

## I Introduction: Historical Survey of the Council of Trent

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The Council of Trent (1545–63) was a major event in the history of Western Christianity that sealed rather than healed the divisions between the Catholic and Protestant communities and shaped Roman Catholicism for the centuries that followed until the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) effectively ended the Tridentine paradigm.

The council was called for a variety of reasons. The Great Western Schism (1378–1417), when the Roman, Avignonese, and Pisan popes all claimed supreme authority in the Church, was only ended when a council, meeting in Konstanz with the backing of Emperor-elect Sigismund, declared its supreme authority in the decree *Haec sancta* (1415). Having deposed the Pisan and Avignonese claimants and secured the resignation of the Roman, the council elected a new pope, Martin V (1417–31), only after mandating the regular celebration of subsequent councils by its decree *Frequens* (1417). In a series of concordats negotiated at the council (1418) to last for five years, the pope agreed to severe limitations on his revenues and curial practices. He saw to the sabotaging of the next council, that of Pavia-Siena (1423), that should have made permanent these reforms. Before he died, Martin V convoked the Council of Basel that soon found itself in conflict with the new pope Eugenius IV (1431–47). Its decrees that imposed severe limitations on papal revenues were opposed by the pope who tried unsuccessfully to close the council. He then transferred it to Ferrara, Florence, and finally Rome where his backers condemned the remnant in Basel and declared his supreme authority in the bull *Laetentur coeli* (1439) that unified on parchment the Greek and Latin churches. The reform legislation of Basel was adopted in France by the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges (1438) and in German lands by the Acceptance of Mainz (1439). These documents also included the decrees *Haec sancta* and *Frequens*. By patient diplomacy, Eugenius IV and his successor, Nicholas V (1447–55), got the German princes and emperor to rescind the Acceptance and replace it with concordats (1447, 1448) that modified these reforms. Repeated efforts

to secure a permanent, similar rescission of the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges failed. By accepting the ecclesiastical appointments made by the remaining members of the Council of Basel and giving its rival pope Felix V (1439–49) legate powers, Nicholas V succeeded in getting Felix V to resign and the council to elect him in his stead and to close (1449). For the next half century, popes were preoccupied with restoring the papal monarchy and suppressing any threat to it coming from a new council. To secure the support of Christian rulers in this struggle, they negotiated concordats with them that granted these rulers the right to nominate candidates for episcopal office and restrictions on fees paid to Rome.<sup>1</sup>

Many of the issues confronting the Renaissance popes came to a head in the council prior to Trent, namely the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17). When Julius II (1503–13) betrayed his allies, Emperor Maximilian I and King Louis XII of France, by violating the terms of the League of Cambrai he had joined in 1509, they backed a group of dissident cardinals, who in 1511 called a council to meet in Pisa, ostensibly to reform the Church. To defeat it, Julius called his own council to meet in the Lateran. While he secured the adherence of much of Europe to his council, it had achieved little by the time of his death. His successor, Leo X (1513–21), quickly ended the Pisan Schism in 1513 and tried to address the calls for reform. He issued the bull *Pastoralis officii* (1513) that regularized the practices and fees of the Roman Curia. The bishops at Lateran V, however, demanded a wider reform that would restore their dignity and jurisdictional powers in regard to the cardinals, exempt curial officials, and members of religious orders. They even insisted on the establishment of a “sodality” that would in effect create a permanent College of Bishops in the Roman Curia, something the College of Cardinals adamantly opposed. In an effort to satisfy some of the demands of the bishops, Leo agreed to the Great Reform Bull (1514) that tried to enforce the provisions of canon law on clerics and laity alike. He also granted the bishops control over pulpits and printing presses to ensure that heresy and immorality, attacks on church authorities, and unfounded apocalyptic predictions were not disseminated in their dioceses. But the pope was reluctant to rescind the exemptions granted by popes to curial officials and members

