**ASIAN**
**HORIZONS**
Vol. 11, No. 2, June 2017
Pages: 262-282

# REFORMATION IN 1517 AND TODAY: CONSIDERATIONS FROM TRENT AND VATICAN II

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**Abstract**

Marking the fifth centenary of the beginning of the Reformation in 1517, this article considers the impact of the two most important councils of the Catholic Church which followed — Trent (1545-63) and Vatican II (1962-5) — upon Catholic-Protestant relations as well as upon world history. Trent's wide-ranging decrees tackled most major issues raised by the Protestant reformation, yet the council listened to Protestant concerns more than that is usually recognized. The decrees of Vatican II were also wide-ranging, though with a different tone to Trent. They led to a new epoch in relations between the Catholic Church and the Churches of the Reformation as well as between Christianity and the wider world. The interval between the two

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councils, including Vatican I, is surveyed briefly and the article concludes with some considerations for today and into the future.

**Keywords:** Catholic Church, Ecumenism, Protestant Churches, Reformation, World Today

How can we assess today the Reformation which started 500 years ago, when Martin Luther — according to the traditional account — nailed 95 theses onto the door of the castle church at Wittenberg in Germany? Please allow me to begin by recognising the obvious: my response to the question is framed within the context of being a Catholic priest and member of the Society of Jesus, the religious order which soon became prominent in the Catholic church's response to the Protestant reformation.[1] I shall try, nevertheless, to be fair even if impartiality is impossible.

The Reformation has been hugely influential. This is the first point I would like to make and though the observation is obvious, it deserves some elaboration in terms of numbers. Today about 30% of the world's population of some 7 billion are estimated to be Christians. While over half of them are reckoned to be Catholics — 1.28 billion according to the most recent statistics from the Vatican[2] — well over half of the approximately one billion other Christians are reckoned to belong to churches indebted to the Reformation. Martin Luther was a guiding star for the Lutheran church and he influenced profoundly almost all the other groups indebted to the Reformation: Calvinists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Anglicans, Methodists, to name only the most prominent.

This reformation initiated by Luther in 1517 also had a profound influence upon Roman Catholicism. In two ways. First and most obviously, the Catholic Church was forced to clarify its teaching and practices on a wide range of issues in response to the criticisms and proposals of Protestants. Hence the term "Counter-Reformation. But Catholics also learnt much from the Reformers. This second dimension was rarely acknowledged by Catholics until ecumenism too root in the twentieth century, but it was present in a mainly hidden manner right from the start.

## Council of Trent (1545-1563)

In considering these two ways in which the Protestant reformation influenced the Catholic Church, perhaps the best starting-point is the

[1]"Protestants" and "Reformers," and allied words, are used in this article for the sake of convenience, while recognizing that wide differences existed among those described in this way.

[2]This is the figure given in the 2017 edition of the Vatican year-book, *Annuario Pontificio*.

council of Trent. Martin Luther was, in good measure, the reason why this hugely influential council took place and many of the conciliar decrees were focused on his teachings and those of other Reformers influenced by him. Early on, as his protest gained momentum, Luther advocated a Church council as the best way of resolving the issues; though quite soon he abandoned this approach and appealed directly to Scripture. Catholic authorities, on the other hand, were wary of another general or ecumenical council.[3] One obvious reason was because Lateran V, which finds its place in the Catholic list of ecumenical councils immediately before Trent, finished its work in March 1517, just seven months before Luther posted his 95 theses. In eerie ignorance of what would soon follow, the council's concluding decree declared thus: "Finally, it was reported to us (pope Leo X) on several occasions, through the cardinals and prelates of the three committees (of the council), that no topics remained for them to discuss, and that over several months nothing at all had been brought before them by anyone."[4]

In addition to the proximity of Lateran V, there was the possibility that another general council would be divisive for the Church rather than unifying. Councils which have proved successful are remembered, but others may be forgotten. Ephesus II in 449 and Hieria in 757, for example, were considered by many at the time to be ecumenical councils but were later struck off the list. Councils are not an easy-fix for every difficulty.

Fear of the ghost of conciliarism was another factor in the delay. The early fifteenth century general councils of Constance (1414-18) and Basle-Florence (1431-45) had brought fierce struggles between

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[3]Should Trent be called a "general council" (of the western church) or an "ecumenical council"? The word "ecumenical," meaning "of the whole world," or more literally "of the inhabited world," derives from the Greek word for house "oikos." Twenty-one councils have come to be recognized by the Catholic church as belonging to this category, from Nicea I in 325 to Vatican II in 1962-5, including Trent; the first seven, from Nicea I to Nicea II in 787, are acknowledged to be ecumenical by the Orthodox church; and the first four, ending with Chalcedon in 451, are accorded special respect by most churches of the Protestant reformation. Somewhat weaker are the terms "general council," or "general council of the western Church." Sometimes, however, these weaker terms are used — also by Catholics — for the fourteen "ecumenical" councils after Nicea II, including Trent.

