

Councils During Two Millennia of Church History



This year marks the 50th anniversary of the start of the Second Vatican Council – Vatican II. It provides an opportunity therefore to look back at the role and the achievements of previous councils in the Church's long history.

Councils have been a feature of Church life from the earliest of times. We read in Acts (15:1-29) that the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem to determine what Jewish obligations, if any, should be placed on Gentiles wishing to become a Christian. This is not perhaps as strange a question as it might at first seem. Jesus was born into the Jewish faith as were

the apostles, so how much of their upbringing and the application of the Jewish Law continued to be pertinent in the new way in which they had been taught by Jesus to image God? The collective verdict which was announced by St Peter was:

'It has been decided by the Holy Spirit and ourselves not to saddle you with burdens beyond these essentials: you are to abstain from food sacrificed to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals and from fornication. Avoid these and you will do what is right.'

Here then was a ruling intended for general application and delivered by the leaders of the Church under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. It displays a clear sense of purpose but incorporates an element of conditionality that no doubt reflected the need for some degree of compromise amongst the participants.

As the Church continued to expand, local and provincial councils became the means of choice to resolve ongoing issues and maintain harmony. From time to time a more broadly constituted forum was considered to be necessary to deal with serious matters of faith and practice and such gatherings were termed 'Ecumenical Councils.' The word is derived from the Greek *aikonome*, meaning 'inhabited' and by extension relating to the entire (inhabited) world. The Roman Catholic Church recognises a current total of 21 Ecumenical Councils up to and including Vatican II and they can be considered within three distinct eras of Church history.

THE COUNCILS OF THE FIRST MILLENNIUM

For the first two hundred years of its life, the Church was forced to endure frequent persecutions at the hands of the civil authorities. However, by the beginning of the third century the Emperor Constantine had himself become a Christian and the relationship between the State and the Church began to change to one of partnership rather than opposition.

Within the Church at that time there were strongly voiced disputes concerning the person of Jesus. One of the main 'combatants' was an Egyptian priest, Arius (died

AD336) , who held that God (the Father) was unique and transcendent and whose essence could not be shared or transferred to another (such as the Son) as this would imply a division of God. His contention was that Jesus was begotten of God in time not from all eternity and as part of creation he was therefore inferior to God but greater than other creatures.

At the behest of the Emperor (and at his expense), the bishops of the Church travelled to the town of Nicea, in present day Turkey, to resolve the controversy. This was the first officially designated Ecumenical Council.

Nicea (AD325)

To refute the claim by Arius of a diminished notion of Jesus' divinity as the Son of God, the council asserted that Jesus is of one substance or being with God the Father, not simply of a similar substance and not created at a particular point in time but eternally begotten of the Father. This upheld the divinity of Jesus as the means whereby the eternal God had personally entered into the historical condition of humanity in Jesus of Nazareth.

The pivotal word to produce the definition was the Greek *homoousios* meaning of the same being (in Latin *consubstantialis*) but for several reasons it did not secure the unanimous approval of the Council Fathers. First, it was not a biblical term and some of the bishops considered that its use was inappropriate to formulate doctrine. Secondly, the word itself is capable of different interpretations and might be taken to imply that Father and Son were the same person but operating in different guises at different times.

Constantinople (AD 381)

The Arian debate continued after the close of Nicea and a second Ecumenical Council was called to reconfirm the 'one in being' of the father and Son which was expanded to incorporate a 'trinitarian' framework of Father Son and Holy Spirit. The agreed text from Constantinople comprises the following statement:

'We believe in one God the Father all powerful, maker of heaven and of earth, and of all things both seen and unseen.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God, begotten from the Father before all the ages, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father, through whom all things came to be.

For us humans and for our salvation he came down from the heavens and became incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, became human and was crucified on our behalf by Pontius Pilate;

He suffered and was buried and rose up on the third day in accordance with the scriptures; he is coming again with glory to judge the living and the dead; his kingdom will have no end.

And in the Spirit, the holy, the lordly and life giving one, proceeding forth from the Father, co-worshipped and glorified with the Father and Son, the one who spoke through the prophets;

In one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

We confess one baptism for the forgiving of sins.

