

**Zeitschrift:** Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte = Revue suisse d'histoire religieuse et culturelle = Rivista svizzera di storia religiosa e culturale

**Herausgeber:** Vereinigung für Schweizerische Kirchengeschichte

**Band:** 114 (2020)

**Artikel:** The historical value of the indulgence of 1436 issued by the Council of Basel

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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-882490>

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# The Historical Value of the Indulgence of 1436 Issued by the Council of Basel

Roman Ivashko

In this article, the author presents an analysis of one of the aspects of the Council of Basel. The proclamation of the Jubilee year by the fathers of the Council on April 14, 1436, had several motives. The first one was the union of Christians in Europe. After the schism of the year 1054 the Union had been discussed since the nineties of the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, the fathers of the Council tried to reduce the cost of donations. A third aim was the continuation of the tradition of the Crusades for the reconquest of the Holy Land. This line was quite idealistic given the national rifts in Europe. A fourth objective was the extension of the influence of Catholics on the Eastern border of Europe, which reached the Latin Archdiocese of Lviv. Fifthly, the indulgence had eschatological motives.

The most significant contributions on the Council of Basel have been published by American and European researchers. The Yale graduate Joachim Stieber (Smith College) analyzed the confrontation between Pope Eugene IV and Nicholas V, focusing mainly on the position of the Holy Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> The religious and political significance of the confrontation was more broadly analysed by Thomas M. Izbicki (Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey), Michael Decaluwé (University of Freiburg) and Gerald Christianson (Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary).<sup>2</sup> It is reasonable to consider Izbicki as the best expert on Vatican sources on the topic.

Notwithstanding this, the digitization of source materials has opened up new prospects and opportunities for further research.<sup>3</sup> In particular, it is interesting to

<sup>1</sup> Joachim Stieber, *Pope Eugenius IV, the Council of Basel and the Secular and Ecclesiastical Authorities in the Empire: The Conflict over Supreme Authority and Power in the Church*, Leiden 1978.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Decaluwé/Thomas Izbicki/Gerald Christianson, *A companion to the Council of Basel*, Leiden 2016; Thomas M. Izbicki, *Indulgences in Fifteenth-Century Polemics and Canon Law*, in: *Ablaskampagnen des Spätmittelalters: Luthers Thesen von 1517 im Kontext*, Berlin 2017, 79–104 (edited by Andreas Rehberg).

<sup>3</sup> <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/>; <https://digi.vatlib.it/>; <https://www.europeana.eu/portal/en>; <https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en>; <http://idb.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/digitue/>; <https://gallica.bnf.fr>; <https://www.manuscripta.at/>; <https://dlugosz.polona.pl/pl>.

review one of the documents of the Council of Basel, namely the indulgence of April 14, 1436, as a part of «the third phase» of activities of the Council of Basel (1433/34–1436). The research question of this article is to rethink the value of this indulgence for World History. We offer an original interpretation of the indulgence regarding its central motives: to establish justice in the Latin Church, to organize anti-Ottoman crusades and the reconquest of the Holy Land, to line up Jubilee celebrations and the Church Union and to define the «Eastern Border» of «Catholic Europe».<sup>4</sup>