[4]*Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. N. Tanner, London and Washington: Sheed & Ward, Georgetown University Press, 1990, 652-3. Hereafter the work is abbreviated to *Decrees*. Pagination is continuous through its two volumes, so the volume number (1 or 2) is omitted. The work includes both the original text (mostly in Latin) and an English translation on the facing page (with the same page-number as the original text).

council members and the papacy over relations between them. Thereafter the papacy was very reluctant to call another general council for fear that these struggles would re-emerge. Lateran V may seem an exception. However, it was convoked by pope Julius II in 1512 only reluctantly, in order to outflank a rival council organized by some dissident cardinals and bishops.

Despite these obstacles, the council of Trent was finally convoked by pope Paul III and began its proceedings in December 1545. The choice of Trent was a compromise. The city was acceptable to the papacy because, although lying outside the papal states, it formed an enclave belonging to the papacy (like Avignon in France). But it was also acceptable to emperor Charles V, the principal ruler in Germany where the Reformation had started, because it lay within German-speaking territory close to the emperor's lands, and so might make the council acceptable to Lutheran leaders: Martin Luther died in February 1546. The three popes in question (Paul III, Julius III and Pius IV) never came to Trent while the council was in session, preferring the safety of Rome, but they kept a good measure of control over the council by appointing papal legates who presided over the council and communicated the pope's wishes to the assembly.

*Pope Paul III and the city of Trent, painted by Titian in 1543*

The extent of the council's decrees, and their wide-ranging nature, are remarkable. Indeed, the council produced detailed decrees on almost all the main topics in the Reformation debates. There was just one exception: the relationship between councils and the papacy was not treated because, as mentioned, it was still contentious within the Catholic community. Luther and the other early Reformers were not

cited by name in the council's decrees. Earlier ecumenical councils were divided in this respect: some named those who were being censured while others remained silent. We may appreciate Trent's wisdom in this regard. If the council had named individuals, they might have replied that views were being attributed to them falsely. Omission of names also made the import of the council's teaching more lasting: it was not limited to the controversies of the sixteenth century

**Doctrinal Decrees:** The council started by quoting in full the Nicene creed — the creed first proclaimed by Nicea I in 325 and then perfected by Constantinople I in 381. As indicated by the paragraph introducing the creed, this was a declaration that the Catholic Church had remained in continuity with the early Church and had not — as the Reformers asserted — deviated from it.[5] Moreover, inasmuch as it originated in the two councils held in the eastern Roman empire, and considering the collective "we believe" in which it is expressed, the proclamation of this creed at the start of the council may be seen as an indication of how Trent sought to maintain the Asian and communitarian roots of the Catholic Church; in contrast to the more western and individual tones of the Reformation.

After the creed, the council moved on to two corner-stones of the Reformation debates: the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and that between faith and good works. Regarding the first, the council was cautious. It asserted the need for both Scripture and tradition — thereby rejecting the Reformers' almost exclusive emphasis upon the Bible — but it was short on details. This was prudent inasmuch as the Church had not yet worked out their relationship. It was only with Vatican II that this was elaborated better. Here is how Trent dealt with the issue:

> Following the example of the orthodox fathers, the council accepts and venerates with a like feeling of piety and reverence all the books of both the old and the new Testament, since the one God is the author of both, as well as the traditions concerning both faith and conduct, as either directly spoken by Christ or dictated by the holy Spirit, which have been preserved in unbroken sequence by the catholic Church.[6]

Regarding faith and good works, however, the council was ready to respond more fully to the Reformers' almost exclusive emphasis upon faith: justification by faith alone. The relevant "Decree on Justification" contained 16 chapters and 31 canons. The council, moreover, seemed to be listening more obviously to the Reformers'

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[5]For the creed and the introductory paragraph, see *Decrees*, 662.
[6]*Decrees*, 663 (session 4).

concerns: the belief that we can be saved by our own efforts, almost without God's grace — the teaching of Pelagianism — must be shunned. God's grace comes first, the council emphasized, but we have an essential role in responding to his invitations. We can say yes or no.

> Justification in adults takes its origin from a predisposing grace of God through Jesus Christ, that is, from his invitation which calls them, with no existing merits on their side; thus those who had been turned away from God by sins are disposed by God's grace inciting and helping them, to turn towards their own justification by giving free assent to and co-operating with this same grace.[7]

The council then expanded on this passage through the beautiful imagery of friendship with God and with one another, stressing too the Biblical underpinning.

