

The Body Politic of *Vivat Rex*: An Allegorical Political Discourse and its Reception at the Court of France

Abstract: In the Middle Ages, allegory was a powerful tool for conveying a message and it saw widespread use in the political discourse of the period. It was employed not just in political tracts, but also in sermons with a political undertone. One such sermon was *Vivat Rex*, delivered at the end of 1405 by Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris and a massively significant figure of the Church at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In *Vivat Rex*, Gerson draw a metaphorical picture of the structures of France, which had the king at their center, in his position as head of this symbolical *corpus mysticum*. Proposing the University of Paris as an advisory body to the king, Gerson proceeded then to deliver, by using corporal analogies, repeated recommendations for how to provide a better governance, combined with moral advice and persistent criticism of the state of the kingdom. Gerson's attempt proved to be a failure, though, because the authority he appealed to, the King of France, was severely weakened and in no position to follow the Chancellor's urgings.

Keywords: Jean Gerson, body politic, *Vivat Rex*, King of France, University of Paris

1. The Historical and Cultural Context of *Vivat Rex*

Born in 1363, in the village of Gerson-lès-Barby, in the province of Champagne, from humble origins, Jean Gerson rose to become one of the most preeminent theologians of the Middle Ages, not just in his native France, but in all the Catholic Christendom. Gerson's path to such a lofty achievement had to be – unavoidably, if we take into consideration his modest birth – through the University of Paris. At that time, the University was at the peak of its prestige and influence: from its beginnings, in the twelfth century, it had benefited from the protection and the favor of both the Crown of France and the Holy See. Despite some occasional frictions, such as those triggered by the privileges granted to the mendicant clergy by the papacy, which the University considered to infringe upon the rights of the regular clergy, the Papacy hailed the University of Paris as *parens*

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scientiarium, the “parent of sciences”, in the words of Gregory IX. As an institution focused on the study of theology, the University of Paris came to be regarded as one of the most important voices in defining the dogma of the Catholic Church. At the same time, though, it gained a significant influence in the affairs of the Kingdom of France as well and its pronouncements came to have a great propagandistic value: for this reason, the Crown of France had tried to gain control of the University and sway its opinions according to the interests of the French monarchy. Such was the case during the Great Schism of the West: when the French cardinals elected Robert de Geneva as pope Clement VII, in opposition to the Roman pope Urban VI, under the pretext that Urban had been elected under the pressure of the people of Rome, the University had doubts over the validity of this second election. Yet, King Charles V, who had decided to support the antipope, compelled the University to go along with his wishes and, later, the Court of France even forbade the University to discuss the matter when it seemed that it may have reached an opinion which did not concur with that of the French Court (Posthumus Meyjes 1999, 15-23). Yet, this apparent subservience was not entirely rejected by the University: the latter often depicted itself as the “Daughter of the King of France”, an allegory which implied its submission, and its strong ties with the French Crown allowed it to try to play the role of an impartial and wise advisor to the king – a position which many University figures, including Gerson, often claimed.

It is in this context that Jean Gerson arrived at the University of Paris, where he joined the College of Navarre to study first arts and then theology (McGuire, 2006, 4). There, Gerson enjoyed the patronage of Pierre d’Ailly, who preceded him as Chancellor of the University, and the Duke of Burgundy himself, Philip the Bold, and he rose, at a young age, up to the position of Chancellor of University. As chancellor of the most prestigious institution of learning in the West, Gerson found himself deeply involved in the most pressing issue of the Catholic world at that time, the Great Schism, which found its resolution at the Council of Konstanz, where the same Gerson played a leading role. But Jean Gerson was involved in the domestic politics of France as well and he often preached in front of the Court, providing advice and making veiled criticisms about the state of affairs in France during that period. Its difficult situation, with a king afflicted by mental disease and incapable of providing a coherent governance and weakened by the internal strife between the princes of the blood, could have only troubled Gerson. In some of his sermons, Gerson made use of the corporal analogy, between the human body and the state: that was a rather common trope during that period, as the medieval mind was prone to allegorical thinking. Such analogies had been previously used

by personalities such as John of Salisbury, Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Jean de Paris, Marsilius of Padua and remained in use long after Gerson's death. In this regard, Gerson fits neatly into a well-established tradition. Gerson used this analogy for the first time in a sermon known as *Adorabunt Eum*, preached on 6 January 1391, but the most important and famous expression of this allegory, which can be said to sum up his political thinking, came in a sermon known as *Vivat Rex*, preached on 7 November 1405.

