

The Council of Trent - An Overview

The Council of Trent was the 19th Ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church. Important members of the Catholic Church met in Trento three times between December 1545 and December 1563. It was the official unified response to the 16th Reformations, but it should be noted that the first session did not meet until 28 years after Martin Luther posted his 95 theses, a day celebrated as “Reformation Day” in the reformed churches of Christianity.

If “new” idea and theologies were the hallmark of the Reformations - or as they would assert, a restoration of the original and true faith - the Catholic responses is thought of as a “reinforcement” of already existing Catholic doctrine regarding salvation, the sacraments, and the Biblical canon, answering all Protestant disputations.

Calls for Reform before the Reformation Age

Calls for reform with the Roman Catholic Church were already hundreds of years old before the age of the Reformations.

The **Council of Constance** was an ecumenical council of the Catholic Church that was held from 1414 to 1418 in the city of Constance in present-day Germany. The council ended the Western Schism by deposing or accepting the resignation of the remaining papal claimants and by electing Pope Martin V. I would note that the council also condemned Jan Hus as a heretic and facilitated his execution by the civil authority.

The council is also important for its role in the debates over ecclesial conciliarism and papal supremacy. Constance issued two particularly significant decrees regarding the constitution of the Catholic Church: *Haec sancta* (1415), which asserted the superiority of ecumenical councils over popes, and *Frequens* (1417), which provided for councils to be held automatically every ten years. The status of these decrees proved controversial in the centuries after the council, and *Frequens* was never put into practice.

The **Council of Basel/Florence** (1431-1449; *clearly with interruptions*) was an attempt to unify the Eastern and Western Catholic Churches (the Great Schism), curtail the growing power of the Roman papacy, and institute a wide range of Church reform in governance. Decrees were at some of the assumed rights by which the popes had extended their power and improved their finances at the expense of the local churches. The decree abolished annates, greatly limited the ability of using patronage of benefices by the Pope, severely limited the jurisdiction of the court of Rome and established rules for the election of popes and the constitution of the Sacred College (of Cardinals, most of whom were laymen).

The **Fifth Lateran Council** was called to begin in April 1512 amidst political and secular intrigue involving the Papal States, Venice, France, the Holy Roman Empire and a host of other “players.” When elected pope in 1503, Pope Julius II promised under oath to convoke a general council, but... as we saw in the “Folly of Popes” neither Julius nor his predecessors were interested in reform. However, political expediency made it necessary for Julius to call an ecumenical council to discuss reform in the Church. Long story short, it did nothing to address the needed reforms. 17 months after the close of the Council, Martin Luther posted his 95 Theses.

The Age of the Catholic Counter-Reformation

Pope Paul III was elected in 1534 as a “compromise candidate” between rival factions within the church hierarchy. He was considered to be in poor health with no base of support or power. Sadly, he was the leading prelate of his time that recognized the Reformation in Germany as a severe threat to the unity of Christianity in the West. One of his first acts was to call for a council whose singular topic was the German reformation. His call was resisted within the church, had little support from the Holy Roman Emperor, and was strongly opposed by the German princes and banking interests.

In 1536, Paul III invited a committee of nine eminent prelates, distinguished by learning and piety alike, to report on the reformation and rebuilding of the Church. In 1537 they produced the *Consilium de emendanda ecclesia*, exposing gross abuses in the Roman Curia, the church administration, and public worship; and proffering bold proposals aimed at abolishing such abuses. Martin Luther responded essentially saying, “too little too late.” Internally the reforms went nowhere. In addition, the report really did not address the already widening chasm of understanding regarding Scripture, Sacraments, Grace, Justification and much more.

Paul III’s lasting legacy was approving the foundation of the Jesuits and reforming the Office of the Inquisition which were later impactful in the Counter Reformation. Unfortunately, his lasting legacy also included all the abuses of his predecessors (nepotism, excess, failure to lead the Church spiritually, etc.)