### *Jubilee years*

The tradition of celebrating a Jubilee year (a Year of Jubilee, a Holy Year) originates in the Bible. The Jews were obliged to release captives every fifty years. In Medieval Europe, the principle of celebrating the Jubilee year was initially local, as was the case with the pilgrimage to Canterbury to honour St. Thomas Becket, for instance. In 1300, however, Pope Boniface VIII instituted an appropriate celebration for the whole Latin Church. It consisted of a pilgrimage of fifteen to thirty days to the Basilicas of St. Peter, St. Paul, and St. John Lateran in Rome in order to get a fifty-year indulgence. The motives for initiating the festivities were not political but eschatological. Christians in Europe widely believed that the end of the world would come in 1300. Therefore, it was necessary to spend saved funds for charity and the salvation of souls, as this money would no longer be needed. However, the end of the world did not happen. Pope Clement VI reduced the interval between Jubilee years from a hundred to a biblical fifty years. Pope Gregory XI added the temple of Santa Maria Maggiore to the list of the Basilicas to visit in honour of the Virgin Mary's contribution to the redemption of humanity. In connection with the short term of human life, Pope Urban VI limited the interval between Jubilee years to thirty-three years, just as long as the earthly life of the Savior Jesus Christ had lasted.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence*, Cambridge 1959, 68; Jürgen Miethke, *Die Konzilien als Forum der öffentlichen Meinung im 15. Jahrhundert*, in: *Deutsches Archiv für Erforschung des Mittelalters* 37 (1981) 736–773; Johannes Helmrich, *Provinzialkapitel und Bullen des Basler Konzils*, in: *Studien zum 15. Jahrhundert* (Festschrift für Erich Meuthen), München 1994, 94–95, 112–117; Thomas Wünsch, *Konziliarismus und Polen. Personen, Politik und Programme aus Polen zur Verfassungsfrage der Kirche in der Zeit der mittelalterlichen Reformkonzilien*, Paderborn 1998, 74; Norman Housley, *Indulgences for Crusading, 1417–1517*, in: *Promissory Notes on the Treasury of Merit: Indulgences in late medieval Europe*, Leiden 2006, 277–308; Mario Sensi, «Il Giubileo viaggio nella storia – Gli Anni Santi del 1423 e 1450», [www.vatican.va/jubilee\\_2000/pilgrim/documents/ju\\_gp\\_0604-2000\\_p-7\\_it.html](http://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/pilgrim/documents/ju_gp_0604-2000_p-7_it.html); Virtual International Medieval Congress 2020, Leeds 2020, 19, [www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/sites/28/2020/07/Programme\\_0107\\_1121.pdf](http://www.imc.leeds.ac.uk/wpcontent/uploads/sites/28/2020/07/Programme_0107_1121.pdf).

Jubilee years were celebrated formally on the eve of the meetings of the Council of Basel. The unifying role of the celebrations was, however, offset by the Great Western Schism and by overcoming its consequences.<sup>5</sup>

### *The eve of the Church Union*

The idea of convening a Church Council to overcome the Great Western Schism propagated by the Conciliar Movement had its origins among Parisian theologians. By the time the Council of Constance took place, the conflict between the theologian Jan Hus and Pope John XXIII had been lasting for several years. Hus had outlined the opponent as «the Antichrist» because of his dissolute and wasteful lifestyle, and therefore believed that it was necessary to limit the power of popes in general, according to a model of the Oxford theologian John Wycliffe. The Fathers of the Council of Constance condemned both opponents, Jan Hus was burned alive, and Pope Balthasar Cossa ended his life as Bishop of Tusculum.<sup>6</sup> The German King Sigismund of Luxembourg tried to keep the Council under control for the possible conclusion of a Church Union. He wanted to gain the Byzantine Empire as a strong ally in the fight against the Ottoman threat. On the other hand, the fathers of the Council of Constance considered their task almost accomplished with the election of Pope Martin V. The burning of the Czech reformer did not solve the problem, though. It triggered the struggle of Hussites to establish a national Czech Church. In the course of the struggle, they succeeded in attracting the support of the «schismatics» of *Russia* (not as an abbreviation or short term of the Russian Federation) or *Rus'*, which caused concern of the Apostolic See and the German King. Hussites required permission to receive the Holy Communion under both species of bread and wine.

Accordingly, solving the two problems – to overcome the Hussite heresy and to establish Church Union – was on the agenda of the new Church Council in the imperial city of Basel. The agreement with the Hussites in Prague had a temporary effect on the stabilization of interfaith relations in Europe.<sup>7</sup> Hussites were allowed to take the Holy Communion under both species and to make worships in the national language. At the level of the entire Latin Church, these principles were achieved only at the Second Vatican Council.

<sup>5</sup> Vatican, Vatican Library, Arch. Cap. S. Pietro. H. 60: Iosephus Blanchinius, *Regestum Omnium Literarum Apostolicarum quae annos Jubilaei illustrent*, 1r–8v, 19r–41v.