> So those justified in this way and made friends and members of the household of God (cf. Ephesians 2:19), going from strength to strength (Psalm 83:8), are, as the Apostle says (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:16), renewed from day to day by putting to death what is earthly in themselves (Colossians 3:5) and yielding themselves as instruments of righteousness for sanctification (cf. Romans 6:13 and 19) by observance of the commandments of God and of the church. They grow and increase in that very justness they have received through the grace of Christ, by faith united to good works.[8]

From these two central issues — the relationship between faith and good works and that between Scripture and Tradition — followed most of the other doctrinal topics treated by the council. Among them the sacraments featured prominently. While the Reformers generally held to only two sacraments — baptism and eucharist — because Scripture shows that they alone were instituted by Christ, Trent began its extensive treatment by reaffirming the earlier tradition, first declared authoritatively by the second council of Lyons in 1274,[9] of seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist (the Mass), penance (confession), last anointing (extreme unction), orders and marriage.[10]

On baptism there was no overt dispute. Very importantly, therefore, Catholics have continued to recognize the validity of baptisms conducted by all the mainstream Reformed churches.

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[7]*Decrees*, 672 (chapter 5).

[8]*Decrees*, 675 (chapter 10).

[9]H. Denzinger and P. Hünermann, ed., *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum: Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Moral*, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012 (43rd edn.), 283, no. 860.

[10]*Decrees*, 684 (canon 1).

Regarding the eucharist, however, there were serious differences. Transubstantiation — the doctrine that, following the priest's words of consecration, the bread and wine are changed in substance into the body and blood of Christ, so that the bread and wine remain only accidentally or in appearance — was rejected by all the Reformed churches as contrary to both Scripture and common sense. This doctrine, which had first been expressed at the level of an ecumenical council by the fourth Lateran council in 1215,[11] was reaffirmed by Trent in chapter 4 of the decree on the eucharist, as follows:

> Since Christ our redeemer said that it was truly his own body which he was offering under the form of bread, therefore there has always been complete conviction in the church of God — and so this council declares it once again — that, by the consecration of the bread and wine, there takes place the change of the whole substance of the bread into the substance of the body of Christ our Lord, and of the whole substance of the wine into the substance of his blood. And the catholic church has suitably and properly called this change transubstantiation.[12]

In the canon supporting this chapter, the terminology of substance and accidents was expressed even more directly by the declaration that after the priest's words of consecration "only the appearance (Latin: *speciebus*) of bread and wine remains."[13] However, though transubstantiation remained for long the favoured term for Catholics to express the mystery of the eucharist, Trent in no way excluded other traditional expressions of Christ's presence: real, mystical or sacramental presence or simply "presence."

Paradoxically, indulgences — the issue that first sparked Martin Luther's protest in 1517 — was treated by Trent in a decree that was approved on the very last day of the council, 4 December 1563. Luther had protested against the indulgences (remission of punishment due to sins) offered in Germany by the Dominican friar Johann Tetzel to those who gave money or other support for the rebuilding of St Peter's church in Rome. He was vehemently opposed to any suggestion that we can buy our way into heaven. Trent's decree upheld indulgences but in a somewhat cautious way: another example of the council listening to the Reformation.

> As the power of granting indulgences was given by Christ to the Church, and this divinely given power has been in use from the most ancient times, the holy council teaches and commands that the practice of indulgences should be retained in the Church, very salutary as it is for the

[11] *Decrees*, 230 (canon 1).
[12] *Decrees*, 695 (chapter 4)
[13] *Decrees*, 697 (canon 2).

> Christian people and approved by the authority of holy councils... But it desires that moderation be used in granting them, according to the ancient and approved custom of the Church, so that ecclesiastical discipline be not sapped by too easy conditions.[14]

**Practical or Disciplinary Decrees:** Although the decrees discussed so far may be described as primarily doctrinal, all of them had implications for the practice of Christian life. Now it is time to turn to decrees that were primarily practical or pastoral while remembering that, *vice versa*, they had doctrinal implications. The two most important such topics treated by the council were seminaries and religious orders.

The decree on seminaries had huge consequences for diocesan priests in the Catholic Church, and through them for the laity too. Religious orders had long provided formation for their members who were to be ordained priests; at most 10% of the diocesan clergy were able to study one or more of philosophy, theology and canon law at university; there were, too, a very few late medieval proto-seminaries for the diocesan clergy, such as Collegio Capranica in Rome. But for the large majority of diocesan priests, formation was more like an apprenticeship: some study in the parish school combined with learning what to do from the parish priest and his assistants. Trent changed the situation radically, though the decree took time to take effect. Here, too, Trent appears to have been learning from the Reformation: an Academy for training ministers had been established by John Calvin in Geneva in 1559, four years before Trent's decree on seminaries.

The decree is worth quoting at length as it reveals so much of the council's mind-set, influenced by the Protestant reformation, and in view of the close links between *Asian Horizons* and *Dharmaram College*, the principal seminary of the Carmelites of Mary Immaculate (CMI), sponsors of this journal.

> If they are not rightly brought up, those of adolescent years tend to make for the world's pleasures and, unless trained to religious practice from an early age before habits of vice take firm hold on so many, they never keep to an orderly life in an exemplary way without great and almost extraordinary help from almighty God.
>
> Hence the holy council decrees that every cathedral, metropolitan and greater church is obliged to provide for, to educate in religion and to train in ecclesiastical studies a set number of boys, according to its resources and the size of the diocese. The boys are to be drawn from the city and diocese, or its province if the former do not provide sufficient, and

[14]*Decrees*, 796 (session 25).

