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A Crisis of Faith:

The Western Schism and its Effect on the Lay Piety Movement

By 1378, the Christians of Europe found themselves divided between two separate popes; one located in the traditional see in Rome while another sat on the papal throne in Avignon. This was partially the result of a bitter political battle Rome and the French territory of Avignon, and the seventy-one years of a papacy absent from St. Peter's. Since the papacy's beginning in the ninth century and into the eleventh century when the bishop of Rome began to assert his power over the rest of the Christian church, the papal seat had been located in Rome. After clashes between the papacy and the French monarchy, the institution of the papacy found itself located in the papal palace in Avignon. Seventy-one years after the first Avignon pope took his seat in the French territory, Pope Gregory XI decided to return to the Eternal City, but the Rome to which he returned was much different than his predecessor had left it in 1305.

The people of the Holy City, and across Europe, changed while the papacy, essentially, had not. While kings and popes were fighting for dominance, a movement for personal religion had taken hold as people struggled to actualize the Christian faith for themselves. The Church controlled what aspects of religion were taught, how they were taught and how people could live virtuous lives. It was believed that through the Church,

a pious life could be lived. But in addition to directing the spiritual life of Christians, the Church played a political role in Europe. In a purely political move, the papacy over-reached in an attempt to exert control over the French monarchy. With this unsuccessful power grab, the French monarchy was able to dominate the head of the Christian church.

During its years in Avignon, the papacy grew more and more corrupt. The Holy See became financially corrupt and was the obvious tool of the French kings. Romans, members of the clergy, and lay people across Christendom pleaded for the return of the papacy to Rome. People, who were not part of the upper Church hierarchy, such as Catherine of Siena wrote to the pope himself, asking for his return to what was considered, the rightful seat of the papacy. However, their hopes of a smooth transition were not realized. The Church structure continued to deteriorate as the papacy moved into the Great Schism, when there would be two legitimate popes elected to preside over Christendom. This split papacy did not mean the end of the Christian Church nor did the schism affect their sense of faith.

Seeing this breakdown of the most powerful religious institution did not cause people to turn away from Christianity nor did it signify the end of Christian faith. Instead, the schism and the corruption that perpetuated it, became the catalyst that forced the lay piety movement to accelerate. This schism gave European laymen and women cause to look at exactly what was wrong with the Church structure. They began to actively seek out their own ways to learn and interpret the faith and bring it out of the sole

control of Church officials. In other words, in this paper I argue that it was because of the Great Schism, that accelerated lay piety movement.

Lay piety is the religiosity of the lay person; people who were not part of the clergy or official Church structure. Emphasis began to shift from relationship with God through the intermediary guidance of priests and bishops to a personal relationship between God and the individual. This movement did not begin with the Avignon papacy, however the movement was directly affected by the schism that resulted in two legitimately elected popes. Sometimes referred to as “modern devotion,” a term that came out of beliefs set forth by communities formed in Germany, lay piety encompassed more than just the turning away from scholastic teaching and embracing simple acts of devotion; it looked at the relationship between the Church and the individual and in whose control does faith lies.

Lay communities began to coalesce around charismatic leaders whose written word both blasted the clergy and offered new paths to God from within the individual consciousness. Through lay communities that formed during the Avignon years, a belief in the *devotio moderna* (modern devotion) formed in response. Leaders in these communities, disgusted with the way that the Church operated during this time, took faith into their own hands, and from these communities, the lay piety movement gained momentum. In turn, faith guides, illustrated Bibles, and devotional manuals spread the words of the movement to wider range of audiences outside of the lay organizations. It is due to the influence of popular figures from these lay organizations and widely distributed printed and translated devotion guides and poorman’s Bibles, that the lay piety

movement spread wider and faster than it had in years prior to the schism. It was because of the schism that the belief lay piety increased.

Protestant scholars first began to look at the lay piety movement in the connection of the Protestant Reformation. In this early study, they are often perceived as "pre-reformers" of the Church, paving the way for Martin Luther (1483-1546) and his ninty-five Theses.[1] The movement fit into larger narratives for the European whole, filling the role as predecessor for other major movements. The people of the lay communities became the "reformers before the Reformation, educators before the Renaissance, pious ascetic before Catholic Reform, democrats before the Revolution, laity before the bourgeois piety."[2] This view has not faded out entirely. In his book, *Reclaiming our Roots: From Martin Luther to Martin Luther King,* Mark Ellingsen looks at the lay communities that formed during the Avignon papacy, with an emphasis on John Wycliffe and the Lollards. His focus is narrow on this specific group, when discussing the period prior to the Reformation. Looking at Wycliffe's dispute with the Catholic belief in *transubstantiation*, or the belief that the Eucharist truly becomes the body and blood of Christ, Ellingsen's area of study solely focuses on the aspects of the lay piety that will carrying on through the Reformation.[3] In keeping with this same view, another more recent book, Charles G. Nauert Jr.'s *The Age of Renaissance and Reformation,* presents the lay piety movement in the same light. Nauert also manages to connect it to the Renaissance as well. The

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[1] John Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvannia Press, 2008), p.3.
[2] *Ibid.,* p.3.
[3] Mark Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots: Martin Luther to Martin Luther King,*(Continuum International Publishing Group, 1999) p. 9.

crisis of the schism and the calls for reforms, Nauert argues, helped lay the foundation for a new European philosophy and new traditions in art, literature and music.[4]

During the nineteenth century, the study of lay piety shifted to promote the nationalistic agendas of the writers. Nationalism drove the narratives as it did so much of the historical scholarship of the time. The Dutch, for example, celebrated and emphasized their local communities and leaders, such as Geert Grote (1340-13804) as their contribution to spiritual renewal. In his history of the schism, published in 1896, Clinton Locke looks at the Italian language and culture evolved due to the critics of the schism.[5] In 1924, Albert Hyma argued that it was the Modern Devout that marked the turning point in European history. The communities that Groote founded, Albert Hyma believes, influenced Late Medieval culture through their lifestyles and their philosophy of what he dubbed "Christian humanism." "This 'New Devotion,' or Christian Renaissance, between 1380 and 1520, absorbed the wisdom of the ancients, the essence of Christ's teachings, the mystic religion of the fathers and the saints of medieval Europe, as well as the learning of the Italian humanists;...assimilated all these ingredients and presented them in a new dress to the old world and the new."[6]

This claim that it was communities of the *devotio moderna*, that was a turning point in Europe's grand narrative was met with a conservative Catholic response, in the form of author R.R. Post who sought to isolate lay piety and 'devotionalists' from the Renais-

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[4] Charles Nauert Jr. *The Age of Renaissance and Reformation,* (New York: University Press of America, 1981) p. vi

[5] Clinton Locke. *The Age of the Great Western Schism,* (Massachusetts: Christian Literature Co. 1896) p.302.