<sup>1</sup> Nelson H. Minnich, “Councils of the Catholic Reformation: A Historical Survey,” in *The Church, the Councils, and Reform: The Legacy of the Fifteenth Century*, eds. Gerald Christianson, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Christopher M. Bellitto (Washington, D.C., 2008), 27–59; *A Companion to the Council of Basel*, eds. Michiel Decaluwé, Thomas M. Izbicki, and Gerald Christianson [Brill Companions to the Christian Tradition, 74] (Leiden, 2017).

of religious orders. Missing in most of the bishops' reform demands was a clear pastoral concern. Leo found very burdensome the bishops' threats of boycotting sessions if their demands were not met, and he counter-threatened to prorogue the council. In the end, he was willing to grant some modification in these papal exemptions in return for a clear conciliar statement on papal supremacy that he was determined to secure. Having lost the Battle of Marignano (1515), he conceded the loss of papal Parma and Piacenza to French-held Milan and secured a guarantee of Medici control of Florence. At Bologna in December of 1515, he successfully negotiated with the victorious Francis I of France an agreement that replaced the Pragmatic Sanction of Bourges with a concordat that granted the French king the right to nominate candidates to the top episcopal and abbatial offices, while the king acknowledged the pope's right to make the appointments and receive fees for doing so. At the eleventh session of the Lateran Council (1516), the Concordat of Bologna was given conciliar approval and the decree *Pastor aeternus* both formally abrogated the Pragmatic Sanction and declared that when there is only one undisputed pope, he alone has the power to convoke, transfer, and close a council. The papacy had seemingly triumphed over conciliarism. By the narrowest of margins, Leo succeeded in getting the bishops to agree to close the council – an approval required by one of the pope's sworn electoral capitularies. The Lateran Council, that the pope had found so difficult to manage despite being heavily populated with Italians and curial prelates, was a warning to subsequent popes. Clement VII (1523–34), Paul III (1534–49), Julius III (1550–55), and Paul IV (1555–59) had all attended the Lateran Council and had seen first-hand the dangers a council could pose to papal authority. Had no new crisis arisen, the popes would have looked on Lateran V as having solved the problems of the previous century and as having confirmed their fear of councils.<sup>2</sup>

The effort to glorify the papal monarchy in stone would create the new crisis. The ancient Constantinian basilica of St. Peter in Rome was

<sup>2</sup> For a series of studies on Lateran V, see *Alla Ricerca di Soluzioni, Nuova Luce sul Concilio Lateranense V. Studi per i 500 anni del Concilio*, ed. Nelson H. Minnich [Pontificio Comitato di Scienze Storiche, Atti e Documenti, 48] (Città del Vaticano, 2019); and his *The Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17): Studies on Its Membership, Diplomacy, and Proposals for Reform* [Collected Studies Series CS 392] (London, 1993); *The Catholic Reformation: Council, Churchmen, and Controversies* [Collected Studies Series CS 403] (London, 1993); and *The Decrees of the Fifth Lateran V (1512–17): Their Legitimacy. Origins, Contents, and Implementation*, [Variorum Collected Studies Series, CS 1060] (New York, Abingdon, Oxon, 2016).

in need of serious repair. Julius II, the successor of St. Peter, was determined to honor the first pope by constructing a new church over his tomb. The design for this building was grandiose and its costs exceedingly high. Having laid the cornerstone for the new edifice (1506) and begun the destruction of the old basilica and construction of the new, Julius left to Leo X the task of completing the project. To finance it, Leo X issued an indulgence in exchange for prayers and/or alms. Albrecht of Brandenburg (1490–1545) needed dispensations both from his lack of the required canonical age and to hold simultaneously the prince-bishoprics of Magdeburg, Halberstadt, and Mainz. An agreement was reached with Rome whereby Albrecht would grant permission to promoters of the indulgence to offer their favors in his territories in exchange for Leo allowing him a share in their revenues to pay for the fees required for his dispensations. The excessive claims for the efficacy of this indulgence aroused the pastoral ire of an obscure Augustinian friar in Wittenberg, Martin Luther (1483–1546). His protests quickly gained wide support among Germans who felt they were being fleeced by Rome. Efforts to silence Luther failed, and the theology underpinning his protests was subjected to scrutiny. At a meeting with Cardinal Tommaso de Vio, O. P. (1469–1534) in Augsburg on October 14, 1518, Luther was told to recant some of his theological statements or face penalties. Once back in Wittenberg, the Augustinian friar formally appealed on November 18, 1518, from an ill-informed pope and his tyrannical judges to a general council. Further investigations of Luther's theology resulted in the bull *Exsurge Domine* (1520) demanding his retractions. His refusal led to his excommunication (1521). To make this effective, Leo X needed the support of the emperor and German Diet.