> educated in a college chosen for the purpose by the bishop near to these churches or in another convenient place.
>
> Those admitted to the college should be at least twelve years old, of legitimate birth, who know how to read and write competently, and whose character and disposition offers hope that they will serve in church ministries throughout life. The council wishes the sons of poor people particularly to be chosen, but does not exclude those of the more wealthy provided they pay for their own maintenance and show an ambition to serve God and the church.
>
> The bishop will divide these boys into the number of classes he thinks fit, according to their number, age and progress in ecclesiastical learning. Some he will assign to service of the churches when he considers the time is ripe, others he will keep for education in the college. He will replace those withdrawn with others, so that the college becomes a perpetual seminary (Latin: *seminarium*) of ministers of God.
>
> So that they may be more appropriately grounded in ecclesiastical studies, they should always have the tonsure and wear clerical dress from the outset. They should study grammar, singing, keeping church accounts and other useful skills. They should be versed in holy Scripture, church writers, homilies of the saints, and the practice of rites and ceremonies and of administering the sacraments, particularly in hearing confessions.
>
> The bishop should ensure that they attend mass every day, confess their sins at least once a month, receive the body of our Lord Jesus Christ as often as their confessor judges, and serve in the cathedral and other churches of the area on feast days.
>
> In consultation with two of the senior and more experienced canons of their choosing, bishops are to see to all these arrangements and any others useful or necessary for this enterprise, as the holy Spirit may prompt, and by constant visitation ensure that they are always kept in force. They will punish with severity the difficult and incorrigible and those who spread bad habits, and expel them if need be. They will take the utmost care to remove all obstacles from such a worthy and holy foundation and promote all that preserves and strengthens it.[15]

Regarding religious orders, the Reformers' rejection of them as contrary to Scripture had a personal touch inasmuch as many of them living during the early Reformation had once been members of religious orders. Martin Luther had been an Augustinian friar and in 1525 he married a former nun, Katharina von Bora. Trent's long "Decree on regulars and nuns" was passed at the final session of the council in 1563. It gave strong support to religious orders of both men and women while seeking a measure of reform and the correction of abuses. In this sense the decree was conservative. However, it also

[15]*Decrees*, 750-1 (canon 18).

gave approval to the recently founded and somewhat innovative Society of Jesus (Jesuits).[16]

*The council in session in the cathedral of Trent, painting attributed to Titian*

**Conclusion:** Looking at Trent's decrees in a book today, one may be deceived into thinking that all had gone smoothly during the council. Some of the tensions and difficulties have been mentioned and there were two gaps in the proceedings. Fear of a plague in the city of Trent induced the pope to transfer the council to Bologna, where it remained in semi-suspension until it was formally prorogued in early 1549. Following a two-year gap the council met again in Trent for two years but was then prorogued again, this time due to fear of the approaching army of the Lutheran Schmalkaldic League. Pope Paul IV (1555-9) showed no interest in reconvening the council and it was only with his successor, Pius IV, that the council met again for what proved to be its final period of 1562-3. This last period, however, began sluggishly, with the end result still in doubt, and it was only thanks to the extraordinary skill and persistence of Cardinal Morone, who presided over the council as papal legate, that the council was brought to a successful conclusion with the final approval of all its decrees.

**Interval**

Trent's decrees were so comprehensive that a long interval could be expected before another council was needed. Moreover, the

[16]*Decrees*, 776-84: p. 781, canon 16, for the Society of Jesus.

Catholic reformation — or Counter-Reformation — was well under way by the time the council ended and thereafter it gained momentum. As a result, there was little inclination to disturb the situation by calling another council. Most Catholics rallied round this approach. There was also the ghost of conciliarism: continuing fear that this spectre might reappear if another council was called.

Also important was pope Pius IV's establishment in 1564 of a Congregation within the Roman Curia (subsequently called *Congregatio Concilii*) to rule on any disputed points regarding the interpretation of Trent's decrees. In this way the papacy gained an important measure of control over the implementation of the council and thereby reduced further the need to summon another council.

Vatican I (1869-70) took place between Trent and Vatican II and the effect of its decree on papal infallibility was strong. There was also the decree on faith and reason. However, when the Italian army, battling for a united Italy, captured Rome in September 1870 and took the city out of papal control, Vatican I had achieved little beyond these two decrees. Pope Pius IX soon decided to suspend the council, leaving it with much unfinished business. Relations between Catholics and Protestants remained tense, with Protestants especially opposed to the decree on papal infallibility.

Pius IX suspended the council but did not formally close it. Several popes in the first half of the twentieth century considered reopening it in order to complete the unfinished business. Thoughts never became reality, however, until the accession of pope John XXIII in 1958, and then with a difference.