[6] Albert Hyma, *The Christian Renaissance: A History of the 'Devotio Moderna'* (New York and London, 1924) p. 23.

sance, the Reformation, and the new world.[7] Post disagreed with the wide range that Hyma had presented and argued that it was in the scope of Europe and lay piety, the *devotio moderna* was an isolated movement in the Netherlands. Professor John Van Engen dismisses Post's attempt to disconnect the movement from the larger narrative of European history and believes to do so would be reduce the movement's relevance outside of local history.[8] He advocates looking at lay piety and *devotio moderna* in the larger European context.

Since the 1970s, under the influence of disciplines such as sociology and anthropology, historians have looked at other angles to the lay piety movement. Rather than simply focusing on the nationality of the communities that formed or the grand narrative, the study of lay piety has shifted to the microhistory of different lay communities and the individuals involved. Historian John Van Engen examines just the Brethren of the Common Life, in his book, *Sisters and Brothers in the Common Life.* To take the focus even narrower, Sally Mayall Brasher looks solely at the role of women in the lay community of the Humiliati and their effect in the movement.[9] The study of lay piety, in this period, was narrowed down to the impacts made by certain individuals and communities rather than focusing on the larger grand narrative of Europe at this time.

As the awareness of women in medieval history became more prominent with the rise of feminism in the 1960s, authors began to look into the importance and contributions of women dominated communities and leaders. Susan Groag Bell believes that

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[7] Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life,* p. 3.

[8] Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers in the Common Life,* p. 4.

[9] Sally Mayall Brasher, *Women of the Humiliati: A Lay Religious Order in Medieval Civic Life*, (New York: Routledge, 2003)

lay piety spread through the noble class by women through their faith books and control over their household. Caroline Walker Bynum specifically looks at the role that food played in the religious context for medieval women.[10] This study shows how narrow the focus of study of religious practices has become. The inclusion of women into the narrative opened up another aspect of the lay piety movement. Women played an equally important role in the expansion of the movement. It is impossible to ignore the contribution that Catherine of Siena made to the philosophy of living a pious life.

While it is impossible to discuss the effects of the movement independent of the Reformation, those who interpret lay piety principally in a direct connection with the Reformation actually limit the influence and importance of the the people involved. The men and women who, in response to the corruption of the papacy and resulting schism, did not intend to break from the Church. They sought to better it and continue its teaching. So, just like lay piety can not be completely independent from the Reformation, nor can it be fully isolated from the schism and this study of the connection of the growth of lay piety with the schism, is my contribution to this area. This project looks at the relationship between the growth of the lay piety movement and the schism of West and argues that the corruption and political instability of the papacy during the schism led to the criticism of the clergy and to people actively spreading faith amongst themselves.

The Avignon papacy and the resulting schism presented the people of Christendom with many problem within the Church at this time. The largest concern for the laity was the issue of corruption. The papacy was involved, not just with financial corruption, but

[10] Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy feast and holy fast: the religious significance of food to medieval women,* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988)

sexual, political, moral, and familial corruption as well. In their need and desire to finance their corrupt lifestyles found the popes of this period exacting higher and higher tithes from average Christians, as well as using the practice of selling indulgences, or buying one's forgiveness, to further enrich themselves. With this higher income of wealth, the papal court did not hide their lavish ways of living and this practice drew the first harsh criticism from the laity. Beyond financial corruption, people were concerned with the papacy role in politics. The move to Avignon was the result of a failed political move against the French king, and in the years that followed in the French territory, the popes would continue to remain focus of political concerns. This focus allowed for the neglect of spiritual guidance for the European Christians. During both the ongoing financial corruption and political intrigue, the concern about moral corruption continued through each pope.

This corruption and political posturing gave way to another major concern, the instability of the institution of the papacy. With the Great Schism creating two separate popes, Europeans had to decide which one was the true pope. This brought up worries concerned with backing the wrong pope and infallibility of clergymen. Once more, the issue of neglect of Christian's needs comes up, as the Church was focused on interfighting between Rome and Avignon and lost it attention on spiritual guidance. By looking at the imperfect actions of the clergy, the philosophers of the laity began to study medium is which Jesus' teachings could be translated.

There are two events in the history of Christianity that have been referred to as the Great Schism. One refers to the split between the Western Roman Catholic Church and

the Eastern Orthodox Church in 1054; the other is the split of papal power between Avignon, France and Rome. This papal schism is also known as the Western Schism. To understand the spiritual state of the people of medieval Europe, it is important to understand the political climate of Rome when Pope Gregory XI died. The Rome that Gregory returned to had changed in the years that the papacy had been absent from the city. The saga of two elected popes began seventy-one years before with a man named Benedetto Caetani. Elected in 1294, Caetini took the name Pope Boniface VIII and tried to further his power in different ways. He was not always successful in his attempts. On the one hand, he is known for his moves to expand the Church, and in 1300, he declared the first Jubilee, or Holy Year, which drew thousands of pilgrims to Rome.[11] Boniface attempted to increase the wealth of the Vatican and bring further prestige to the Church. With his declaration of the Holy Year, and the subsequent flood of pilgrims pouring into the city, the Church's sale of indulgences was on the rise.[12] The indulgences were a sign of the growing financial corruption that lay critics were concerned with throughout the Avignon papacy.Indulgences eventually replaced penances that people had to pay as part of the expatiation of their sins.[13] With the introduction of the indulgence, the Church was able to "forgive" confessors when a sum of money had been paid. The Church was basically selling its forgiveness.[14] Boniface benefited greatly with the success of his Jubilee and furthered cemented the spiritual centrality of Rome.