<sup>6</sup> New York, The New York Public Library, Spencer Collection Ms. 32: Ulrich von Richental, *Chronik des Constanzer Concils*, Swabia 1460, 138–139.

<sup>7</sup> Vatican, Vatican Library, Vat. Lat., 2973, 178r–v, 235r–237v; Melk, Benediktinerstift, Cod. 1799: *Bulla concilii Basileensis missa per Martinum presbyterum in Crudim et Presko de Praga de compactatibus*, 224r–v.

*The indulgence*

After the temporary resolution of the Hussite issue, the Church Union issue gradually began to move forward. The Ecumenical Council in the opinion of the Byzantine side ideally was to be started in Constantinople according to tradition, but Catholics agreed to finance its holding only in Italy, Germany, or France. The Byzantine Emperor and Patriarch agreed to leave the city, if Catholics would ensure their arrival and return and hire 300 crossbowmen to protect the city of Constantinople from a possible attack by the Ottomans at the time of their absence. The fathers of the Council of Basel had to fulfill the conditions of the Emperor and the Patriarch. They decided to create a plenary indulgence announcing an additional Jubilee year 1436–1438 to raise funds for the ships of the delegation from the East and to hire the crossbowmen.

The authors of the text addressed the biblical image of the prophet Isaiah, who urged the Israelites to rejoice over the imminent end of the Assyrian captivity (Is. 40. 1–2; 52. 1). Likewise, the Church schism should soon be over. It was necessary to direct efforts of Christians to achieve «the precious pearl» (Matth. 13. 46), Church Union. The fathers planned to place the appropriate boxes for sacrifices in cathedrals with three keys – for the prelates of cathedral, the bishop and the authorities of the city – to control the raising of funds. *Laboratores* should donate a daily or weekly amount of earning of their families. Other workers should undertake a pilgrimage to St. Peter, St. Paul, or St. Jacob or fast, according to the decisions of their confessors. In principle, this was much less than the cost of a fifteen-day or thirty-day stay in Rome during a Jubilee year. *Bellatores* had to participate in the Crusade. Catholics considered that the success of the salvation of Constantinople was undoubted. The Holy Land was expected to be re-conquered afterwards. *Oratores* should pray seven psalms, Our Father, Hail Mary, or perform seven masses.

The fathers of the Council of Basel had sent the relevant documents to the significant Latin Metropolitanates and Archdioceses.<sup>8</sup> In principle, the Pope did not agree with the right of the Council to issue such documents. He also continued

<sup>8</sup> Vatican, Vatican Library, Vat. Lat. 456, 199v–203v; Vat. Lat. 4182, 259r–260r; Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Guillelmus Sprever, Epistolae, orationes et statuta conciliorum Constantiensis et Basileensis, 147r–149v; Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, E I 4: Liber Cartusiensis in Basilea continens Secreta et quamplurima acta in Concilio Basiliensis nonnullos Tractatus et Bullarum copias utiles infra magis specificatis (Composite manuscript of writings regarding the Council of Basel), 52r–54v; Tübingen, Eberhard Karls Universität Tübingen, Universitätsbibliothek, MC 282–2: Textsammlung zu den Reformkonzilien (2): Concilium Basiliense, Erfurt 1776, 93r–96v; Sacrorum Conciliorum nove et amplissime collectio, ed. Joannes Dominicus Mansi, 29, Florentias/Venetiis 1758–98, 128–133; Documents on the Papal Plenary Indulgences 1300–1517 preached in the Regnum Theutonicum, ed. Stuart Jenks, Leiden 2018, 106–111.



refusing to recognize the place of the Ecumenical Council, which was proposed by the adherents of the Conciliar Movement. Byzantine Emperor John VIII Palaeologus decided still to negotiate with the Pope. During the confrontation, Pope Eugene IV independently called for the Crusade seven years after the issuing of the indulgence. The next Holy Year of 1450–1451 – announced in 1449 by Pope Nicholas V – was devoted to the end of the schism of the Council of Basel.