The Council of Trent

Trent was called by the next pope, Paul IV. Because of wars, it met in sessions over a 17 year period. Its legacy can be seen in the doctrinal decrees it issues

Doctrine	Session	Date
The Creed	3	February 4, 1546
The Holy Scriptures	4	April 8, 1546
Original sin	5	June 7, 1546
Justification	6	January 13, 1547
The Sacraments	7	March 3, 1547
Baptism	7	March 3, 1547
Confirmation	7	March 3, 1547
Holy Eucharist	13	October 11, 1551
Penance	14	November 15, 1551
Extreme Unction	14	November 4, 1551
Holy Eucharist	21	June 16, 1562
Sacrifice of the Mass	22	September 9, 1562
Holy Orders	23	July 15, 1563
Matrimony	24	November 11, 1563
Purgatory	25	December 4, 1563
Saints Relics Images	25	December 4, 1563
Indulgences	25	December 4, 1563

The consequences of the Council were also significant with regard to the Church's liturgy and practices. In its decrees, the Council made the Latin Vulgate the official biblical text of the Roman Church (without prejudice to the original texts in Hebrew and Greek, nor to other traditional translations of the Church, but favoring the Latin language over vernacular translations, such as the controversial English-language Tyndale Bible). In doing so, they commissioned the creation of a revised and standardized Vulgate in

light of textual criticism, although this was not achieved until the 1590s. The Council also officially affirmed (for the second time at an ecumenical council) the traditional Catholic Canon of biblical books in response to the increasing Protestant exclusion of the deuterocanonical books. T

In 1565, a year after the Council finished its work, Pius IV issued the Tridentine Creed and his successor Pius V then issued the Roman Catechism and revisions of the Breviary and Missal in, respectively, 1566, 1568 and 1570. These, in turn, led to the codification of the Tridentine Mass, which remained the Church's primary form of the Mass for the next four hundred years.

While the traditional fundamentals of the Church were reaffirmed, there were noticeable changes to answer complaints that the Counter-Reformers were, tacitly, willing to admit were legitimate. Among the conditions to be corrected by Catholic reformers was the growing divide between the clerics and the laity; many members of the clergy in the rural parishes had been poorly educated. Often, these rural priests did not know Latin and lacked opportunities for proper theological training. Addressing the education of priests had been a fundamental focus of the humanist reformers in the past. Parish priests were to be better educated in matters of theology and apologetics.

The Council of Trent also attempted to improve the discipline and administration of the Church, especially the worldly excesses of the secular Renaissance Church, whose “poster boys” were Alexander VI and Pope Leo X. The Council forbade the appointment of bishops for political reasons, required bishops to live full time within their dioceses, gave them greater power to supervise all aspects of religious life. Milan's Archbishop Carlo Borromeo (1538–1584), later canonized as a saint, set an example by visiting the remotest parishes and instilling high standards.

The Reformation and the Historic Creeds of the Church

Many of the decrees of the Council of Trent regarding reformed theology and matters of faith are covered in other papers, but what about the historic Creeds? While there are in large part acceptance, there were certain 16th-century Reformers who did not fully accept or adhere to the historic creeds of Ecumenical Councils. While the specific views varied among Reformers, some expressed reservations or differences regarding certain aspects of the creeds. Here are a few notable examples:

While Martin Luther generally affirmed the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed, he did express reservations about the inclusion of certain phrases and theological nuances. For instance, Luther took issue with the filioque clause in the Nicene Creed, which asserts that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father "and the Son." Luther believed that this clause was not adequately supported by Scripture and was the result of theological speculation.

Ulrich Zwingli, the Zurich-based Swiss Reformer, was critical of certain aspects of the creeds. He questioned the authority of the creeds and their theological formulations, emphasizing the primacy of Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith and doctrine. Zwingli believed that the creeds were valuable as historical expressions of faith but should not be elevated to the same level as Scripture.

Anabaptist Reformers, such as Menno Simons and Conrad Grebel, held a more radical position regarding the creeds. They rejected the notion of creedal authority altogether, emphasizing the sole authority of Scripture and the necessity of personal faith and discipleship. Anabaptists sought to distance themselves from the institutionalized and hierarchical nature of the Catholic Church, including its creeds, and focused on a more personal and communal understanding of faith.

It is important to note that while these Reformers expressed reservations or differences regarding certain aspects of the creeds, they did not necessarily reject the core teachings of the Christian faith contained within the creeds.