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[11] Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes,* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 160.
[12] *Ibid.,* p. 160.

[13] Code of Cannon Law (Cann. 992-997) "Indulgences," *Enchiridion Indulgentiarum*, 4th Edition, 1999, (http://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG1104/__P3I.HTM)
[14] Enrico dal Convolo, "The History of Indulgences," in *L'Osservatore Romano*, May 19, 1999. (http://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?id=1054&CFID=4694091&CFTOKEN=48510964)

Boniface was very adept at financially enriching the Church, but he also sought to better his family and friends, and punish enemies while he was in office. Once in power, Boniface began to wage a personal war against the Colonna family that was historically his own family's rival, even at one point offering spiritual privileges to those who would join him against the Colonna.[15] Here Boniface used his power and authority for a personal agenda. Using papal power for political motivations was not unusual, however during Boniface's term, the politics would outweigh the spiritual guidance for a Christian life. By venturing into the realm of politics, the Church opened itself to the criticism of the people.

Boniface's ultimate fight would come in the person of the French king, Philip the Fair (ca. 1268-1314).Embattled in Gascony with the English, Philip decided to fund his conquest by levying taxes against the clergy that resided in the French territory. Boniface viewed Philip's actions as an infringement on the Church's power and challenged France's rights over church property. This led to the pope issuing the papal bull entitled *Clericis Laicos* in 1296*,* which forbid "the laity to take or the clergy to give away the property of the Church."[16] Relations with the French king grew tense as a power struggle between the Church and the monarchy waged on, forcing Boniface to issue another papal bull in an attempt to assert his authority once and for all. Boniface issued *Unam Sanctam* in 1302 and declared that spiritual authority should judge temporal authority.[17] This was not the first attempt of a pope to declare his ecclesiastical authority; in 1198

[15] Duffy*, Saints and Sinners,* p. 160

[16] Duffy, *Saints and Sinners,* p. 161

[17] Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots,* p. 6

Pope Innocent III issued a similar decree with his *Sicut universitatis Conditor.* Boniface's bull expands further on this total dominance of the papacy's power over the royals, stating "Therefore, of the one and only Church there is one body and one head, not two heads, like a monster."[18] Predictably, this extreme stance on papal power upset Philip, causing him to issue an order of his own, one for the capture of the pope.[19] Once more the pope was too preoccupied with political maneuvering and neglected the spiritual needs of average Christians. This neglect was a major concern for the laity and drew heavy criticism.

The king's emissaries found the pope in his papal residence in Anagni. Arriving in Anagni under the banner of France, Sciarra Colonna, the pope's rival, led three hundred horsemen to the papal palace.[20] Confronting Boniface with cries of "Death to Pope Boniface!." Colonna seized the surprised pope and his men ransacked the palace.[21] Though Boniface was eventually rescued, he had been beaten physically and mentally by the time he had been returned to Rome.[22]The pope died not long after.[23] This whole situation presented the laity with the evidence of the influence of political powers over that of their churchmen. The pope, the leader of the Christian Church had been subdued and fears of the papacy's stability occupied the laity. By providing the precedent for a politi-

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[18] Boniface VIII, trans. Dept. of Philosophy at the Catholic University of America, *Unam Sanctam,* (CUA Press, 1927)

[19] Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots,* pp. 6-7

[20] Vincent, Marvin Richardson. *The Age of Hildebrand,* (Massachusetts: Christian Literature Co.1896) p. 421.

[21] *Ibid.,* p. 421

[22] *Ibid.,* p. 422

[23] Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots,* p. 7

cal power to dominate the head of the Christian Church, the criticism in the Avignon years would include the charge that the pope had become a French political tool.

The pope who followed Boniface, Clement V, was elected by a predominately pro-French party. In an effort to repair the strained relations between the papacy and the French, Clement moved the papal residence to Avignon, and not once during his pontificate did he return to Rome. For the next sixty-eight years the popes were elected by Frenchmen and officiated from French territory.

The French papacy was rife with corruption, serving as a tool for the French monarchy and aiding in its conflict with England during the Hundred Year's War. With an obvious bias toward the French, the Avignon papacy alienated Christians who were France's rivals. The corruption within the French papacy also alienated the faithful lay people. The French popes were embroiled in sexual scandals, political intrigue, and extravagant living on the tithes of ordinary Christians. The papal court looked more like a royal court with ostentatious display of wealth that starkly contrasted to the vows of poverty that the monastic clergy made. One instance of the extravagant lifestyle, was when Clement VI celebrated his ascension to the papacy in 1342. He decided to throw a feast. Records show that for this single-day extravaganza, the kitchens prepared 118 roast oxen, 1023 sheep, 914 lambs, 7428 chickens, 1195 geese, 3043 fowl, 39,980 eggs, 6000 pounds of almonds, 50,000 tarts and 90,000 loaves of bread just for the pope and his court of cardinals. The food was seasoned with gold leaf and served on gold plates.