When Jean Gerson delivered his sermon *Adorabunt Eum*, the French King Charles VI was considering the idea of restoring the unity of the Church by force – by means of a military expedition in Italy, which would have made the Avignon pope, Clement, the undisputed head of the Church. That was the so-called *via facti* or *via rigoris*, one of the four ways of ending the Schism envisioned during that period, the other three being *via cessionis*, where one (or both) of the claimants of the papal throne would have resigned, the *via concilii*, which proposed the convocation of a general council to settle the issue, and *via compromisi*, which envisioned the appointment of neutral arbiters, to whose decisions the popes would have been compelled to submit. The University and Jean Gerson himself were very much in favor of a peaceful resolution of the crisis, strongly advocating during this period in favor of *via cessionis* and urging the occupants of the papal throne to put the welfare of the Church above their pride and desires and resign for the sake of all Christendom. Yet, despite that, at times, the antipopes from Avignon and the popes from Rome gave hints that they might consider such an option, in the end all these urgings proved fruitless and many, Gerson included, moved decisively towards the third option, the calling of a general council (Posthumus Meyjes 1999, 15-203). But the bellicose plans which Charles VI was considering at the beginning of the 1390's and the antipope Clement VII was supporting did not meet with a strong approval in the University circles and that was the main theme of Gerson's sermon, *Adorabunt Eum*, where he urged the king to put aside this solution. In this sermon, preached before the Court on 6 January 1391, Gerson, as Brian Patrick McGuire pointed out, defined three types of kingdoms: personal, temporal and spiritual. In the first, each person must govern himself, in the second princes govern others, in the third the Church is governed. Gerson urged the king to look after all three kingdoms, because of his role as an anointed ruler, describing him as a priestly figure and appealing to the earlier view of royal power as sacerdotal (McGuire 2005, 49). In addition to the use of corporal analogies, two other themes which were going to feature prominently in *Vivat Rex* appeared also in *Adorabunt Eum*: the concern with sins and their impact on worldly politics, as Gerson made reference to them in order to urge the king to act in accordance to the Christian tenets he professed, as the health of the

kingdom depended on the king's own "spiritual health"; second, the emphasis on the role of the University, as Gerson sought to portray the institution he was a part of as an authoritative advisor to the Crown in all ecclesiastical and political matters (Newhauser and Ridyard 2012, 142). And it is worth pointing out that Gerson was not the only one to use sermons in order to attempt to push the ruling elites on the path on personal and political reformation. Not long before the chancellor delivered *Vivat Rex*, Jacques Legrand, an Augustinian friar and preacher, condemned in May 1405 in a sermon before the queen the frivolity and extravagance of her court, also with the use of allegory, but using more direct words than Gerson would use (as proven by the fact that Legrand was criticized by some courtiers for uttering harsh words in front of the Queen, while Gerson's sermon was largely regarded as commendable) (Gibbons 1996, 64-65).

The context and the central topic of *Vivat Rex* were completely different from *Adorabunt Eum*. Unlike the former sermon, *Vivat Rex* focused exclusively on French domestic politics. Since *Adorabunt Eum* was delivered, in 1391, the situation in France had taken a turn for the worse: Charles VI's bouts of insanity which started in 1392 meant that the central authority became severely weakened and the magnates of the kingdom acquired sufficient power to become an actual threat for the monarchy and throw the realm into anarchy through their feuding. The years preceding *Vivat Rex* saw the enmity between the Houses of Burgundy and Orléans grow into open conflict, with their heads, Philip the Bold, the king's uncle, succeeded in 1404 by his son John, and Louis d'Orléans, the king's brother, disputing their control over the kingdom and its weak monarch. In the summer of 1405, in response to the queen's – who, at the time, was acting in conjunction with Louis d'Orléans – attempt to take the Dauphin out of Paris, John of Burgundy marched at the head of an army against the capital, captured the Dauphin and brought him back to Paris, something which was taken by his enemies as an attempt to carry out a coup. With the tensions growing, the University attempted to intercede with the Duke of Orléans, only to be rebuffed, but, in October 1405, a settlement was reached between the parties in conflict (Adams 2010, 166-175).