Purgatory

The Council of Trent addressed the doctrine of Purgatory, affirming and clarifying the Catholic understanding. Here are some key points from the Council's teaching on Purgatory:

1. **Existence and Purpose of Purgatory:** The Council of Trent affirmed the existence of Purgatory as a temporary state or place of purification after death for those who die in God's grace but still need to be purified from the effects of their sins before entering into the fullness of heaven. Purgatory was seen as a means of God's mercy and justice, allowing for the final cleansing and preparation of souls.
2. **Purifying Fire:** The Council emphasized that the souls in Purgatory undergo a purifying fire, which is different from the punishment of Hell. This purification is believed to remove any remaining attachment to sin and to satisfy the temporal punishment due to sin.
3. **Prayers and Indulgences:** The Council of Trent reaffirmed the efficacy of prayers, suffrages, and Masses offered on behalf of the souls in Purgatory. It emphasized the role of the Church and the faithful in assisting and offering prayers for the souls in Purgatory, believing that these acts can help alleviate their suffering and hasten their entry into heaven. Indulgences, understood as the remission of temporal punishment, were also acknowledged as a means of spiritual aid for the souls in Purgatory.
4. **Church Authority:** The Council of Trent emphasized the authority of the Church in defining and clarifying the doctrine of Purgatory. It stated that the faithful are bound to accept and adhere to the teachings of the Church on this matter.

Overall, the Council of Trent affirmed the Catholic belief in Purgatory as a temporary state of purification after death. It emphasized the role of the Church and the faithful in assisting the souls in Purgatory through prayers, Masses, and indulgences. The Council sought to provide clarity and reaffirm the importance of this doctrine in the Catholic understanding of salvation and the afterlife.

Martin Luther and all the Reformers strongly rejected the teachings of the Council of Trent, including its decree on Purgatory. Luther believed that the Council had distorted and obscured the Gospel message through its reaffirmation of Catholic doctrines. Specifically, Luther vehemently disagreed with the Catholic understanding of Purgatory as taught by the Council.

1. **Denial of Purgatory:** Luther outright rejected the existence of Purgatory as a separate state or place of purification after death. He argued that the concept of Purgatory was not supported by clear biblical evidence and that it had been developed and propagated by the Catholic Church as a means of control and financial gain.
2. **Authority of Scripture:** Luther, as a central tenet of his theology, emphasized the authority of Scripture above all other sources of doctrine. He argued that the doctrine of Purgatory, as well as other Catholic teachings, lacked clear scriptural support and were, therefore, to be rejected. Luther believed that the Bible alone should be the basis for theological truth and that any teaching not grounded in Scripture was suspect.
3. **Rejection of Indulgences:** Luther's opposition to the Catholic doctrine of indulgences was closely related to his rejection of Purgatory. He viewed indulgences as a corrupt practice, as they were tied

to the belief in Purgatory and the notion that one could buy or earn remission of temporal punishment for sins. Luther famously expressed his strong opposition to indulgences in his Ninety-Five Theses, which sparked the initial controversy leading to the Reformation.

Consistent with their rejection of Purgatory, they argued that once a person dies, their fate is sealed, and there is no possibility of changing their eternal destiny through prayers or other means. All the Reformers believed that salvation is determined by faith in Christ alone, and therefore, prayers for the dead were unnecessary and ineffective.

About the faithful who had died, the beliefs of the 16th-century Reformers regarding the immediate destination of the elect upon their death varied to some extent. While there were commonalities in their theological views, there were also differences among the Reformers. Here is a general overview:

Martin Luther held the belief that upon death, the souls of the elect would be immediately in the presence of God in heaven. He emphasized the assurance of salvation through faith in Christ and taught that believers would experience immediate fellowship with God after death, without any need for an intermediate state or purification.

John Calvin, on the other hand, held a slightly different view. While Calvin affirmed the immediate bliss of the elect upon death, he also believed in the existence of an intermediate state called the "intermediate state of the blessed" or the "paradise of the faithful." According to Calvin, this intermediate state was a temporary dwelling place for the souls of the departed believers until the final resurrection. However, Calvin did not provide detailed elaboration on the nature or duration of this intermediate state.

In the broader Reformed tradition, some adherents aligned with Calvin's belief in the intermediate state, while others hold views similar to Luther, affirming the immediate entrance of the elect into heaven upon death. Which brings us to the "great cloud of witnesses" mentioned in Hebrews 12:1. The expression refers to the faithful individuals who have gone before as examples of faithfulness in the pursuit of God. The 16th-century Reformers had various interpretations of this passage and its implications for the Church and the faithful still alive.

Luther, drawing from the concept of the "communion of saints," believed that the "great cloud of witnesses" in heaven, including the saints and martyrs, were not passive but actively concerned for the Church on Earth. He taught that they pray for and intercede on behalf of the living believers. Luther saw this as a source of encouragement and comfort for Christians, knowing that they are surrounded by a community of believers, both living and departed.