An influential writer, Francesco Petrarch famously dubbed these Avignon years, as the "Babylonian Captivity". He was an early critic of the French papacy, and the abuses of which took note were the same ones that would influence the thinkers of the lay piety movement. In Petrarch's letter to a friend, he describes the French popes, "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."[24] The corruption was obvious. Feasts and displays of wealth were not just limited to Clement VI's, as Petrarch's letter further describes the corruption,

> Instead of holy solitude we find a criminal host and crowds of the most infamous satellites; instead of soberness, licentious banquets; instead of pious pilgrimages, preternatural and foul sloth; instead of the bare feet of the apostles, the snowy coursers of brigands fly past us, the horses decked in gold and fed on gold, soon to be shod with gold.[25]

These criticisms of the papal court, for their rich living impacted the creation of lay communities. Much like the monastic aspect of the Church and their vows of poverty, many communities in the *devotio moderna* also rejected the wealthy life and in fact choose to live in poverty as a show of their faith. This makes the lay organizations different from the monasteries; the monks and nuns take vows of poverty when they enter the monastic life, while the laymen and women voluntarily follow the same course. They

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[24] Petrarch, *Letter to a Friend, 1340-1353*, Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14cpetrarch-pope.html

[25] Petrarch, *Letter to a Friend, 1340-1353*, Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14cpetrarch-pope.html

opposed more than just the extravagant lifestyles of the papal court orders such as the Spiritual Franciscans, also opposed the fact that the pope owned land in his name.[26]

The papacy, too accustomed to being used as a political tool for the French, was not focused on being the spiritual guide for the laity. Returning the papacy to Rome seemed to be the solution to Church critics, in an attempt to restore the papacy's prestige that it had at its height during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Catherine of Siena believed that the Pope had grown too weak and she became one of the strongest proponents for the return to Rome. Calls for the return of the papacy to Rome echoed throughout the Church.[27]

In order to restore papal spiritual authority and focus, Pope Gregory XI made the decision to return to Rome practically from the moment that he was elected to pope in 1370. It was a decision that would draw controversy from all around him in his papal court.[28] He was a Frenchman, as was his court of cardinals, and the papacy had been located in Avignon for sixty-eight years now; the opposition was fierce on the French side. But despite these obstacles, Gregory entered Rome in January of 1377.[29]

The situation in Italy grew dire when Gregory was elected. Unhappy with the pope residing in Avignon, threats of revolts sprang up among the Papal States. Romans believed the pope's place was in Rome, and they were not above threats to get Gregory there as swiftly as possible. One way they went about it, according to the Inquisitor of

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[26] Norman F. Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages,* (New York: HarperCollins, 1994) p. 499.
[27] Ellingsen, *Reclaiming Our Roots,* p. 7

[28] Richard C. Trexler, "Rome on the Eve of the Great Schism", Speculum, Vol. 42, No. 3 (Jul., 1967) p. 489.
[29] *Ibid.,* p. 489.

Aragon at that time, was to threaten the election of their own pope from their citizenry, thus creating a rival pope. The Inquisitor of Aragon writes about how the Roman ambassadors, during a meeting with the pope, stated "the Romans would provide themselves with a pope who would live in Rome," and thus separate themselves from the Avignon papacy by electing their own Roman pope, if the pope himself would not relocate.[30] Once more the pope was the subject of political bickering and the issues of faith and the importance of the Sacraments were being pushed aside for the power of papal location. Many lay critics looked at this problem of the emphasis on the political nature of the papacy when writing their philosophy of private faith.

Viva il papa! greeted Gregory on the 17th of January, 1377, when he finally set foot in the city of Rome. However the political climate of Rome where Gregory arrived was not as joyous as the crowds that attended his homecoming; the Rome that Gregory encountered was thick with tension and worry about what was going to happen now that the people had finally succeeded in bringing the papacy back to the Eternal City.[31] In Rome itself, there were worries concerning the loyalty of Gregory, elected in Avignon, by a French conclave and of French nationality; would he put Roman interest first or would he always be under the thumb of Avignon and be no different than the other popes who had resided in the French territory.[32] Gregory did not ease these tensions, when in the summer of 1377 he moved to the papal residence at Anagni. This move brought up the fears that the papacy was not a permanent fixture in Rome anymore and that the pope

[30] *Ibid.,* p. 491.

[31] Trexler, "Rome on the Eve of the Great Schism", p. 493.

[32] *Ibid.,* p. 492.

would never return to the city or that the pope was using this period of time away from Roman eyes to amass an army and planned to take over the city.[33] This fear of the instability of the papacy is one of the causes that would enable people to turn to lay communities. Another issue was brought up with the pope out of the Eternal City. What would happen when the pope died? Nothing would be able to stop the French from using that moment to elect another French pope, or seize the opportunity to move the papal seat back to Avignon. It is clear that the Romans, though having succeeded in bringing the pope back to their city, thought they had a tenuous hold on keeping him there and that Avignon was a constant threat to the proper seat of the Holy See. Once more the focus was not on spiritual guidance but rather the political power that would be gained with the location of the pope. This continued fighting for power served as an example of what was wrong with the Church.

In March of 1378, Gregory did die, but he did so in Rome. As the conclave gathered to elect the next pope, Rome was mobbed by worried and suspicious crowds, terrified that the French cardinals would elect another Frenchman and move the papacy back to Avignon.[34] Under such pressure, the Conclave of Cardinals elected Bartolommeo Prignano, a Roman and the archbishop of Bari, as the next pope. He selected the papal title of Urban VI. Prior to becoming pope, Urban had been a leading and well-respected cardinal acting as a regent of the papal chancery in Avignon. However, when he took the office of the pope, he turned out to be a violent and paranoid man. The cardinals found

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[33] *Ibid.,* p. 495.

[34] Duffy, *Saints and Sinners,* p. 168.

that he was unmanageable and too difficult to deal with, leading to their renouncement of Urban and him fleeing Rome back to Avignon. The cardinals claimed that Urban's election was null and void due to the duress they were under when they were forced to elect a Roman pope.

With the entire Curia now back in Avignon, they gathered once more and elected the bishop of Geneva as their new pope, Pope Clement VII. Back in Rome, Urban, now without his court of cardinals, appointed a court of his own consisting of twenty-nine cardinals from all over Europe. Christendom now had two spiritual leaders, supposedly given their power by God, himself; the Great Schism had begun. Europe had two fully functional papal administrations, two ecclesiastical legal systems, and two popes; the people had to choose between Urban and Clement at to whom they would follow. There had been antipopes before; elected by rival groups and claiming to have the true spiritual authority, but never had they split the people because they were not elected by a legitimate source. Urban had been elected by the proper Christian process, by the proper cardinals of the *il conclave* only to have those same cardinals denounce the pope's rule and elect Urban's successor through the same process. The cardinals believed, with Clement's election, Urban's tenure was over, but Urban was not putting in his resignation yet; the Church faced an unprecedented situation.[35] Presented with two, legally elected popes, the Church's attention continued to be focused on power and control instead of the practice of faith and devotion. The papacy, now divided between two cities, and after years of corruption and instability, made no attempt at this point to re-

[35] Duffy, *Saints and Sinners,* p. 168.

form itself. These concerns of the corruption and political focus remained unaddressed and people began to turn to options of lay piety.

