

# The General Councils of the Catholic Church

An Overview

By Marilyn Hughes

*The Out-of-Body Travel Foundation!*

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The Fourth General Council of the Lateran

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# The First General Council of Nicaea

The Church's First Attempt to Define Teachings, 325  
A.D.

Many of the earliest General Councils were formed to define dogma and remove heresies.

Although the First General Council of Nicaea is considered to be the first 'General' Council, many bishops were holding smaller councils on their own before for the purpose of making sure their doctrines matched one another, defining dogma, and creating a unity in the teaching of the Catholic faith.

## **What brought about the First General Council of Nicaea**

Three hundred or more bishops came together from all over the Christian world in 325 A.D. to find remedies for disturbances, mostly between the eastern and western branches of the church, which had caused major problems between the two camps. The main cause of this disturbance was Arianism, a disagreement over the basic mystery of the Christian Religion.



## **The First Issue of the First General Council of Nicaea**

Ironically, Arius believed that Christ was a son of God by adoption - not nature. But it is found in the apostolic succession of the sacrament of baptism the answer to this seemingly complex issue - Jesus and the Apostles had formulated the baptismal formula to include being baptized by 'The Father, The Son and the Holy Spirit.' The Council concluded that "The doctrine them of a Supreme Triad is the elementary truth of Christianity."

### **Emperor Constantine**

It was the Emperor Constantine who called the council after he embraced the Christian religion during his reign. Raised as a Roman son, he had embraced his father's pagan religions until he had the mystical dream on Milvian Bridges in the year 312 A.D. It was then that he stopped the persecution of the Christians through the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D. and eventually led to calling this council into action to define the dogmas of the Mysteries of Christ.

### **Results of the General Council of Nicaea**

The theology of Arius was condemned although he did remain with twenty two bishops supporting him in the conclave. Utilizing a baptismal formula, a new creed was born. It addressed the Cather clergy and the process by which they could return to full communion with the Catholic Church. It was also

decided the Eastern Churches would celebrate as they had been doing with their own liturgy – known as the Divine Liturgy, while the Western Fathers would embrace the Roman Liturgy. The date of the Easter Feast was finally agreed upon, and two canons on the readmission of heretical schismatic's.

In total, twenty canons regarding moral law were written into the teaching of the church, about then of them regarding the rigorous requirements for a man to enter the priesthood.

As a side note, the issue of a belief in reincarnation which was widespread at the time was voted out of the dogmas of the faith despite the support of such high esteemed fathers as Origen.

# The First General Council of Constantinople

Second Attempt to Wipe out Arian Heresy, 381 A.D.

Each of the General Councils has its own special purpose and personality.

The First General Council of Constantinople which occurred only fifty six years after the First General Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. was actually instigated the night after the Council of Nicaea was dismissed when three bishops changed their minds and revoked their votes on the condemnation of Arianism and Bishop Arius, one of the most powerful heresies in the early church.

## **Arianism and its Differences from Orthodox Belief**

It was in the First General Council of Nicaea that Arianism was thought to be stomped out forever. Arianism was at war with Catholic Orthodoxy in that it didn't believe in the Trinitarian system which came be known after the First General Council of Nicaea as homo-ousion. *Homo-ousion* was defined in that First General Council as the belief in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit being three persons in one trinity of God. Arian's believed that the Son was not an incarnation of God, and the Holy Spirit was not God, either. In their belief, God the Father was supreme, and the Son and the Holy Spirit were subordinates to Him.

## **Why Arianism had to be Re-Addressed in a Second General Council**

What had begun with three bishops revoking their votes to condemn the Arian Bishops, a chain reaction began in the entire church. The Eastern Church was already up in arms against the Western Church, because Arianism was very popular in the East. The First General Council was meant to destroy this heresy once and for all. Banished by the emperor for revoking their votes, others were elected in their place.

But shortly after the dismissal of the First General Council of Nicaea, the emperor who supported the conclusions of the council died, and was replaced by Constantine. In 328, the bishop of Alexandria died and was replaced by the First Doctor of the Church, Athanasius which was to create a clash like no other. Constantine recalled the three exiled bishops and gave them back their posts. Historically there are no answers as to why. But the Orthodox Athanasius quickly became the target of similar persecutions. Constantine recalled the Bishop Arius from exile, as well, and received him at court.

A smaller council (not a General Council) was held at Tyre in 335 which deposed Athanasius who was banished to the farthest point in the empire – that of Tyre.

## **The Death of Constantine and Arius**

Arius died in 336 A.D., Constantine in 337 A.D. which opened for more controversy which continued and grew over many years. People were being killed for supporting one or the other belief, it's almost unimaginable. After years of infighting amongst Western and Eastern Bishops, not to mention empires and their lines, the bishops realized that the only way to save the church at this point was to convene another General Council and insist that the *homo-ousion* be applied.

### **What the First General Council of Constantinople Concluded**

It is often said that the council itself had little to do with the battles which came before and set the stage. These two councils (of Nicaea and Constantinople) follow a historical pattern that has never been duplicated since.

One Hundred and Fifty Bishops attended the First General Council of Constantinople. At the closing of the council they reinstated the authority of the General Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D. They also issued a statement of belief renewing homo-ousion - the definition of the Orthodox Trinity. Finally, they set out to name every form of Arian heresy and to condemn every one of them.

## **The Four Canons of the First General Council of Constantinople**

- 1.) A declaration renewing the work of the Council of Nicaea
- 2.) A Canon forbidding the bishops of one district to cross into the frontiers of another.
- 3.) The most famous - "The Bishop of Constantinople shall have the primacy of honour after the bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is New Rome."\*
- 4.) The Council declared that Maximus, an Arian Bishop, was not a bishop and that whatever ordinations had been performed by him were null and void.

# The General Council of Ephesus

The Nestorian Problem, 431 A.D.

The human reaction to the General Councils of the church has been varied and unpredictable throughout history.

St. John Chrysostom brought the first controversy which led to the General Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D. when the bishop of Alexandria, Theophilus, was considering who should replace and fill the position of the recently deceased Bishop of Constantinople, Nectarius, who died in 397 A.D. Although he had one of his own priests set up to be already a candidate who seemed a shoe in, the court had other ideas. A simple man known only at the time as the monk, John, who had become a famous preacher of the day and would later become a Doctor of the Church. John Chrysostom was consecrated as bishop in 397 by Theophilus, but it is said that Theophilus went home an unhappy man because his own choice had not made the cut.

## **Nestorius and Cyril of Alexandra**

Tensions were building again between the Eastern and Western Churches, but this time over the Nestorian indecision. Not that far removed from Arianism, the issue at hand was that Bishop Nestorius

taught that Christ's human nature came from his mother, Mary, and his divine nature from God, the Father. Therefore, in their view, Mary could not be called 'The Mother of God' or *Theotokos* as the theology was known in Latin.

But Bishop Nestorius was up against St. Cyril of Alexandria, one of the greatest minds of the church who would also become a Doctor of the Church in later years. History proves who won this fight. But it began when Cyril wrote to Nestorius in 430 A.D. expressing his surprise that Bishop Nestorius would disturb the peace of the mind of the faithful with such heretical statements. Declaring twelve Anathema's against Nestorius, thus began the journey to the next General Council of the Church.

### **Pope Celestine's Involvement**

When word reached Pope Celestine of the preaching of Nestorius, he prepared a dossier of his heresies and summoned bishops to make pronouncements upon them. They went to the Bishops of Antioch, Jerusalem, Thessalonica and Philippi. In essence, the Bishops agreed that Nestorius must recant and on December 7<sup>th</sup> of 430 A.D., St. Cyril received his orders from Pope Celestine to summon Bishop Nestorius to recant to St. Cyril directly. But he did not, and thus on November 19<sup>th</sup> of the following year, the emperor called another General Council of the Church to occur at Ephesus.