Leo X's relations with Emperor-elect Charles V were complicated. He had initially opposed his election as emperor for fear he would dominate the papacy from his bases in Naples and Milan. Francis I of France also feared the dominance of the Habsburg prince who would surround France on all sides as emperor-elect of the Holy Roman Empire, king of Spain, duke of Burgundy, archduke of Austria, and nephew of the queen of England, Catherine of Aragon. Leo saw Francis as a natural ally against Charles, but in the end sided with Charles and, thus, after a military victory regained Parma and Piacenza earlier lost to Francis in 1515. Charles fulfilled his obligations as protector of the Church by securing at the Diet of Worms in 1521 the declaration of Luther as an outlaw of the empire. Luther, however, found support among German lay princes and even among prince-bishops. Cardinal Archbishop Albrecht of Mainz refused to sign the Edict of Worms and

initially held an ambiguous stance toward Luther. The German Diet of Nürnberg in 1523 demanded that the case of Luther be resolved by “a free Christian council in a city on the German border.”<sup>3</sup>

Clement VII did all in his power to avoid calling a council. He ignored the Nürnberg Diet’s call by both Lutherans and Catholics on April 5, 1524, for “a general free Christian council in German lands” to reform the Church. The pope tried to substitute for it a Roman conference that would be attended by a few representatives from each nation, but no one came to his planned meeting in 1525. He forbade the papal legate in Germany, Cardinal Lorenzo Campeggio, to assemble a national council to hear the case of Luther and reform the German church. He did not support Charles V when he advocated calling a general council but supported instead the adversaries of the emperor. The German princes feared that if Charles succeeded in suppressing Luther and his supporters, there would be little effective opposition to his centralizing of power. Clement joined the League of Cognac (1526) to weaken Charles’ hold on Italy but suffered instead the humiliating Sack of Rome (1527) and a capitulation to the emperor. Clement was forced to crown Charles as Holy Roman Emperor in a ceremony in Bologna in 1530 and to promise to call a general council. For the remainder of his reign, however, the pope found repeated excuses for not doing so.<sup>4</sup>

His successor, Paul III, became convinced of the need for a council. He tried on his own to reform the Roman Curia and reluctantly went along with the efforts of Charles V to hold colloquies (1540–41) at which leading theologians from the Protestant and Catholic sides worked to reconcile their differences. The pope’s earlier efforts to assemble a general council in Mantua (1537) and then in Vicenza (1538) each failed due to the lack of cooperation of the emperor and king of France, to problems of security, and to the poor attendance. When the warring rulers made peace in 1542, Paul III secured their support for a council to be held in a new location.<sup>5</sup>

The city of Trent was a compromise location. It was in the southern Tyrol, within the boundaries of the Holy Roman Empire, situated on the

<sup>3</sup> Hubert Jedin, *A History of the Council of Trent*, Vol. I, trans. Ernest Graf, O. S. B. (London, 1957), 166–211.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 211–87; For Clement’s political calculations regarding Charles V and the Protestants, see Gerhard Müller, *Die römische Kurie und die Reformation 1523–1534: Kirche und Politik während des Pontifikates Clemens’ VII* [Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte, 37] (Güterloh, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> Jedin, *History*, I, 288–510.