The spilt between Rome and Avignon would continue into the early fifteenth century, with each side electing its own successor with the death of the given pope. The cardinals and Roman Pope Gregory XII and the Avignonese Pope Benedict XIII met to form the Council of Pisa, in an attempt to end the schism in 1409, but instead of forging a resolution, they exacerbated the problem by electing a third pope, Alexander V who would reign for one year until his death and be succeeded by John XXIII.[36] Europe was now faced with three popes.

During the Schism, the Church hierarchy had been split and its attention turned inward. The political machinations of the royal elites can be seen in the way that the French and English monarchies dealt with the splitting of Church power. The feelings of the lay people are not so easily gauged. How were these people handling the break up of their religious authority? Without that absolute leader that the papacy once represented to them, the laity were forced to turn to their own versions of lay piety to express their religiosity. Men and women, rather than becoming disillusioned with the Church, identified the missteps of the papacy and sought their own ways of continuing in their person faith. Evidence of this movement can be seen in the appearance of manuals that outlined the proper personal worshipping of Christ, in the printings of such books as the *Bibla Pauperum* (*The Pauper's Bible*), in the urgings and examples of saints, like Catherine of Siena, and the growing communities that offered environments as alternatives

[36] Locke, Clinton. *The Age of the Great Western Schism,* (Massachusetts: Christian Literature Co. 1896) p. 134.

for churches that still allowed for the practice of individual faith. The Western Schism offered the intellectuals and philosophers of the laity a motivation and cause to spread their belief in lay piety further than it had gone before.

One of the most influential of these charismatic lay leaders was Catherine of Siena (1347-80). She was not an educated nun but was born to a poor family as the twenty-third of twenty-five children. At a young age, she renounced marriage and declared that she would spend the rest of her life in service to the Lord and joined the Third Order of St. Dominic. Catherine devoted her life to feeding the poor and spreading the word of God. Her work attracted many people throughout northern Italy. She began to write letters to those who followed her. These letters provide a wealth of information on her views of devotion, practice of faith, and her opinion of the French papacy. The letters also served as an example for men and women seeking a return to a purer faith. Her letters show that Catherine is aware of her followers and she gives instructions of how to continue living faithfully for God. She warns against sin, pride and impatience, and she writes of the importance of humility. In her letter to Monna Alessa Del Saracini, a noble widow in the Order of St. Dominic, Catherine instructs her readers to create two separate "'homes' for thyself, one physical that would not be left unless for necessity, and a spiritual "home" inside oneself, where "the cell of true self- knowledge, where thou shalt find within thyself knowledge of the goodness of God."[37] This shows Catherine's belief that people could seek God for themselves.

[37] Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Monna Alessa Del Saracin*i, trans. Vida Dutton Scudder (London, New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1905),

By instructing her followers to seek the knowledge from within, Catherine of Siena acknowledges the ability to live a spiritual life despite the corruption of the papacy. However, that is not to say that she advocated breaking away from the Church. In fact, in her letters, she often advised her followers to still make time to attend church: "Order thy time: the night to vigil, when thou hast paid the debt of sleep to thy body; and the morning in church with sweet prayer."[38] The lay piety movement did not separate itself from the known Church to form one of its own, rather it focuses on strengthening the bond between the individual and God. This strong relationship is supported by Catherine: "From living faith one will derive a will in accord with that of God."[39] She recognizes the importance of the communities that coalesced around her teachings and champions working together to achieve a more devout way of life, writing to her followers in Siena, "Therefore I beg that you be not negligent, but zealous; do not shift about in the wind like a leaf, but be firm, stable, and constant; loving one another with true brotherly charity, bearing one another's faults."[40] She ends the letter by asking Sano, to whom she addressed the letter, to read her word out loud to her "children". From an early age, Catherine of Siena devoted her life to God and continuously sought to live as faithfully as she could.

Sharing her wisdom did not limit her to just the poor in the cities to which that she travelled. As the numbers of her followers grew, so did the range of recipients of her letters. She took to writing to some of the most influential people of this time, such as Pope

[38] *Ibid.,*

[39] Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Sano Di Marco and All Her Other Sons in Siena,* trans. Vida Dutton Scudder (London, New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1905),

[40] Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Sano Di Marco and All Her Other Sons in Siena.*

Gregory, himself. She affectionately call him, “Babbo,” Italian for daddy, and took up the call for his return to Rome. She could see the corruption that had been taking place in Avignon. “Do you uproot in the garden of Holy Church the malodorous flowers, full of impurity and avarice, swollen with pride: that is, the bad priests and rulers who poison and rot that garden,” she wrote to Gregory.[41] This opulent lifestyle for which the papal court in Avignon had become known went against Catherine’s belief in a life of poverty. She considered the rich display a threat to the Church, saying, “Christ holds three vices as especially evil--impurity, avarice, and swollen pride, which reign in the Bride of Christ among the prelates, who care for nothing but luxuries and honours and vast riches.”[42] She clearly disapproved of the way things are being managed in Avignon. It was specifically the Great Schism that pushed Catherine of Sienna to champion lay piety and the accounts for her tremendous popularity with the people of Sienna.

