Research on William Durant the Younger’s
Tractatus de modo generalis concilii celebrandi: A Critical Review

As far as we can tell, research on the *Tractatus de modo generalis concilii celebrandi* began in 1869.¹ That may seem strange, for 1869 was also the year in which the First Vatican Council met. At that council the Catholic Church not only celebrated a highpoint in its rapid revival following on the losses it had suffered during the French Revolution, but also issued decrees that are, at least on a common understanding, diametrically opposed to the ideas of William Durant the Younger, bishop of Mende from 1296–1330.² Durant, after all, is best known for having insisted on one particular proposal for the reform of the church among the many he submitted to the Council of Vienne (1311–12) in his *Tractatus*: that the pope ought no longer to be permitted to pass or alter any laws without having consulted a general council, and that such

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² Concerning church history in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, I should like to refer once and for all to Jedin, ed., *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, vols. 6–7. Jedin, *Kleine Konzilengeschichte*, provides an introduction to the history of general councils. Unfortunately there is no good treatment of ecclesiastical historiography from a Catholic perspective. For the time being the remarks and bibliographical references in Jedin, ed., *Handbuch der Kirchengeschichte*, 1:44–55, 6/2:261–4, 328–34, 7:283–6, will have to do. The history of Protestant ecclesiastical historiography by Meinhold, *Geschichte der kirchlichen Historiographie*, is similarly insufficient for our purposes. That makes it necessary to rely largely on biographical information in dissertations, bibliographies, and biographical dictionaries. For accounts of the historiography of conciliarism see Bäumer, “Erforschung des Konziliarismus,” and Alberigo, “Movimento conciliare.”
councils were to meet every ten years.\(^3\) It is true that there still is no convincing
and comprehensive interpretation of the theories behind Durant’s demand.
The present study is only a preliminary step towards such an interpretation.
Nonetheless, at least this much is certain: not only the ten-year period, but also
Durant’s entire understanding of the role of popes and councils amount to a
striking anticipation of the decrees *Haec sancta* and *Frequens* that were passed
by the Council of Constance more than a hundred years later, however much
this judgment may need to be qualified in detail.\(^4\)

That brings us to the point at hand, for if anything can be said to character-
ize the history of the Catholic Church in the decades leading up to the First
Vatican Council, it is increasing hostility towards so-called liberals in the
church and criticism of movements in favor of councils or movements under-
stood to have been inspired by democratic tendencies more broadly speaking.
Such increasing hostility and criticism are well reflected in Denzinger’s deci-

\(^3\) Durant, *De modo generalis concilii celebrandi tractatus*, ed. Crespin, i.4, fol. 7\(^r\), 3.27, fol. 59\(^r\).

\(^4\) The text of *Haec sancta* and *Frequens* can be found in *Conciliorum oecumenicorum decreta*,
409–10, 438–43.

often reissued with various revisions, most recently Denzinger, ed., *Enchiridion symbolorum*
(2010).