**Vatican II (1962-5)**

In January 1959, only three months after his accession, to the surprise of almost everyone except himself, pope John announced the forthcoming ecumenical council. Soon he clarified that it would be a new council and not the continuation of Vatican I. Regarding its purpose, however, there was some perplexity as there seemed to be no major doctrinal issues requiring resolution. On Christmas day 1961, when announcing that the council would begin on 11 October 1962, pope John was somewhat more specific, declaring that its purpose was threefold: the better internal ordering of the Church, unity among Christians, and the promotion of peace throughout the world. All three aims, especially the second, were partly linked to the Protestant reformation. The word *aggiornamento* (updating), and the phrase "opening the windows of the Church to let in fresh air," were also used by pope John to summarize his thoughts; to these too the

Reformation could be seen as part of the background. Even so there was much uncertainty about the details of the council's programme.

**Participants:** Some 2,400 bishops (more than three times the number at Vatican I and almost ten times the number at Trent) duly assembled in Rome for the council, which would be the second ecumenical council to be held in the city's most famous church, St Peter's. Many of them came from countries affected by the Reformation and so were influenced, in various ways and to varying degrees, by this background. The bishops constituted over 80% of the Catholic episcopacy worldwide: most of the other bishops were prevented by Communist governments from attending while a few were too old or infirm to come. These numbers remained fairly stable during the four years of the council, with new bishops coming in place of more than two hundred who died. Bishops have been the core members of all the 21 ecumenical councils of the Church, but always supplemented by some others: in the case of Vatican II they included a few abbots and heads of religious orders as well as some cardinals who were not bishops. In addition to these full members of the council, with voting rights, were a large number of *periti* (experts) whom the bishops and other members selected to help them. Most of them were priests, many from religious orders: many of them coming from predominantly Protestant countries.

"Observers" formed the third category: representatives from other Christian churches — mainly Protestants — and some Catholic laity who were invited to attend. Among the "observers" were around two dozen women, most of them religious sisters (nuns), thus introducing a minimal female element. However, if this seems gender advancement it is worth remembering that two women played far more important roles while presiding over early councils: empress Irene at Nicea II in 787, the council which protected religious art, and empress Pulcheria at Chalcedon in 451.

Journalists made the fourth group. They were not permitted to attend the formal sessions in St Peter's, but through their contacts with bishops, *periti*, observers and others, they proved very influential — too influential in the eyes of some. They interpreted proceedings as well as reporting them and brought the council to a worldwide audience. Particularly influential in the Anglophone and predominantly Protestant world was the Redemptorist priest Joseph Xavier Murphy, who wrote regular columns in *The New Yorker* under the pseudonym Xavier Rynne (Rynne was his mother's maiden name). Francophone and German-speaking countries were well

served by regular columns in *Le Monde*, *La Croix* and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* as well as by coverage on radio and television.

The colourful and photogenic opening of the council, as the bishops and other participants processed, fully robed, into St Peter's church, through the piazza outside, attracted wide media coverage. Pope John XXIII's appealing and warm-hearted character also caught the limelight. The days before his death in the summer of 1963, as the gravity of his situation became apparent, brought worldwide attention and mourning. Struggles over the direction of the council provided another focus. In these and other ways interest in the council reached out beyond Catholics to Protestants and other Christians, and to the wider public, principally within the western world but beyond it too.

**Preparation:** Preparation for the council, which lasted almost four years from January 1959 to early October 1962, was entrusted to some ten preparatory commissions (the number changed slightly) which were largely controlled by the Roman Curia. A questionnaire was sent to all the bishops and other prospective members of the council. Their replies, as well as the speeches and other proceedings during the council itself, have been published in the multi-volume *Acta*.[17] As a result, we are very well informed about the course of events; though it is important to remember that much of the council went on outside the official proceedings — at informal gatherings of bishops, in private conversations, and so on. The replies to the preliminary questionnaire did not provide an agreed overall plan for the council, though many of the points that later came to the fore can be found in them, scattered here and there. The outcome was that some 78 short draft decrees, some fully elaborated but most only in outline, were ready for the opening of the council. Overall they seemed to envisage the council as completing the unfinished work of Vatican I.

**Proceedings:** Reality, however, led into another direction. Quite quickly the planned short decrees were abandoned, more or less, and then gradually replaced by the sixteen documents that were finally approved. As a result, the council was unable to finish its work within two months, as intended, but had to be prolonged, eventually for three more years. Indeed for Vatican II, as for Trent, a successful outcome was in doubt until shortly before the conclusion of the council.

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[17] *Acta et Documenta Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II apparando: Series prima, antepraeparatoria*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1960-1; *Acta et Documenta Concilio ecumenico Vaticano II apparando: Series secunda, preparatoria*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964-95; *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Vaticani II*, Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1970-2000.

Each of the three years comprised two months or so in the autumn when the full council met in Rome, preceded by some ten months when most of the bishops were back in their dioceses and small groups — appointed by the pope and including *periti* — met in Rome or by correspondence to reflect on the debates that had taken place during the preceding autumn and to compose improved texts for the decrees which would be presented for debate in the following autumn.