Italian side of the Alps in the Adige River valley that led to the Brenner Pass, Trent being about eighty miles south of an imperial residence in Innsbruck. According to Angelo Massarelli, the council's secretary, the river Avisio that flowed into the Adige five miles north of Trent formed the linguistic boundary between Italy and Germany. North of Avisio Italian was no longer spoken, whereas southward all the way to Verona some spoke German, while others Italian (CT, I, 286: 4–11). Trent had 1,500 houses, and its population was divided between German speakers, who lived in the northern quarter of the city and dressed in their customary garb, and the other residents who were Italian speakers, who kept to themselves and followed their own customs. It is estimated that the normal population was about 6,000 inhabitants and the council could swell the population by 2,000. The city was ruled by a prince-bishop, Cristoforo Madruzzo, who guaranteed its safety by a confederation with the count of the Tyrol (CT I, 156: 25–157: 25). Despite the wars waged in the empire, Trent was never attacked by a Protestant army. The city unfortunately lacked the proper resources to host a large international meeting. Food had to be ferried in, lodgings were in short supply, and the sultry summers and bitterly cold snowy winters were unappealing. Bishops, accustomed to living in palaces with fancy fare, sought to avoid coming or to stay as briefly as possible. Poorer prelates needed subsidies from the pope. Renewed hostilities between France and the Empire delayed the opening of the council until December of 1545.

The First Period of the Council lasted until 1549 when the bishops were allowed to return to their dioceses. The early work of the council was given over to establishing its procedures and setting the foundations for its later decisions. Its reaffirmation at the third session of the Nicene Creed with its *consubstantialis* wording and *filioque* clause implied from the start a rejection of the *sola scriptura* principle. The fourth session's decree on Sacred Scripture affirmed the truths and rules contained in the written books of the Bible and in unwritten Apostolic traditions, declaring the old Latin Vulgate to be the "authentic" text to be cited in disputations and sermons but not prohibiting the use of other versions. The fifth session affirmed the existence of original sin that is passed on to humanity by propagation (not imitation); by baptism its guilt is truly removed (not merely not imputed) and sanctifying grace is given, while the effects of original sin in concupiscence (an inclination to sin) remain. A reform decree mandated in churches with prebends or in prominent collegiate ones the establishment of biblical lectureships. Revenues were also to be provided for hiring instructors to teach

grammar to clerics and other poor students and to provide instruction in Sacred Scripture. Since the chief duty of a bishop is to preach the Gospel, they and all those who are charged with providing pastoral care are obliged to preach personally or to hire a suitable substitute. Members of religious orders are required to present themselves before the local bishop before being allowed to preach. Anyone who preaches heresy should be forbidden to preach and be prosecuted according to law or local customs. After six months of discussion, the sixth session passed a decree on justification. It introduced a new format by dividing the decree into chapters that presented the Church's positive teaching on justification with supporting biblical texts and into canons that condemned with an anathema anyone publicly holding a heretical opinion. The decree rejected any form of Pelagianism that held humans can, on their own power, become and remain justified. It also rejected the notion of imputed justice or justification coming from faith alone. Rejected too was any notion of a double justification whereby one is justified by sanctifying grace, but then needs to have Christ's merits imputed to oneself to make up for the deficiencies in one's living out the Christian vocation – a conciliatory theory adopted at the Regensburg Colloquy in 1541. While the Tridentine decree insisted that one cannot merit justifying grace that is a pure gift of God, an adult needs to cooperate by preparing and disposing the will to receive the gift. Once adults are justified, they are free with the help of grace to perform good works that increase one's justice and allows one to hope in an eternal reward from a merciful God. Many Protestants saw this decree as closing the door on any reconciliation. The reform decree of this session required prelates to reside in their own dioceses or suffer a loss of revenues and be denounced to the Apostolic See – a weak measure that was not enforced and was revisited at another time. Two months later, the seventh session issued a decree on the sacraments, declaring that there are seven of them (baptism, penance, confirmation, the Eucharist, marriage, holy orders, and anointing of the sick); that they were instituted by Christ and confer grace by their very action on those who do not put up an obstacle; that they are not all equal in dignity and that three of them cannot be repeated since they place an indelible mark on the soul; and that they are to be performed according to the intention and ritual of the Church by ministers appointed for the task. Baptism by water is declared necessary. It can be administered to infants. It does not free one from observing the commandments nor prevent one from sinning. Confirmation confers power and is to be administered by the bishop. The reform decree restated the canonical requirements for