## General Council of Ephesus

Somewhere between 230-250 A.D., bishops came from the East and the West. Nestorius was stripped of his rank, but that was only the beginning of what was to happen. After the edict had been made, several other bishops arrived from Antioch and immediately went to work to examine the pronouncement against Nestorius.

They arrested both Nestorius and St. Cyril - who was now accused of many protestations of the improper use of the wealth of the Holy See.

The emperor was to intercede. Holding a conference with eight delegates from each side at Chalcedon's palace, the Emperor made the final decisions in the Council of Ephesus leaving many frustrated at the failed process. But the emperor made wise decisions according to many in his time. He refused to condemn Cyril for his twelve anathema's of Nestorius. When asked to consider Nestorius, he replied *"Don't talk to me of that fellow, he has shown the sort he is."* As to some who were excommunicated during this complicated and confusing process, the emperor said, *"Never so long as I live will I condemn them. When they appeared before me none were able to prove anything against them."*

And that was it. Nestorius remained condemned and all was accomplished according to the original intent.

But it was a messy General Council, and one that would not be forgotten.

# The General Council of Chalcedon

Nestorian's Violent Re-Eruption, 451 A.D.

Considered a recorded, continuous activity of the church for 2,000 years, the General Councils have defined Catholic Dogma.

Just twenty years after the previous council held at Ephesus, another controversy erupted in the church. Again, the controversy would be about the true meaning of the mystery of the incarnation, but it was apparently a more violent outbreak of the debate.

## **Protagonists in the General Council of Chalcedon**

Eutychus, a monk in Constantinople, Flavian, Bishop of the Alexandria and Dioscoros, St. Cyril's one time deacon were the primary protagonists in another General Council at Chalcedon in 451 A.D. which would be unable to quell the Nestorian controversy and what would eventually be considered a heresy. Although the council took it on again and denounced it with fervor and severity, Nestorianism would not die.

## **Nestorianism**

*Theotokos*, the Latin word for the theological belief in question, was the big stumbling block to Nestorians.

Bishop Nestorius, who had already been censured by the previous General Council of Ephesus in 431 A.D., was still teaching that Christ's human nature came from his mother, Mary, and his divine nature from God, the Father. Because of this view, calling Mary 'The Mother of God' was incorrect - and the theology of *Theotokos* must be discarded.

### **A Conflict that Continues Today**

It is said in various accounts of the General Council of Chalcedon that the theological points to be considered required a high understanding of what is known as technical theology. And that those who were trying to suppress the heretical teaching of Nestorius made profound errors in their attitude to their opposition. And it was because of this that a defection from the traditional faith still endures 1500 years after the General Council of Chalcedon supposedly eradicated the dispute.

### **Parties to the Differences**

Eutychus and his disciples claimed to be loyal to the orthodox St. Cyril. But Eutychus explained his understanding of this doctrine in a way that made it appear that the entire Alexandrian church had become heretical. This was not his intention and even Pope St. Leo defended Eutychus in stating that he had only gone wrong because of his lack of skill in interpreting these matters rather than through intention or malice.

Ninety years old, Eutychus ran a monastery with over 300 monks. And when he found that his own words had put him in the position of unintentionally reviving another form of Nestorianism, he wrote a letter to the pope. But he was too late; Bishop Eusebius of Dorylaeum had already denounced him as a heretic and asked the pope to require him to appear before a synod. Eutychus who came with a vast amount of support was proclaimed a heretic. Bishop Flavian sent a letter to the Pope supporting the decision and the pope agreed that Eutychus was a heretic.

When the General Council was finally called to resolve this dispute, which it would do unsuccessfully, Dioscoros presided.

### **Decisions of the General Council of Chalcedon**

This time, however, Dioscoros was put under the microscope. He was accused of trying to stand in the place of the pope, both in the General Council of Chalcedon and the previous Council at Ephesus. When he defended himself by saying that the bishops had all voted unanimously for the decisions made there, they defied him by bringing up violence and coercion that had been used to secure their votes. In the Dioscoros was punished and all the canons and laws which were passed in the absence of proper authority were made null and void.

## **The Final Accomplishment**

Because there were so many disputes before the General Council of Chalcedon and so many crises between bishoprics in all regions, the pope informed the council that their primary and only concern was reorganization of the sees, the districts with which each bishop would have charge.

The issue of Eutychus was never resolved and forgotten in all the infighting. But the council did manage to redistribute the holy sees and districts in such a manner as to bring unity back to the church and end some of the disputing of the day.

Nestorianism would have to be reserved for a later date.

# The Second General Council of Constantinople

Alexandria is Finally Heard, 553 A.D.

Latin, Greek and Syriac were the varied languages utilized in the General Councils of the Church.

In the early church, General Councils were called to define some of the minutest of discrepancies in belief, and that is why a doctrine that St. Cyril had introduced into the church which was considered by all bible and theological scholars to have been perfectly Catholic, became an issue in the Second General Council of Constantinople.

## **The Council Defines St. Cyril and his Words**

It was during the eighth sentence presented that the Monophysite situation which would have to be come to grips. In the Greek, Monophysitism meant 'One Nature.' And it was with the rise of Monophysitism that the age old story regarding the divinity or humanity of Christ was yet again raised. Catholics believed that Christ had both a divine and human nature and Monophysites believed that he had only one nature which brought together both human elements and divine. Eutyches taught this and word spread.

Monophysitism did increase the anger and discord between the eastern and western church.

### **The Second General Council of Constantinople Defeats the Monophysite Heresy**

As the council read through a series of sentences indicating their wishes to find unity in these disagreements, they came upon the eighth sentence. St. Cyril had been fighting Monophysitism and his response which had been controversial at the time was used word for word, "There is but one incarnate nature of God the Word." And the council determine that the Catholic sense of how it is used, the sense that seems to work with Ephesians, and the sense of those who attended Chalcedon was this: "This formula, it is now said, should not be understood to mean that the unity by which Christ is one being is the effect of a fusion between the divine and the union, and the union is a union in a single person. Those who thus fuse the natures are as erroneous as those who speak them as separate beings."

### **Other Issues in the Second General Council of Constantinople**

But this isn't the only argument they will encounter. Nestorianism is again condemned, although it's been done before. They are forbidden to do a double worship including worship to the divine in Christ and the human.



### **The Condemnations**

Because many heresies had gone on without stop despite previous General Councils, they took the time to denounce and anathematize several heretical teachings and their followers.

### **A Few Benefits that Came from the Second Council of Constantinople**

A few great things came out of the Second General Council of Constantinople; Chalcedon was no longer at odd with Ephesus. A little more favor was given to Alexandrian speed than only to those who spoke at Antioch.

# The Third General Council of Constantinople

Monothelism, a New Heresy, 680-81 A.D.

The first seven General Councils of the church were charged with the task of defining the basic mysteries of Christianity.

Heresy seems to be the game of the day when it comes to General Councils of the Church and the Third General Council of Constantinople was no exception.

## **The Seventh Century Heresy - Monothelism**

This time it was Arianism, Nestorianism, Appolonianism or any of the more familiar heresies we've heard about in the first five councils, but a new heresy which pitted the Eastern Church against the Western Church yet again – Monothelism.

The dispute began well before the Third General Council of Constantinople convened in the years between 610 - 641 A.D when an emperor decided to make a move towards theology and define the Christian Faith. If he had not done so, the next great heresy would never have been born.

Monothelism was a new belief touted by an emperor but which was quickly held to be true by the Eastern

Churches in direct contradiction again to the Western Churches.

In the Western Church, Catholics believed that Christ operated through two natures – Human and Divine. Therefore, He performed many human acts through the human will, and He performed His divine acts such as healing through a divine will which operated separately – but in union with – his human will.

Monothelism contended that Christ did not possess a human will, only a divine will. Thus, he had never operated or acted with anything possessive of a human nature and, therefore, Jesus Christ Our Lord could not have been a man.

This dispute incited years of infighting in the church between the East and the West, the popes and the patriarchs until an unusual document was written to hopefully cause a cease-fire of words and as a result, hopefully peace.