### *Borders of Europe*

The fathers of the Council of Basel had sent one of the documents to the Latin Archdiocese of Lviv. It was delivered by the canon of Krakow and the envoy of the Council, Nicholas Kozlovsky. The scribe Johannes Andreas transcribed the content of the indulgence in the High Castle of Lviv in the presence of the canons of Lviv on November 8, 1436.<sup>9</sup> Priests and monks had to declare this privilege in the temples of the Archdiocese. At the time of copying the document, the Metropolitan of Lviv, John of Rzeszow (Jan Rzeszowski), had died. His successor, Archbishop John Odrowoncz (Jan Odrowąż), was chosen by agreement to retain the Moldovian lands under the control of the Jagiellonians. 1'000 Florins were conveyed from the Crown of Poland to the Apostolic Camera in 1438.<sup>10</sup> The sending of the indulgence indirectly testified that the fathers of the Council of Basel had abandoned the previous attempts to conclude a local model of the Church Union in the lands of *Russia* or Rus' and had turned towards the whole of Eastern Christianity. In this regard, they tried to continue the cause of the Council of Constance. However, the implementation was indirectly hindered by the German King Sigismund of Luxembourg, who sowed strife between Poles, Lithuanians, and Ruthenians leading to war, which weakened both sides for almost ten years. The large part of the ecclesiastical province covered the area inhabited by Ruthenian

<sup>9</sup> Lviv, Central State Historical Archive in Lviv, found 131, discription 1, unite of storage 105: Hramota upravytelia lvivskoho arkhiepyskopstva Petra zi zvernenniam bazelskoho synodu do viruiuchykh skladaty pozhertvuvannia na utrymannia predstavnykiv Skhidnoi Tserkvy dlia provedennia unii z ohliadu na zahrozu Khrystyianstvu z boku turkiv [Charter of the the Governor Peter of the Archdiocese of Lviv with the address from the Synod of Basel to faithfuls to make donations for the maintenance of representatives of the Eastern Church for conducting of the Church Union in view of the threat posed to Christianity by the Turks], fol. 1. See also Tomasz Graff, *Katolicki episkopat metropolii Gnieźnieńskiej i Lwowskiej wobec wyboru pseudopapieża Feliksa V przez sobór Bazylejski* [The Catholic episcopate of the Metropolitanates of Gniezno and Lviv in the face of the election of the pseudo-pope Felix V by the Council of Basel] in: *Nasza Przeszłość* [Our past] 99 (2003) 55–129.

<sup>10</sup> Arnold Esch, *Überweisungen an die Apostolische Kammer aus den Diözesen des Reiches unter Einschaltung italienischer und deutscher Kaufleute und Bankiers. Regesten der vaticanischen Archivalien 1431–1475* (Quellen und Forschngen aus italienischen Bibliotheken und Archiven 78), 1998, 287.

«schismatics» who revolted against the rule of the Jagiellonians under the leadership of the Grand Duke of Lithuania Švitrigaila. Conditionally, the influence of Catholics reached Lutsk and Kamianets. Pope Eugene IV refused to continue negotiation about the local model of the Church Union while the war was lasting. The warfare between the Christians, moreover, made them vulnerable to attacks of enemies. Tatars inflicted the crushing defeat on the Poles in the battle of Podolia in 1438.<sup>11</sup>

### *The controversial decisions of the Council of Basel*

The issue of concluding the Church Union should have been one of the priorities at the Council of Basel. However, the fathers of the Council made two controversial decisions on the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 36<sup>th</sup> meetings, which prevented religious unification and tolerance in Europe. The first of these concerned Jews. They were accused of the spreading of the Black Death, although Pope Clement VI considered them innocent. The fathers of the Council issued a decree on the actual isolation of Jews from Christians. Moreover, Jewish people were forbidden to provide the services of teachers and doctors, to manage the financial affairs of Christians.<sup>12</sup> The decision was not in the spirit of religious tolerance. The second controversial decree referred to the adoption of the dogma of the Innocent Conception of the Virgin Mary. The practical implications of this was the conviction that she was not old, ill, and eventually ended her life with sleep, not death. The celebration should be annually on December 8, following the ancient tradition of the Church.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the understanding of the dogma of Filioque that the Latin theologians urged to adopt Greek theologians and the celebration of the Immaculate Conception with appropriate adaptation were borrowed from the East. However, the dogma of the Immaculate Conception was not officially adopted until

