Was Avignon the “Babylon of the West?”

By [Matthew E. Bunson](http://www.catholic.com/profiles/matthew-e-bunson)

The great Italian humanist and poet Petrarch wrote of the popes during the so-called Avignon Papacy:

*Now I am living in France, in the Babylon of the West . . . Here reign the successors of the poor fishermen of Galilee; they have strangely forgotten their origin. I am astounded, as I recall their predecessors, to see these men loaded with gold and clad in purple, boasting of the spoils of princes and nations; to see luxurious palaces and heights crowned with fortifications, instead of a boat turned downward for shelter.*

These pontiffs—all of them French—resided at Avignon, France, instead of Rome, from 1309 to 1377. The letters of Petrarch were a reflection of his own dislike for Avignon and his desire to see the popes return to the Eternal City. But Petrarch’s harsh caricature of the popes also has served as ammunition for writers, critics, and heretics ever since. Especially significant was Petrarch’s image of the Avignon papacy as the equal to the Babylonian Captivity, the idea that the popes lived in thrall just as the Israelites spent 70 years in captivity in Babylon, an image Martin Luther embraced with alacrity.

Truth be told, the Avignon papacy marked a period of depressing papal weakness, but three myths regarding the Avignon papacy need to be refuted. The first is that somehow the Avignon popes were illegitimate. The second is that the Avignon popes were hopelessly corrupt and therefore damaged the claim of the popes to primacy over the Church. The third is that no good was accomplished by the Avignon popes, meaning they were emblematic of the whole corrupt medieval Church.

A French Battle Royal

To appreciate how the popes found themselves in Avignon, we have to go back to the reign of Pope Boniface VIII and his bitter struggle with King Philip IV the Fair of France. Convinced of the need to restore the papacy to its position of supremacy in Christendom, Boniface found himself opposed at every turn by the French monarch. Their conflict climaxed with Boniface’s famed bull *Unam Sanctam* in November 1302, stressing the superior position of spiritual power over temporal rulers and concluding with the well-known assertion that for salvation, “every human creature be subject to the authority of the Roman pontiff.” Philip was unimpressed with the statement, and on September 7, 1303, his ruthless agent Guillaume de Nogaret—with the help of Boniface’s enemies—seized the pope at Anagni, a day before the pope had planned to publish his excommunication of Philip. Probably tortured, the pope was finally freed after several days by some outraged citizens of the city. Boniface returned to Rome but died on October 12, never having recovered from the shock and humiliation.

There followed the all-too-brief reign of Bl. Benedict XI, from 1303 to 1304. Although saintly, Benedict was too frail to oppose Philip. He died at Perugia, the king ready to carry on a campaign to dominate the Church. Philip’s plans did not work out exactly as he had hoped. Eleven months passed as the deadlocked cardinals struggled to select a new pope. In the end, with the anti-French cardinals divided, the conclave settled on Bertrand de Got, a French lawyer and archbishop of Bordeaux who became Pope Clement V. Refusing the pleas of the cardinals to go to Rome for his coronation, he ordered them to Lyons where he was crowned on November 14, 1305. His reason for doing so: the king’s demand. Clement’s decision was momentous. He soon began appointing French cardinals to reduce the Italian influence in the Sacred College.

Not surprisingly, the next popes, John XXII (1316-1334), Benedict XII (1334-1342), Clement VI (1342-1352), Innocent VI (1352-1362), Urban V (1362-1370), and Gregory XI (1370-1378) were all French. Over the course of their pontificates, they heavily favored French members of the Sacred College: The seven Avignonese popes named 134 total cardinals, and 111 of them were French.

Clement V had planned to return to Rome, but the gentle pontiff gave in to the demands of Philip that the court should stay in France. He wandered around the regions of Provence and Gascony until finally settling in Avignon in 1309. The choice of the city was a seemingly odd one. Avignon had a reputation for being filthy, unhealthy, and dissolute, as Petrarch and others bitterly noted. Still, the city had its advantages. It provided easy access to the sea and was not part of France but belonged to the Angevins of Naples, vassals of the papacy, as part of their county of Venaissin. In essence, the pope was living in papal territory, even more so after Clement VI purchased Avignon outright in 1348.

Not Quite Dissolute Pawns

There was nothing unprecedented about the popes living away from Rome. In fact, the papal court in the Middle Ages was often on the road. The papal court resided in places other than Rome for over 120 of the years between 1100 and 1304, in part because of political crises and in part because of the unwholesome atmosphere in the Eternal City from malaria, heat, and intrigue among the Roman nobility.

Still, a misunderstanding persists that the popes of the time were illegitimate—picked and installed by the French kings. This charge is based on the pontiffs’ reputation as mere pawns to French interests. The fact is that while French kings exercised some influence on the popes’ secular decisions, the Avignon popes were all legitimately elected. They may have been French, but they were still popes, and as we shall see, finding a way back to Rome was never far from their thoughts.

Even worse than the empty claim of illegitimacy are the allegations that the popes were morally bankrupt and dissolute. Pope Clement V has been denounced harshly for his role in the extirpation of the Knights Templars in 1312 at the connivance of King Philip and other crowned heads in Christendom, and for absolving Philip of any wrongdoing in the king’s dealings with Boniface VIII. John XXII was maligned for his nepotism. Clement VI was accused of adoring banquets, spending vast sums on such projects as the Palais Neuf in the city, and indulging in sexual escapades on the ridiculous claim of “improving” his health.