### **The *Ecthesis* – Declaration about the Faith**

In a move that shows humor, wisdom and common sense, Sergius prepared an edict from the emperor which declared a policy of silence which was obliged of all the citizens of their provinces. Specifically, the *Ecthesis* took it so far as to preclude the citizens of their various districts to discuss in particular the ‘operations’ of the Godhead in any way, shape or form.

It was theorized that by doing this it would quell the arguments and avoid another need for a General Council over yet another heresy.

The *Ecthesis* defined the 'will' or 'wills' differently to avoid the people thinking that there could be conflict between the divine and human nature of Christ.

The Western Church agreed that the two wills worked through one, and the Eastern Church proclaimed there was one will in the operations of Christ, and therefore, they put it together and declared that "We profess that there is but a single will."

### **Signs of the Times**

Warring and battling over this doctrine stilled for a time, but these years in history were times of high drama. The Persians had taken over the Holy Land and were in possession of the true cross and many of the crusades took place during this point in time.

When the General Council was finally called, everyone was exhausted, war-worn and ready for a simple solution to yet another heretical debate.

### **Results of the Third General Council of Constantinople**

What made this General Council different from the rest was that there was little argument to be had for

the bishops all seemed to agree on this heresy. In previous councils, there were large factions among the Churches own clergy fighting for their cause; Arians, Nestorians, Eutyches. Not this time.

The bishops declared in one accord with Pope Agatho that "We teach that in Our Lord, Jesus Christ, there are two natural wills, and two natural operations, indivisibly, inconvertibly, inseparably, without any fusion, as the holy fathers have taught, and that these two natural wills are not contrary." *From the Denzinger Decree*

# The Second General Council of Nicaea - Prelude

Veneration of Images and the Issue of Idolatry, 787  
A.D.

The first eight General Councils of the church consisted of Greeks, Egyptians and Syrians.

If you tried to conjure up a more bizarre period in Catholic history than the time which led to the Second General Council of Nicaea, you'd have a difficult time doing it.

## **The Emperor Leo III Makes an Edict**

Around the year 725 A.D., Emperor Leo III, who had a profound difference in ideology with the Catholic Church regarding the veneration of relics, statues, images, holy objects and praying to the saints, began the controversy which would only end well over sixty years and many deaths later in the culmination of the Second General Council of Nicaea.

Because the empire thrived during the reign of Leo III, he had much influence among the people and his troops and was able to secure his wishes despite the illogical nature of how far it went in history. He came into power right after a period of twenty one year's

wherein six emperors had been dethroned, four of them by public execution. The realm was in turmoil. Armies fought all throughout Europe and Asia Minor and there were few areas untouched by war.

Gregory II was the Pope at the time that Leo III made his first move which was to take down an image of Christ from over the principal gate of the Constantinople Palace. This caused riots, deaths and arrests. The emperor Leo III sent many letters to Pope Gregory II, but Pope Gregory II refused to assent to his ideals.

He would die before Leo III made his biggest move that would cause much bloodshed and put the church at schism for over sixty years. Pope Gregory the III was barely beginning his pontificate when Leo III called together his senators and chief officers and issued an edict which proclaimed that whoever refused to destroy images they owned, paid any kind of honor or veneration to images was automatically declared a rebel of the state. The Patriarch from the church refused to sign this edict, took off his badge and went to his family home while Leo III appointed his own bishop to sign the edict, thus causing a huge schism with Rome, when Gregory III refused to recognize this person as a lawful bishop.

### **Reasoning Behind Emperor Leo III Edicts**

Historians tell us that when Leo III grew up, religious art passed into a new phase. In the early centuries of

Christianity, images and statues were representation primarily of saints in what would be considered 'natural' postures. At the time Leo III was a child, this started to change. Religious relics and art began to take on a new form in that the saints were being portrayed in doing heroic acts, and martyrs were shown in mythical postures according to the legends of how they had died. Even images of the Blessed Virgin and Jesus Christ were to be included in this transformation and there was concern building about two issues: 1.) Squelching superstition related to the mythologies and legends versus the facts, and 2.) Dealing with the question of whether or not such veneration constituted idol worship which was expressly forbidden in the Old Testament. These were the controversies of the day.

### **Emperor Leo III Calls his own Council**

In a bold move against the Vatican, Emperor Leo III called his own Council in 753 A.D. which would later be squelched by the Second General Council of Nicaea in which he didn't invite the pope or any of his opponents. In that 'Council,' The bishops who were invited conceded at that time to the proposal to forbid veneration of images, but they were opposed to other doctrines that Leo III tried to also present which included overturning the decisions of previous councils on the nature of Christ, the *Theotokos* (Blessed Virgin Mary) and her role as intercessor, the practice of prayer to the saints and veneration due to their relics. Final Summation: Veneration of images is



idolatrous and heretical and anyone who possessed them even in the privacy of their home was to be excommunicated.

# The Second General Council of Nicaea - Concludes

Reinstatement of Orthodoxy Regarding Veneration of  
Images, 787 A.D.

The Second General Council of Nicaea was actually meant to be held at Constantinople.

After the long 'Reign of Terror' begun by Leo III and continued by Constantine V and his son Leo IV, the widow of the Emperor Leo IV, Irene became the hero. So for this moment, this Council, she saved the day. But another time would come not many years later when she would become the villain.

## **The Long Road Home to Orthodoxy through a Royal Line**

What was to ensue for the next thirty years constituted some of the greatest tragedies of the Catholic Faith. Persecution began and Churches, Relics, Religious Articles and even the bodies of saints were destroyed and thrown into the sea. It was called 'The Reign of Terror,' and indeed it was this. Leo III was succeeded in rule by Constantine V who was succeeded in rule by his son, Leo IV. It was only then, when Irene, Leo IV's widow began to rule that the road back to orthodoxy began.

## The Second General Council of Nicaea wasn't Meant to be Held There

Irene was orthodox and wished to stop the reign of terror and called the bishops to a new General Council. It was to be held at Constantinople, but they were raided by an army and driven away. But she was not to be dissuaded, one year later, the Second General Council of Nicaea was formed and Irene made sure that the current pope, Adrian I, Would preside.

Other controversies were handled during the Council, but the primary motives were to completely anathematize the 'Council' held by Leo III condemning the veneration of images. Pope Adrian made a strong case for the apostolic tradition all the way back to St. Peter, the first pope. He noted the figures of cherubim in 'Holy of Holies' and the serpent. He quoted long lines of authority from the Greek Fathers. It was decreed: "We define that as with the priceless, life-giving cross, so with the venerable and holy images, they may be set up in their various forms in the churches . . . The more often we look upon them, the more vividly are our minds turned to the memory of those whom they represent . . . to give to them, the images, an adoration of honour, but not, however, the true *latria* (worship), which, as our faith teaches, is to be given only to the divine nature . . . so that, like the holy cross, the gospels, and the relics of the saints, to these images offerings of

incense and lights may be made, as was the pious custom of our ancestors." *The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325 - 1870* - By Philip Hughes

In the final decrees the Latin word *Honorariam Adorationem* is given to the practice which means paying obeisance to or a gesture of great respect.

In the final decisions, it was declared that idolaters who were condemned in the Old Testament truly believed their idols were Gods, whereas in Catholic Tradition, the images were venerated in memory of events, people and places and were not worshipped as idols in such a manner, but rather, reminders of holy things which are good and true for every believer to remember.

# The Fourth General Council of Constantinople

Rivalry and Reconciliation, 869-70 A.D.

It is the pope who legally reigns over the General Council of his time.

However, in the time of the Eighth General Council – the Fourth General Council of Constantinople – the line between popes, antipopes, bishops and antibishops would become very unclear. And in a move that would stun even historians of today who only found out the final details of this Council around 1934 A.D. due to the unearthing of some lost documents within the Vatican Archives, it is also perhaps the most truly profound story of arch-rivals and enemies within the church achieving complete reconciliation within their lifetime AND through this Fourth General Council of Constantinople.