2. Gerson's Rhetorical Artifice: The University of Paris as "Daughter of the King"

Gerson preached *Vivat Rex* on 7 November 1405 to celebrate the reconciliation between the Dukes of Burgundy and Orléans and, fittingly, the theme was the peace of the state (Posthumus Meyjes 1999, 120-121). Just like in the previously discussed sermon, Gerson emphasized the moral authority of the University, who, while an obedient daughter of the King of France, could nonetheless provide the soundest advice. The Chancellor

considered Paris as the seat of all meaningful theological endeavor, calling Paris the throne of divine wisdom and asserting that the University of Paris sustained the Christian faith, which would have been less well-defended without the University (Pascoe 1973, 87). Nancy McLoughlin pointed out the significance of Gerson using a female persona for the University, despite the fact that the University itself was an all-male institution and an exponent of the patriarchy: while maintaining her daughterly dependence and loyalty, Gerson attempted to present the university as the only reliable, objective, and moral authority figure who could help the king and his court see the unbearable consequences their policies had for the university, the city of Paris, and the French people (McLoughlin 2015, 97). Such a position, though, could have led to frictions, as many nobles and even the king himself might not have been inclined to accept reproaches from the University. In the aftermath of John of Burgundy's march against Paris, Louis d'Orléans advised a delegation of the University which tried to advocate reconciliation to concern itself only with scholarly matters and leave the politics for the king and the princes of the realm. Louis d'Orléans had his own particular reasons for such a harsh retort, as he had come to regard the University as sympathetic to his political rival, the Duke of Burgundy – and he was not wrong in this. But the University could have been regarded as an intruder in a medieval world dominated by a martial spirit and its advice as unwelcome. Therefore, when Gerson wished to advise the Crown regarding a politically sensitive topic, he was extremely careful to demonstrate the extent to which he accepted the king's superior authority by adopting a purposefully subordinate and female persona for the university based upon her royally granted title as Daughter of the King: when he opened his sermon *Vivat Rex*, he was careful to start with the assurance that the university, personified as the Daughter of the King, spoke not by right, but with humility, like an obedient daughter, and, furthermore, he assured the members of his royal audience that he did not aspire to teach them anything that they did not already know, but rather sought to move them to act upon what they knew already (McLoughlin 2015, 35-36). And such a rhetorical artifice was greatly necessary, having in mind the claims made by Gerson in his argument which, if not carefully polished, could have offended many powerful people. Gerson's sermon, delivered after that particular quarrel between the parties of Burgundy and Orléans was settled, however, asked much more of the queen and the dukes than the peaceful conclusion of the most recent conflict: he demanded an end to wars entirely (McLoughlin 2015, 110).

Yet, the image so carefully constructed by Gerson for the University was not entirely one of submission: as a relation of the King, a female could wield considerable influence and there were many such precedents in France. A woman could move her father or her husband and even more so

a queen. This was convincingly argued by Kimberly LoPrete, who pointed out that there were “physical and conceptual spaces in which ruling women came to figure prominently and even laudably in the ‘public’ affairs of medieval France” and “being a woman did not constitute ipso facto a legal incapacity to lordly rule”: on the opposite, the image of a woman as de jure or de facto regent over her husband’s or son’s lands or even exercising lordship within her own rights were one quite familiar in late medieval France, even though, naturally, male heirs were still accorded preference (LoPrete 2007, 1921-1941). By the time of Jean Gerson, the Salic Law had indeed taken hold and it firmly excluded the women from either succeeding to the Crown of France or transmitting rights of succession to it, but that was a regulation which remained exclusive to the Crown rights. On the other hand, women could possess themselves the kind of authority inferior to the royal one and an advisory role such as the one claimed by Gerson for the personified University was even expected. A contemporary model was easily available for Gerson, which would have eased the reception of his claims in favor of the University as an advisor for the king: that of the Queen Isabeau, who, in the preceding years, was often called to mediate between the warring dukes and her role was articulated initially as “one requiring a lack of ambition combined with diplomatic skill” (Adams 2009, 10) – a position which the University mirrored perfectly. Therefore, the reference to the University as “daughter of the King” was more than a mere figure of speech, because, in the words of Daisy Delogu, “Gerson stages a complex allegory of the University, endowing her with voice and body, intellect and effect, [...] promoting her as one that can ought to perform critical state-building and governing functions” (Delogu 2013, 11).