For each attack and suggested failing, every Avignonese pope can be honored for lasting achievements. Clement V helped found the Universities of Orléans and Perugia. John XXII reorganized the Curia, founded new dioceses, promoted learning, codified Church law, and sponsored vast missionary labors that eventually reached China. He also issued the bull *Docta Sanctorum*, the first major papal declaration on Church music, and canonized Thomas Aquinas. Benedict XII initiated both extensive ecclesiastical reforms and issued the bull *Benedictus Deus*, in which he stated the deserving perceive the beatific vision upon death instead of after the Day of Judgment. Clement VI distinguished himself for his personally devout life, and in 1348-1349, as Avignon was ravaged by the Black Death, the old pope helped care for the sick and prevented the hysterical mobs from attacking the Jews in the city out of a superstitious fear that they had caused the epidemic.

Steps Toward Rome

The popes of Avignon were likewise condemned for ignoring Rome. It is certainly true that conditions in the Eternal City proved unsettled, at times even disastrous. Still, they were not entirely absent in their administration.

As early as 1305, the Romans pleaded with the pope to bring back the central government of the Church. Without the papacy, the Eternal City suffered economically and slid into social and political decline. Clement V had hopes of going back, but they never materialized. Benedict XII was so serious in his plans to head to Rome that he financed repairs to the roof of St. Peter’s Basilica and the Lateran and looked forward to moving the court temporarily to Bologna. The political chaos in the city, however, gave the French cardinals a suitable excuse to discourage the enterprise.

Innocent VI recognized that any earnest thought of a Roman homecoming meant that the Papal States had to be stabilized. Cardinal Gil Albornoz, a brilliant Spanish prelate and a talented soldier, was named vicar-general of the Papal States and set out to re-establish papal authority. Literally marching at the head of a papal army, he crushed the many bandits and gangs in the city and at last restored some order. Such was his talent for organization that his 1357 constitution for the Papal States, which divided states into provinces, remained in effect until 1816.

Pope Innocent’s successor, the saintly Urban V, was able to build on this progress and finally entered Rome on October 16, 1367. Urban remained there for three years, residing in the Vatican, as the Lateran was uninhabitable because of disuse. While the court was in Rome, however, the papal administration continued at Avignon, and Urban went on naming French cardinals. Even worse, conditions in Rome gradually deteriorated again after the death of Cardinal Albornoz in August 1367.

Ignoring the pleas of Petrarch, St. Bridget of Sweden, and especially the Romans (who had prospered since his return), Urban returned to France in September 1370. He entered Avignon on September 27, soon fell ill as St. Bridget had warned, and died on December 19. Seventeen cardinals assembled at Avignon and swiftly chose the 42-year-old Frenchman Pierre Roger de Beaufort, who took the name Gregory XI. The last Avignonese pontiff, he began his reign by proclaiming his intention to move the papal court back to Rome as it was the appropriate seat for the Bishops of Rome and was crucial to his wider plans of a genuine reunion with the Eastern Church. Once again, to the anguish of the Romans, political and financial difficulties delayed his plans.

Finally, bolstered by the appeals of St. Catherine of Siena, Gregory processed into Rome on January 17, 1377, ignoring the displeasure of King Charles V of France and the French cardinals, who feared a decline of French influence in papal affairs. Gregory faced much upheaval in the Eternal City during his remaining years of office, but by the time of his death in March 1378 the popes were once more firmly in residence in Rome—where they remained.

A Divisive End

The age of the Avignon popes was at an end. Alas, the next conclave was an unhappy one. The French cardinals in Rome were eager to take the papacy back to France, but the Romans were equally adamant that the popes should stay where they belonged. Aware of the violent reaction that would follow the election of one of their own, the French cardinals chose a candidate not even in Rome at the time, Archbishop Bartolomeo Prignano of Bari, who took the name Urban VI (1378-1389). Pope Urban proved intemperate and bitterly anti-French, and the French cardinals were equally intransigent.

The Avignon Papacy thus left one last legacy: The French cardinals departed Rome and declared Urban’s election invalid because of the threat of the Roman mobs, whereupon they elected an antipope, a Frenchman who took the name Pope Clement VII, and set out for Avignon. So began the Great Western Schism that split Christendom into rival camps, endured until 1417, and was a scandal for all.

While the popes at Avignon were not the corrupt minions of the French crown portrayed by their enemies, the so-called Babylonian Captivity produced a perception of lavish extravagance, worldly interests, and indifference to the suffering of Christians still reeling from the Black Death that did great damage to the reputation, the strength, and the influence of the medieval papacy.

Please thoroughly answer the following questions on another sheet of paper:

1. What does the author claim as one reason why so many historians and pundits have

criticized the Avignon popes?

2. What role did the *Unum Sanctam* play in the Avignon papacy?

3. For what reasons did the popes remain in France?

4. One of the so-called “three myths” the author alludes to is that the pops of Avignon were illegitimate; what evidence does the author use to refute this claim?

5. What does “dissolute” mean? Based on the information in this article, do you believe this term accurately describes the Avignon popes? Why or why not?

6. What challenges existed to the returning of the papacy to Rome?

7. What created the Great Western Schism?

8. What is the author implying in the last paragraph? Try to reword/discuss what you think his final message is meant to communicate.