appointment as bishop and forbade the holding of multiple sees. It also repeated laws regarding benefices, how they may be united, a prohibition on pluralism, who can be appointed to benefices, how long one may delay ordination, and obligations to provide pastoral care or hire substitutes. Ten days later at the eighth session, on March 11, 1547, the legates ordered the council to transfer to Bologna, claiming that they had a papal bull granting them the authority to do so.<sup>6</sup>

The decision to transfer the council from German soil to the Papal States was hotly contested. The Italian prelates disliked the conditions in Trent and were eager to leave. The Schmalkaldic War had brought a Protestant army near the Alpine pass, raising fears for the bishops' safety. Even if the Protestants were defeated, as they were six weeks later at the Battle of Mühlberg on April 24, 1547, a new fear was that an all-powerful emperor would now impose a conciliatory settlement that compromised Catholic doctrine and practice. The outbreak of typhus in Trent provided the excuse for abandoning the city. The emperor felt the success of the council hinged in part on its being celebrated on German lands as advocated by Luther and the German diets. The council had addressed the crucial question of justification and seemed on the verge of a successful conclusion. Now was not the time to transfer it, especially not to the Papal States. Charles V ordered the bishops from lands under his authority to remain in Trent. But the legates had followed the procedure for transferring a council laid out at Konstanz and had secured the necessary two-thirds vote. Paul III threatened with ecclesiastical censures and penalties any prelate who remained in Trent. The emperor was furious. A council called to consolidate the Church was creating a new schism in it. Initially, fourteen prelates refused to join their colleagues in Bologna.<sup>7</sup> Animosity only deepened when Paul III learned that his son Pier Luigi Farnese, the duke of Parma and Piacenza, had been assassinated on September 10, 1547. The pope suspected that the emperor had been behind the plot. Lest a new schism develop in the Catholic Church, Paul ordered the council meeting in Bologna not to pass any decrees defining doctrine or reforming practice. The conciliar fathers and their theologians discussed for over a year such questions as the remaining sacraments, indulgences, purgatory, and sacred images,

<sup>6</sup> "Trent, 1545–1563," *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, Volume Two: *Trent to Vatican II*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, trans. Peter McIlhenny and John Coventry (Washington, D.C., 1990), 660–89; hereafter this work is cited as COD-T.

<sup>7</sup> Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, Band II (Freiburg im Breisgau, 1957), English translation by Ernest Graf, *A History of the Council of Trent*, Vol. II: *The First Sessions at Trent, 1545–47* (London, 1961), 416–43.



but issued no measures on these topics, decreeing instead at the ninth and tenth sessions that the council was legitimately transferred and working away in Bologna. By August of 1548, only twenty prelates remained in Bologna. Meanwhile, Charles V had taken into his own hands a resolution of the controversial issues. At the Augsburg Diet on May 15, 1548, Charles presented his proposal for an interim accord until a council definitively decided the issues. Known as the Augsburg Interim, it made many concessions to the Lutherans regarding discipline (clerical celibacy, communion under two species, fast and abstinence, disposition of benefices, etc.) and was opposed by Rome and many German Catholics since it encroached on the authority of a council. Paul looked for a way to end the impasse. Hoping to form a commission composed of four bishops each from Trent and from Bologna to complete the reforms of the council, he ordered on September 13, 1549, through his vice-chancellor that the legate allow the remaining bishops in Bologna to return to their dioceses (CT I, 864: 12–15). But the bishops at Trent declined his invitation to come to Rome and Paul died on November 10, 1549.<sup>8</sup>

