

# The Councils of the Church

Source: Christendom College Graduate School of Theology (slightly modified).

## What was the Council of Jerusalem?

In the early Church a question arose concerning Gentile converts to the Faith. Paul's missionary activity brought growing numbers of Gentile converts but some within the Church believed these new converts should follow Jewish dietary restrictions and the law of circumcision. The issue threatened to divide the Church as strongly opinionated groups formed around Saint James the Less, bishop of Jerusalem, who believed in the tenants of the Circumcision Party, and St. Paul, who argued that Christ fulfilled the Law and therefore circumcision was no longer required. In order to resolve the conflict, the apostles gathered in Jerusalem, where after some debate, Peter spoke on the issue in favor of not requiring circumcision and dietary restrictions of the Gentiles. James agreed but proposed Gentile converts follow the law of "strangers among the Jews" (i.e. do not eat meat offered to false gods, or the flesh of strangled animals, and refrain from engaging in temple prostitution) as given by Moses. James' amendment was accepted and the apostles decided to promulgate their decision by sending Paul, Barnabas, and a few other men with letters to Antioch to inform the Christian community in the city. The council of Jerusalem was an important event in the life of the Church since it set the procedures for how disagreements and questions of importance were decided by the Church's leadership. This "council" is not listed among the twenty-one ecumenical councils in Church history because it was an apostolic gathering and significantly pre-dates the ecumenical meetings.

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## Brief Historical Sketches of the 21 Ecumenical Councils

### 1. First Council of Nicaea – 325 AD

Called by the Roman Emperor Constantine and approved by Pope Sylvester I, this first gathering of the bishops of the Church met in the imperial city to discuss the teaching of the Egyptian priest, Arius. In essence, Arius taught that Jesus was a creature of God and therefore He was not God Himself. Unfortunately, Arius' teachings gained acceptance and spread threatening the unity of the Church and the Empire. Desiring an end to the debate, Constantine invited the world's bishops to Nicaea to discuss the matter. Three hundred and eighteen bishops responded to his call. Most came from the East although several were from the West including the papal legate, Bishop Hosius of Cordoba. The Council condemned Arius' heresy, proclaiming the apostolic faith that Jesus is "true God and true man, *consubstantial (homoousios)* with the Father." A Creed was developed to express this apostolic faith. It forms the majority of the Creed that is still recited at Mass today. The council fathers also passed several discipline canons and established the universal method for dating Easter as the first Sunday after the first full moon of the vernal equinox – this dating method is still used by the Church today.

### 2. First Council of Constantinople – 381

Near the end of the fourth century a devout Catholic emperor from Spain ruled Rome. Theodosius I the Great was concerned with the heresy of Macedonianism, which denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit – as Arius had done previously. Theodosius called the bishops of the East to meet in the imperial capital to condemn this heresy. The 148 bishops reaffirmed the teachings of the Council of Nicaea and added the following words concerning the Holy Spirit to the Nicene Creed: "*I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified.*"

### **3. Council of Ephesus – 431**

In the early fifth century the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, entered into heresy when he denied that Mary was the Mother of God (*Theotokos*) and instead preached that she was the Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*). Nestorius attacked not only Mary but also her Son Jesus. Shocked by this attack on Jesus and His Mother, St. Cyril, the Patriarch of Alexandria wrote letters to Nestorius, the Emperor and Pope Celestine I. The pope condemned Nestorius' teachings and eventually with papal approval the Emperor convoked a council to meet in Ephesus. The council fathers proclaimed the apostolic faith that Mary is the Mother of God. Nestorius was deposed from his see, excommunicated, and exiled for his heresy.

### **4. Council of Chalcedon – 451**

The Christological controversies continued twenty years after the Council of Ephesus with the arrival of Eutyches, an abbot of a monastery in Constantinople, who taught that Jesus had only a divine nature. Eutyches denied the human nature of Christ calling into question whether Jesus was truly human. This rejection of the apostolic faith as reaffirmed by the previous three ecumenical councils inspired one of the great popes in Church history to write a book reiterating Church teaching. Pope St. Leo the Great wrote his famous *Tome* (formulating the doctrine of the hypostatic union) to St. Flavian the Patriarch of Constantinople, who in turn excommunicated Eutyches. Eventually a council was called at Chalcedon where the assembled bishops embraced Leo's *Tome* and declared that Jesus is one Divine Person with two natures – human and divine. They asserted: "Peter has spoken through Leo!"

