

# The Council of Trent

Decades earlier [before the Council of Trent], Luther and other reformers had called for a council to deal with the serious issues facing the Church. By the time the Council of Trent was convened in 1545, Luther had long gone his own way and the council that resulted was not going to bring about the sweeping changes in doctrine that he wanted. Nonetheless, this Council was a huge event. The bishops gathered there may not have made the changes that Luther and other reformers wanted, but they did give the clearest and most precise statements to date about many Catholic doctrines. This was work enough in itself, but the biggest success of the Council lay in its complete overhaul of the way the Church was organized and run.

The Council met in three stages over the period 1545–1563. So why did it take almost 20 years for the Council to do its work? On the one hand, the bishops had too many things to deal with; on the other, wars were being fought over the very issues they were discussing, which meant that the Council had to disband at times to avoid danger. We can break down the Council's work into three main categories: the authority of Scripture and Tradition, issues related to doctrines and sacraments, and organizational reforms.

## The Authority of Scripture and Tradition

This was really at the heart of the disagreements between Protestants and Catholics. The Protestant Reformers held that Scripture was the only true guide for Christian belief. Catholics then and now accept the authority of Scripture but also believe that early Christian writings, the statements of popes and documents from Church councils—collectively known as Tradition—are also part of the divine revelation to humanity. In the face of the Protestant declarations to the contrary, Trent affirmed that the Holy Spirit continues to lead the Church—that revelation did not end with the final book of the Bible.

This belief in the ongoing process of revelation had implications for the Catholic position on who should interpret Scripture. Protestants generally said that every believer could interpret Scripture, although they quickly realized that this led to many different interpretations and much fragmenting among Christians. The Council said that bishops are the ones given authority over interpretation because they are in the line of apostolic succession, which guarantees that they maintain the wisdom and knowledge of the early Church and of succeeding generations.

## Doctrines and Sacraments

The Protestant Reformers hit hard at the sacraments, with Luther and others holding that only baptism and the Eucharist can be shown from the New Testament to be valid. The bishops at Trent reaffirmed that each of the seven sacraments was instituted by Jesus during his ministry on earth, and explained the theology behind each one in detail. In addition, many Protestant Reformers had thrown the tricky issue of transubstantiation out the window, explaining that the purpose of the Eucharist was to serve as a remembrance of Christ's sacrifice, not a reenactment of it. Trent, however, continued the Catholic understanding that the bread and wine are truly changed into the body and blood of Christ, meaning that the Mass is a continuation of the work of Christ.



The Council also explained how Catholics think about grace. Luther had become convinced that even though humans remain sinful, God justifies them because of their faith. Trent rejected this, saying that the believer plays a role in cooperating with God's grace. God justifies people not only on the basis of what they believe but also on what they do with that belief—their works. This in no way implies that belief is unimportant; rather, it is a statement that belief must result in action in order for it to be effective.

## Reforms

Here we find the most innovative part of the Council. The bishops decided that reform needed to begin where most people's point of contact with the Church begins: with the local parish priest. Too many priests were poorly educated and did not understand the theology that they were supposed to teach. The bishops came up with a novel solution to this problem: the creation of seminaries. The word "seminary" comes from the Latin for "seed"—in seminaries, the seeds of good priests are planted and grown. Before Trent, the education of priests had been haphazard; in some places, the ability to speak enough Latin to say the Mass was all that was required. But now priest candidates would be well trained and thoroughly examined, both on their theological knowledge and on their worthiness to perform such an important role in the life of the Church.

There were top-down reforms of the Church as well. Church leaders were made to stop the practices of simony and nepotism. Bishops were required to hold regular synods as a way of dealing with clerical abuses and theological questions, and to spend time in their home parishes with the souls under their care. The teaching authority of the bishops was reaffirmed, since they connect the Church's head (the hierarchy) with its body (the believers), but bishops were reminded that their role as teachers meant that they had to make sure that the laity knew the faith and stayed in line with it.

The Council also laid out guidelines to ensure that people viewed relics and images with the proper reverence, but not in a magical or superstitious way. As for indulgences, that fireball that sparked Luther's protests in the first place, Trent said that they really were valid, but that the way they had been used at times was disgraceful. They were for devotional purposes, and the Church should not make money on them.

The Council dealt with many other issues, but you can see from these main points how it worked to answer the questions that Protestants had raised in the minds of believers. It was a big success in explaining exactly what the Church taught about Christian faith and Catholic practice, and it helped bring new life into the Church. On the academic side, Catholics made big leaps in biblical and theological scholarship in the decades following the Council. On the personal side, we see a renewed interest in moral reform and spiritual growth among people throughout the Church. In the last half of the sixteenth century, more than half of the popes were men who had been involved in the Council, and they helped keep its spirit alive and growing in the Church—a big change from the "Now that God has given us the papacy, let us enjoy it" mentality of earlier in the century.



What the Council could not do is heal the divisions among Christians and bring them into unity once again. This was due partly to a fundamental divide between Protestants and Catholics over what exactly needed to be reformed. Protestants thought that the problems in the Church ultimately stemmed from incorrect theology, while Catholics believed their theology to be grounded in God's truth and thought reform was needed in the areas of ethics and morality. The Council of Trent is where it became clear that Western Christianity was not going to be unified again.

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