

History of the Crusades. Episode 312. The Baltic Crusades. The Lithuanian Conflict Part XVII. The Council of Constance, Part 1.

Hello again. Last week we took a look at the Hunger War, a conflict between the Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania on the one side, and the Teutonic Order and the people of Prussia on the other side. Both sides ended up trying to starve each other into submission, and eventually the invaders were forced to withdraw from Prussia.

A two year long truce was brokered between the parties, but as we saw in last week's episode, Grand Master Michael Kuchmeister was concerned that the Teutonic Order remained vulnerable to Polish aggression. The Order didn't possess sufficient resources to either hire enough mercenaries to plug its depleted ranks, or to re-equip and re-arm the Order to the level it was at prior to the battle of Tannenberg. So the Grand Master began to look for outside help, a foreign power which would be able to protect Prussia should it find itself facing future attacks from its Polish neighbour. Handily for the Grand Master, a General Council of the Latin Christian Church was about to convene in the picturesque town of Constance in the Kingdom of Germany, so the Grand Master decided to do all he could to add the Teutonic Order to the agenda of items to be discussed at the General Council, with a view to hopefully obtaining some sort of an outcome which would ensure the ongoing viability and protection of both Prussia and the Teutonic Order.

Now, this General Council was going to be a major event in the Latin Christian calendar. It will run on and off for a period of four years, and it will end up achieving its primary objective, which was to end the decades long Papal schism. Before we turn to the Council and the important outcomes it managed to achieve, we first need to take a look at the background leading up to the event.

Now, around the time the Hunger War from last week's episode was in full swing, King Wenceslas of Bohemia was particularly cranky. Two events had increased his anger levels, those events being, firstly, the failure of the Teutonic Order to hand him the overlordship of Prussia following the agreement made by Georg of Wirsberg, and secondly, the fact that his brother, Sigismund of Hungary, was now the Holy Roman Emperor, a position which Wenceslas believed was rightly his, despite the fact that Wenceslas had been the Holy Roman Emperor once before and had been epically bad at it.

In contrast, when he had been elected to the position of Emperor, Sigismund had been positively brimming with happiness, relief, and above all, heaps of ambitious new plans about the directions in which he could take the Empire. Sigismund was not the sort of ruler to do a lot of quiet work behind the scenes and use diplomacy and negotiation to achieve his goals. No, Sigismund was the sort of ruler who craved the spotlight. He wanted to let as many people as possible know about his ambitious plans, and he wanted fanfares, tournaments, and red carpets to accompany both his announcements and his achievements. The trouble was, by the time the Hunger War was playing out, Sigismund's dreams of leading his Empire to ambitious new heights had come crashing up against the solid wall of the reality of getting anything of substance done in the complex political arena of this era. One of the many problems which were acting as a handbrake on Sigismund's flashy red imperial sports car was his brother, cranky old King Wenceslas of Bohemia.

When he became Emperor, back in the year 1411, Sigismund's plan was to lead a large army into Italy, an army large enough to force the Popes to end their schism and to bring

the upstart Italian states, like Venice, back into line. However, the ever unpredictable and irrational King Wenceslas failed to provide Sigismund with military support for this venture, and had upset the fragile relationship between Hungary, Bohemia and the Papacy in his dealings with a local Church reformer named Jan Hus.

Jan Hus was a man born into poverty in Bohemia, who decided to better himself by training for the priesthood. Once he had been ordained as a priest, though, and began preaching to the people of Prague, Jan began pointing out various failures in the Catholic Church. Before long, he had built a dedicated band of reformist followers inside the Kingdom of Bohemia and had begun attracting the ire of a number of senior clerics, including the Archbishop of Prague. Eventually, tales of Jan Hus and his criticisms of the Catholic Church began to circulate around the Kingdom of Germany, and ironically, the more outraged the clerics of Germany became about Jan Hus, the more King Wenceslas of Bohemia came out in support of Jan Hus and his followers.

Now, we all know that King Wenceslas was an unpredictable sort of person, whose years of alcohol abuse may have been beginning to catch up with him, so it's probably unlikely that Wenceslas was supporting Jan Hus' stance because he agreed with him about the shortcomings of the Catholic Church. No, King Wenceslas, was more interested in, well, curious and amusing things, and seeing a local inhabitant of Prague stand up and throw a bunch of theological hand-grenades at the Church establishment was highly curious and highly amusing, and had King Wenceslas cheering him on in delight.

Until the year 1411. What happened in the year 1411? Well, Pope John XXIII became involved, and unfortunately for Jan Hus, Pope John was very good at politics and very good at manipulating people like King Wenceslas. Like the other man-of-the-moment, Emperor Sigismund, Pope John XXIII was an ambitious man who believed that he possessed the ability to solve the Papal schism and various other crises facing the Catholic Church. His plan to solve the Papal schism was that the other two Popes would be forced into stepping aside, leaving him, Pope John XXIII, as the only Pope left standing. However, like Emperor Sigismund, by the year 1411 the ambitious dreams of Pope John had been smashed against the walls of various political realities.

Pope John was an Italian cleric who had been elected as Pope following the death of Pope Alexander V in the year 1410. Pope John immediately set about convincing the powerful Italian states to support his bid to end the schism and become the one and only Pope. However, he was opposed by the powerful King of Naples Ladislaus, who had thrown his support behind the competing Roman Pope, Gregory XII. By the year 1411, Pope John was trying his best to increase his reach and influence, with a view to raising an army to march against a Ladislaus of Naples. Just when Pope John was attempting to establish himself as the Pope to be reckoned with, Jan Hus began loudly denouncing Pope John for his selling of indulgences.

