

THE “MOTHER” OF ALL COUNCILS: THE COUNCIL OF TRENT-PART I

If the Easter Vigil is rightly called “the mother of all vigils,” one could argue that the **Council of Trent** occupies a similar space in the annals of Ecumenical Council history— though Vatican II may beg to differ. My copy of all conciliar decrees comes in a side-by-side (Latin-English) format, in **very small** print! Trent occupies **139 pages**, while Vatican II fills a whopping **315 pages**! But Trent was of an entirely **different nature**. Its twenty-five sessions were spread out between 1545-63. A whopping **306 years** passed before the next ecumenical council, the longest such **drought** in Church history. But Trent’s decrees arguably are more **consequential** than any others, due to the tremendous influence of the Reformation. Recall, we left off this series early last December discussing Lateran V (1511-17), in which the tone-deaf bishops declared “There was peace for the whole church and a resulting union,” and that “no topics remained for debate and discussion.” Just seven months later, Martin Luther nailed his **95 Theses** to the Church door in Wittenberg.

The formality of the decree convoking Trent is itself a lesson in the tremendous formality of the Renaissance Church. On **13 December 1545**, the assembled prelates answered Pope Paul III’s call to convoke a council: “And whereas the solemnity of the Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ is near, and other festivals of the closing and opening year follow thereupon, doth it please you, that the first ensuing session be held on the Thursday after the Epiphany, which will be the seventh of the month of January, in the year of the Lord **MDXLVI**? They answered: It pleaseth us.” Notice that they waited **28 years** to convene, allowing the ecclesial wound to **fester and metastasize**. This was not without reason. There was fear that the conciliar movement (i.e., a Council is superior to a pope) might again rear its ugly head. Location also became a problem. The pope wanted to meet in Italy, but Emperor Charles V was dead set against assembling in Rome, lest the Council be seen as **controlled** by the pope.

Trent was agreed upon because it formed part of the **fiefdom** of the Emperor. Though within Italy, it was **365 miles** from Rome, in northern Italy. Sessions were held inside the Cathedral. It began modestly, with **fewer** than 30 bishops. Later sessions swelled to over 200 bishops. But Trent **methodically** addressed key issues of the Reformation, clarifying and defining Church doctrine and dogma in a laser-focused fashion. The first ten sessions dealt with Catholic teaching on scripture, tradition, original sin and the sacraments. It opened with a bang, its first paragraph signaling its purpose “for the uprooting of heresies” and the “crushing and complete removal of the enemies of the Christian name.” While easy to judge harshly such language, recall how **profound** was the **wound** in the Church and how rapidly it spread: Germany in 1517; Switzerland in 1519; Sweden in 1531; England in 1534. The Church was reeling—it was time to act.

The first doctrinal decree issued (Session IV, April 1546) concerned the content of the **Holy Scriptures**. Teaching that the Church “venerates with an equal affection of piety, and reverence, all the books both of the Old and of the New Testament,” and “lest a doubt may arise in any one’s mind,” the Council of Trent definitively **listed all the books** in the OT and NT considered canonical— that is, the inspired Word of God: “ if any one receive not, as sacred and canonical, the said books entire with all their parts, as they have been used to be read in the Catholic Church... let him be anathema.” This ought not be interpreted as meaning that prior to 1546, the Catholic Church was **unsure** of which books belonged. Even the Hebrew Scriptures were in flux in early Christian times. The Jews formalized their list only in 90 A.D. For Catholics too, it **took time**— the Bible did not materialize out of **thin air**. Finalized by 397 A.D., the Catholic canon of Scripture was not seriously called into question for centuries.

In 250 B.C., a Greek version of the Old Testament emerged. Called the **Septuagint**, it contained several books **not found** in the Hebrew Bible. When an Old Testament passage is quoted in the New Testament, 2/3 of the time it is from the Septuagint—the same version from which **Jesus** quoted. The reformers countered that the New Testament **never quotes** from any of the seven books that Protestants removed from the Bible. True enough, but neither is quoted in the NT a **single verse** from any of the following OT books: Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Obadiah, Zephaniah, Judges, 1 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Lamentations and Nahum. Notice the **circular** argument. So often, teachings were clarified only after being called into question. When the canon of Scripture was called into question by the Reformers, an **infallible** declaration was needed.

The Council next took up the thorny issue of **Original Sin**. This is fundamental theology about the **nature** of the human person. We can't get it wrong about sin. It begins by stating something seemingly obvious—the first man—called **Adam**—was **real**, not a mere myth. As a result of his sin, man was changed for the worse. It then quotes a key verse of St. Paul's Letter to the Romans (5:12): "Therefore, just as through one person sin entered the world, and through sin, death, and thus death came to all, inasmuch as all sinned..." The decree was brief and pointed, stating: "If anyone asserts, that the prevarication of Adam injured himself alone, and not his posterity; and that the holiness and justice, received of God, which he lost, he lost for himself alone, and not for us also...let him be anathema." God created us in grace. The sin of our first parents lost that grace. Baptism **restores friendship** with God by washing away the stain of original sin, filling our souls with sanctifying grace. (To be continued).

- Until quite recently, **Kazakhstan** has been a model of inter-religious cooperation. Marking 30 years of independence from the USSR, the central Asian nation of 19 million is 71% Muslim and 25% Christian (almost all Orthodox). But January **riots** have disturbed that peace— 160 were killed and more than 700 injured. Though **barely 1%** of the population is Catholic (70 parishes in total), let us pray for the Church and for peace in that nation.
- Cardinal Timothy Dolan lamented recent **increased attacks** on houses of worship, referencing **Thomas Jefferson's 1779** Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom. It states: "... all men shall be free to profess, and by argument to maintain, their opinions in matters of religion, and that the same shall in no wise diminish, enlarge, or affect their civil capacities." Religious liberty is in our nation's DNA!
- Join us for the 7:30 a.m. Mass on Wednesday February 2, the Feast of the **Presentation of the Lord**. On this special feast marking forty days after Christmas, blessed **candles** will be available. The blessing of throats takes place the very next morning, the **Feast of St. Blaise**.
- From St. Augustine's treatise against the Manichean heresy: "I would not believe the Gospel, unless the authority of the Catholic Church were moving me." (*Contra Ep. Manichaei*, V, 6.) He understood the role of Tradition with respect to the authentic interpretation of Scripture.

Sincerely in Christ,

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Rector