This opulent lifestyle for which the papal court in Avignon had become known went against Catherine’s belief in a life of poverty. By acknowledging this abuse, Catherine seeks reform from within the Church’s structure when she pleads with Gregory, “you and the Holy Father ought to toil and do what you can to get rid of the wolfish shepherds who care for nothing but eating and fine palaces and big horses.”[43] In writing to Gregory, Catherine scorns the clergy members whom she believes lost the way,

> Alas, what confusion is this, to see those who ought to be a mirror of voluntary poverty, meek as lambs, distributing the possessions of

[41] , Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Gregory XI*, trans. Vida Dutton Scudder (London, New York: J.M. Dent and E.P. Dutton, 1905),
[42] *Ibid.,*

[43] Catherine of Siena, *Letter to Gregory XI.*

> Holy Church to the poor: and they appear in such luxury and state and pomp and worldly vanity, more than if they had turned them to the world a thousand times! Nay, many seculars put them to shame who live a good and holy life.[44]

She even goes as far as to tell Gregory that he needs to be strong and manly in the face of the "devils" in Avignon; she pleads, "Be manly in my sight, and not timorous."[45] Fiercely critical of how the papacy was progressing, Catherine of Siena's opinion was echoed among the followers in her order.

Through her work with the sick and poor, she gained popularity that allowed her to address the pope. She could see the corruption within the papacy and while preaching for reform, her example inspired others to seek out their own personal piety. It was the schism, then, that created the environment in which this simple urban girl was able to gain enough prestige to write the most powerful man in Christendom.

As mentioned above, Francesco Petrarch held many of the same criticisms that Catherine spoke of. He had spent his childhood and several of his adult years in Avignon, but he did not enjoy his time there. In his letter to a friend, Petrarch's disgust at both the papacy, and of Avignon, which is described as "the sun in its travels sees nothing more hideous than this place on the shores of the wild Rhone" is evident.[46] Like many of the philosophers of the lay piety movement, there is a nostalgic sound to Petrarch's letter, as he wrote about the early Church fathers in comparison with the French popes, "We no longer find the simple nets which were once used to gain a frugal suste-

[44] *Ibid.,*

[45] *Ibid.,*

[46] Petrarch, *Letter to a Friend, 1340-1353*, Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14cpetrarch-pope.html

nance from the lake of Galilee, and with which, having labored all night an caught nothing, they took, at daybreak, a multitude of fishes, in the name of Jesus."[47]

Like Catherine of Siena, Petrarch makes the comparison of how the papal court now looked like a king's, "In short, we seem to be among the kings of the Persians or Parthians, before whom we must fall down and worship, and who cannot be approached except presents be offered."[48] Once more it apparent, how visible the popes were living lavishly to the laity across Europe. This criticism of financial corruption in the Avignon papacy and schism heavily influenced the men and women of the lay piety.

With the papacy too focused on politics and greed, and people believing that they could achieve a pious life outside the dictates of the clergy, many turned to communities where they could practice their faith. One of the most important communities to form during the Avignon papacy was the Brethren of the Common Life. Lay men and women, living together in a communal system, educated children in faith independently of the Church. From the Brethren of the Common Life came the philosophy of *devotio moderna.* The *devotio moderna* movement began in the mid fourteenth century led by Geert Groote (d. 1384). In 1366, Groote found himself residing in the papal court of Avignon as a monk from Utrecht, relishing the rich and luxurious life that Catherine of Siena criticized.

However, in 1374, Groote underwent a strong spiritual reawakening, due in part to a critical illness he suffered earlier that year. After renouncing the rich lifestyle of the Avignon court, he spent three years in a Carthusian monastery. After this experience in

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[47] Petrarch, *Letter to a Friend, 1340-1353*, Medieval Sourcebook, http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/14cpetrarch-pope.html
[48] *Ibid.,*

Avignon, Groote began to form his philosophy of modern devotion. Groote received ordination as a deacon and began missionary preaching in Utrecht. His preaching attracted many people and from these sermons *devotio moderna* emerged. *Devotio moderna* supported the use of doctrinal Christian texts for one's own personal study. Groote firmly believed that it was the responsibility of each individual to take up the suffering of Christ and imperative to for each person to break his or her own will to conform to that of Christ's, saying "For what is more forceful than to break your own will? What more divine, what richer than to conform to the will of God?"[49]

He looked to the original Church Fathers. Groote strongly believed in the vow of poverty and was staunchly opposed to the same elaborate living of the papal court that Catherine of Siena criticized. In 1379 Groote founded the predecessor to the Brethren of the Common Life, the Sisters of the Common Life. Groote used his wealth to purchase homes for the women and he wrote up a constitution for their association.[50] The women took the vow of poverty and lived together in a commune style, where they shared expenses and labor. It was on the Sisters, that the Brethren of Common Life was modeled. These communities, formed in the aftermath of the Avignon papacy served as the educational centers that allowed for the philosophy of *devotio moderna* to spread. It is important to see here, how Groote was influenced by the corruption in Avignon, and how the failures of the papacy aided his contributions to furthering lay piety.

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[49] Geert Groote, *On the Patience and Imitation of Christ,* (1380-4) p. 90.

[50] Prudence Allen, *The Concept of Woman: The Early Humanist Reformation 1250-1500,* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2006) p. 753.

Inspired by the *devotio moderna,* which advocated that all men and women learn from doctrinal Christian texts, popularity of the Bible and devotional guides rose. However, literacy was not widespread at this time, so in order to learn the stories of the Bible, people had to attend church. As the lay piety movement spread, the laypeople had to find another way to teach themselves the story of Christ for those who could not read. They still attended church, but sought a deeper understanding of the basic Christian stories that was provided by the corrupt clergy, who neglected to teach the people basic precepts. This lead to the woodcut prints of the *Biblia Pauperum,* which are created by a stamp made of wood. While some of the printed Bibles had images, the *Biblia Pauperum* was created especially for those who could not read Latin and instead the stories of the Bible were told through pictures.[51] The woodcut made these Bibles easier to produce and distribute among the people. The need for translations had also made direct knowledge of the Bible difficult across Europe, but this was not the case with woodcuts. The *Biblia Pauperum, was* meant to be looked at more so than to read and was printed on paper. Paper was cheaper than vellum and it allowed for more to be printed.[52] Many of these Bibles were produced by the men and women in the Brethren of the Common Life communities. The corruption and the schism of the papacy, having played a major role in the Groote's creation of the Brethren, therefore also had a part in the reason and the need for the woodcut Bibles to be spread around Europe.