In case you are wondering what an "indulgence" is, the scheme went a little something like this. If you had committed a sin, or in some cases were about to commit a sin, you could obtain an indulgence from the Church, which would reduce the amount of punishment you would receive for your sinful act. All you needed to do, in many cases, was to make a payment to the Church, and Bang! The sin points in your sin tracker were magically reduced. People like Jan Hus were beginning to point out that the practice of paying money to obtain indulgences was a sign of corruption within the Church, and that people

should pay for their sins via acts of repentance rather than making a payment to make them go away.

The up-and-coming Pope John didn't want the upstart Jan Hus and his supporters criticizing his use of the selling of indulgences, so Pope John came to an arrangement with King Wenceslas, whereby King Wenceslas would denounce Jan Hus (after having supported him for the past three years) in return for a cut in the proceeds of the indulgences being sold by Pope John. King Wenceslas heartily agreed, and went so far as to behead three Jan Hus supporters who had declared the indulgences to be fraudulent. King Wenceslas ordered Jan Hus to stop making such a nuisance of himself, and for good measure, Pope John excommunicated Jan Hus.

The end result of all of this was that Prague was now in a state of uproar, and suddenly many people inside both Prague and Hungary were set against Pope John and were suddenly big fans of Pope John's arch enemy Ladislaus of Naples. To cut a long story short, Ladislaus of Naples then cruised to victory on the back of his now expanded power-base, ending Emperor Sigismund's dreams of uniting Italy under one Pope, and ending Pope John's dreams of being the one Pope which everyone was united under. Ladislaus of Naples ended up going on to occupy Rome, forcing Pope John to flee from Rome to Florence.

Pope John and Emperor Sigismund then came up with an idea to convene a General Council meeting, in an attempt to resolve the schism issue in a manner which didn't involve attempting to defeat Ladislaus of Naples militarily. So, in the year 1413, with Emperor Sigismund's full support, Pope John XXIII called for a meeting of the Church to take place in Constance in November of 1414.

In October of 1414 influential men from around Europe began to arrive in Constance to secure lodgings for themselves and await the opening of the Council. The Teutonic Order decided to dig deep into its nearly empty coffers to make an appropriately impressive entrance into Constance. Its delegation, which included the Archbishop of Riga and the Master of the Livonian Chapter of the Order, arrived with nine Prussian knights from the Teutonic Order and 150 horsemen. They ended up hiring a house as well as a hotel to accommodate all of their delegates.

Now, this council will sit from the year 1414 until the year 1418, and there is no way that the Teutonic Order will be able to afford to pay for lodgings over that period of time, so shortly after the Council commenced, everyone from the Teutonic Order delegation upped and left Constance, leaving only two men and a limited staff behind to conduct business on the Order's behalf. Those men were Johannes von Wallenrode, who was the Archbishop of Riga, and the Procurator General of the Order, a man who had previously spent time in Rome lobbying on the Order's behalf.

Now, to say that the Council of Constance didn't turn out the way in which Pope John or Emperor Sigismund expected it to is an understatement. Pretty early on in the proceedings, accusations of corruption and mismanagement began to be leveled against Pope John, which was all a bit awkward, seeing that Pope John had been the man behind the whole Council of Constance idea in the first place. One of the people willing to put up their hand to provide witness statements against Pope John was the Procurator General of the Teutonic Order, who had been privy to a lot of behind the scenes activities by Pope John during his time in Rome.

In the end, it was all a bit too much for Pope John, who decided to run away. In March of the year 1415, with the assistance of Archduke Friedrich IV of Austria, he quickly and quietly made his way out of Constance, disguised as a postman. He planned to head to Burgundy, deciding that, as soon as he was somewhere safe, he would declare the Council of Constance to be dissolved before anything truly nasty or unexpected could happen, like him being forcibly removed from office.

However, Emperor Sigismund was having none of this. He asked everyone to stay put in Constance while he tracked down the fleeing Pope and brought him back. Only a few days later, Emperor Sigismund did manage to apprehend the absconding Pope, and he handed him over to Archbishop Johannes of Riga, with instructions that the Archbishop was to escort Pope John back to Constance. The unfortunate Pope John XXIII was then formally suspended from his function as Pope before a session of the Council, and was ordered to stand trial on a number of charges, including simony and perjury. Pope John appears to have thrown in the towel at that point. In May of 1415, after having been suspended and deposed by the Council, he declared that the actions of the Council were infallible, ratified the findings the Council had made against him, and renounced any claim he held to the office of the Papacy.

So Pope John's mission to cull the Popes down to a more manageable level has backfired spectacularly, with the only Pope to date who has been successfully culled by the Council being himself. Oops. The former Pope John XXIII was then carted off to a prison cell, where he will remain until the Council formally adjourns in the year 1418.

In the end, the Council resolved that the two remaining Popes should also abdicate, and that a brand new single Pope should be elected. The Avignon Pope Benedict XIII refused to comply with this order, and was subsequently excommunicated. Once the way was cleared of Popes, a new Pope, Martin V, was elected in 1417.

So the good news is that the Council of Constance has managed to end the Papal schism, although not in the manner originally envisioned by Pope John XXIII. The bad news is the tumultuous proceedings of the Council of Constance are still to play out, and they are about to backfire spectacularly on yet another influential figure, that man being Jan Hus. Join me next week as the Council of Constance places Jan Hus on trial, and the Teutonic Order attempts to muscle in, to air its concerns. Until next week, bye for now.

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