<sup>11</sup> Krakow, Biblioteka Jagiellońska, Manuscript 33: Ioannis Longini Canonici Cracoviensis Historiae Polonicae, 2, 1501, 378r–384v, 388r–391r, 392r–394r, 401r–406r, 408v, 415v–416r, 418r; Krakow, Museum Narodowe w Krakowie, MNK VIII-rkps-193: Ioannes Longini Canonici Cracoviensis Historiae Polonicae, 3, 1501, 3–7, 8–11, 18–19, 29–30, 32–33, 48–51.

<sup>12</sup> Vatican, Vatican Library, Vat. Lat. 456, 185r–186r; Vat. Lat. 4182, 229v–230r; Vat. Lat. 5600, 280v–282r; Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, E I 4: Liber Cartusiensis in Basilea continens Secreta et quamplurima acta in Concilio Basiliensis nonnullos Tractatus et Bullarum copias utiles infra magis specificatis (Composite manuscript of writings regarding the Council of Basel), 41r

<sup>13</sup> Basel, Universitätsbibliothek, E I 4: Liber Cartusiensis in Basilea continens Secreta et quamplurima acta in Concilio Basiliensis nonnullos Tractatus et Bullarum copias utiles infra magis specificatis (Composite manuscript of writings regarding the Council of Basel), 83r–83v; Thomas M. Izbicki, The Immaculate Conception and Ecclesiastical Politics from the Council of Basel to the Council of Trent: The Dominicans and Their Foes, in: Archiv für Reformationsgeschichte 96 (2005) 145–170.

the pontificate of Pope Pius IX in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He recognized the dogma based on the revelation of St. Bernadette Soubirous in Lourdes. Officially, Orthodox Christians have not supported it till nowadays.

### *Conclusions*

Popes, Jubilee years, and Crusades were still symbols of the unity of Catholics in the Late Middle Ages. But this unity had been broken by the struggle to establish national models of Churches. The content of the indulgence of 1436 testified that the fathers of the Council of Basel tried to make changes in the Latin Church by reducing the number of sacrifices by Christians. They were still trying to mobilise Christians to re-conquer the Holy Land. However, Pope Eugene IV refused to confirm the indulgence. Besides, the fathers of the Council of Basel adopted decrees concerning Jews and the dogma of the Immaculate Conception, which contradicted the ideas of Church Union and religious tolerance. Thus, a rising of the Conciliar Movement onto a pan-European level was impossible. Another reason for this was also that the Emperor and the Patriarch wanted to have a deal with the Pope and not with his subordinates in Basel. Isaiah's prophecy concerning Jerusalem in the content of the indulgence – the liberation from the Ottoman, analogous to the Assyrian captivity – had eschatological warning of the approaching fall of Constantinople. The influence of the Latin Church in the Southwestern Rus' was limited to the Latin Archdiocese of Lviv.

### *The historical value of the indulgence of 1436 issued by the Council of Basel*

The article deals with the Indulgence issued on 14<sup>th</sup> April, 1436 by the Council of Basel. The participants of this Ecumenical Council proclaimed a Jubilee Year (Holy Year) to organize fundraising in favour of the Council. Besides, the content of the Indulgence had eschatological motives and reflected some features of the pre-Reformation. The Jubilee Year was supposed to be one of the attributes of unity and consolidation, if not of Christians, then at least of Catholics. Latin clergy and believers of southwestern Russia also received the Indulgence. However, true religious unity and tolerance in Europe were difficult to achieve. In principle, Pope Eugene IV refused to recognize the Indulgence as it was his authority to make such decisions. It led to a decisive rift between the papacy and representatives of the Conciliar Movement, a rift which the pope tried to eliminate towards the end of his life.

Council of Basel – the indulgence of April 14, 1436 – Pope Eugene IV – Jubilee year (Holy Year) – Church Union – Hussites – The Latin Archdiocese of Lviv.

