

It was September 13, 2001. People throughout the world were still living the events that had occurred two days earlier, when Islamic terrorists attacked the World Trade Center in New York City. Barbara Frale, however, an Italian mediaevalist, had other matters on her mind, as she was carrying out an investigative search at the Vatican Secret Archives. She was poring over registers of Avignon documents from the time of Benedict XII, whose pontificate was from 1334 to 1342. She came across a parchment that was catalogued as a protocol of one of the many French Inquisition investigations in the diocese of Tours. She would probably not have paid much attention to it had she not noticed a name that was familiar to her: Bérenger Fredoli.

Frale was very familiar with this man's biography. She immediately realised that she had no ordinary document before her. Bérenger Fredoli was one of the most influential Catholic hierarchs of the early 14th century: a French cardinal, the most outstanding canonist of his time, and a trusted associate – even nephew – of Pope Clement V, who sent him to various corners of the world on particularly delicate missions. What could such a person have possibly done during interrogations carried out by some provincial inquisitor in the diocese of Tours?

Frale looked at the bottom of the document. There were three seals on the parchment: one from Fredoli and two from other cardinals, Étienne de Suisy and Landolfo Brancaccio. Frale could not believe her eyes. She realised that she had found a seven-hundred-year-old document that historians had regarded as irretrievably lost, since it had been mistakenly catalogued in 1628 and again in 1912. It shed new light on the most notorious trial of the Middle Ages, particularly on the attitude of Pope Clement V, who, together with King Philip the Fair of France, was generally regarded as the main culprit in the dissolution of the Knights Templar and the execution of its leaders.

French historians certainly did not encounter this parchment at the beginning of the 19th century, when Napoleon had the Vatican Secret Archives transported to Paris. Enlightenment anticlerical officials were particularly interested in the catalogues pertaining to the Knights Templar trial and the trial of Galileo Galilei. They expected to find confirmation of facts that would set the Holy See in an unfavourable light. The French kept the files on the Knights Templar trial even after the fall of Napoleon, the restoration of the monarchy, and a decree to return all documents to the Vatican, as they still hoped to find material compromising the papacy. Fr. Marino Marini, the chamberlain of the prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives, persuaded them to return the files, telling them that the publication of the complete dossier would tarnish not Pope Clement's image, but King Philip's.

Was Fr. Marino Marini bluffing in order to regain the files? The answer became evident when Bishop Sergio Pagano, the prefect of the Vatican Secret Archives, presented an over three-hundred-page publication, *Processus Contra Templarios*, at the Vatican Palace's Aula Vecchia del Sinodo on 25 October, 2007. The publication contained the most important material concerning the Templars' trial, including the Chinon Parchment, discovered by Barbara Frale.

Excerpt translated by Stan Kacprzyk



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#### Foreign language translations

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