

# *The General Councils*



A History of the  
Twenty-One Church  
Councils from Nicaea  
to Vatican II

*Christopher M. Bellitto*



PAULIST PRESS  
New York/Mahwah, N.J.

## Chapter 8

### Reform Lost and Regained:

#### Lateran V (1512–1517) and Trent (1545–1563)

The sixteenth century witnessed two general councils. Lateran V was a long but fruitless meeting that ended just months before a famous invitation to deal with the church's real problems: Luther's *95 Theses* in 1517. Trent met nearly thirty years later in three sets of sessions spread out from 1545 to 1563. At Trent, the Roman church not only had to reexplain her own doctrines, but also deal with the consequences of several centuries of failed attempts to reform the church. More than at any other moment in the church's life, at Trent the church had to look at herself and recognize that the troubles she faced were partially her own fault. It was a moment as critical in the church's life as the challenge to write doctrinal creeds had been for the general councils of the first millennium.

At the dawn of the problems. But Pope Julius II he literally led armies (1512–17) because he had a council at Pisa, a location far from the schism. Some of the French king and the pope at Pisa, which met from 1511 to 1517, the assembly caused the pope and asserted the conciliar supremacy.

The combative Julius II for 1512, which he intended for four Lateran councils from 1512 to 1517. Lateran V was a very papal building, and its documented order of business was obtained at Pisa, calling it a "quasi-council" of participants "schismatics and heretics" king and the Holy Roman Emperor and supported Lateran V died in February 1513. Lateran V, and Lateran V continued.

After condemning the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges for Lateran V was fighting the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges principles as contained in the Pragmatic Sanction also restricted the pope's power over other church officials by those over whom the pope had authority.

Lateran V called the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges ordered copies of the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges was so preoccupied with the Pragmatic Sanction, and



assortment of Protestant  
verse forms of addressing

V, some Catholic leaders  
or a thorough house clean-  
at a number of Protestant  
of reform: They did not  
, hierarchy, and rituals  
se most Protestant groups  
nged in the church in the  
ow them out completely  
us had intended from the  
ism is sometimes referred  
ement.

f this fundamental oppo-  
posed to the Catholic  
lvin and his sixteenth-  
community described in  
urrect. They wanted to  
: deacons, teachers, pas-  
at bishops as Catholics  
e of cardinals, and curia.  
ore participatory form of  
e medieval conciliarism  
stance. So the fifteenth-  
ority, especially at Con-  
Basel, became part of

tury the Roman church  
ructures from several  
ed the very foundations  
ndered anew just what  
ed, and how her mem-  
stions flowed naturally  
e sources of authority:  
dition: the writings of

the fathers and/or general councils and/or papal decrees? How many sacraments are there, what do they mean, and what do they do? Who decides these matters and on what grounds do they base their explanation? How should the church run herself and celebrate her beliefs liturgically?

### *Trent*

With such a major challenge taking place on such a large scale, why did it take almost three decades after Luther's first steps in 1517 for Trent to start meeting? The Protestant desire for a council dampened Catholic enthusiasm because the Roman church did not want to look like she was giving in to her critics. Protestants wanted everyone, clergy and lay, to participate in a council; they sought the backing of secular powers to establish one, preferably in Germany. Moreover, Lutherans and other Protestants believed Christians could call a council on their own and did not want papal interference. They also knew popes would not readily call a council because the papal curia comprised one of the main elements in the church needing an overhaul. It was also true that not every pope in this period was happy with the idea of a general council, however much it was needed. This may have been because conciliarism's challenge to papal authority had dovetailed with the Protestant attack on the very concept of the papacy.

A Catholic council had to deal with this unprecedented context and face some basic and crucial questions about the church's life. Eventually, after some hesitant steps and objections, the organizers selected the city of Trent, which was then on imperial soil but today is in northeast Italy (near modern Switzerland and Austria). Finally, the long awaited and extremely essential Catholic general council would meet both to take up problems that predated the Protestants and to respond to the developments in Christianity since Luther opened the floodgates of questions for the Roman Catholic Church.

Trent met in three stages: 1545 through 1548, 1551 through 1552, and 1562 through 1563. There are many reasons for this



nt have to do with the  
aplicated and the times  
e to discuss and imple-  
the Roman church's  
had questioned (espe-  
s) fully, carefully, and  
took place while reli-  
all over Europe. When  
instance, the bishops  
decade passed before

ions, we must remem-  
ad its own dynamics,  
lpful for our purposes  
occupied Trent's three  
eral topics, final deci-  
stage to the next. We  
y of scripture and tra-  
raments, and reforms.  
concerned the author-  
olics and Protestants  
d different answers to  
d who says so?" This  
authority of scripture  
d tradition underlay  
loctrine (and, indeed,  
authority. If the two  
iat is, the very nature  
could be made on any

all Christians could  
ripture should be the  
different Protestant  
nce to Christianity's  
e dating back to the  
Catholics, in contrast,

said the church, in particular the top of her hierarchy, should over-see scriptural interpretation and that individual Christians could not interpret scripture on their own.

The Catholic position also held that the church's authority rested not only on scripture, but also on tradition. This tradition included the writings of the fathers, papal statements, and conciliar documents—all guided by the Holy Spirit. The Catholic idea of authority relied on the church's hierarchy as the agent having the right and power to decide what was to be included and excluded from scripture and tradition. Catholics believed this teaching authority had been handed down to the hierarchy over the centuries in an unbroken succession. That line of succession started with the apostles and moved through the fathers and bishops up to, and including, the members of the Council of Trent.

From these starting points concerning the authority of scripture and tradition as interpreted by the Catholic hierarchy, Trent began with the basics. The delegates issued a creed very early on, in 1546, which repeated the ancient formulas set down by the fathers at Nicaea I in 325 and Constantinople I in 381. Throughout the rest of its documents and especially its doctrinal statements, Trent always made sure it demonstrated its own authority and the sources of that authority. The fathers at Trent did so by continually stressing that their teachings rested on scripture and tradition, especially as that tradition was found in—and handed down by—the fathers and the councils.

Because of the central importance the word of God played in the Protestant reformations and the Catholic responses, Trent turned to the Latin, or Vulgate, Bible. After listing the books of the Vulgate Bible, Trent called for a fresh version of the Latin text. But the fathers at Trent also made a point of saying only the Roman church, not individual Christians, could interpret that Bible with final authority.

The second major issue for Trent stemmed from the first: the bishops' teaching authority as members of the church's hierarchy. The subject had particular importance in light of the Protestant questioning of the offices of bishop and pope. This context resulted