We look forward to a resurrection of the dead and life in the age to come. Amen .'

It is immediately apparent that the Credo which we recite at Mass each Sunday is virtually identical to the text agreed at Constantinople - a remarkable tribute to these two early councils.

Ephesus (AD 431)

The third Council was called to reject the claim that there were two separate persons in Jesus, one divine and the other human. This view had arisen as a result of the refusal by Nestorius, then bishop of Constantinople, to describe Mary as 'Mother of God' (*theotokos*) or 'God bearer,' claiming that she only gave birth to a man in whom God dwelt. The Council witnessed an element of rivalry between the different patriarchs who were in attendance but ultimately affirmed the unity of Jesus by recognising Mary's title.

Chalcedon (AD 451)

As at Nicea a century before, the decision reached by the bishops at Ephesus did not totally eliminate ongoing disputes or prevent new propositions being introduced. One such formulation was that Jesus had two natures before but only one nature after the incarnation – a position known as 'monophysitism' (from the Greek *mono* = 'one; *physis* = 'nature').

This proposition was rejected by the Council which proclaimed that there were two distinct natures that were united in the person of the 'God-man' Jesus. It then became the task of the assembled bishops to formulate the manner in which the divine and the human natures were combined, drawing together the teachings of the previous councils that Jesus is truly God and truly man, begotten before the ages from the Father in his divinity and from Mary the God-bearer as regards his humanity. By formal definition at Chalcedon, Jesus was acknowledged as having two natures which: *'undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between natures taken away through the union but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and as a single subsistent being.*

This formulation defines the 'Hypostatic Union' (from the Greek *hypostasis*, meaning 'individual' or 'person'), being the union of two distinct natures of God and man in the person of Jesus, who is truly God and true man. This, together with the findings of the three earlier councils is accepted doctrine for virtually all Christian Churches concerning the true understanding of Jesus in himself (Christology).

Constantinople II (AD 553)

This council was intended as a 'rounding-off' of the first four councils as despite the clear formulation at Chalcedon, arguments still continued concerning the person of Jesus particularly within the Eastern Church. Constantinople II was an attempt to reconcile the monophysites and the Chalcedonians.

Constantinople III (AD 690)

The focus of this council turned to a question of the duality of wills in the person of Jesus – was there one for his divine nature and another for his human nature or should these be treated as a single one in accordance with his one person or substance (a proposition known as 'Monothelitism')? The finding of the Council was that there were two wills and principles of action in Jesus whereby *'...each nature wills and performs*

the things that are proper to it in a communion with the other.' The significance of this formulation is that it ensures that the humanity of Jesus must be taken seriously and not subsumed into his divinity.

Nicea II (AD 787)

The principal topic for this seventh council was images. What kind of reverence, if any should be paid to images associated with Jesus, Mary and the early saints? This had been an ongoing dispute for some time with those opposed to any use of images ('iconoclasts') claiming biblical support for their position vis Exodus 20:4 and Deuteronomy 5:8. However, the Council found in favour of the use of images but emphasised the type of reverence that could be paid to them, distinguishing between worship which could be given only to the divine and in no way to images, and veneration or reverence which should be paid to an image on account of the person(s) it represented.

It is interesting to note that this council decision is diametrically opposite to the view which was forcefully expressed in Islam, which by the eighth century had become an established religion in the region.

Constantinople IV (AD 869)

The agenda for this council had more to do with ecclesial politics than theology. It revolved around the patriarch of Constantinople (Photius) who had gained his position due to the favour of one emperor but was deposed by his successor who then called upon the Church to 'ratify' his decision. This eighth Council is not recognised by the Eastern Church as being 'ecumenical' and a period of discord between the Eastern and Western Churches would continue for the remainder of the first millennium. A formal schism between the two Churches was declared in 1054 and remains in place up to the present time.

In summary, the councils of the first millennium established our fundamental faith understanding of Jesus. They all took place in the East, the common language was Greek and each of the councils were convened and presided over by the respective civil rather than religious leaders of the time.