During the autumn sessions, the bishops and other members of the council met in the nave of St Peter's church on each weekday morning to debate one or more decrees. Given the very large number of participants, this arrangement proved remarkably successful, especially as it was supplemented by the other means of communication just mentioned.

*Photograph of Vatican II in session, with tiered seating for the bishops and other members of the council*

**Individuals:** Much credit for the successful outcome must be given to pope Paul VI. He inherited a semi-chaotic situation on his election as pope in June 1963, by which time not a single decree had been approved, yet he managed to steer the council to a successful conclusion two and a half years later. His task was made difficult by differences among the council participants. In approximate numbers, some 85% of the council members were content with the way the council developed, but there was a significant and well organized minority — perhaps 15%, among whom members of the Roman

Curia were prominent — who had serious reservations. The pope was eager that the conciliar decrees should be approved with unanimity and so avoid any schism within the Church. In this he was successful. Not a single bishop refused his consent to the decrees: only later in 1976 would archbishop Marcel Lefebvre break with the Church. Some felt, however, that in seeking this unanimity pope Paul made too many concessions to the conservative minority.

The council was a collective event. Nevertheless some individuals were specially prominent. The two popes John XXIII and Paul VI were crucial figures, obviously, though they very rarely came to the sessions in St Peter's apart from those at the beginning and end of the four autumn periods. Speeches during formal sessions in St Peter's were made by only about one-fifth of the bishops and other members of the council. Some of them spoke frequently. The other four-fifths never delivered a speech; although they were represented when — as was frequently the case — individuals spoke on behalf of a group of bishops. Latin was the rule and very few speeches were made in other languages, with six minutes the time-limit eventually settled upon for each speech.

Besides the two popes, other major figures were the four cardinals who presided over most of the council sessions: Suenens from Belgium, Döpfner from Germany and Lercaro from Bologna, who worked well together and belonged to the progressive majority, and the more independent minded Agagianian from Armenia: the three Synoptics and St John, as they were sometimes called. Among prominent conservatives were three Italians: cardinal Ottaviani, prefect of the Holy Office, archbishop Felici, Secretary-General of the council, and cardinal Ruffini, archbishop of Palermo. The three most prominent and influential *periti*, who worked hard in the commissions composing the decrees, were Yves Congar, OP from France, Karl Rahner, SJ from Germany and Monsignor G. Philips from Belgium. Among many other influential Europeans were two future popes: Karol Wojtyla as archbishop of Cracow and Joseph Ratzinger, who came as *peritus* of cardinal Frings of Cologne, himself an important participant. Western Europeans led the council for the first two years but gradually those from other parts of the world grew in confidence and influence. A good example is the contribution of archbishops Darmajuwana and Djajasepoetra of Indonesia, assisted by their Dutch *peritus* Piet Smulders, SJ, who together helped to move *Gaudium et Spes*, the decree on the Church in the modern world, from an approach that was largely western and European to a much broader worldwide vision.

Noticeable is the number of prominent figures at the council from Germany and other European countries where the Reformation had made a strong impact. They would have known about Luther and the other Reformers, and likely were to some extent influenced by them. Such knowledge and affinity also applied, in some measure, to the two popes. This is how the young Roncalli, later pope John XXIII, described in his *Journal* the visit to Rome of the British king Edward VII in April 1903:

> This man (king Edward VII), a Protestant, did one really good thing while he was in Rome... Showing himself superior to certain tendentious currents of anti-clericalism here and in other countries, in the height of his power he did not disdain, indeed he considered it an honour, to visit and pay homage to another man (pope Leo XIII), a poor persecuted old man, whom he acknowledged to be greater than himself: the pope, the vicar of Jesus Christ... A highly significant event this, of a heretical king of Protestant England, which has persecuted the Catholic Church for more than three centuries, going in person to pay his respects to the poor old pope, held like a prisoner in his own house.[18]

**Documents:** Sixteen documents were finally approved, each with one of three grades of authority: three "declarations," the lowest grade, nine "decrees"[19] the middle grade, and four "constitutions," the most authoritative. Here are their titles and some comments on Protestant influences upon them:

***Declarations***

*Gravissimum educationis*, Declaration on Christian education.

*Nostra aetate*, Declaration on the Church's relations to non-Christian religions.

*Dignitatis humanae*, Declaration on religious freedom.

The low status accorded to the document on religious freedom was mainly due to differences among the council members. Most of the members from predominantly Catholic countries — Italy and Spanish-speaking countries, for example — were opposed to giving public status to Protestant and other non-Catholic churches, as well as to other faiths, which equalled the status already enjoyed by the Catholic church; arguing too that this was traditional Catholic teaching and so could not, or at least should not, be changed. "Error

[18]*Journal of a Soul*, translated by D. White, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1965, 181 (29 April 1903).

[19]Note, therefore, that "decree" has two senses: (1) all the sixteen documents that were approved by the council; (2) the nine documents with an authority between the three "declarations" and the four "constitutions."

has no rights" was the extreme position here. But most bishops from more liberal or less Catholic countries — USA and other Anglophone countries, for example — supported the declaration and it proved to be very influential in the post-Vatican II era.

