When the council would not accept this, the pope appointed new presidents for the council at Basel but the council would not accept them. England, France, and the emperor backed the council. The pope found that he could count on only six out of twenty-one cardinals. The pope issued a bull declaring that no decrees of a council limiting the power of the pope had any force. The Milanesia invaded the Papal State and the pope had to flee from Rome to Florence. The council issued a decree that it received its power from God and that the pope was bound to obey it. Pope Eugene had to withdraw his decrees and recognize the council.

The council took up the Jewish problem. The profession of medicine was closed to the Jews, distinctive dress was prescribed for them, and an order was issued for chairs of Hebrew to be established in all universities to aid in converting Jews.

In January of 1435 the council took up the reforming of Christian living. It decreed the end of clerical concubinage and decreed excommunication for bishops who took bribes to allow clerical misconduct.

The council took up the matter of papal finances. Papal taxes, the sale of benefices, and fees were so cut as to leave the pope in poverty. The regulations were so unreasonable as to arouse sympathy and support for the pope. The council went too far. The pope sent the council word that the Holy See could not function without revenue.

In 1437 the picture changed rapidly. The Eastern Emperor, John VIII, and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Joseph II, sent to the pope and the council an offer to enter into negotiations for union between East and West in return for help against the Ottoman Turks who were threatening the Eastern Empire. Both pope and council sent delegations to negotiate. Pope Eugene outmaneuvered the council and split it. The council insisted that the Greeks come to Basel. The Greeks requested a meeting in Italy which would be more convenient. The pope offered to negotiate in Ferrara and the Greeks accepted the invitation of the pope. The more responsible members of the council, including Cesarini and Nicholas of Cusa, joined the pope at Ferrara.

The council at Basel voted to depose Pope Eugene and elected the Duke Amadeus of Savoy to be Pope Felix V. The council at Basel rapidly lost its influence.
Pope Eugene had won a great victory. The unity negotiations captured the imagination of the people. Emperor John VIII, Joseph II, Patriarch of Constantinople, Bessarion, archbishop of Nicæa, and a host of Oriental prelates and scholars came to Ferrara. Lengthy discussions and debates took place in 1438 and 1439. The principal topics were the primacy of the pope, the rights of the Eastern patriarchs, their peculiarities of worship, priestly marriage, and the "filoque" clause of the creed. In 1439 the council moved to Florence. The Easterners accepted the primacy of the pope in vague terms, the West guaranteed the preservation of the rights of the Greek patriarchs, the Greeks retained their rites of worship and the right of the clergy to marry. The Greeks agreed to recognize the "filoque". The reunion of the two churches was joyfully proclaimed in July 1439. Pope Eugene was a hero—the pope's prestige was restored. His victory over Basel was assured even though the reunion failed. Mark, archbishop of Ephesus, refused to sign the unity agreement and went home to denounce the emperor and all who accepted unity with Rome. Eastern monks aroused the people against the agreement. The Turks captured Constantinople in 1453. Bessarion fled to the West where Pope Eugene made him a Cardinal. Eugene excommunicated the Basel pope, Felix.

England, France and the empire worked out difficult compromises with Pope Eugene with each side making concessions. Some minor reforms were carried out. The English king gained a large measure of control over the English church in return for financial support for the papacy. A synod of the French clergy accepted the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges in 1438 giving the French king control over the French church and limiting the flow of money to Rome, while still recognizing the pope as the spiritual head of the church. A German diet drew up the Pragmatic Sanction of Mainz, increasing local control in Germany, but its divided condition still made possible papal exploitation.

Pope Eugene died in February 1447. Ten days later Tommaso Parentucelli, papal legate to Germany, was elected Pope Nicholas V. The Emperor, Frederich III pressured the town authorities of Basel to order the council to find a new meeting place in June 1448. In July the council moved to Lausanne where Felix had already moved. Pope Nicholas V secretly negotiated a surrender with Felix who realized his position was impossible. Felix announced that with the consent of his council he would resign. In January 1449 Nicholas V lifted all sentences and censures against Felix and his council. Felix did the same for Nicholas on April 4. The council met once more on April 16 and recognized Nicholas as pope and Felix as legate and perpetual vicar over the lands faithful to him, granting him first place in the church after the pope and the privilege of wearing the papal dress and at last decreed its dissolution.

Nicholas V allowed these last acts of the council, created Felix a cardinal with authority of legate over his old domain, and gave him a handsome pension for life. Nicholas also made a cardinal of Louis Aleman who had been the leading cardinal at Basel and also made him Archbishop of Arles. He also recognized as cardinals the three cardinals that Felix had created. Such gracious actions completed the victory of Pope Nicholas over the reforming council.

NICHOLAS OF CUSA: The great German scholar and ecclesiastic who had played an important part in negotiations with Hussites and
Greeks was sent to Germany to promote reconciliation and reform. For twelve months (February 1451 to March 1452) he toured Germany and the Low Countries, preaching and holding synods to correct abuses in the churches and monasteries. His success was so great that he was made a cardinal.

THE FAILURE OF THE REFORM COUNCILS:

The conciliar movement ended with the reestablishment of absolutism in both political and religious realms. Those in authority had drawn back in fear of the power of the people. The reformers had not really altered the doctrine of the church. The supremacy of pope and king were too much a part of the mind of the majority. The establishment was against the reformers. The reformers failed to implement their ideas.

Pope Pius II in his bull "Excrabilis" in 1460 anathematized anyone who would go over the pope's head to call a reforming council.

The failure of the reform movement in the fifteenth century left uncorrected abuses in the church that would result in mounting pressures that in the sixteenth century would explode in the Protestant Reformation.