3. The Corporal Allegory of the King and the Realm of France

If it was the personified University of Paris which addressed, through the words of her Chancellor, the king and his Court, it was only natural that Gerson’s discourse revolved around the person of the king. It has already been remarked in historiography that Gerson’s political outlook was heavily monarcho-centric (Nederman 2013, 465-480) and it could not have been otherwise: except for the writers from northern and central Italy, for whom the Republican model still held sway, the political thinkers from the rest of Europe were overwhelmingly insisting that monarchy was the best system of government. It was a model which fitted the theological sensibilities of these writers, most of whom were clerics, and the natural model of the human body which many referred to in making their case. Following faithfully this medieval tradition, Gerson argued in favor of the unicity of rulership, because “plurality of princes or princely powers is bad” and, typically, this was an idea which was supported by appealing to the analogy

with the human body, when pointing out that “so the small world, namely the man has only one soul which governs him” (Gerson 1824, 3). In the opinion of Brian Patrick McGuire, Gerson used the monarchy as a rallying point for all who lived within the kingdom of France and, in his summons to moral and political reform, he frequently made use of shared symbols in French History: the King was anointed by God himself through the Archbishop of Reims and therefore had a duty to look after all the estates of his realm, especially the weak (McGuire 2005, 189). That was a common enough trope in medieval France, where the king was seen as the guarantor of his realm’s unity and his subjects’ security. Christine de Pizan, in her works such as *Le Livres du Corps de Policie*, linked the metaphorical health of the kingdom to the actual physical health of its monarch and, in the context of the early fifteenth century, that was more than a figure of speech, as the illness of Charles VI was throwing France into anarchy.

According to P.S. Lewis, the idea that the king was the head of a *corpus mysticum* of which the various groups in society were the members was a popular one and it served to place the king beyond the normal pale of humankind (Lewis 1968, 84). Gerson’s appeal to the king was even more logic when considering the status which he attributed to him and which, to a certain extent, even went in opposition to the policy of the Church. In order to prevent another monarch to gain an edge over the papacy, as it happened during the Carolingian and the Ottonian periods, the Catholic Church strongly denied the sacerdotal character of the monarchy. Its ire was directed mostly against the imperial office and Gregory VII reminded the emperors that, not being able even to chase away the demons, they are inferior even to the exorcists (Bloch 1961, 186). Yet, when Gerson reminded his audience about the sacred origins of the French monarchy, when Clovis was baptized by Saint Remy with the miraculous holy oil, he pointed out that the king was endowed not only with the royal power, but also with a “priestly or pontifical dignity” (Gerson 1824, 4).

In his sermon, Gerson reiterated the concept of the multiple personas of the king. It was a concept which was discussed at length by Ernst Kantorowicz in his classic work *The King’s Two Bodies*, where he argued convincingly that the medieval and early modern monarch was seen to possess two bodies, a corporal one, which was perishable and subjected to all human infirmities, and a political one, which was immortal and flawless. Gerson referred to this as “the corporal life” and “the civil life” of the king, to which he added “the spiritual life”. With respect to the first, Gerson’s thought was dominated by the medical paradigm of this time, who maintained that the health of the human body depended on the harmony of the main qualities, which corresponded to the four humors. In Gerson’s words, the corporal life of man “is guarded and preserved by the convenient proportion and harmony of the four main qualities, warmth, coldness,