## **Photius and Ignatius, the Prime Personalities in the Fourth General Council of Constantinople**

In a move that stunned Christendom, Ignatius, the rightful Patriarch of Constantinople was usurped in authority by a certain Photius. Many shenanigans ensued with the emperor's household including murders and take-overs of the throne, and when Ignatius refused communion to these members of the royal family he was arrested, deported, dethroned

and instituted at a monastery by Michael I and replaced by the emperor's choice.

But Photius was a troublemaker throughout his reign. For nine years, he reigned undisturbed although the Archbishop and the Roman See refused to recognize or acknowledge him. As a result, Photius, because of his unusual relationship with the emperor made the bold move of actually excommunicating the Pope.

A very complicated history ensues wherein Photius and Ignatius are at odds for years, going back and forth between who is the rightful Patriarch of Constantinople. All the while, Photius calls a 'Council' himself to excommunicate the pope and seals his fate.

### **The Fourth General Council of Constantinople Convenes to Reinstate Ignatius**

The irony was that Nicholas I, the pope that Photius had excommunicated as has farcical Council never knew how far Photius had taken it. Having been sick during the summer of 867 A.D., Nicholas I died before the pronouncement reached Rome. But you can bet his successor, Adrian II, called the Fourth General Council of Constantinople wherein the contents of this farcical Council were deemed to be burned.

The second matter of affairs was to insist that Ignatius be restored to his form Patriarchy and Photius was to

be excommunicated. All bishops and priests ordained under his rule were to be excommunicated unless they signed a document indicating their loyalty to the teachings of the previous Councils of the Church. All Churches which had been blessed by Photius would be reconsecrated by legitimate bishops of the church.

The final business of the Fourth General Council of Constantinople consisted of shaping twenty seven canons which would hopefully preserve and protect the papacy and the line of the teaching of the church forever. Among the twenty seven canons were included those that disallowed emperors to choose bishops and a very select process was laid out which would be required of all men to be ordained. This would protect against these random laypeople that were being chosen by emperors to do their bidding in the church.

Photius and any of his remaining followers, if they repented, would be allowed to receive Holy Communion but never retain any status other than a layperson in the church.

Everything Photius had ever written was to be burned and the teachings of the previous councils were upheld.

## **The Unheard of Upheaval which Led to the Reconciliation of Bishops**

Pope Adrian II died in 872 and was succeeded by John VIII who tried to contact Ignatius but heard no reply for quite some time. He later found, after dispatching papal legates to find him, that Ignatius had been dead for more than a year. Shockingly, they learned that Photius had taken his position as Patriarch of Constantinople and had reconciled completely with Ignatius before his death and they had been collaborating wholeheartedly to fulfill the teachings of the General Council - together.

Completely taken aback, the outcome was a secondary non-general council held at Constantinople by the new pope where John VII accepted the repentance and apologies of Photius restoring him completely with the clergy of the church appealing that it was time now to let 'bygones be bygones.'

Enemies throughout life became allies in the end, and perhaps another great Christian story of forgiveness and redemption occurred in 869 A.D.



# The First General Council of the Lateran

The Reign of Anti-Popes 1123 A.D.

The General Councils of the Church are scattered across 1700 years of church history.

In a period of history where no more than 130 years had gone by between general councils in the past, the First General Council of the Lateran didn't take place for a full 253 years after the eighth General Council, the fourth to be held at Constantinople. This was not a trend, however, and shortly after this First General Council of the Lateran, there would be another string of General Councils held quite closely together.

## **Priestly Celibacy and the Simony in the Ordination of Bishops and Priests**

As the middle ages were known for, the time of the First General Council of the Lateran was no different; wars, wars and then some more wars.

But the primary issues which would bring the Pope and the bishops together for this General Council had to do with two things that had gone quite awry.

Firstly, an issue which would only be partially resolved in this First General Council of the Lateran, the matter of priests and those under holy orders

obtaining to the state of matrimony. Apparently, in these times, although celibacy was recommended, it was not illegal for a priest to get married. And in the case of one who did, that marriage became legal.

Partially, as a result, issues arose wherein the sons of priests would take their posts upon their retirement or death and some parishes or patriarchates became almost imperial in the family line.

Secondly, it had become a very common practice for emperors and even just rich people to hand over a bishopric or even a parish to anybody that they might so choose. This person didn't have to be a priest, they could be a layperson. And in many instances, some posts were for sale to the highest bidder and this is where simony came into the picture and became a problem in the church worldwide.

### **The Agreements between the Papacy and the Empire**

It didn't happen quickly that the papacy and the empire were reconciled on such matters because the emperors had become accustomed to putting those who agreed with them on issue of morals or politics in the positions of patriarchs in their domains. They weren't quick to rescind that right and it took several popes to negotiate with several generations of emperors before they agreed to come together and meet for this Ninth General Council (The First General Council of the Lateran.)

Considered one of the largest General Councils in history up to that time, up to 1,000 bishops from around the world had gathered with knights, soldiers and other emissaries from around the world who had come to put an end to the simony in the church and restore orthodoxy yet again.

Pope Calixtus and Emperor Augustus came to an agreement which involved the church making all decisions regarding the matter of priests and bishops, but allowing the empire to also participate in the ordination and the regalia - better known as the 'touch of the sceptre' from the emperor - at such events.

Twenty two canons were established at the General Council which also included the condemnation of simony by what were then regarded as 'lay lords,' rich people selling parishes or diocese's to the highest bidder. Any bishops, priests not lawfully elected by the church were removed from their posts and all transfers of church property - which had been innumerable in the race to attain status and high postings - were rendered void.

### **An Era of Anti-Popes**

The period of 253 years which had passed between these two General Councils had been one of great controversy and a series of Anti-Popes, those who falsely laid claim to the Papacy while a true Pope was

presently seated. At one time, there were actually three men claiming to be the true pope. These were worked out through a variety of measures, many of which were horrific, murderous and too numerable to mention.

The General Councils to come shortly were likely held in part to prevent any further such disgraces to the true line of the Papacy.

# The Second General Council of the Lateran

Defining Priesthood and Marriage, 1139 A.D.

Later General Councils of the church were very cautious about redefining dogmas already discussed in previous councils.

As a result, the Second General Council of the Lateran held in 1139 A.D. is said to be complimentary to the First General Council of the Lateran held only sixteen years before in 1123 A.D.

## **Two Popes Claim the Papal Seal**

The schism which caused the need for a General Council to be called involved two popes claiming their rightful seat. There were two families in faction with one another who elected their own Pope. The Pierleoni clan elected Anacletus II, a member of their family. Whereas the Frangipani faction elected Innocent II. Historical records say that there was no question that Innocent II was the better man, but neither held proper claim to the title based on the law set down in 1059 A.D. in the election of Popes.

Innocent crossed the Alps to look for support which he found in the famed Doctor of the Church, Bernard of Clairvaux, but Innocent did not take full reigns until Anacletus died in 1138 A.D.

## **Contributions of the Second General Council of the Lateran**

Many of the issues which had arisen before were included in the thirty canons of this council, but a few new issues were defined.

Five new canons were issues regarding clerical life. One of them made null and void all marriages of the clergy before or after their ordination. Faithful were not allowed to attend Mass celebrated by a married clergyman. And the famed and hated practice *hereditary benefices* which were positions in the church which were handed on from father to son, and then so on, was annihilated and condemned.

There was a strange canon in this General Council involving the pillaging of the homes of the bishops upon their death. This was strictly forbidden and had apparently been a rather rampant and cultural practice of the time as horrific as it seems.

Two other odd canons were added which might intrigue the modern mind. Knights who participated in jousts were denied Christian Burial as this was considered a detestable act. And to use a catapult in wartimes against Christian men could usher in an excommunication. This new method of warfare which hurled huge stones at the walls of castles was considered 'detested by God.'