Similarly, the declaration on non-Christian religions proved to be one of the most influential of all the council's documents. Despite its tentative and guarded language, there was a positive appreciation of religions beyond Christianity: something that was unprecedented in magisterial documents of the Church. The declaration may be seen, too, as having a knock-on effect on the Catholic Church's greater respect for Protestants and other Christian churches.

***Decrees***

*Inter mirifica*, Decree on the mass media. Although rather short and undeveloped, this document faced up to, in an appreciative manner, while also recognizing difficulties and dangers, the huge recent developments worldwide regarding literature, radio, films and television. Numerous Protestants had been involved in these recent developments.

*Orientalium ecclesiarum*, Decree on the eastern Catholic churches. This decree focused on eastern churches in full communion with Rome.

*Unitatis redintegratio*, Decree on ecumenism. A very important development for the Catholic Church. Protestant and other Christian churches were treated positively and with appreciation while efforts to reach greater unity were encouraged. Lutheran and Anglican "observers" at the council influenced the composition of the decree and the Anglican communion was singled out for special mention.[20]

*Christus Dominus*, Decree on the pastoral office of bishops in the Church.

*Perfectae caritatis*, Decree on the renewal of Religious life.

*Optatam totius*, Decree on priestly formation. This document sought to update Trent's decree on seminaries.

*Apostolicam actuositatem*, Decree on the apostolate of the laity.

*Ad gentes*, Decree on the missionary activity of the Church.

*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the ministry and life of priests.

***Constitutions***

*Sacrosanctum concilium*, Constitution on the sacred liturgy. There was widespread agreement among the council members regarding

[20]Chapter 3, no. 13.

the two principal aims of the document: a return to the sources of the liturgy and fuller participation on the part of the laity. However, the cautious recommendation that vernacular languages could be used in place of Latin[21] resulted soon after the council in an almost complete change of language in the liturgy. Important, too, was the ruling that responsibility for making changes belonged more with the local church than with the Roman curia.[22] Protestant influences may be found in all these factors. But implementation of the constitution was fraught.

*Lumen gentium*, Dogmatic constitution on the Church. Elaboration of this document was a corner-stone of the council right from its beginning: the desire to complete the work of Vatican I's constitution on the Church, which had focused on the papacy. However, Vatican II's long document gave a much less top-down approach to the Church than the one indicated by Vatican I. Thus the first two chapters of *Lumen gentium* were entitled "The Mystery of the Church" and "The People of God" and it was within this context, in chapter 3, that the document treated the papacy, where the teaching of Vatican I was reaffirmed but the pope was situated more clearly within the order, or college,[23] of bishops.

Important, too, was the coverage of Mary within the constitution, in chapter 8, rather than in a separate document; thereby following the wishes of the progressives, rather than the conservatives, in the council.

The document's coverage of the Church and of Mary may be seen as listening to Protestant concerns that the Catholic church had been exaggerating the roles of the pope and of Mary, placing them too much above and almost in isolation from the rest of the Church.

*Dei verbum*, Dogmatic constitution on divine revelation. This constitution was very important in asserting the centrality of Scripture in all areas of Christian life and in refining Trent's teaching on Scripture and Tradition, in linking them together better. "Sacred tradition and scripture are bound together in a close and reciprocal relationship. They flow from the same divine well-spring, merge together to some extent, and are on course towards the same end... Tradition and Scripture form a single sacred deposit of the word of God, entrusted to the Church."[24]

The document also emphasized the person of Christ as the source of revelation, "Christ our lord, in whom the whole revelation of God is

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[21]No. 36 of the constitution.
[22]No. 36 of the constitution.
[23]*collegium* was the word sometimes used in this chapter.
[24]Nos. 9 and 10.

summed up,"[25] rather than Trent's more intellectual and propositional "gospel" which Christ "first proclaimed with his own lips."[26]

It accepted, too, many of the principles of recent biblical scholarship, so that attention must be paid to the human dimension in the composition of the Bible as well as to the inspiration of the holy Spirit. "God chose and employed human agents, using their own powers and faculties, in such a way that they were authors in the true sense, and yet God acted in and through them." And therefore, "In order to get at what the biblical writers intended, attention must be paid to literary *genres*."[27]

All this was a major change from the somewhat uncritical approach that had been prevalent in much Catholic teaching during the Modernist crisis in the earlier part of the century, and it gave official blessing to the work of Catholic biblical scholars. Also, inasmuch as Biblical criticism owed its inspiration principally to Protestant scholars, the document was another example of how Vatican II acknowledged the contributions made by the Churches of the Reformation, thereby helping ecumenical relations too.

*Gaudium et spes*, Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world (7 December 1965). This second constitution on the Church was more practical than *Lumen gentium*, especially in its second Part entitled "Some Urgent Problems," where the range of issues covered is indicated by the chapter and section headings: "Promoting the Dignity of Marriage," "The Conditions of Culture in Today's World," "Socio-economic Life," "Life in the Political Community" and "Promoting Peace and Encouraging the Community of Nations."

