

# The Pope and the Plague

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by Frans van Liere.

Medieval plague victims, Woodcut, 1532.  
Source: Wikimedia Commons

In 1349, a [terrible epidemic arrived in Avignon](#). It had spread from Italy, but its origins were somewhere in Central Asia, on what is now the border between Xinjiang and Kyrgyzstan. For the next seven months, the Black Death ravaged this small city on the Rhone river in southern France, and some historians estimate that half the population died.[\[1\]](#) “Such was the fear,” says [one eye-witness](#), “which invaded all, that as soon as an ulcer or bump appeared in someone’s groin or arm pit, this person would be completely shunned, even if he was a close relative. Father left son, and son left father lying on his cot. No wonder, for as soon as someone in a home had caught the disease and died, often all others were infected too and died a similar sudden death, even (horrible to hear!) dogs and cats and chicken.” Out of fear of contagion, many of the dead were left unburied or thrown into the river.

At the time of the plague, Avignon was not the sleepy provincial town it is now; it was a center of power in late medieval Europe, as the seat of the papal curia. The man who had the misfortune to be pope during this arguably deadliest-ever world pandemic was Pierre Roger, who bore the papal name Clement VI. He had a reputation for luxurious living, and some critics say he gave the papacy a bad name. “My predecessors did not know how to be popes,” he allegedly countered.[\[2\]](#)

The City of Avignon  
Photograph by Frans van Liere

Portrait of Clement VI.  
Image source: ArtStor

Clement’s role during the Black Death is assessed differently by historians. Some say he rose to the job, while others accuse him of lack of empathy and leadership. [One medieval chronicler](#) tells how the pope, “shut up in his room, with a large fire continually going, gave no one access” while the plague raged. Unfortunately, this one statement from an “acrimoniously anti-papal”[\[3\]](#) source has been given disproportionate weight by modern historians, giving a one-sided picture of Clement’s attitude during the epidemic.[\[4\]](#)

Fourteenth-century papal biographers, however, give a somewhat more nuanced description of Clement’s behavior during the disaster. [One anonymous biographer](#) tells us that the “pope in Avignon acted very charitably.” He ordered his doctors to visit the sick, and made sure the poor received all necessities. For the needy, he arranged for burials, and even bought a piece of land to be used as a plague cemetery. Of course

he was also a spiritual leader, and he alleviated some of the spiritual anxieties by instituting a special Mass for the cessation of the plague, and, more importantly, he provided a general absolution of all sins for victims of the plague who had died without proper confession or receiving the last rites.

Spiritual anxiety abounded during this disaster. A movement arose in Germany that claimed that the disease was caused by the God's displeasure at the sins of mankind, in particular the violation of the Day of the Lord, breaking the fast, usury, blasphemy, and adultery.

Members of this movement went around in large processions carrying crucifixes and stripped to the waist, while lacerating themselves with whips with iron hooks, stopping in towns to preach penitence to the bystanders. With this self-torture they hope to stave off the wrath of God. In 1349, they visited Avignon. Clement was not impressed with their theology. He issued an official condemnation on October 20, 1349, and ordered the movement to disband.

Procession of flagellants, by Francisco de Goya.  
Source: ArtStor.

Even more troublesome was the attempt to find scapegoats for the plague. The fourteenth-century [world chronicle of Albert the Monk](#) tells us that, while many said the pestilence was caused by "a corruption of the air," others said that "Jews, wanting to extinguish the whole of Christendom, had started poisoning wells and springs everywhere with a horrible poison." And indeed, soon the first Jews confessed under torture to having "boiled spiders and toads in a pot" in order to carry out this evil plan. "As evidence of the truth of this vile plot, several sachets of poison were found near wells and springs," Albert assures readers. Soon, pogroms against Jews ensued throughout Germany, "few places excepted. Many of the Jews accepted baptism, but not for the sake of God, rather out of fear of death."

Not all believed in the Jews' guilt. The anonymous author of Clement's *Life* tells us how "many innocent and inculpable people, both Christians and Jews, were burned to death, slaughtered, and mistreated, while in truth nothing caused [the plague] but a [unlucky] constellation of the stars, or divine displeasure."

Clement condemned these mass murders, which historians now call pogroms, in the strongest terms. "It has come to our attention", he [says](#), "that Christians, at the inspiration of the devil, have falsely imputed this pest, which God has inflicted on all Christians as a due punishment for their sins, to the Jews." He continues: "No Christian should dare to harm, kill, or take the possessions of the aforementioned Jews, without due judgement of the Lord of the region," and "no Christian should compel a Jew to accept baptism by means of violence." In a later bull, Clement admonished all archbishops, bishops, and church leaders to denounce the slaughter of the Jews, and threatened anyone who harmed the Jews with a papal condemnation. He personally took into his protection those who had suffered persecution.[\[5\]](#)

While the current coronavirus threat is arguably not as grave as the medieval Black Death, some of the human reactions are disconcertingly similar. Even antisemitism is [rearing its ugly head](#). Despite the bad reputation of the Avignon papacy (wholly undeserved, [as I have argued elsewhere](#)), Clement VI offered a model of sound church leadership. He provided for the poor and needy, and offered spiritual guidance, while denouncing religious mass hysteria and scapegoating. If the story of his locking himself inside the papal palace is true, it may show that he, too, was afraid of the contagion. But compared with the other responses of his contemporaries, was this really reprehensible? The pope's death would surely have

brought still further harm to Christendom. Perhaps Clement's social distancing was really one of the more sensible responses to the crisis.

#### Sources:

Matthias of Neuenburg's *Chronik, Fassung WAU*, edited by Adolf Hofmeister, in MGH, SS rer. Germ., N.S. 4, 422 (Munich, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, 1924-1940); Albert the Monk's *Weltchronik*, edited by Rolf Sprandel, MGH, SS rer. Germ., N.S. 17, 110 (Munich, Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1994). The *Vita Prima* of Clement VI can be found in Stephanus Baluze, *Vitae Papatum Avenionensium*, ed. Guillaume Mollat (Paris, Letouzey & Ané, 1914–22), vol. 2:251-252. The bulls of Clement VI can be found in Odorico Raynaldo, *Annales Ecclesiastici: ab anno MCXCVIII, ubi card. Baronius desinit* (Rome: Mascardus, 1646–77), 16, 181 (*ad annum 1349*, 33).

[1] John Kelly, *The Great Mortality. An Intimate History of the Black Death*. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2005), 161.

[2] Yves Renouard, *The Avignon Papacy, 1305–1403*, trans. Denis Bethell (Hamden: Archon Books, 1970), 47.

[3] Guillaume Mollat, *Les Papes d'Avignon (1305–1378)* (Paris: Letouzey & Ané, 1949), 566.

[4] Robert E. Lerner, *The Powers of Prophecy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 116; Joëlle Rollo-Koster, *Avignon and Its Papacy, 1309–1417*. (Lanham, Boulder, New York, London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 84.

[5] Mollat, *Les Papes d'Avignon*, 89.

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