### **5. Second Council of Constantinople – 553**

The Emperor Justinian the Great desired unity and peace in the empire. Although the previous four ecumenical councils addressed the question of Jesus' identity and relationship with the Father and Holy Spirit, proponents of Monophysitism remained. Violence erupted in the east between Monophysites and the orthodox but the emperor believed a compromise could be reached. The Monophysites criticized the writings of three long-dead theologians (known as the "Three Chapters" – they are Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Ibas of Edessa), who they argued were friends of Nestorius. Justinian thought an imperial edict condemning these theologians would pacify the Monophysites but Western bishops viewed his decree as an attack on the Council of Chalcedon (because two of the three theologians had been reinstated at the council after repudiating Nestorius). Pope Vigilius refused to accept the emperor's edict and was eventually arrested and sent to Constantinople, where he remained in captivity for a decade. Ultimately, a council met in 553 that condemned the writings of the three theologians and reiterated the teachings of Ephesus and Chalcedon

### **6. Third Council of Constantinople – 680**

This council was called to address another Christological heresy that originated when the Patriarch of Constantinople (Sergius) taught that Jesus had only one will – a divine will (the heresy is known as Monothelitism). Like the false teaching of Eutyches, this heresy called into question the humanity of Jesus. Emperor Constantine IV called a council, which was approved by Pope St. Agatho. The assembled bishops condemned Sergius' heresy.

### **7. Second Council of Nicaea – 787**

In the 8th century a heresy erupted in the East that threatened to destroy all forms of sacred art. Known as iconoclasm, this heresy taught that any representation in art of sacred persons was idolatry. Those who held to this belief destroyed religious paintings, sculptures, icons and other works of art. This council met in the same city as the first ecumenical gathering to declare that Catholics do not worship artistic images but rather sacred art assists the faithful in giving reverence to God (and venerated to the saints) who is represented.

#### **8. Fourth Council of Constantinople – 869**

In the mid-ninth century, Emperor Michael III deposed Ignatius, the legitimate bishop of Constantinople and replaced him with the layman Photius. News of this illegal action eventually reached Rome, where Pope Nicholas I the Great refused to recognize Photius' claim to the episcopacy. Subsequently, Photius excommunicated Pope Nicholas (although he had no authority to do so) and a schism erupted. Eventually, in 869, the new emperor, Basil the Macedonian, called a council to end the schism. Photius was deposed and banished and unity was restored. No further council was to meet for the next 124 years.

#### **9. First Lateran Council – 1123**

Who has the right to appoint bishops and provide them with the symbols of their office – the secular ruler or the Pope? This question, known as the Investiture Controversy, dominated the relationship between secular rulers, especially King of the Germans Henry IV, and the pope, especially Pope St. Gregory VII, during the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries. At this time, bishops held feudal secular territories as well as ecclesiastical lands and the secular lord regularly invested the bishop with the symbols (the ring and crozier) of his ecclesiastical office. The controversy turned violent as the excommunicated Henry IV marched his army to Rome and only retired when Pope Gregory elicited the help of Norman troops from southern Italy. The Normans proceeded to sack the city and the pope died amidst much criticism. The Investiture Controversy ended with a compromise whereby bishops, who were also secular lords, received the symbols of their secular office from the king or his representative and the symbols of his church office from the pope or his representative. This compromise, known as the Concordat of Worms, was ratified at the First Lateran Council.

#### **10. Second Lateran Council – 1139**

Upon the death of Pope Honorius II, the Church was afflicted with conflicting claimants to the papal throne. The antipope died in 1138 but to solidify the reign of Pope Innocent II and to condemn various heresies, especially the revolutionary Arnold of Brescia, the second council to meet in the pope's cathedral church (St. John Lateran) in Rome was convoked.

#### **11. Third Lateran Council – 1179**

Similar to the previous council held forty years earlier, this council met to resolve the remaining issues of conflict in the papacy when antipope Callistus III repudiated his claim and pledged allegiance to Pope Alexander III. The council condemned the Waldensian heresy and specified the election of a pope required a two-thirds majority of votes by the cardinals.