Several canons were added regarding Christian belief, and what would constitute the necessity for excommunication. Christian Burial and the rights thereof were also laid out very clearly.

# The Third General Council of the Lateran

The Beginning of the End for the Cathars, 1179 A.D.

Another task of the General Councils was to supply a common understanding between the different languages spoken by those attending.

It is in the Third General Council of the Lateran that the famous Cathars are finally mentioned. And the recommendations in their regard are profoundly merciless and rather violent. Specifically, the General Council actually goes to the lengths to insist that no one associate with them, do business with them, give them a Christian Burial and even to meet violence with violence: a sad beginning to a tragic end for this heretical sect.

## **A Great Pope Emerges, Alexander III**

In the years before the Third General Council of the Lateran, much is remembered about a few unique and unusually holy personages in the Catholic Church. Among them is Pope Alexander III who is remembered as the pope who was one of the "Chief Founders of the Roman all-powerfulness over the clergy of the church, with a very high idea of his office, ruling the clergy by the aid of trustworthy assistants, and thanks to means of government . . . steadily being improved, intervening everywhere



throughout the Church by his legates, setting in order and controlling the jurisdiction of the archbishops . . . and everywhere seeking to strengthen the links that bind the Holy See to various local establishments.”  
*The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325 - 1870* - By Philip Hughes

### **Canon Law has its Beginnings through Gratian, a Monk and Lawyer**

In the beginning of the twelfth century, a legally educated monk created the very first complete book on laws of the church which was called *Corpus Iuris Canonici* in Latin and held up as Catholic Church law book up until the year 1918 A.D. which is quite an accomplishment. Canon Law began from this man's work.

### **Accomplishments of the Third General Council of the Lateran**

About 300 bishops attended this General Council and quite a few laws and rules came down from it, despite the fact that the actual acts of the council did not survive. We do know Twelve Canons were proposed which the bishops rejected. A critic of the council openly challenged them that there were too many rules and laws already and that it would be to go back to the gospels and follow the leadings of the Lord.

But the Pope had another agenda which was to insure that laws which had been enacted regarding the

election of popes would be upheld because of the problem of anti-popes in the past one hundred years or so. It was made clear that the majority of the pope's decision would be final, and if there was another candidate who perhaps owned a third of the votes, he would be an anti-pope and excommunicated if he did not fall in line. If they were not to repent before death, Holy Viaticum would be denied them.

A whole series of laws which were meant to eradicate all the power plays which had occurred in the church regarding the clergy, priesthood, bishopric and papacy. Alexander III was not messing around. He laid out every possible thing that could be misconstrued and then followed through illegally and contracted a plan of action which would be acceptable in every circumstance and make simony and any kind of corruption really difficult to pull off anymore. Frankly, historians credit Alexander III as being one of the top six popes in history because of his insistence on the cleaning up of the scandals within the clerical culture. He even made note to insist that Knights Templar and Knights Hospitalers were definitively under the rule of the local abiding bishop, because they had also swayed away and developed some of their own societies outside of the church.

Canon 18 completely defined the role of the training of parochial clergy, and made it almost impossible for scandal to occur in this arena again.

Unfortunately, a pretty strong decree was put out against the very popular Cathars, which unfortunately, was likely the beginning of their end. But on an opposing more positive note, Alexander III insisted on bringing forth laws regarding lepers - the first time this had been brought up in a council - insisting that lepers were to be allowed to have churches of their own, cemeteries and were entitled to their own priest. No tithes could be legally asked of any leper.

So again, a contradiction of good and evil, but in the view of historians - despite the Cathar condemnation - Alexander III is held in high esteem.

# The Fourth General Council of the Lateran

The Greatest of all Councils before Trent, 1215 A.D.

There is little order in the timing of the General Councils of the church.

Pope Innocent III, the Pope to reign over the Fourth General Council of the Lateran, was known for many things, the council only one of them. After following a series of five aged popes who died quickly in succession between 1179 and 1198, Pope Innocent III was only thirty seven years old and would reign for eighteen years. Those eighteen years would be considered among the highest peaks of papal power. But there is another reason Innocent III will never be forgotten.

## **The Historical Time of Pope Innocent III**

Two great saints emerged during Pope Innocent III reign, Dominic and St. Francis, both of whom would start two of the greatest orders that still reign supreme today – the Dominicans and the Franciscans. The story of Pope Innocent III's meeting with St. Francis is legendary, because he recognized St. Francis only after having a dream.

## **Declarations about the Fourth General Council of the Lateran**

Innocent III declared that the two primary jobs which lay before him in his pontificate were the recovery of the Holy Land - the crusades continued in great force - and the reform of Catholic Life. This would be the foundation of the seventy canons agreed to during this General Council.

Innocent the III is considered on par with Alexander the III who came before him in the formation of canon law and the systems which eventually evolved from them.

## **Manichaeism and Albigensianism, Heresies of the Day**

Manichaean cosmology believed in two supreme beings which ruled the earth, one evil and one good. All things regarding the material world, in their view, were evil. Therefore, they embraced a very ascetic life where they tried to avoid contact with matter. This manifested in food, property and sex. Marriage was enslavement. They even had rather odd rituals involving starving themselves to death to make them worthy of the kingdom of heaven.

Albigensians were not that far removed from the Manichaeans, and neither were very far removed from Gnosticism and what became Cathar belief. Their cosmologies were complex, but the primary

reason for their popularity was the perception of the Catholic Clergy as having lost its way, corruption, etc.

Innocent III fought hard to change these perceptions and was successful during the Fourth General Council of the Lateran, the 12<sup>th</sup> General Council.

### **Seventy Canons Introduced**

Among the seventy canons introduced included a new confession faith, canons involving the dealing of heretics, the dignity of patriarchal sees, yearly provincial councils, inquests, on the appointment of priests and schoolmasters, a prohibition against new religious orders, clerical incontinence, gluttony, drunkenness or lack of decorum. Clerics were forbidden to participate in soldiering, the introduction of locking up the chrism and Eucharist in churches, the introduction of yearly confession and communion, the seal of confession wherein the penitent could be assured of absolute secrecy was made canon law, numerous new procedures introduced to insure the proper training of the priesthood, and among others, rules were established in the handling and passing on of the relics of the saints.

It was thorough and much was achieved, it is considered the first council to really solidify the church, the canons, the teachings, and the future of the Catholic Faith.

# The First General Council of Lyons

The Condemnation of a Traitor, 1245 A.D.

Each of the General Councils of the church arose from a crisis in church dealings.

After the Fourth General Council of the Lateran which was so thorough in its definition of the laws and canons of the church, one wouldn't expect the need for another council within just thirty years of the previous. However, General Councils have always seemed to come out of some unexpected necessity and the First General Council of Lyons is no exception.

## **The Dying Wish of Henry VI to Pope Innocent III**

It all began on the death bed of the Emperor Henry VI, King of Sicily, who asked Pope Innocent III to be the ward to his three year old son Frederick II. Within only five years, Frederick would begin one of the greatest bloodbaths in history and become an antagonist the papal throne until his death.

## **Frederick II Wished World Domination**

Sent off to help with the crusades in the Holy Land, Frederick II rather went there and negotiated with the sultan and made himself King of Jerusalem. During

his travels, he pursued his larger goal of eventually overtaking Rome itself and redesignating the Roman Empire as of old.

Frederick II was a very crazy man, known to skin alive his enemies. He was the cause of brutal wars that lasted his entire lifetime against many nations and of course against the Pope and the Papacy which his father had entrusted him to.

### **Innocent III Dies, Gregory IX Takes Over**

During this disgusting mess, Innocent III passed away, but the pope who would take his place was even stronger and more intent on overthrowing Frederick II's attempts to destroy not only many kingdoms of the world, but the papacy itself which he hoped to take under control, as well.

Gregory IX was a fierce competitor and refused to back down. He attempted to call another council, but no one would back him. The bishops remained imprisoned, and all were afraid of what Frederick II would do.