THE COUNCILS OF THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

The most obvious changes in this second era involved geography, language and governance. The centre of gravity in the Church moved to Western Europe, the language of choice became Latin and there was a noticeable and on occasions an assertive papal involvement at each gathering.

The first four medieval councils took place in the Lateran Basilica in Rome which had been built for the Church by Constantine. We tend today to associate Pope and Curia with St Peter's and the Vatican, but the actual Cathedral church of the Bishop of Rome – and thereby the Mother Church to the world – is St John Lateran, in the centre of Rome.

Lateran I (1123)

This first council was concerned with the independence of the Church and in particular the right and practice that had developed for lay monarchs and rulers to invest local bishops with their insignia of office. Lateran I ratified an earlier Church/ State agreement reserving the right of investiture to the Church alone.

Lateran II (1139)

The council was called to end a minor schism within the Church but is remembered principally for its pronouncement on clerical celibacy. The marital status of those in major orders (sub-deacon, deacon, priest and bishop) had been a long standing issue of debate and the formal declaration of the Council, was that a marriage of clerics was not only unlawful but invalid. The Church's present celibacy rules date from Lateran II.

Lateran III (1179)

The achievement of this council was to effect a reconciliation between Pope Alexander III and the German emperor, Frederick Barbarossa, which had which had witnessed years of political argument concerning who was the rightful person to hold the office of pope. The Council also introduced the provision for a candidate to secure a two-thirds majority vote from the cardinals in order to be elected pope.

Lateran IV (1215)

The fourth Lateran Council is generally recognised as one of the principal gatherings of the Medieval Period. The Council was called by Pope Innocent III in order to:

'eradicate vices and to plant virtues, avert faults and reform morals, to remove heresies and to strengthen faith, to settle discords and to establish peace, to get rid of oppression and to foster liberty, to induce princes and Christian people to come to the aid and succour of the Holy Land.'

Lateran IV attracted 400 participants comprising bishops and other representatives from church and state. The agenda was drawn up by the Pope and his Curia based on the feedback they received from numerous local councils which they had purposely convened for this purpose. The arriving delegates were met with a total of 71 propositions for consideration but with the expectation that their role was principally to endorse rather than seriously debate the individual items.

In terms of doctrine, the first decree was in the nature of a creed and intended to refute a heresy known as 'Catherism' which held the entire material world as evil. The Council's defence of the sacraments contained the first definition of 'Transubstantiation' to describe the change involved in the Eucharist. Aside from doctrinal matters, the remainder of the decrees were disciplinary in nature, touching upon marriage (including rules on consanguinity), the life-style of the clergy, relationships between clergy and laity, and for the laity in particular a requirement for annual confession and Holy Communion –what became known as 'Easter duties.'

Lyons I (1245)

Physical threats against Pope Innocent IV (1243-54) which emanated in Germany caused him to leave Rome and travel to Lyons. Bishops were invited to join him for the stated aim of seeking to review this and other menaces to the papacy and to make reforms to the clergy. However, the real purpose of the council was to effect the deposition of Frederick II as King of Germany and Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire which was enacted with immediate effect. This first Council of Lyons is therefore a further example of a council driven by political rather than theological aims.

Lyons II (1274)

This Council is still known as one of history's 'what-ifs.' Pope Gregory X had sought the advice of the best theological talent in the Church which included the French

Dominican Thomas Aquinas. Sadly, Thomas died en-route to Lyons and one can only wonder what influence he would have exercised if he had been present.

An attempt was also made at Lyons to secure a re-union between the Eastern and Western Churches but this proved to be unsuccessful. Further reforms were introduced to the procedure for papal elections and the Council formally affirmed that there were seven Sacraments.

Vienne (1311)

The background to this council was a longstanding power struggle between France and the Papacy which reached a turning point in 1305 with the election of Pope Clement V – a Frenchman with an affinity towards King Philip IV of France. Under the king's influence Clement moved to Avignon and so began the 'Avignon Papacy' which would run for more than 70 years under seven successive French popes until Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome in 1378.