The election in 1550 of Giam Maria del Monte, the former president of the Council of Trent, as Pope Julius III opened the possibility of a return to Trent. Charles V had extracted from the Protestants defeated at Mühlberg an agreement to attend the council. On December 14, 1550, Julius reconvened the council and Charles now worked to have a large delegation of German Catholics and Protestants be present at it. The three electoral prince-archbishops of Cologne, Mainz, and Trier, plus other German bishops or their procurators appeared in Trent. Protestant delegations from Brandenburg, Württemberg, Saxony, and some imperial free cities also came. Hopes ran high when the Brandenburg delegation submitted to the council and was incorporated into it. Elector Joachim II of Brandenburg was a moderate Lutheran married to a Catholic whose son Frederick was said to be Catholic. In 1547, despite his underage of twenty years, Frederick had been elected by the cathedral chapter as co-adjutor to Johann Albrecht von Brandenburg-Ansbach, the archbishop of Magdeburg and administrator of Halberstadt. Upon the death of Johann Albrecht in 1550, Frederick wanted his succession confirmed by Rome. The adhesion

<sup>8</sup> Hubert Jedin, *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient*, Band III: *Bologneser Tagung (1547/48) – Zweite Trienter Tagungsperiode (1551/52)* (Friburg im Breisgau, 1970), Italian translation as *Storia del Concilio di Trento*, Vol. III: *Il periodo bolognese (1547–48), Il secondo periodo trentino (1551–52)*, trans. Anita Sorsaja and Gino Moretto, rev. Giuseppe Alberigo (Brescia, 1973), 13–303.

of Brandenburg to the council was part of a strategy to secure Rome's approval – it worked. He was confirmed by the pope in August 1552, but died five weeks later, to be succeeded by his fourteen-year-old brother Sigismund who was Protestant and who secularized the prince-bishoprics.<sup>9</sup> The German bishops at Trent reached out to the Protestant delegations with acts of kindness. But the cardinal legate, Marcello Crescenzo, was adamant that the other delegations must also submit to the council. They refused to do so unless a set of conditions unacceptable to the papacy were first met. To overcome the stalemate, Crescenzo was pressured to allow the Württemberger and Saxon delegations to address a private general congregation on January 24, 1552, in which they read their Protestant confessions of faith and demanded an acceptance of their conditions for further participation. Rome was furious that Crescenzo had allowed them to address the assembly without first submitting to its authority. The pressures on the legate were such that he took to bed and died four months later on May 28, 1552. Not being allowed to participate officially in the work of the conciliar commissions and general congregations, the Protestant delegates gradually left Trent.<sup>10</sup>

During this Second Period, the council held six sessions. The eleventh on May 1, 1551, affirmed that the council was being resumed in Trent, the twelfth prorogued the council to allow more bishops to arrive. The thirteenth session affirmed the Church's teaching on transubstantiation, the reservation and veneration of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, and its uses. The reform decree addressed questions of episcopal supervision of morals, the trial and punishment of criminal clerics, and the procedures to be used regarding a bishop accused of crimes. The issue of communion under only one species was to be deferred until the Protestants arrived. Session fourteen addressed questions related to penance and extreme unction. It affirmed the institution of penance by Christ, its difference from baptism, its necessity for those who have fallen into serious sin after baptism, and its constitutive parts (contrition, confession of one's sins to a priest, reception of absolution, and satisfaction). The section on satisfaction lacks a treatment of purgatory and indulgences, topics included in the council's rushed final

<sup>9</sup> Georg May, *Die deutschen Bischöfe angesichts der Glaubenspaltung des 16. Jahrhunderts* (Wien, 1983), 189–90.

<sup>10</sup> "Wie in dem Basilischen concilio den Bohemen gescheen? The Status of Protestants at the Council of Trent," *The Contentious Triangle: Church, State, and University. A Festschrift in Honor of Professor George Huntston Williams*, eds. Rodney L. Petersen and Calvin Augustine Pater [Sixteenth Century Essays and Studies, 51] (Kirkville, MO, 1999), 201–19.