dryness and wetness. Through the disproportion or the indisposition of these contrary qualities in the human body the natural and vital complexion is corrupted, by having too much warmth or too much cold, as experience shows in diverse afflictions” (Gerson 1824, 11). Naturally, for Gerson the civil life was more important than the corporal one, because it coincided with the life of the realm, and it had to be protected against all dangers: this was something which the University was supposed to contribute to, by “finding and helping to make a convenient remedy”, but without infringing upon the issues which belonged to the king’s Council (Gerson 1824, 16). But, as already pointed out, for Gerson, the king possessed not a double body, but a triple one, in his quality as guardian of the faith. After all, the King of France was “Le Roy Tres Chretien”, and, therefore, in Gerson’s words, “the King lives, lives, I say, a life not just corporal, as they say, but civil and mystical” (Gerson 1824, 19). By pointing out that the king did have an existence which was civil and mystical, Gerson made it possible to explain the tight connection between the well-being of the monarch and the well-being of his realm. The king was the head of his realm and, as such, he was the preserver of its unity, joined together with his subjects, who are the members of the body of the state, “according to the many offices and estates which are in this kingdom”. The king described by Gerson was not a mere person, but a public power instituted for the common good and, in this quality, he “spreads life through the whole body” (Gerson 1824, 19-20) – a characteristic which was emphasized also by other predecessors of Gerson, such as Giles of Rome.

The royal power was sustained by two arms, one being the nobility, the other the clergy and each of them was responsible for the well-being of the other. Since, according to the established theory of governance, injury to a part of the body politic resulted in injury to the whole, it was a solemn duty for one part to protect the other from harm. The clergy could not provide physical protection, as they were forbidden to bear arms and shed blood and, therefore, this was the task of the nobles: but the clergy had the even more important duty of providing for the spiritual well-being of the realm. Even more, it could have provided advice in matters of politics, because medieval governance was supposed to be rooted in the Christian faith and morals. The University of Paris was an ecclesiastical institution and a major source of knowledge of wisdom and, for this reason, Gerson emphasized that it had a duty to take an interest in the well-being of the other Estates. The nobles, argued Gerson, should not begrudge the University for this and should not deny her this right, because, as an arm of the kingdom, the University was not allowed to remain silent: “If a knight, in order to do injustice, will risk himself and his life in battle, the arm of the clergy and of the University of Paris should let him fall without saying a word?” (Gerson 1824, 10).

Just as he always rallied against sin in his sermons, Gerson was also quick to point out the necessity for the king of possessing the four cardinal virtues: extolled since the Antiquity as the defining traits of the ideal prince, they were appropriated as well by the medieval political thought, which added to them specific Christian virtues, such as charity, hope and faith. Gerson drew a parallel between the four cardinal virtues and the physical qualities which, according to the anatomical medieval model, also inherited from the Antiquity, determined the health of the human body. Through this analogy, Gerson emphasized the idea of order, proportion and harmony – “just like the corporal life preserves itself through the good proportion, order and harmony of the four main qualities, as they say” (Gerson 1824, 14) – and, in this regard, he was merely following faithfully the typical medieval line of thought. If the civil life of the king mirrored the structure and the workings of the natural body, then it was a foregone conclusion that its existence depended on the already-mentioned cardinal virtues: “Accordingly, this civil life maintains and preserves itself in conjunction with the four cardinal or main virtues, prudence, temperance, fortitude and justice”(Gerson 1824, 14).

Gerson explicitly indicated that rather than resulting from the misdeeds of a few sinful aristocrats, the evils he recounted resulted from a complete breakdown in the system of royal government: those who were supposed to lead France pursued instead their own self-aggrandizement at the expense of royal power and the common good (McLoughlin 2016, 329). Yet, despite his calls for reform and his assertions that all was not all well in the Kingdom of France, Gerson was careful in assigning blame. After all, he spoke in front of an audience consisting of many of the people which one might have considered to be responsible for the ills afflicting the realm. Gerson was not a radical and, despite his recognition that significant changes might have been necessary, he expected these changes to be effected by the existing authorities. In the good medieval tradition, he stressed the value of obedience, the duty of all good subjects and key to the preservation of the realm, and he emphasized his point through the corporal analogy (Gerson 1824, 11). In this regard, it has to be pointed out that medieval tradition regarded obedience not “in terms of servile subordination but as an aspect of individual virtue and rightful order in the society” (Rigby 2012, 471).