Calvin also recognized the existence of the "great cloud of witnesses," but he placed less emphasis on their active involvement with the Church on Earth. While acknowledging their faithfulness and setting them as examples, Calvin did not attribute intercessory or mediating roles to them. He believed that the primary focus should be on Christ as the mediator between God and humanity.

In general the later Reformed Tradition tended to lean towards a more Calvinistic view, emphasizing Christ as the sole mediator and minimizing the involvement of the saints in the affairs of the living.

All this being said, it is important to note that the understanding of the immediate destination of the elect upon death was not a central focus of the Reformation. The Reformers primarily emphasized the centrality of faith in Christ for salvation, the sufficiency of God's grace, and the authority of Scripture. The specific details and beliefs about the afterlife and the timing of the elect's entrance into heaven were not as extensively discussed or elaborated upon compared to other theological topics.

Catechism of the Catholic Church: Purgatory and the Great Cloud of Witnesses

The Catechism of the Catholic Church offers a modern expression of Purgatory: *All who die in God's grace and friendship, but still imperfectly purified, are indeed assured of their eternal salvation; but after death they undergo purification, so as to achieve the holiness necessary to enter the joy of heaven.* (CCC §1030) The paragraphs that follow can be summarized as follows:

1. **Existence and Purpose of Purgatory:** The Catechism affirms the belief in Purgatory as a state of purification after death for those who die in God's grace but still need to be purified from the effects of their sins before entering into the fullness of heaven. Purgatory is seen as a sign of God's mercy and a means of final purification for souls destined for heaven. (*cf.* 1 Cor 3:15 - *“the person will be saved, but only as through fire”*; 1 Pet 1:7 - *so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold that is perishable even though tested by fire, may prove to be for praise, glory, and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ*)
2. **Purification from Sin:** The Catechism teaches that the souls in Purgatory undergo a process of purification in which they are cleansed from any remaining attachment to sin and made fully ready to enjoy the beatific vision of God. It is a state of temporary suffering but also of hope and anticipation of heavenly glory.
3. **Prayers and Suffrages:** The Catechism emphasizes the importance of the communion of saints and the unity of the Church. It teaches that the living can assist the souls in Purgatory through their prayers, intercession, and offering of Masses. The faithful are encouraged to pray for the souls in Purgatory and to offer acts of penance and works of charity on their behalf.
4. **Efficacy of Indulgences:** The Catechism explains that indulgences, granted by the Church, can also assist the souls in Purgatory. An indulgence is the remission of temporal punishment due to sin, granted through the Church's authority, and obtained through specific prayers, actions, or devotions. Indulgences are seen as a way of expressing solidarity with the suffering souls and a means of obtaining spiritual benefits for them.
5. **The Finality of Purgatory:** The Catechism teaches that once the souls in Purgatory have been fully purified, they will enter into the joy of heaven. Purgatory is not a "second chance" or a state of eternal punishment, but rather a temporary stage of purification that leads to eternal union with God.

In summary, according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church, Purgatory is understood as a state of purification after death, where souls undergo cleansing from the effects of sin before entering into the fullness of heaven. The faithful are encouraged to pray for the souls in Purgatory and to offer acts of penance and indulgences on their behalf, believing in the power of God's grace to assist and bring them to the glory of heaven.

The Catholic view of the "great cloud of witnesses" aligns closely with the understanding of the communion of saints. The Catholic Church teaches that the saints, including those in heaven, are not detached from the concerns of the Church and the faithful on earth. Here are some key points regarding the Catholic view:

1. **Intercession of the Saints:** Catholics believe that the saints in heaven are alive in Christ and united with Him. They participate in the divine life and have a deep concern for the well-being of the Church and the faithful on earth. The saints are seen as powerful intercessors who can pray for and assist those in need. Catholics often invoke the prayers of the saints, asking them to intercede before God on their behalf.
2. **Communion of Saints:** The Catholic Church emphasizes the communion of saints, which encompasses the unity and solidarity of all the faithful, both living and departed. This unity

transcends time and space, connecting the Church on earth, the saints in heaven, and the souls in Purgatory. The saints are seen as members of the spiritual family, offering support, guidance, and prayers for the Church on earth.

In summary, the Catholic view of the "great cloud of witnesses" highlights the active concern and intercession of the saints for the Church and the faithful on earth. The saints are seen as powerful intercessors who participate in the divine life and are united with Christ. Catholics turn to the saints for prayerful support, guidance, and inspiration in their journey of faith.

