CHAPTER 2

A New View of William Durant the Younger’s
Tractatus de modo generalis concilii celebrandi

The work which is the subject of this article marked a major advance in the history of medieval political thought. Its significance, although perhaps not widely enough perceived, is well known to scholars specializing in the origins of conciliarism.1 This is not to suggest that William Durant the Younger’s


I would like to express my gratitude to John H. Mundy, Louis B. Pascoe, S. J., and Robert Somerville for their help in the writing of this article. Since I have used manuscript evidence to supplement the printed editions, it may be helpful to explain the method I follow in quoting from the Tractatus de modo generalis concilii celebrandi. Quotations are based on the editio princeps by Jean Crespin, Lyon, 1531. Variant readings are set off by angle brackets, followed by square brackets with the siglum of the manuscript from which they are taken. Quotations are followed by an indication of the book (Tractatus maior or Tractatus minor) and the part and chapter (or ‘rubric’) of the Tractatus maior or the chapter of the Tractatus minor as numbered in the manuscripts, followed by square brackets with the number of part and chapter in the editio princeps whenever this differs from the manuscripts, as well as the folio, column, and lines in the editio princeps, with r and v standing for recto and verso, and a and b for the first and second columns, e.g., Tractatus maior 1.4, fol. 7ra lines 40–3, Tractatus maior 2.96 [3.27], fol. 58va lines 9–19, Tractatus minor 9 [3.32], fol. 62vb, lines 16–26. Durant’s references to canon law will be given in their original form, followed by the modernized form in square brackets; cf. Ochoa and Diez, eds. Indices canonum, v; Brundage, “Appendix I.”

Other material added by the present writer will be put in square brackets.

1 See the judgment of Tierney, Foundations, 190, 196, that Durant’s treatise was a “really very considerable contribution to the growth of conciliar thought,” which “strikes for the first time the authentic note of the Conciliar Movement properly so called.” The bibliography on William Durant reflects the different contexts in which he has been studied by historians. The best biographical essay is Viollet, “Guillaume Durant.” Scholars who have come to deal with the bishop of Mende because of their interest in the reform-legislation of the Council of Vienne include Heber, Gutachten, 40–56, 64–74; E. Müller, Vienne, esp. 587–8, 591–610; Leclerc, Vienne, esp. 38–50; Bellone, “Cultura e studi”; and Vereecke, “Réforme de l’église.” Their attention to the developments in political thought around the turn of the fourteenth century led the following to discuss William Durant in some detail: Scholz, Publicistik, 208–23; Haller, Papsttum und Kirchenreform, 58–66, 70; Rivière, Problème, 363–9; and Posch, “Reformvorschläge.” Durant’s relationship to Gallicanism motivated Martin, Origines du Gallicanisme, 192, 357, 231, and Torquebiau, “Gallicanisme,” to devote some thought to him. Durant’s striking demands are also frequently mentioned in studies such as Dempf,
Contribution to the nascent conciliar theory has been exhaustively interpreted. On the contrary, it is probable that the systematic legal and political argument underlying his pointed demands has never been as fully understood as would have been possible or desirable. But Durant's theories lie beyond the scope of this article. Instead it is addressed to the more fundamental question whether the available texts of the treatise are sound. It is somewhat surprising that this question has never been studied before, since the early modern printed editions, on which all previous work on Durant has relied, do not give the impression of being trustworthy. Upon inspection of the extant manuscripts it must be concluded that the unsuspecting faith put in these editions was ill-advised, to say the least. It is the thesis of this article that every known printed edition of the *Tractatus de modo generalis concilii celebrandi* is seriously flawed, and, furthermore, that the deficiencies have prevented scholars from arriving at an adequate interpretation of the nature and the scope of Durant's plan for reform.

Before the evidence is presented in detail, it will be useful to give some introductory information on the author, on his treatise, and on the sources of this study. During his lifetime, ca. 1266–1330, bishop William Durant the Younger of Mende commanded considerable respect, not only in the area under his immediate influence, i.e., the diocese of Mende and the Gévaudan, but also at...