As a central figure of the Council of Konstanz and a preeminent supporter of the general council as the supreme authority in the Church, even above that of the pope, Gerson was long considered in the modern historiography as a proponent of a kind of ecclesiastic constitutionalism. But such a term attributed to Gerson would be misleading, because, even though Middle Ages accepted the idea that some limits must exist for any authority, such limitations were imposed upon the person, not upon the

office. Basically, an evil ruler could have been rightfully resisted, but a virtuous one could have not. In his ecclesiastical works, Gerson talked about the limits of papal power, but he raised this issue in relation with the secular monarchy as well. Catherine Brown pointed out that Gerson claimed in *Vivat Rex* that a monarchy did not have to be absolute, but the term is a rather poor choice. Unlike in the modern age, where absolutism has strong negative connotations, the medieval mindset did not necessarily see something wrong with an absolute power: what concerned medieval political writers like Gerson was the idea of a just and virtuous rulership. An absolute power in the service of God and the law of nature was, on the contrary, something to be commended and desired. But Catherine Brown is correct when pointing out that Gerson thought it was better if kings had less lordship, if there were some restraints on their power: in his opinion, this would have helped rather than harmed the ruler (Brown 1987, 163). Gerson made his case again with the help of the corporal analogy when he pointed out that such a step was necessary so that the “head does not draw too much humor and blood from the members” (Gerson 1824, 24).

The head was always maintained to be the most important part of the body, although, from the late thirteenth century, under the influence of the recently rediscovered Aristotelian anatomy, that was a position which it had to share with the heart. By comparing the realm with the body (and the king with the head), Gerson was able to describe the organization of the former as an outcome of nature. Thus, he asserted that, just like in a true body the inferior members would expose themselves for the sake of the head, so in a mystical body, the true subjects would similarly expose themselves to danger for the sake of their prince. Yet, the relationship between head and members comprised of obligations for both sides. The medieval political paradigm constantly emphasized the idea of interdependency between the parts of the body politic, but that meant that the head itself could not exist without the inferior parts and it owed them justice, order and protection, a point which did not escape Gerson’s attention, as he stated that “the head must take care of and rule the other members, otherwise there is destruction: because a head without a body cannot last” (Gerson 1824, 20). As already mentioned, with respect to his conception about the rulership of the Church, Gerson was often called a constitutionalist (in the medieval sense of the word), because of his emphasize on the role of a general council, which, according to Gerson, should have been able to overrule a pope in certain circumstances. While there was nothing “constitutionalist” in his statement that a king’s existence depended upon his subjects, it got somehow closer to that when Gerson addressed the topic of tyranny – an ever-present concern in medieval political thought. In his opinion, it was better if there were limits on the king’s power. But the restraints against a king’s abuse of power were not codified by law, nor did they concern the

powers of the office – instead, they related to the king’s own self-preservation and took the form of warnings about the dangers of tyranny. The king was not restrained by an external authority, because he was the supreme authority in his realm, but he limited himself in order to act in accordance with the law of God and nature. To provide a more convincing and vivid picture, Gerson delivered that warning in corporal terms – a king who abused his power (by despoiling his subjects) was like a head which sucked out all the blood, humor and substance from the members. Such a king would literally annihilate himself, because “a head without a body cannot last: a body without sustenance will also perish” (Gerson 1824, 21). Gerson did not limit himself to a mere warning against tyranny, but went further in order to explain why it was so dangerous. His explanation was, once more, delivered with the help of metaphors, where tyranny was presented as “poison”, “venom” and “disease”, who put to death “the whole political and royal life”. But the most charged accusation against the tyranny was that it was “unnatural”, working only for its benefit, which was contrary to “good civil life” (Gerson 1824, 23). In a time when nature was considered as providing the best models of organization and action, which should have always been followed if good results were to be had, being “unnatural” was regarded as flawed, even evil and contrary to God’s law. But, despite the rhetoric directed against tyranny, Gerson was not prepared to countenance the most radical actions which could have been taken to prevent it. In this regard, Gerson remained pretty much a traditionalist, strongly attached to the political establishment. Despite his disillusionment with many of its flaws and his frequent allusions to the shortcomings of the French government, which was allowing the country to slide into anarchy, increasing the sufferings of the poor, Gerson envisioned any potential reforms as coming from above, initiated by the monarchy itself, and his calls all aimed for this purpose. As for the option of disobeying and even rebelling against a tyrannical king, Gerson was hostile to it, because he regarded the solution as worse than the problem. In fact, Gerson’s dilemma was one which troubled pretty much all medieval political thought, without exception. There was a total consensus about the evils and dangers of tyranny, but Middle Ages did not actually have any constitutional mechanism for peacefully restraining the actions of a king who was determined to flout the norms of equity and justice. The king was constantly urged to respect the laws of God, nature and of his own realm, the coronation oath asserted his obligation to do so, but actually constraining an unrepentant king confronted medieval political theory with two unpalatable alternatives: sedition or tyrannicide. The former tore apart the unity of the realm, the latter was a major sin against the laws of God, both because of the act itself, and because the intended target was, despite his flaws, God’s anointed. If a part of the body politic was afflicted by a