The Council of Vienne was dominated by French politics and in particular by a plan to expropriate funds from the Order of Knights Templar in order to finance the King's overseas wars. Only selected bishops were invited to attend and the large presence of the King's agents ensured that the Order was relieved of its funds as well as being condemned and suspended. It is difficult to judge the Council of Vienne as other than a blatant manipulation of the papacy and a scandal for the Church.

Constance (1414).

The last of the 'Avignon Popes' Gregory XI, returned to Rome in 1377 but died the following year. The unequivocal view of the populace was that his successor should be an Italian and this was achieved with the election of Pope Urban VI. Unfortunately, Urban turned out to be a violent man and the focus of his attention soon turned towards the cardinals who decided as a group to flee from Rome. They departed claiming that their election of Urban had been as a result of earlier threats and was therefore invalid, leaving them free to elect a new pope, who as Clement VII, returned to Avignon.

This action by the cardinals initiated what became known as the 'Great Western Schism,' which divided the allegiances of rulers across Europe.' The consensus view amongst the scholars and canon lawyers of the time was that only an Ecumenical Council could resolve the problem. Led by the German emperor Sigismund, clerical and lay leaders called for a council to take place in the Swiss city of Constance.

The primary purpose of Constance was to elect a pope who was acceptable to all Catholics but this brought to a head what had been a the long running debate within the Church of whether supreme power lay with the pope or with an ecumenical council. Before embarking on the election process the council therefore passed a formal decree *Sacrosancta* which declared that a General or Ecumenical Council was the Supreme authority in the Church. A further decree, *Frequens* was then introduced, requiring that such councils should be called at regular intervals. Having established these parameters of authority, the Council then elected Pope Martin V and effectively ended the schism.

Basle (1431)

This Council was called by Pope Martin V in accordance with the *Frequens* provision

agreed at Constance but he died shortly after the Council began. His successor, Eugene IV inherited a very poor attendance amongst the bishops and so decided to dissolve the proceedings. However, the assembled bishops refused to be dismissed and asserted their right to exercise day-to-day control of Church affairs.

Six years later and unaware of the Basle 'stand-off' the Byzantine emperor approached Pope Eugene for help in his struggle against the Turks. The Pope seized this opportunity for a reunion between the Eastern and Western Churches and instigated a new, and more conveniently located, council in Ferrara (1438) which transferred to Florence the following year. Most of the original delegates at Basle refused to move and in 1439 they deposed Eugene and elected Felix V as their own pope. The Church had returned to a situation of having more than one pope and now had to contend also with two ongoing Councils.

The Council in Florence reached an agreement for a reunion between the Eastern and Western Churches but when the Eastern delegates returned home this was quickly rejected by the Greek clergy. The Council itself moved subsequently to Rome and came to a close in 1445. A few years later, Pope Felix V resigned and so concluded the original Basle Council.

Lateran V (1512)

This Council was called by Pope Julius II to reach an accord with the French monarch (Louis XI) and to pass a series of urgently needed reforms. The former objective was achieved, but the worst of the prevailing abuses within the Church were not even addressed, let alone resolved. Within seven months of the end of the Council in 1517, a very different notion of Church reform took shape in Wittenberg, Germany, led by an Augustinian monk named Martin Luther. The Protestant Reformation had begun.

Thus a second era in the Church's history was destined to end in discord with a division in Western Europe between the Roman Catholic and Protestant Churches. The councils of the Medieval era did define further matters of doctrine but the main emphasis can be seen to have moved towards issues of discipline and ecclesial practices.

THE COUNCILS OF THE MODERN PERIOD

Trent (1545)

It will be evident from the start date of the Council that 28 years had elapsed since the beginning of the Reformation. The reason for this was partly due to German and French politics but also a reluctance on the part of the papacy to promote a council for fear of reviving the notion of 'conciliarism' and its claim of superiority over the pope. A council was eventually called by Pope Paul III in 1545 with the agreed location being the North Italian town of Trent. Invitations were extended for Protestant representatives to attend and the Council's three working sessions would span a total of 18 years until 1563.