### *Der «historische Wert» des Ablasses von 1436 des Konzils von Basel*

Der Artikel befasst sich mit dem Ablass des Konzils von Basel. Seine Teilnehmenden riefen ein Jubiläumsjahr (ein Heiliges Jahr) aus, um eine Spendenaktion zugunsten des Öku-



menischen Konzils zu organisieren. Ausserdem hatte der Inhalt des Ablasses eschatologische Motive und spiegelte einige Merkmale der vorreformatorischen Zeit wider. Das stimmgige Jubiläumsjahr sollte eines der Attribute der Einheit und Konsolidierung sein, wenn nicht der Christen, so doch zumindest für die Katholiken. Auch lateinische Geistliche und Gläubige der Rus im Südwesten erhielten die Möglichkeit zum Ablass. Eine echte religiöse Einheit und Duldung in Europa war jedoch schwer zu erreichen. Im Prinzip weigerte sich Papst Eugen IV., den Ablass des Konzils anzuerkennen, da es in seine Autorität falle, solche Entscheidungen zu treffen. Dies führte zu einer endgültigen Spaltung zwischen Papsttum und Vertretern der konziliaren Bewegung, die der Papst am Ende seines Lebens zu beseitigen versuchte.

Konzil von Basel – Der Ablass vom 14. April 1436 – Papst Eugen IV. – Jubiläumsjahr (Heiliges Jahr) – Kirchenunion – Hussiten – Die lateinische Erzdiözese Lemberg.

*La valeur historique de l'indulgence de 1436 du Concile de Bâle*

L'article traite de l'indulgence du Concile de Bâle. Ses participants ont proclamé un jubilé (une Année Sainte) pour organiser une campagne de collecte de fonds en faveur du Concile Œcuménique. En outre, le contenu des indulgences avait des motifs eschatologiques et reflétait certaines caractéristiques de la période de la pré-Réforme. L'année jubilaire devait être l'un des attributs de l'unité et de la consolidation, si ce n'est pour les chrétiens, du moins pour les catholiques. Le clergé latin et les croyants de la Rus dans le sud-ouest ont également eu l'occasion de faire preuve d'indulgence. Cependant, il était difficile de parvenir à une véritable unité religieuse et à la tolérance en Europe. En principe, le pape Eugène IV a refusé de reconnaître les indulgences du Concile, car il était de son ressort de prendre de telles décisions. Cela a conduit à une scission finale entre la papauté et les représentants du mouvement conciliaire que le pape a tenté d'éliminer à la fin de sa vie.

Concile de Bâle – indulgence du 14 avril 1436 – Pape Eugène IV – jubilé (Année Sainte) – Union des Églises – Hussites – archidiocèse latin de Lviv.

*Il valore storico dell'indulgenza del 1436 del Consiglio di Basilea*

L'articolo tratta dell'indulgenza del Concilio di Basilea. I suoi partecipanti hanno proclamato l'anno giubilare (Anno Santo) per organizzare una campagna di raccolta fondi a favore del Concilio Ecumenico. Inoltre, il contenuto delle indulgenze aveva motivazioni escatologiche e rifletteva alcune caratteristiche del periodo pre-Riforma. L'Anno giubilare doveva essere uno degli attributi dell'unità e del consolidamento, se non per i cristiani, almeno per i cattolici. Anche il clero latino e i credenti della Rus' sudoccidentale hanno avuto l'opportunità di godere dell'indulgenza. Tuttavia, era difficile raggiungere una vera unità religiosa e una situazione di tolleranza in Europa. In principio, papa Eugenio IV si è rifiutato di riconoscere le indulgenze del Concilio perché prendere tali decisioni rientrava nella sua autorità. Questo ha portato a una divisione finale tra il Papato e i rappresentanti del movimento conciliare, che il Papa ha cercato di ricucire alla fine della sua vita.

Concilio di Basilea – L'indulgenza del 14 aprile 1436 – Papa Eugenio IV – Giubileo (Anno Santo) – Unione delle Chiese – Ussiti – Arcidiocesi latina di Lviv.

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