“disease” which could not be cured and threatened to spread to the whole body, medieval political writers advocated a radical solution such as its removal, a “surgical” operation performed by the realm’s symbolic physician, the king. But that was clearly not viable if the king himself was the source of the illness, such as in the case of tyranny. In this regard, Gerson’s approach favored lenience, because, even if tyranny threatened to enter the body politic, “it is not convenient to cut or divide the body” and he recommends to “treat it kindly with gentle words just like the good physicians do” (Gerson 1824, 23-24). Gerson totally rejected the idea of sedition, because it contradicted the fundamental medieval tenet of preserving the unity of the body politic and, therefore, in his opinion, in such a case the remedy was worse than the disease: “There is not anything less reasonable and more cruel than to wish to stop tyranny by sedition, and I call sedition popular rebellion without reason, which is worse than tyranny: Lucius Scilla was called to Rome to overthrow the tyranny of Marius, but he was worse than him, just like some say *Excessit medicina modum*. The medicine without measure hurts more than the disease, says Lucan.” (Gerson 1824, 24). But, if the subjects could not legally restrain their sovereigns, the latter were supposed to restrain themselves, because, this way, the royal power was more durable: even though Gerson opposed sedition, he was realistic enough to understand that oppressed subjects could retaliate against their princes. In order to prevent this from happening, he argued that the power of the prince should not be unrestrained, but, on the contrary, some limits should exist, because a limited royal authority was “reasonable, healthy and durable”. The justification is provided in corporal terms: if such restraints existed, then the head would not be able to drain all the humors and blood from the other members (Gerson 1824, 24).

Jean Gerson was always concerned with the concept of sin, which appeared often in his sermons. As Gerson applied the sins to politics, he began treating them as embodied and diabolically inspired entities that acted upon the political world as independent forces allied with misguided or wicked humans (McLoughlin 2016, 333). As a cleric, Gerson placed sin as the source of all evils which could befall a kingdom: in his opinion, the prosperity of the corporal and civil life depended on a good spiritual life and the latter had to be defended “against the prince of tyranny, the Mortal Sin”. Medieval thought had long established a link between physical and spiritual life, considering that the diseases of the body were often the consequence of sin. It was a belief which sprang from the medieval notion that the body was the mirror of the soul and a sinful soul resulted in a diseases body. Gerson took this relationship into the sphere of political thought, when he connected, again by using corporal terms, the calamities which might befall a realm to the spiritual flaws of its prince or its people.

For him, sins were worse than the “evil humors”, because they destroyed not only the body, but the “spiritual life”: “Be certain that for the sins of the body mystical, be them in the head or in the members, we face great corporal and civil dangers, and especially when they are horrible, strange sins, ugly and evil against God and nature”. (Gerson 1824, 47). Gerson referred in the text to the sins which might hinder the four cardinal virtues, but he devoted most of his attention to the sin of flattery: not only because the connection between its effects and bad governance was obvious, but also because it allowed him to redirect the blame from the king, especially with respect to the concept of tyranny. In his opinion, the flatterer was the one who pushed the prince on the dangerous path of tyranny and, for this not to happen, it was essential for the monarch to be surrounded by counselors who provided him with the best advice for the good of the realm and not for their own aggrandizement. Such counselors were an integral part of the body politic imagined by Gerson as, without them, the body was incomplete: “It is a great help for the conservation of the King and of the civil life, because a King without prudent counsel it is like the head in a body without eyes, without ears and without nose.” (Gerson 1824, 32).