### **Frederick II Kidnaps Bishops**

The Pope attempted to call a General Council, but it would be required that all the bishops would have to travel by sea. Frederick II, of course, attacked several of those ships, capturing at least one. He took as prisoners over 100 bishops and two of the three papal



legates. Due to his fear for his own life, the third of the papal legates turned to Frederick II's side. Gregory IX died shortly after these attacks.

For two years, the papacy remained vacant with no one to elect a new pope since most of the bishops were imprisoned. Finally, Frederick II ordered Senator Matteo Orsini to lock the bishops up in an ancient Septizonium announcing that none would leave until they had elected a new pope. For two months, they survived this imprisonment in an old ruin and elected Celestine IV before fleeing from Rome as if from the plague. Unfortunately, Celestine IV died within one night of his election due to the illnesses he had contracted during his harsh treatment in prison.

### **An Even More Vigorous Pope, Innocent IV**

At a time when strong heroes were really needed, God called another. Innocent IV took the Papal Throne in 1243. He was quoted as being "the greatest lawyer that ever sat upon the chair of St. Peter." He wasn't about to let up on Frederick II. Calling another General Council at Lyons, the pope had actually escaped Rome in disguise to hold the Council in another location to prevent his kidnapping before the event could take place.

Frederick II was excommunicated and it was the beginning of his end. He would die within five years and his cause had been lost and the papacy restored.

Other canons were enacted during this General Council but pale in consideration of the treachery of one man's betrayal to the wishes of his own dying father.

# The Second General Council of Lyons

The Birth of the Conclave, 1274 A.D.

The General Councils represent the gradual correction of misperceptions of the teachings of the Apostles after the church began.

The Second General Council of Lyons had to be held in Lyons because of a rift between the Eastern and Western Church which required it to be held outside of the Roman Domain in order to include the Eastern Patriarchal Sees.

## **The Division over the Trinity**

The main schism between the Pope and Papal See of Rome and the Eastern Patriarch who resided in Constantinople was actually a division of belief over the Trinity.

Roman Catholicism held to the belief in the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Eastern Christians believed the belief in a Trinity was heresy. They believed in the Father and the Son, but not the Holy Spirit as being a third member of the Trinity of God.

This issue was resolved in the council with the decree: "We firmly profess that the Holy Ghost proceeds eternally from the Father and the Son, not as from two principles but as from one principle, not as by two spiration but as by a single spiration. This is what the holy Roman Church, the mother and teacher of all the faithful has hitherto professed, preached and taught, this is what it holds, preaches, professes and teaches. This is truly what the unchanging judgment of the orthodox Fathers and Doctors, the Latins and the Greeks equally, holds." *The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325 - 1870* - By Philip Hughes

### **Other Doctrines Further Defined in the Second General Council of Lyons**

Other doctrines were further defined, even though they had always been held as a part of the tradition of the church. Gregory X, the pope who presided over the Second General Council of Lyons, felt that they needed to be more clearly explained in the canons of this council.

Some of the doctrines which were further explained and propounded upon were the doctrine of purgatory, the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the concept of Transubstantiation, the sacrament of Marriage and the supreme authority of the See of Rome which was a big one considering the separation with the Eastern and Greek church for which the council was originally called.

## **The Controversy over the Election of Bishops and Popes**

As was the norm in most General Councils up until this time, the issue of the election of bishops came into play yet again. Despite the constant defining of how bishops would be appointed, it was again necessary to stiffen these rules and make them more impenetrable. Consequences of greater magnitude were made against those who appointed bishops inappropriately.

But the newest thing to come out of the Second General Council of Lyons was the conclave, which is eminently known today as the sequestering of the bishops at the time of a Pope's death allowing them no contact with the outside world until they have elected a new pope.

The conclave was proposed by Gregory X because there was a three year period between the death of the pope who preceded him and his election. Since this had happened before on at least one occasion where two years had passed between the death of one pope and the election of his successor, Gregory X felt that it was necessary to institute what would become the conclave to prevent Cardinals and Bishops from undertaking this very important task.

Gregory X tried very hard to institute a great deal of reform during this General Council, but in the end he

was able to bring together the Eastern and Western Churches and institute only a few of his ideas. But it was a successful General Council, nonetheless. Gregory X died on his way back to Rome from the council on January 10, 1276.

# The General Council of Vienne

The End of the Knights Templar, 1311-1312 A.D.

One purpose of the General Councils was to define terms such as 'person' or 'divinity' so that doctrine would be clearer.

The Fourteenth General Council Vienne came about because of a feudal relationship between the French King, Philip IV the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII. Philip the Fair was constantly suppressed by Pope Boniface VIII because of his evil deeds and Pope Boniface refused to relent upon him during his lifetime. The next elected Pope was Benedict XI but he died within eight months. It was Clement V who summoned and presided over the General Council of Vienne.

## **The Knight Templar and their Demise**

Philip IV the Fair was determined to have Pope Boniface VIII dug up from his grave and excommunicated from the church as a heretic. He wanted him to be buried in a heretic's graveyard. And when Clement V encouraged him to let go of his obvious vengeful desire, Philip IV the Fair decided he would go about things in an entirely new way.

Instead, since the French government owed the Knights Templar a lot of money, he called them all

forward, tortured them mercilessly until they confessed to anything he could think up including idolatry, and then when they recanted later no longer under the duress of torture – deemed them guilty and sentenced to death by burning at the stake. He even made sure that the superior general of the order was included in this sordid affair.

Pope Benedict XI was Pope during this time and was known as a good and holy man. However, he was unable to stop the French Army from carrying out their orders and as a result, he excommunicated them all.

Of course, Philip IV the Fair didn't take kindly to his stance and appeared in the papal courts demanding that this excommunication be rescinded and one of his men attempted to assassinate Pope Benedict XI, but instead only hit him in the face. But the weight of the matter took its toll, and Pope Benedict XI died within three weeks.

Pope Clement V held out for as long as felt he could, but fell to the weight of the pressure. He felt the only way to stop Philip IV the Fair who was going after all the Knights Templar worldwide was to hold a General Council.

### **The General Council of Vienne**

Philip IV the Fair had a difficult time in finding any evidence to support his claims, but despite this, the



Knights Templar and their order was suppressed worldwide although no more executions took place because they were all acquitted of heresy. Their properties were distributed and the issue of the innocence or guilt of the Templars was pushed aside as an irrelevant point in this whole dramatic affair.

Ironically, despite this highly immoral procedure, many moral laws were enacted during the General Council of Vienne, as well as, further clarification of laws regarding religious orders which were becoming more necessary as more and more continued to come into being despite the ban on this procedure in the previous General Council.

### **Legends of the Fall**

There is a great legend regarding the Grand Master Jacques de Molay as he stood upon the burning stake on the island of Seine where he and the other members of his order had been put to death prematurely as they would've been cleared as had all the others had there been no rush to judgment.

Philip IV the Fair, the Clement V and a certain William de Nogaret stood before the condemned man who prophesied from the burning pyre that all three of them would be summoned to the judgment seat of God within the year. And indeed all three men died within the year. Philip IV the Fair – although he left three sons – not one of them had their own son and

his 'royal' line became extinct less than fourteen years after his death.

It is a sad end for Clement V, who defended Boniface VIII with great rigour and truly felt that he could overcome the power of the French King. But in the end, he gave in and participated in the evil which was done to the Order of the Knights Templar and Grand Master Jacque de Molay who were acquitted in the courts of their own peers later.

# The General Council of Constance

The Two Popes Deposed, 1414-18 A.D.

General Councils involved the bishops of the church and special dignitaries who came together to define and unify their teachings.

The General Council of Constance was one of two councils held in a forty year period in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. One of the most odd elements of the council was that the two Popes who called a General Council in what appeared to be an attempt to rectify who the true Pope was, were both deposed and another chosen. But the confusing thing is there were more than two Popes claiming the position at the time.

