



The Case of Antipope Anacletus II and the Eternal Lesson of Fidelity to the Truth

Introduction: When the Smoke of Hell Nearly Entered the Church

Throughout the history of the Catholic Church, there have been moments when her boat was shaken by storms so violent that it seemed everything would sink. One of the most dramatic—and least known today—occurred in the 12th century, when the Chair of Peter was almost occupied by a heretic supported by worldly powers. It was a decisive moment in which the Church nearly suffered an irreparable schism: the case of **Antipope Anacletus II**.

This story is not merely a historical curiosity. It speaks to us of pressing and current issues: the power of truth over consensus, the need for discernment in the face of appearances, and how to remain firm when doing the right thing is not popular. In times when doctrinal confusion seems to reign even within the Church, this ancient story echoes with renewed strength.

I. The 12th Century Context: Tensions, Ambitions, and a Divided Church

The 12th century was a time of great tension between spiritual and temporal power. While the papacy sought to assert its authority over all Christendom, the noble Italian families—especially in Rome—tried to control who sat on the Chair of Saint Peter.

In this turbulent context, the death of Pope Honorius II in 1130 unleashed one of the most dangerous crises of the medieval Church: a divided conclave, two popes elected, and a Church torn between truth and falsehood.

II. The Scandal: Two Popes, One Truth

After the death of Honorius II, a faction of the College of Cardinals, dominated by the powerful Pierleoni family, organized a rushed election and proclaimed **Pietro Pierleoni** as Pope, who took the name **Anacletus II**. However, the majority of the legitimate cardinals—although politically disadvantaged—gathered elsewhere and elected **Innocent II** as pope.



This sparked a dramatic struggle that would last nearly a decade. Anacletus II had the support of the Roman nobility, the local clergy, and even several European bishops. But there was one insurmountable problem: **his election was illegitimate**, and his doctrine was suspicious. Many knew that Pierleoni had not only come to power through questionable means but was also willing to subject the Church to worldly interests.

III. Who Really Was Anacletus II? A Mere Antipope or a Heretic in Disguise?

Pietro Pierleoni was a member of a family of Jewish converts, very powerful in Rome. He was educated in Cluny, ordained cardinal by Pope Paschal II, and held significant intellectual prestige. However, his career was always marked by an ambition that was anything but evangelical.

The issue was not his origin—the Church never judges by blood—but **his proximity to subtle heresies** that denied the spiritual independence of the Church from political power. Indeed, Anacletus II promoted a clericalist vision in which bishops were mere functionaries of earthly rulers, and he accepted alliances with princes who endangered Catholic doctrine.

His election was a fraud, and his governance a scandal. Yet he was obeyed for years by much of the Church! Many believers, without bad intentions, fell into the trap.

IV. Saint Bernard of Clairvaux: The Saint Who Saved the Church

In the midst of the chaos, God raised up a prophetic voice: **Saint Bernard of Clairvaux**. This Cistercian monk, one of the greatest saints of the 12th century, led a spiritual crusade in favor of the true Pope, Innocent II.

Saint Bernard not only theologically argued against Anacletus II, but also traveled throughout Europe convincing kings, princes, and bishops that only the legitimate pope should be obeyed.

With deep faith and humility, he wrote:

“It is not the multitude that makes the Church, but the truth.”



| *Where the true faith is, there is the Church.”*

This phrase, even today, should resonate in our hearts when we see confusion even within ecclesial sectors.

V. The Outcome: The Triumph of Truth and Fidelity

After eight years of schism, the death of Anacletus II in 1138 and the recognition of Innocent II as the sole pope put an end to the scandal. The antipope was declared illegitimate, and many of his followers reconciled with the Church.

It was a victory of grace, not politics. The one who had more power did not triumph, but the one who was faithful to the revealed truth.

VI. Theological Relevance: What Does This Scandal Teach Us Today?

The case of Anacletus II reminds us that the **Church is indefectible**, but **not exempt from trials**. Not everyone who wears white is necessarily faithful to the Catholic faith. Apostolic succession is essential, yes, but so is **adherence to the deposit of faith**.

Christ said:

| *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” (Matthew 7:15)*

This warning has not expired. Today more than ever, Catholics must ask God for discernment and courage to **remain faithful to the truth**, even if it means going against the current.



VII. Practical Guide: How to Live This Lesson Today

Below is a pastoral and theological guide to applying this teaching in daily life:

1. **Ongoing Doctrinal Formation**

You cannot love what you do not know. Study the Catechism, Sacred Scripture, and the documents of the authentic Magisterium. Don't be swayed by theological trends or ambiguous speeches.

2. **Spiritual Discernment**

Not every ecclesiastical authority speaks with the voice of Christ. Listen with humility, but also with a critical spirit. Always ask: "Is this in conformity with the faith of all time?"

3. **Fidelity to Tradition**

The Church does not invent new truths; she preserves the deposit of faith. Trust in what has been believed "always, everywhere, and by all," as Saint Vincent of Lérins taught.

4. **Prayer and Penance**

Fidelity is not only intellectual. It is cultivated in daily prayer, in the sacraments, and in interior life. Ask the Holy Spirit for light and the Virgin Mary for strength.

5. **Courage to Bear Witness**

If you see error or confusion, do not remain silent. Speak with charity, but without cowardice. The truth is not aggressive, but it is never neutral.

6. **Union with the Legitimate and Orthodox Pope**

Love the Pope, but not blindly. True obedience is not flattery but adherence to the truth he is called to guard.

Conclusion: Truth, Though Alone, Is Never Defeated

The story of Anacletus II is a reminder that **fidelity is not always popular**, but it is always



holy. The Church of Christ is guided by the Holy Spirit, but her members can err—even gravely. That is why every Catholic is called to be a sentinel of the faith, a brave disciple, and a witness of the truth.

When everything seems dark, let us remember that **a single candle, like Saint Bernard, can illuminate the entire Church**. And when confusion reigns, Christ remains King, and His promise remains firm:

“You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18)