Because the realm was depicted as one united body and the well-being of its parts was interdependent, it was easy for Gerson to emphasize the concept of solidarity: “Then all that is needed for the defense of the civil life of the king and the kingdom, take and raise money, that must be done in good equality and equity by all the body mystical” (Gerson 1824, 45). None of the parts of the body politic should be compelled to contribute to the common good more than the others, because otherwise it would mean to incur the risk of sedition, but, on the other hand, Gerson was quick to follow the medieval tradition in pointing out that other parts have different responsibilities within the realm than mere labor. He alluded to the well-known fable of the belly, pointing out to what a “senator of Rome said in order to bring about the union of the people with the Senate, against which the former grumbled”, in order to assert that the lower parts should not feel envious on the others for their different tasks, because the latter merely fulfilled the role which was ascribed to them by God. On the other hand, the superior parts had a duty not to “despoil the members who toil” (Gerson 1824, 45). Yet, despite this concern for the state of the poor, Gerson’s focus was, in the words of Cary Nederman, mostly “on the king’s relations with the nobility and the great men of the realm”, in order to “stabilize the fraught condition of the aristocratic orders” (Nederman 2013, 475). Gerson’s approach towards the lower class was very paternalistic and, in this, the analogy between the realm and the body served him well: the metaphor had always been strictly hierarchical, with superior and inferior parts of the body. The interdependency of the parts might have been

admitted, but that never meant that all of the members of the body politic had the same status.

4. Conclusions

Despite Gerson's powerful rhetoric, his passionate appeals did not have the desired effect. The underlying cause for his failure lies in the fact that his approach was fundamentally inadequate, having in mind the situation of France at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The contrast with his success in ending the Western Schism is powerful and it explains the reasons for his failure in bringing about a resolution to the French crisis: in the case of the Schism, after initially starting with appeals to the two popes to resign for the sake of the Church, he pushed for an institutional solution, where a General Council asserted its superiority over the pope and imposed its will on the claimants to the papal throne. On the other hand, with *Vivat Rex*, Gerson called upon the existing authority, the King, to resolve the crisis, but it was the weakness of this authority which brought the crisis in the first place. With Charles VI basically a non-factor, for long periods, on the political stage due to his illness, the government was in the hands of the Queen, Isabeau of Bavaria, and the king's brother, the Duke of Orlèans. In other periods, a regency would have been powerful enough to control the situation, but, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, a rival authority had formed in France around the Dukes of Burgundy, an authority which was powerful enough to challenge the monarchy, albeit under the guise of protecting the king from bad counsel and providing a better government for the realm. The peace Gerson preached for completely collapsed in 1407, after the murder of the Duke of Orlèans by his rival. Of course, *Vivat Rex* was not the end of Gerson's efforts and, in a sermon from 1408, *Veniat Pax*, he preached again in favor of reconciliation. But, instead of the expected penance, the Duke of Burgundy made, through his men, the apology of his crime and that was to prove too much for Gerson, who slowly and gradually moved in the camp hostile to the Burgundy faction.

Yet, even if it did not have the desired practical effect, Gerson's careful cultivation of the monarchy and his praise directed towards the King of France ensured the success of the sermon. Despite his criticism directed against the crisis France was going through at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the monarchy saw nothing troublesome in Gerson's words. On the contrary, as Nancy McLoughlin pointed out, Gerson's *Vivat Rex* circulated in the libraries of kings and monasteries and it was published independently, in 1561 and 1824, as means of shoring up royal power, at the time when it was seriously tested by popular discontent and succession problems. Yet, at the same time, one should not fall into the trap of attributing an excessive importance to *Vivat Rex*, because many of the ideas expressed in this

sermon were not original, but merely fitting into an already existing tradition of political thought. When someone claims that French political thinkers were particularly inspired by Gerson's conflation of the king's body with the realm as a means of making the king responsible for the elimination of vices (McLoughlin 2015, 125), that means to ignore that this particular idea preceded Gerson by a long time. It would be hard to argue that Gerson was the inspiration for it, when, by 1405, it had already been expressed by illustrious figures such as John of Salisbury, who argued that the prince "must correct the errors of its subjects in a medical fashion" (John of Salisbury 2004, 49), or Giles of Rome, who likewise claimed that "the king and the good prince must try to tame the dissatisfactions and the discords" (Giles of Rome 1966, 366).

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