The Meaning of Anathema

During the Reformation and the Council of Trent, the term "anathema" held significant meaning and was used in a specific context.

The word "anathema" originates from Greek and refers to a formal ecclesiastical condemnation, often accompanied by excommunication. In the context of the Reformation and the Council of Trent, the term was used to pronounce severe spiritual and social consequences on individuals or groups deemed heretical or schismatic.

The Council of Trent was convened by the Catholic Church in response to the Protestant Reformation, with the aim of addressing the theological disputes raised by the reformers and reaffirming Catholic doctrine. During the council, anathemas were pronounced against various teachings and practices considered contrary to Catholic orthodoxy. For example, the Council of Trent condemned key Protestant doctrines such as *sola scriptura* (the belief in Scripture as the sole authority in matters of faith) and the rejection of the sacraments as means of grace. Those who held or propagated these beliefs were subject to anathema.

In essence, anathema was a declaration by the Catholic Church that an individual or group was separated from the Church and their teaching condemned. It carried serious consequences, including exclusion from the sacraments and excommunication. Depending on how people understood excommunication from the Catholic Church, anathema included the threat of eternal damnation.

It is important to note that the Council of Trent's anathemas were primarily directed towards the Protestant reformers and their teachings, aiming to safeguard Catholic doctrine rather than engage in open dialogue or compromise. The anathemas were part of the broader effort to reestablish Catholic authority and unity in the face of the Reformation's challenges.

More details on each session of the Council

The Council of Trent was a series of meetings held by the Catholic Church between 1545 and 1563. It was one of the most significant ecumenical councils in Catholic history and had several sessions with different contexts and purposes. Here is a general overview of each session: *(Note: there were sessions within each "session" and so you will see source information that organize under different session #s)*

1. **First Session (1545-1547):** The first session of the Council of Trent focused on establishing the groundwork for the council's proceedings. It addressed procedural matters, confirmed the authority of the council, and defined its scope. The council acknowledged the need for reform and aimed to counter the challenges posed by the Protestant Reformation. The extended time was due to imperial entanglements, papal reluctance, and outbreak of the plague in Northern Italy.
2. **Second Session (1551):** The second session of the council took place in 1551 but was cut short due to political unrest and the outbreak of war. During this session, the council focused on the doctrine of

justification, specifically countering the Protestant belief in "sola fide" (faith alone). The council affirmed the importance of faith and good works for salvation and condemned certain errors associated with the Protestant understanding of justification.

3. Third Session (1562): The third session, held in 1562, addressed various aspects of the sacraments. It reaffirmed the seven sacraments, including their nature, effects, and proper administration. The session also tackled issues such as the Eucharist, penance, and the sacrament of holy orders.
4. Fourth Session (1546): The fourth session of the council, held in 1546, focused on the authority of Scripture and tradition. The council affirmed the necessity of both sources for the transmission of divine revelation. It declared the Latin Vulgate as the official translation of the Bible and emphasized the role of tradition in interpreting Scripture.
5. Fifth Session (1546-1547): The fifth session continued the discussions on original sin, justification, and the role of grace. It addressed the effects of Adam's sin on humanity, the necessity of baptism for the remission of sins, and the role of free will and divine grace in the process of justification.
6. Sixth Session (1547): The sixth session of the council concentrated on the doctrine of justification, particularly addressing the role of good works in the Christian life. It emphasized the cooperation of the individual with divine grace and rejected the notion that human effort alone could merit salvation.
7. Seventh Session (1547): The seventh session focused on the sacraments of penance and *extreme unction* (anointing of the sick). It affirmed the necessity of sacramental confession and rejected certain Protestant teachings that questioned the sacraments' efficacy.
8. Eighth Session (1547-1549): The eighth session of the council addressed the sacrament of the Eucharist. It reaffirmed the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, stating that the substance of bread and wine is transformed into the body and blood of Christ during the Mass.
9. Ninth Session (1551-1552): The ninth session resumed after a hiatus and discussed various issues, including the veneration of saints, relics, images, and indulgences. The council emphasized the appropriate use of these practices and condemned abuses associated with them.
10. Tenth Session (1551-1552): The tenth session dealt with the reform of religious orders, including addressing issues such as monastic discipline, education, and the selection and training of clergy.
11. Eleventh Session (1562-1563): The eleventh session, held near the conclusion of the council, focused on the Mass, its celebration, and the establishment of norms for liturgical worship.