

The Origins of the Pisan New Year

On 25 March, at noon, when the sun's rays pierce the Cathedral windows and strike a marble egg on Giovanni Pisano's pulpit, Pisa celebrates *Capodanno Pisano*. This is a great day to be in Pisa, where New Year doesn't come just once a year! Celebrations begin the evening of the 24th, but the most special moment comes the next day.

In the morning, historical processions go from Piazza dei Cavalieri to Piazza dei Miracoli. After the Holy Mass sunlight hits the marble egg, and the miracle of renewal is condensed into this instant. But where did this tradition actually begin?

According to the Gregorian calendar, which was followed from 1200 to 1749, the new year begins with the Annunciation, the visitation of the Angel to Mary nine months before Christ's birth, and coincides with the equinox, which Julius Caesar established on this date in 45 BC.

Pope Benedict XVI's resignation this year reminds us of a particular moment in history, when the Pisan New Year took on special meaning. From 1378 to 1417, for 39 years, two men simultaneously claimed the Papacy: Benedict XIII for Rome and Gregory XII for Avignon.

In 1409, on March 25th, cardinals from Rome and Avignon, with the encouragement of scholars from the great Universities of Paris, Oxford and Cologne, held an ecumenical Council in Pisa (which was pretty much the halfway point) to resolve this "Great Schism". After eleven days in conclave the Council chose Alexander V to take Benedict and Gregory's place, forcing them to resign. But Alexander became known as an "antipope" since the Church didn't recognize the authority of the Council.



Alexander's biography shows he was uniquely suited for his role. Born in Crete in 1339, an intelligent and pious lad, he became a Franciscan friar and was sent to study at Oxford and Paris. Clearly gifted and linguistically adept, he progressed rapidly, becoming Bishop to Giangaleazzo Visconti of Milan, and then Archbishop of Milan.

As a cosmopolitan priest, he was the ideal choice to end the schism. But Alexander died after serving only nine

months as Pope, and in 1418 the Council of Constance rejected the line of Pisan popes, calling them antipopes.

Note: Pisa and its surroundings offer many cultural events to celebrate this date: tours of Pisa, Volterra, Pomarance, and Castelnuovo Val di Cecina, spa and wellness offers in Casciana Terme and San Giuliano Terme, special church openings in Pisa, Calci and Cascina, and visits to fortresses and monuments (Vicipisano and elsewhere).

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