## **John XXIII, Benedict XIII**

In order to properly expedite these Popes, a citation had to be sent to Spain to notify Benedict XIII who had been reduced to living in Aragon, Spain in his family's ancient fortress with only a few followers who were basically his servants. John XXIII was compelled to call a General Council by the Emperor Sigismund when John's evil life had caused his practical ability to lead and guide the church in the ways of Christ had become quite suspect. He did this even though he did not agree.

The deposition of Benedict XIII was easier and more to the point than John XXIII's. He wished to hold onto his power until the bitter end and so he negotiated with the council demanding resignation at a price. He wanted the red hat, control of Italy and Avignon and gold coins totaling 30,000. But when he realized that the General Council would not be bought, he attempted to flee and was caught, arrested, tried and deposed. Records say he was transferred to a German prison.

### **The Business of the General Council of Constance**

Thirty five members of the council were called in to deal specifically with decrees reforming all that was wrong in the Church at the time which took seven months of their time. Much of this reform had to do with papal authority, and the manner in which appointments were made to offices - a recurring theme in many General Councils which just couldn't seem to get finalized.

An issue of taxation had come up in that priests, bishops and others in the church were taxed on their earnings from charitable giving by the princes and powers at the time. A great amount of time was spent in working with the emperors and the heads of states to completely eradicate this form of taxing the clergy.

Five decrees were originally published by the General Council of Constance, seven more later, the first of these was considered the most important. It

addressed the issue of holding regular General Councils frequently – this decree in Latin was called *frequens*. They called for General Councils to be held every ten years. In the text of the decree it was stated: “The frequent celebration of General Councils is the best of all methods for tilling the Lord’s field, and for extirpating the weeds and thorns of heresy, schisms and errors . . .” *The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325 – 1870* – By Philip Hughes

The second decree provides a formula to prevent future schisms in the church and in the further decrees they set out a formula for the election of the Pope, expanding on the Conclave and they announced the election of the new Pope to replace the two anti-popes, Martin V.

Of the seven remaining decrees, the pope was regulated to the effect that he was never again to be allowed to tithe priests and bishops for the benefit of royal families.

The General Council of Constance remained somewhat ambiguous, but the bishops and prelates were careful to keep quiet – in order to restore peace to a ravaged Church.

# The General Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence

The Fruit of the Franciscans, 1431-45 A.D.

Some General Councils were held within decades of one another, whereas others were held off for a couple of centuries or more.

Pope Martin V was not a huge fan of General Councils, but due to the edict laid out at the previous General Council of Constance, he was pressured by the bishops to follow the new guideline of regular General Councils. He planned and prepared for the General Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence with great disdain, but died literally as it was about to begin. Eugene IV was his successor and would prove to be a great diplomat.

## **The Primacy of the Pope Versus the Primacy of the General Councils**

Although Pope Eugene IV tried to hold onto the power of the papacy during this lengthy council which lasted well over a decade, one of the first things that the General Council made sure to define was the power of the Pope. Their first definition to arise was that the General Council's has primacy over the Pope and it was the General Councils which were infallible. This would be changed in a later council, but for the moment, that's how it stood.

## **The Incredible Effect of the Franciscan Order Around the World**

The great beauty which occurred at the General Council of Basel-Ferrara-Florence was the reuniting of so many different heretical sects of Christianity. Patriarchs and representatives of Patriarchs of many previously defined heresies which had continued since the councils had condemned them, came forth and asked to be reunified under the Papal Seal. This was due to the profound missionary work of the Franciscans, and it was no less than a miracle.

The Greeks had been divided and took the most time to reconcile, but eventually came to the conclusion that they were in unity with the Roman Latin Rite in belief and tradition. But the really astounding attendants were representatives of the Monophysites, the Emperor of the Ethiopians, the Emperor of the Indians, the Abyssinian monks, the Copts and most surprisingly the remnants of Nestorianism, the Chaldeans and the Maronites.

They all came to the General Council with letters asking to be reinstated in unity with the Holy Roman Catholic Church. It was astounding what the fruits of the Franciscan Missionaries had become.

Another heretical group, the Baselites, did not wish to make amends and were therefore excommunicated by Pope Eugene IV.

When Eugene IV passed while the council was still in session, a move was made to elect a new Pope immediately. But because of a lack of bishop's presence, the ability to provide a legal election became problematic. Eugene IV's successor was first a layman who took upon himself the name of Felix. It was the emperor who interceded saying this election was farcical and Nicholas V was named. Felix willingly gave up his post as he was already fed up with the difficult business of dealing with cash in the Church.

Nicholas V was said to be a scholar who became a very humanistic and princely Pope, generous to those who had falsely come before him. He made Felix a Cardinal and restored him a pension. To the president of the council who had originally named Felix as Eugene IV's successor, he gave an Episcopal Consecration. His actions united the church and helped bring about an end to a lengthy but fruitful General Council at Basel-Ferraras-Florence.



# The Fifth General Council of the Lateran

Papal Authority Restored, 1512-17 A.D.

The General Councils of the Church arose because of doctrinal difficulties.

The Fifth General Council of the Lateran was called into action during the time of Pope Julius II, who was determined to bring back the power of the papacy and end the difficulties arising from conflicts relating to different territories, turfs, dioceses, empires and municipalities. But Julius II would die long before this General Council finished its work and another Pope, Leo X, would finalize the work under harsh circumstances because he not well liked and considered corrupt very worldly.

## **Julius II and War, War and More War**

Not unlike previous councils, the Fifth General Council of the Lateran, the eighteenth General Council held by the church, occurred in part because of a breakout of war across the globe. It seems the kings of Spain, France, England and Venice were all out to take over the world. Louis XII was the primary papal enemy, but all of these empires wished to move the papal role into one of submission to their empires. In essence, what they wanted was a pope who would act as a spiritual counselor and do their bidding.

Julius II was not at all pleased with these ideas and refused to cooperate. It was Louis XII who called a 'rebel' council in the name of the church without Julius II being present. Julius II's bishops, believe it or not, gave the king the verdict that he was right and that France was hereby withdrawn from obedience to the pope and any sentences of excommunication enacted by Julius II. Meanwhile, Julius II was at war defending the Papal States from French invaders.

For the moment, Louis XII had won the day and was in control of all Northern Italy.

### **Leo X Finishes the Job, Although Unpopular**

Pope Leo X came from a French family, and one of the first matters he attended to upon arrival into the papacy and the General Council was to receive the two surviving cardinals from the 'rebel' council in a formal act of contrition towards the church for what they had done.

Much has been stated historically about the Fifth General Council of the Lateran that very little was actually accomplished and there is truth in this. There were a few things done which were new to the church and worthy of mentioning.

First and foremost was the new tradition of the 'Imprimatur.' With the invention of printing, books were becoming more common and it was at this Fifth

General Council of the Lateran that they addressed the issue of having the bishop's seal printed at the beginning of any book that had been reviewed and approved of by a diocesan bishop. This is called the 'Imprimatur' and was practiced widely until the late twentieth century when the standards became laxened.

This issue would become huge in the next two years, because Martin Luther would come onto the scene. In his establishment of Lutheranism, he would utilize this new technology to spread the word and the 'Imprimatur' became immediately more important for Catholics to have access to in order to know if they were reading books approved by the church.

A secondary major accomplishment of the General Council was the defining of the roles of the religious orders in the church, to what powers they would be assigned, under whose authority they would reign (diocesan bishops), and how to maintain a balance between the religious orders in the church and the primary diocesan clergy.

Finally, what is considered to have happened of most importance was a doctrinal bull entitled *Pastor Aeternus* which restored the doctrine that the Roman See was the highest authority in the Christian Church and the Papacy had been given a divinely founded authority. This was Leo X's main objective and the accomplishment for which he took the most pleasure.

An interesting anecdote is that Copernicus wrote to the Fifth General Council of the Lateran. He sent a copy of his work 'The Revolutions' which described the solar system and how it really functioned to the council.