However, piety was not just spread throughout the illiterate, noble literate women used books and their own influence over the household to spread lay piety. Author Su-

[51] Perserved Smith, *The Age of Reformation,* (H. Holt and Company, 1920) p. 26.

[52] Gertrude Burford Rawlings, *The Story of Books*, (George Newnes,Limited. 1901) p. 74.

san Groag Bell looks at the lay piety movement with a narrow focus on women and their relationship with books. Bell finds evidence that the growing spread of lay piety was greatly influenced by book-owning women.[53] Medieval book-owning, traditionally has been described as a male dominated practice, closely associated with monasticism. This is simply not true. Monks, rarely nuns, are viewed as the scribes and the readers of the religious books that were available at the time, however Bell points out that from the ninth to the fifteenth century, there is considerable evidence of laywomen in the upper class of European society that read and owned books.[54] Tracing back book ownership, Bell comes to the conclusion that the number of laywomen book owners increased dramatically from the late fourteenth century and furthered multiplied by the fifteenth.[55] The schism had affected all classes across Europe and with the criticisms and ideas that had been fostered in the lay communities that produced these faith books, women were able to take control of their personal faith and their children's spiritual education.

In the thirteenth century, women had a prominent role in monastic life. Female religious communities began to emerge, such as the Dominicans, of which Catherine of Siena was a member, the Poor Clares, and the Beguines.[56] The Beguines are often associated with the Brethren of the Common Life. They were an informal group of laywomen who were usually of middle-class urban backgrounds.[57] Though many of these female groups held the same beliefs as the Brethren, these growing groups were not

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[53] Susan Groag Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners: Arbiters of Lay Piety and Ambassadors of Culture," *Signs*, 7 (1982): 743.
[54] *Ibid.,* 743.
[55] *Ibid.*, 745.
[56] Bell, "Medieval Women Book Owners" p. 752.
[57] Cantor, *Civilization of the Middle Ages,* p. 499.

always welcomed by the male hierarchy of the Church. More often than not, these women were associated with heretical movements.[58] According to Bell, it is because of this negative attitude to their devotion that the women in these communities took to religious books.[59] Looking at the different types of books that medieval women owned, Bell finds of the different laywomen identified who owned books before 1500, seventy-five percent of their collection included books devoted to piety.[60] The way that Bell believes the women shaped the lay piety movement was through the education of their children. The women commissioned from printers what they wanted their children to read. It was through these commissions that the women were able to influence artistic and ideological development.[61] The women would choose between alphabet Psalters, Gospels, or Book of Hours. A Book of Hours (in Latin, *horae),* is a collection of texts, prayers, and psalms. They sometimes included calendars with Church festivals and saints' days. In choosing the information that was taught to their children, laywomen were spreading piety, without the aide of the rigid male dominated Church hierarchy. The widespread evidence that women did in fact own books shows how the lay piety movement further their teachings. These books of piety that the women chose to educate their children with, are the results of the teachings that originated in the lay organizations. In other words, when Europeans began to reject the male clergy as corrupt, due in part to the schism, this opened the door to the influence of lay women on Christian spirituality.

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[58] *Ibid.*, p. 752.
[59] *Ibid.*, p. 752.
[60] *Ibid.,* p. 753.
[61] *Ibid.,* p. 757.

Spurred on by the continuing papal corruption and negligence of average Christians' needs, private faith guides were introduced to the laity. The faith guides instructed people how to go about their lives in a pious fashion without actually living in the lay communities. Thomas À Kempis is the author of the guide to spiritual devotion entitled *The Imitation of Christ*; it got its title from the name of the four books that make up the guide, *De imitatione Christi et contemptu omnium vanitatum mundi.* It first appeared anonymously in 1418, four years after the Council of Constance ended the schism that had divided the Church.

Most of *Imitation* is written in simple statements, describing how best people should live their lives like Christ, with some chapters appearing in meter and rhyme. Through its straightforward writing style, *Imitation*, instructs readers not to live their lives like saints or the clergy, for they are imperfect and Jesus' teachings are far superior to their teachings. This echoed later in the writings of Erasmus, who believed that the philosophy of God is always corrupted when placed in the hands of the clergy. When the word of God becomes translated through the imperfect words of a clergyman, it is no longer as pure as Jesus' teachings. This emphasizes the importance of the individual's relationship with Christ. Catherine of Siena advocated something similar, when she explained that a person needed to have two "homes," the physical and the one devoted to seeking the true knowledge within themselves.

Through the observation of the corruption in the Church, the proponents of the lay piety movement championed the idea that by solely accepting the teachings of the clergy, they are inherently taking in flawed lessons and are furthered removed from

Christ. However, seeking a pious life through the self, allowed for a closer relationship to God. *Imitation* states that a simple man or woman can lead a just and holy life and that he or she did not have to have knowledge to accept the way of Jesus. “Every man naturally desires knowledge but what good is knowledge without fear of God? Indeed a humble rustic who serves God is better than a proud intellectual who neglects his soul to study the course of the stars.”[62] À Kempis wrote *Imitation* in accordance with the belief movement that he was apart of, *devotio moderna.* À Kempis was schooled with the Brethren of the Common Life as the schism was taking place. The belief in personal religiosity influenced his writings and the very existence of the *Imitation of Christ* reflects his school of thought. The book was originally printed in Latin, which was the language of the Church and Church scholars. However, there is a surviving manuscript of *Imitation* from 1441 that is translated into French. Other translated copies exist as well in other languages, such as Catalan, Italian, German, English and even an Arabic translation turns up in 1663. The translated copies in the vernacular language, made it easier for those who did not read Latin to practice their faith without the aid of the clergy.