Effectively, Trent drew a proverbial 'line in the sand' in order to define what was and was not orthodox Catholic teaching in respect of a wide range of doctrinal matters. These included the relationship between Scripture and tradition as sources of authority in the church, the roles of faith and of good works in our justification, Original Sin, the Eucharist and in particular the doctrine of transubstantiation, plus a re-affirmation of the other sacraments.. It also introduced a number of major reforms to Church practices and made provision for improved training for the clergy.

Not surprisingly, the decrees of Trent were proscriptive in nature and expressed in the language of the time but they did give the Roman Church a platform and a confidence to end years of acting defensively in the face of the Reformation. The approved measures gave rise to the publication of a 'Catechism of Trent' and a missal containing the rite which later became known as the 'Tridentine Mass', both of which would exercise a profound effect on the life and thinking of the Church for the several centuries to follow.

Trent was a great reforming Council but over time its success would become its weakness. Nobody felt the need to refine or develop the original theological and liturgical formulations. In contrast, civil society witnessed major social, political and intellectual change with the Church adopting an increasingly introspective and defensive outlook.

Vatican I (1869)

A formal summons to patriarchs, archbishops, bishops and abbots was issued by Pope Pius IX in 1869. The stated objective of the Council was, *'...to provide a remedy for present evils in the Church and society...determine what is to be done in these calamitous times for the greater glory of God, for the integrity of belief, the splendour of worship, the eternal salvation of humanity, the discipline and the solid instruction of the secular and religious clergy, the observance of ecclesiastical laws, the reform of morals, the Christian education of youth and peace and universal concord.'*

Representatives from the Eastern and the Reformed Churches were invited to look upon the Council as an opportunity for returning to the true fold but this did not elicit a positive response. A total of 800 Catholic prelates did attend and were presented with an agenda of 52 draft documents for discussion. Due to serious time constraints as a result of external political events only six documents reached the council floor and of these, only two were discussed and agreed. These two documents were *'The Constitution on the Catholic Faith' (Dei Filius)* and *'The Constitution on the Catholic Church' (Pastor Aeternus)*.

The former dealt with God as the creator of all things, the possibility of knowing God and the need for revelation, the nature of faith and knowledge from faith and reason. The second document was intended to be a full decree on the Church, thus filling the gap left by Trent. However, the threat of a Franco-Prussian war and the impending arrival in Rome of Nationalist Italian troops added urgency to the proceedings and only allowed time to discuss and agree the first part of the intended document which dealt with Papal Primacy which became a decree in its own right. Moreover, during the course of the debate, the original agenda for papal primacy was expanded to incorporate papal infallibility.

These collective definitions held that:

'when the Roman Pontiff speaks ex-cathedra, that is, when, in the exercise of his office as shepherd and teacher of all Christians in virtue of his supreme apostolic authority he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church, he possesses by the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter, that infallibility which the divine Redeemer willed his church to enjoy in defining doctrine concerning faith and morals.'

This then is a brief summary of the twenty Councils which preceded our own Vatican II. The backcloth for us therefore was a Church with a 'siege theology' that was

essentially based on a 300-year-old medieval catechism and liturgy and all contained within a formally centralised governance structure. The remedy proposed by Pope John XXIII was '*aggiornamento*' to bring things up-to-date or, in his often reported expression, '*to open the windows and let in some fresh air.*'

Strictly speaking the absence of the Eastern Church from the eleventh century onwards precludes later councils being defined as 'ecumenical'. Indeed, in 1974, Pope Paul VI pointedly referred to the medieval councils as 'general councils of the Western Church.' Notwithstanding this, the participants at all of these gatherings met to confront the great issues of their day and collectively they touched upon an amazingly broad range of Christian belief and practice.

As described by the historian, Norman Tanner, somehow the Holy Spirit has preserved the church through these councils and many other local ones, enabling Christians to remain in contact with their roots and at the same time to grow, develop and adapt through history to keep Christianity a living and vital force. Councils are not simply museum pieces of interest only to the historian but they have been able to foresee and articulate the needs of the future as well as speaking to their own age.

It is interesting to reflect that the two most serious schisms in the Church's history in the eleventh and sixteenth centuries occurred in the absence of councils, not as a result of them. One might speculate that these events could have been averted, or been more contained, if a council had been called earlier.

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