#### **12. Fourth Lateran Council – 1215**

The culmination of the pontificate of Innocent III (r. 1198-1216) and a high point of the Middle Ages, this council condemned the heretical writings of Joachim of Fiore and the false teachings of the Cathars in southern France. The importance of evangelization as a primary mission of the Church was emphasized, as was the requirement for episcopal approval to preach. Plans for the Fifth Crusade were formulated at the council and the "Easter Duty" instituted, whereby Catholics were required to confess and receive Holy Communion at least once a year.

#### **13. First Council of Lyons – 1245**

The Crusades were an agenda item at a council once more when the bishops gathered in the French city of Lyons midway through the thirteenth century. Besides the crusades, the council discussed the recalcitrant Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, who was excommunicated and deposed by the council for his anti-papal political activity.

#### **14. Second Council of Lyons – 1274**

The fissure between the Eastern and Western halves of the Church was repaired, albeit briefly, during this ecumenical council. Reconciliation was achieved by Emperor Michael VIII Palaeologus, even though it was politically motivated. A later emperor repudiated the union in 1282 and a fifteenth council would once more address the schism and achieve a short-lived reunion.

#### **15. Council of Vienne – 1311 – 1313**

The struggle between Pope Boniface VIII (1294-1303) and the French king Philip IV “the Fair” produced acrimony between Church and state so that at the death of the pope, Philip desired to control the papacy. The king ensured his favored candidate was ultimately chosen to succeed Boniface (after the short reign of Bl. Benedict XI). The king sought to control Pope Clement V (r. 1305-1314) and demanded he conduct a trial of Boniface VIII, move the papal residence to France, and condemn the Knights Templar.

Clement initiated a trial of the former pope but stalled the proceedings. He moved the papal residence to Avignon in 1309, where it remained until 1378. The suppression of the Templars, after their imprisonment in France, was accomplished at this council, although no decision on their guilt or innocence of the charges levied by Philip was made. The Knights Hospitallers assumed control of Templar property.

#### **16. Council of Constance – 1414 – 1418**

In January 1377, Pope Gregory XI came home to Rome. For the previous seventy years, the Roman Pontiffs lived in the southern French city of Avignon. This papal displacement wrecked havoc on the diocese and city of Rome as well as for the larger Church. Pope Gregory XI died in 1378. Fearing the majority French cardinals would elect another Frenchman, who might return the papacy to France, the people of Rome clamored for the election of an Italian. Their request was granted at the election of Pope Urban VI. Unfortunately, Urban VI was quick to anger and soured his relationship with the cardinals. Frustrated at the uncharitable treatment, the cardinals met again five months after the conclave and declared their election of Urban VI was invalid (they had no authority to do such a thing) since they were “forced” by the mob to elect an Italian. The schismatic cardinals proceeded to elect a Frenchman, who took the “papal” name Clement VII (he was really an anti-pope). This illegal behavior ushered in the Great Western Schism.

This was not the first time in Church history that witnessed an anti-pope, but what made this schism more destructive was the division it caused within Christendom as various secular rulers supported either the true pope in Rome or one of the anti-popes (at one time there were two anti-popes along with the true pope). Eventually the whole mess was sorted out at the Council of Constance, called by the Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund who wanted Christendom united in order to fight the Turks. The true pope in Rome, Gregory XII (r. 1406-1415), recognized the council, approved its future decrees and then resigned for the good of the Church. The council then elected Martin V (r. 1417-1431) as pope, ending one of the most difficult periods in all of Church history.

#### **17. Council of Florence – 1431-1439**

After transferring from the cities of Basle and Ferrara, this council conducted its final business in Florence. As at the Second Council of Lyons, the subject of reunion with the Eastern half of the Church was the main agenda item. Facing a significant Turkish military threat, Emperor John VIII was desperate for Western military aid. Byzantine envoys at the council accepted papal primacy and once more reunion has established but the Eastern clergy and people were not happy with the reunion, which was short lived as within twenty years the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople.