Imitation gave the layperson a chance to worship and live a godly life without having to go to the clergy and repent or pay for indulgences. In *Imitation,* people were urged to read the Scriptures for themselves and try to glean truth from what has been written in the past. “If you would profit from it, therefore, read with humility, simplicity, and faith, and never seek a reputation for being learned. Seek willingly and listen attentively to the words of the saints; do not be displeased with the sayings of the ancients, for they were

[62] Thomas À Kempis, trans. Aloysius Croft, Harold Bolton. *The Imitation of Christ, (*USA: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1940) p. 4.

not made without purpose."[63] Though À Kempis early warned of imperfect representations of Jesus' teaching through the clergy, that does not mean he taught people to ignore the words of the sainted. It is only people's interpretations of Jesus' words that cause problems. The saints lived very holy lives and by their examples, anyone could follow in their path. The men and women living in the Brethren of the Common Life reproduced *Imitation of Christ,* much like the illustrated Bibles, allowing for the beliefs of the lay piety movement to be seen by many more than those in the communities where it was being taught. It is relevant to see how much Groote and À Kempis were influenced by the corrupted lifestyle in Avignon. It can be seen in how they preached and instructed people to understand that the clergy was not pure enough to interpert Jesus. *Imitation* was À Kempis' way to get those instructions to a wider audience.

Like Catherine of Siena, Desiderius Erasmus Roterodamus (ca. 1466) did not approve of the state of the Church, but while Catherine criticized the extravagant lifestyles of the papal court in comparison with the vows of poverty, he brought out issues with formalism, or going throught the motions of a faithful life without truly understanding why. Erasmus had also been a student of the Common Life. And Groote's philosophy born from his experiences in Avignon, had been passed down to Erasmus. In 1503, Erasmus published the *Enchiridion militis Christiani,* translated into *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier*. Erasmus wrote *The Handbook of the Christian Soldier* on behalf of a particular woman in order to help her husband begin living a more pious life. The text was translated into all major European languages, and more than seventy editions of

[63] *The Imitation of Christ*, p. 9.

the Latin text survive, all serving as a testament to its popularity.[64] Erasmus expanded beyond the woman and her morally-challenged husband's story, saying, "I composed it not in order to show off my cleverness or my style, but solely in order to counteract the error of those who make religion in general consist in ritual and observances of an almost more than Jewish formality."[65] By not explaining and seeking to explain why along with the how, Erasmus believed that the Church was more than corrupt in action, but in its ideas as well.

In his preface to *The Handbook for the Christian Soldier,* Erasmus bluntly asks the reader, "Is there any religious man who does not see with sorrow that this generation is far the most corrupt there has been?"[66] Once more like Catherine of Siena, Erasmus does not advise people to turn against the Church, rather he uses the examples of corruption as a rallying point to bring the people together and urge them to look within themselves to change how faith is taught and seek a way to God individually. Times are desperate, he believes, but there is hope. "The winter of our wickedness never brings so low the fire of charity that it cannot be rekindled from the flint."[67] Erasmus recognizes that the philosophy of God is something pure that is "sullied" when placed in the hands of clergymen. Expanding on the beliefs of the Brethren, he offers a theological solution. In his diagram, Christ is in the center, never moving, with several other circles around that; similar to the sun and planet orbits. Erasmus describes his circles as such, "Ecclesiastics form the first circle around Christ, secular princes the second, and the common

[64] Desiderius Erasmus, edited by Erika Rummel, *The Erasmus Reader,* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990) p. 138.
[65] *Ibid.*, p. 138.

[66] *Ibid.,* p.138-9.
[67] Erasmus, "The Handbook for the Christian Soldier," p. 139.

people the third but there is no reason to excuse any walk of life from pursuing the highest goal,"[68]

He recognizes that the laity can possess the desire to pursue a devout life, and it does not matter which class or profession from which a person comes, for "the perfection of Christ lies in our desires, not in our walk of life; it is to be found in the spirit, not in clothing or in choice of food,"[69] Erasmus' words in *The Handbook for the Christian Soldier* demonstrate how influential the teachings of Groote had become. Erasmus, an immensely influential man in his own right, had continued furthering the lay piety movement. Though the schism had ended before the time in which Erasmus wrote, the effects can be seen in his writings. The schism had ruined the reputation of the pope, and Erasmus' writings show how the centralization of faith shifted from being based in the clergy to the self. Martin Luther would draw heavily on Erasmus' writings during the Reformation.

The schism finally drew to a close with the Council of Constance in 1414. The cardinals were able to secure the resignations of John XXIII and Gregory XII and excommunicated the unyielding Benedict XIII.[70] The council went on to elect Martin V as sole pope of the Church. Back in Avignon, Benedict XIII still clung to his title and a series of antipopes followed his reign. Antipope Clement VIII eventually resigned in 1429 and recognized Martin as the true pope. The Catholic Church now recognized the Pisan line of popes during the schism as part of the papal line while the other claimants have all

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[68] *Ibid.,* p.140.
[69] *Ibid.,* p. 140.
[70] Duffy, *Saints and Sinners,* pp. 197-200.

been deemed antipopes. But the schism left it marks on the scholars of the time. The schism showed how the philosophy of God could be corrupted in the hands of humans and yet, instead of fully turning from the Church, lay Christian leaders preached that a purer way to achieve devoutness was through the individual soul. By presenting the people with obvious shows of human weakness within the papacy, the laity responded with a show of human strength from within. Catherine of Siena pointed out the papacy's flaws and tried to direct her followers away from those sins. Geert Groote, profoundly effected by the Avignon papacy, founded one of the most important communities of the of the lay piety movement, the Brethren of the Common Life. From the education of the Brethren came Thomas À Kempis and Desiderius Erasmus. À Kempis' contribution, the widely translated, *Imitation of Christ*, further made private faith, a practice more easily carried out from the home. Erasmus expounded on Groote's philosophy and brought in criticism of the rituals of the Church. These teachings and beliefs were spread to a wider range of people outside of the communities through devotional guides, Book of Hours, and the *Biblia Pauperum.* The lay piety movement did not start with the schism, but in the years following it, momentum was gained and it was spread wider across Europe. Influenced by his contemporary, Erasmus, Martin Luther also drew on the lay piety movement, laying the foundation for the Protestant Reformation, which would again divide the Church and bring the issue of individual spirituality to the forefront.

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