Some would see *Gaudium et spes* as the crown of the whole council: the last of the documents to be approved, the one that most closely corresponded to pope John's wish for a pastoral council that would result in *aggiornamento*, and the one that has had the widest influence upon Catholic activity in the world.

**Today and Tomorrow**

In conclusion, the following eight points occur to me.

1. First and most obviously, the councils of Trent and Vatican II have had a huge influence upon the Catholic Church. If you doubt this, try to think of the Catholic Church without them. In covering a very wide range of doctrinal and practical matters, Trent helped

[25]No. 7.
[26]*Decrees*, 663 (session 4, first decree).
[27]Nos. 11-12.

greatly to ensuring the vitality of Catholicism through the modern era while Vatican II has contributed similarly for the contemporary period.

2. Both councils have contributed much to the development of Protestant and other Christian Churches, albeit in partly different ways. In giving the Catholic Church a much clearer and confident profile, Trent effectively helped other Christians to define themselves more clearly; Vatican II had a similar effect but it also — and more importantly — highlighted the fundamental shared heritage that exists among all Christians.

3. Conversely, the Protestant Reformation initiated by Martin Luther in 1517 had an important and beneficial influence upon both Trent and Vatican II. Partly through these two councils, moreover, this Protestant influence extended to the entire Catholic Church as well as to the wider world. In the future, too, this influence should help Catholics to keep in mind important truths that they might otherwise forget — to keep them on their toes.

4. According to present estimates, as mentioned, the Catholic Church numbers some 1.28 billion members out of the world's total population of some 7 billion; members of other Christian churches are estimated at somewhat more than 1 billion. These figures mean that the influence of the Lutheran Reformation upon the Catholic Church and other Christian Churches has reached a significant proportion of the world's population. Moreover, through the contacts of Christians with other people, as well as through the considerable worldwide interest in Vatican II, a much larger audience still has been reached.

5. How novel was Vatican II? Those who stress the novelty of this council tend to compare Vatican II only with Trent and Vatican I. Knowledge of earlier councils, however, provides a wider context for Vatican II in which the uniqueness of the council is much reduced. In many ways the ecumenical council most similar to Vatican II was the first, Nicea I in 325. Both councils gave attention to doctrinal issues: Vatican II principally through its two dogmatic constitutions, *Lumen gentium* and *Dei verbum*; Nicea I with the first version of the Nicene creed. And both councils gave attention to a wide range of practical and disciplinary issues: Vatican II through fourteen other documents, Nicea I through its twenty canons.

6. Let us not be too enthusiastic about Vatican II. Perhaps this dowsing is unnecessary inasmuch as the council has plenty of critics today even — or perhaps especially — within the Catholic Church. Even for enthusiasts of the council, however, it is wise to remember its limitations.

7. Credit must be given to both Trent and Vatican II for keeping alive the universality, or worldwide nature, of the Church. In the case of Vatican II, this should be evident from what has already been said. In the case of Trent, the importance of its beginning with the eastern and Asian creed of Nicea has been mentioned. This council also coincided in time with the expansion of the Catholic Church from a largely European to a global community, so that Trent's contribution towards invigorating the Catholic Church had worldwide implications.

8. Is another ecumenical council likely soon? Could the wounds of the Reformation be healed finally and conclusively through such a council? Several factors occur to me. First, according to the canon law currently in force in the Catholic Church, calling an ecumenical council is the exclusive prerogative of the pope. Who can predict when the Holy Spirit may inspire the pope towards such a decision? The place of the council, too, is decided by the pope. So the next council may be Kinshasha I or New York I rather than Vatican III.

Secondly, the success of the council is not guaranteed. We may be deceived by focusing on councils that proved successful, such as Trent and Vatican II, while forgetting others. The councils of Ephesus II (449) and Hieria (757), for example, as mentioned earlier, were widely considered ecumenical at the time but were later discounted. Even among the councils that are included in the Catholic Church's list of ecumenical councils, some (e.g. Lateran I and II) are much less important than others. Councils can be contentious affairs. They are not a quick-fix for every problem.

Thirdly, there have been 21 ecumenical councils (according to the Catholic Church's numbering) in the 20 centuries of Christian history. So another such council in the twenty-first century might seem appropriate. On the other hand, these councils have not been spaced evenly: there were three centuries before Nicea I in 325, three between Constantinople IV (869-70) and Lateran I (1123), and four between Trent and Vatican I. So another long gap is quite possible.

Fourthly and as suggested under no. 3 above, the continuing influence of the Reformation is beneficial for Catholics. Maybe, therefore, the Holy Spirit wishes some ecclesial diversity to remain within the Christian community for some time more? Who are we to judge?

Finally, plenty of important new issues have surfaced since Vatican II. But would another ecumenical council be the best means of helping us to face them? This question I leave for your own consideration.