### **18. Fifth Lateran Council – 1512 – 1517**

Although preoccupied with securing the Papal States from foreign influence during the majority of his pontificate, Pope Julius II (r. 1503-1513) called an ecumenical council to remedy the ecclesiastical problems and abuses that infected the Church during the sixteenth century. Julius II died before the council completed its task. His successor, Pope Leo X (r. 1513-1521) oversaw the completion of the council, which tried to eradicate the serious abuses in the Church at the time. However, the reform efforts were not fully implemented before the Saxon Augustinian monk Martin Luther began his revolution against the Catholic Church, which resulted in the cleaving of Christendom.

### **19. Council of Trent – 1545 – 1563**

Nearly thirty years after the beginning of Luther's revolt against the Church, Pope Paul III (r. 1549-1555) called the nineteenth ecumenical council, which met in the imperial city of Trent (modern day Trento, Italy). Trent is one of the most important councils in Church history and was one of the major elements of the Catholic Reformation. Called in response to the Protestant Revolt, the bishops assembled at Trent reaffirmed Church teaching on Divine Revelation, the Sacraments, Original Sin, Justification, and passed numerous reform decrees. One of the most important reforms was the establishment of seminaries in all dioceses in order to educate and form priests authentically. The council also called for the promulgation of a universal catechism for use in teaching the Faith as well as the revision of the Roman Missal. The council was suspended twice, once due to an outbreak of typhus and another time due to the threatening presence of a Protestant army. As a result of the suspensions, it took eighteen years spanning the pontificates of three popes for the council to complete its work.

### **20. First Vatican Council – 1869 – 1870**

Called by Pope Bl. Pius IX (r. 1846-1878) to restate the Faith in areas where it was under attack; to discuss the relationship between the Church and the state; and to issue a doctrinal statement on the Church, the First Vatican Council met in the latter stages of the nineteenth century. It was the first ecumenical council attended by bishops from the United States of America. The council's work was cut short by the arrival of the Franco- Prussian War so it only produced two documents: one on the subject of faith, reason, and revelation (*Dei Filius*) and the other on the role of the papacy and papal infallibility (*Pastor Aeternus*).

### **21. Second Vatican Council – 1962 - 1965**

Pope St. John XXIII (r. 1958-1963) called the most recent ecumenical council in order to engage the modern world in a new and effective manner. Seventeen years after the closure of the horrific Second World War, the world was in desperate need of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. St. John XXIII hoped the council would bring forth a new and fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit. The Church needed to find new ways to demonstrate the validity of her teachings; to present them in a way that made sense to those living in modernity. The council produced sixteen total documents, including four major constitutions on the following topics: the Sacred Liturgy, Divine Revelation, the Church, and the Church in the Modern World.

## The 21 Ecumenical Councils of the Church

#	Council	Date(s)	Pope(s)	At Issue
1	Nicaea	325	St. Sylvester I	Arianism
2	Constantinople I	381	St. Damasus I	Macedonianism
3	Ephesus	431	St. Celestine I	Nestorianism
4	Chalcedon	451	St. Leo I the Great	Monophysitism
5	Constantinople II	553	Vigilius	Three Chapters
6	Constantinople III	680	St. Agatho	Monothelitism
7	Nicaea II	787	Hadrian I	Iconoclasm
8	Constantinople IV	869	Hadrian II	Photian Schism
9	Lateran I	1123	Callistus II	Investiture Controversy
10	Lateran II	1139	Innocent II	Arnold of Brescia
11	Lateran III	1179	Alexander III	Albigensianism
12	Lateran IV	1215	Innocent III	Eucharistic heresies
13	Lyons I	1245	Innocent IV	Emperor Frederick II
14	Lyons II	1274	Bl. Gregory X	East-West Schism
15	Vienne	1311 – 1312	Clement V	Knights Templar
16	Constance	1414 – 1418	Gregory XII, Martin V	Great Western Schism
17	Florence	1431 – 1445	Eugene IV	East-West Schism
18	Lateran V	1512 - 1517	Julius II, Leo X	Ecclesiastical Abuses
19	Trent	1545 – 1563	Paul III, Julius III, Pius IV	Protestantism
20	Vatican I	1869 – 1870	Bl. Pius IX	Modernism
21	Vatican II	1962 – 1965	Sts. John XXIII, Paul VI	Modern World