# The General Council of Trent

The Response to Martin Luther, 1545-63 A.D.

There have been twenty one General Councils in the Catholic Church since they began to acknowledge them in 325 A.D.

The General Council of Trent became inevitable on the day that Martin Luther began his revolt against the rule of the Catholic Church. It started with his proclamation against the rule of the Pope as the divine leader of the entirety of the church of Christ, but it culminated in Martin Luther's famous ninety nine thesis's which he tacked onto a door of a monastery attacking the church on many points - the most famous of which has lasted in historical memory against the practice of indulgences.

## **Martin Luther's Proclamation**

We must remember that Martin Luther was a monk of the Catholic Church, and therefore, under submission to the rule of the Catholic Church when he made his big move to secede from it. Because of this, he was called by a papal legate to withdraw his attacks against the church. But Martin Luther replied by denying the validity of all laws that the General Councils of the Church had made in the past.

Martin Luther was condemned in a papal bull entitled *Excurge Domine* and was given sixty days to respond. Instead of responding, on the sixtieth day he gathered a large group of public supporters of his revolt and threw the papal bull into a bonfire which was set on the town's dunghill. And after this, he threw the entire collection of all the papal laws binding the church of Christ. Luther had made his schism complete in 1520 A.D. It would take another twenty five years for the Catholic Church to realize that Martin Luther's revolt was an irrevocable breach from the Universal Catholic Church which would become irreconcilable, rather than just another heresy to be endured.

### **The General Council of Trent Redefines Catholic Teaching**

It is said by many Church historians that the documents written at the Council of Trent outnumber all of the previous councils combined, and that in regard to scholarship, they are the most excellent.

But the basic ideas of the Church, as in many previous councils, were simply being restated. A few new things came about, but the purpose of this General Council was to simply restate the beliefs of the Catholic Church and condemn the beliefs that the Catholic Church did not accept which had now become a part of Lutheranism.

Again, the issues of bishops and usury were addressed and laws enacted to prevent financial gain to those who misused the offices of the Church. Marriage laws were redefined preventing those of near relation from marriage, and considering all unwitnessed marriages invalid and restricting the ability of children to marry without parents consent. The seven sacraments were restated and defined as being the true amount of sacraments brought into the Church by Christ Himself. The General Council of Trent is responsible for the institution of seminaries and the official order of teaching of priests. The Congregation of the Council of Trent was formed which continues to this day under the title of permanent Ministry of the Interior of the Catholic Church as a church governmental agency created to deal with any type of interior corruption. Duels were dealt with during this council and those involved in any way were considered murderers. Automatic consequences were to result from any involvement in these hideous 'games.'

Luther was validated on the issue of indulgences, and the General Council of Trent agreed that much usury had been done in this practice and it was abolished that any clergy could receive monies for this purpose.

But perhaps the most important definition coming from the General Council of Trent is the one which restated the Catholic Faith in detail condemning the concept that Justification is an act of Predestination and that Faith is determined by scripture alone.

# The First General Council of the Vatican

Papal Infallibility Defined, 1869-70 A.D.

The first General Council to be held at the Vatican occurred during the reign of Pope Pius IX.

For three hundred years, the seat of the General Councils had remained still and as the world progressed into a more technologically advanced society, calling many bishops to join in one location for a General Council had become a much easier prospect. With the system of railways which now extending throughout Europe and the Atlantic passage being shortened to that of a few days, the meeting of the bishops would be much simpler now.

## **Pope Pius IX Calls a General Council Under the Bull *Aeterni Patris***

On June 29, 1868, Pope Pius IX released his papal bull, *Aeterni Patris*, summoning all the bishops to a General Council. The purpose of this council, according to his bull, was to “restate the faith in certain matters where it had been attacked or misunderstood; to review the whole matter of clerical life and its needs; to provide new safeguards for Christian marriage and the Christian education of youth; and . . . to promote peace and prosperity in the national life everywhere.”



*The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils, 325 - 1870* - By Philip Hughes

But what the council is remembered for and will always be remembered for is the final declaration determining papal infallibility in matters regarding to the faith or morals.

There was a great deal of dissent on this issue and many bishops disagreed either with the concept itself or the timing of the proclamation. Obviously, the Protestant Reformation had changed the entire landscape of the church and such a proclamation could make matters worse. But it went ahead as planned and the doctrine of *Pastor Aeternus* was passed despite a lot of hesitation and concerns.

### **Other Issues Resolved In the First General Council of the Vatican**

Much was done in this General Council, so it is only possible to summarize the doctrines which were formally defined.

God was defined as the Creator of all things and it was defined as an error to deny one true God. Revelation was defined as something which can be known by the natural light of human reason but can also be taught by extraordinary divine intervention. Faith was defined in a manner stating that God may juxtapose understanding upon someone within the context of their own human reason. And it was stated that it would be an error to believe that within the

context of divine revelation there remain no mysteries and that all things can be understood by simple human reason. In essence, faith is essential and divine revelation needful for the mysteries of God to be known in an individual soul.

# The Second General Council of the Vatican

Reformation of Mass and the Liturgy, 1963-65 A.D.

The Second General Council of the Vatican made radical changes to the manner in which the church worshipped worldwide.

It was the beloved Pope John XXIII who opened the Second General Council of the Vatican in 1963, but it would be Pope Paul VI who would finish the work after Pope John XXIII's death.

## **Pope John Paul I, Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI's Involvement in the Second General Council of the Vatican**

Three future popes were involved in the Second General Council of the Vatican. Bishop Albino Luciano became Pope John Paul I, Bishop Karol Wojtyla became Pope John Paul II and Father Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI. All attended this General Council of the Bishops, although Ratzinger was not yet a bishop.

## **The Form of the Mass Altered to Utilize Native Languages**

Perhaps the most noticeable change after Vatican II was the fact that the Mass, which had previously been celebrated only in Latin, could now be celebrated in

the Mother Tongues of individual nations. This gave the people of the church more of an understanding for what was going on in the individual parts of the Mass and encouraged more participation.

Similarly, the change involving the celebrant or priest changing the position of facing the altar to facing the people was done for similar reasons.

In Pre-Vatican II times, Latin was used to celebrate the Mass so that the Holy Rite would be Universal around the world, but so few laypeople understood what was happening during the Mass that this became an issue in the church. In order to stimulate more involvement from the people, the Mass had to become understandable to the common man in every country.

This was accomplished by allowing the Mass to be said in all languages and changing the position of the priest to face the congregation. By also having the liturgy spoken in the Mother Tongues, it allowed for the faithful to hear the recitation of scripture at every Mass which they could understand.

### **Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium***

In the Dogmatic Constitution, the basic belief of the church is laid out in these words: "In the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which our Saviour, after His Resurrection, commissioned

Peter to shepherd, and him and the other apostles to extend and direct with authority, which He erected for all ages as 'the pillar and mainstay of the truth.'" *Lumen Gentium*

The document goes on to say that this subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Pope and the bishops. But it makes sure to clarify that the Catholic Church acknowledges that salvation comes not only through the Catholic Church, but through the Mystery of Christ working through many faiths. Specifically referring to Protestant denominations, this statement was also meant to include Muslims and those of non-Christian religions. "Nevertheless, many elements of sanctification and of truth are found outside its visible confines." *Lumen Gentium*

Volumes of documents emerged out of Vatican II explaining the teaching of the church, but the major changes to the Church as a whole can be summarized in this manner.

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# The General Councils of the Catholic Church

An Overview

By Marilyn Hughes

*The Out-of-Body Travel Foundation!*

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*The Catholic Faith was formed by many things including most importantly Scripture and Tradition. But it was the General Councils of the Catholic Church which defined and shaped these beliefs into a tangible and understandable system of belief. Complex in their histories, they can be summarized to present the most important points of these grand moments in faith history. This book gives you an overview and insight into a subject otherwise only understood through lengthy study.*

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