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**The Council of Trent  
(1545 - 1563)**

**A Church Crisis Contained**

**John Carroll Society Pilgrimage, 2011  
Trento, Italia - Trent, Italy  
August 6, 2011**

Many scholars argue that the Council of Trent was probably the most important Council of the Catholic Church. It began in 1545 and ended 18 years later in 1563. It did not meet continuously. There were three distinct meetings, the first from 1545 to 1547 followed by a gap of six years. The second meeting sat from 1551 until 1552 and then, ten years later, the third and final meeting met from 1562 to 1563. This 18 year period saw no less than 5 popes come and go, Paul III, Julius III, Marcellus II, Paul IV and Pius IV. It became the centerpiece of what is popularly known as the Catholic Counter Reformation. The need for an ecumenical council was bitterly argued for about 25 years and it was finally held during a period of great religious and secular turmoil. That it survived and successfully determined the course of the Church for centuries to follow was a remarkable achievement.

Before we assess what the Council did it is necessary to take the temperature of the political and religious life of Europe in the 15<sup>th</sup> century or, at least, the one hundred years before the first meeting here in Trent. Of prime importance is to know something about the Reformation which, of course, was the main but not the only reason the Council was convoked.

Those of us in the room know how profoundly the electronic age has changed our lives in recent decades. Although changes did not come as rapidly at that time, new discoveries and new inventions were altering the face of Europe.

Obviously the continent was vastly different in the 1400s and 1500s than the continent we know today. There were no democracies. Kings and queens, their dynasties frequently bolstered by politically expedient intermarriages, ruled territories with constantly changing borders. Court intrigues sometimes culminated in patricide and fratricide. Various ranks of the nobility presided over lesser territories and the size of their local armies was sometimes a measure of their autonomy. You may forget your mental concept of the location of various countries in modern Europe because they were much different four and a half centuries ago. For example, during the time of the Council, Spain controlled most of southern Italy, all of Sicily and, of course, Sardinia. By our standards, populations were low and kept so by the depredations of various diseases generically referred to as the plague. Infant mortality was high, life expectancy was low and society was still predominately rural.

To keep the era of the Council in context we must take a look at a few of the developments which were to produce dramatic changes in the life styles of generations and, in some

ways, act as a prelude of our world of today.

Refinements in the manufacture of gunpowder were to change the face of warfare forever. Castles and other fortifications became obsolete and combatants could be destroyed at a distance. Not all the uses of gunpowder were negative. It was also used for mining and construction projects.

The invention of printing by Gutenberg, who died in 1468, ushered in a new era in communications which goes on unabated. Education ceased to be the prerogative of the wealthy and ecclesiastics who jealously guarded their possession of their hand-copied books and manuscripts. One cannot underestimate the implications of the printed word in the dissemination of new ideas in every field of endeavor.

There wasn't too much progress in the field of medicine. The surgeon was still likely to be your local barber. I have already mentioned the plague which terrified and decimated cities and towns. One particularly virulent form of the scourge was known as the French Pox, a name not especially liked by the French! Those who were superstitious believed that the frequent visitations of the plague were a sign of God's judgment on a sinful people; a similar conclusion, you may recall, was voiced by some when dealing with the more recent AIDS crisis. Those returning from the New World brought with them the dried leaves of what they called a "bewitching vegetable" touted as having health-giving properties. The Native Americans called it "tobaco." You know the rest of the story.

The impact of all aspects of the Renaissance on the upper classes and on the nations and city states of Europe was profound. Two discoveries made a significant contribution to the flowering of this celebrated artistic age, namely, the rules of perspective and the successful mixing of pigments which made oil painting possible. Popes and bishops vied with each other in doling out commissions to their favorite artists and sculptors. Although many of the chosen themes were biblical or religious in nature there was also a considerable body of work which was considered alien to the Faith. The age of secularism had arrived accompanied by new ways of thinking which would pre-occupy the Church for centuries to come.

In the generation before the Council of Trent stories abounded concerning the advent of global exploration.

The Portuguese were fastest off the mark. In 1488 they rounded the Cape of Good Hope and, sailing in the southern seas where the North Star was not visible, they developed solar navigation and ten years later Vasco da Gama reached India. Columbus, under the auspices of the Spanish, in 1492, also searching for India, reached the Americas. For the British Sebastian Cabot reached Hudson Bay in his quest for the fabled Northwest Passage. Along with the benefits of exciting discoveries came the destruction of some ancient civilizations, colonialism, piracy and slavery and an exacerbation of greed in all its forms. Certainly the Church was involved and the stories of its missionary endeavors are well documented but its role was frequently resented by both the natives and the colonizers.

More than most other influences it is probably safe to say that the ideas generated by the Renaissance and the Age of Exploration were polarizing the educated classes of the continent and, unfortunately, the Catholic Church was not ready to be part of the dialogue.

Quite simply the Church was in a mess. It had lost its bearings. It was dispirited. It had

become worldly, materialistic and spiritually bankrupt. These are hard words but there is no way to gloss over the systemic corruption which impacted those to whom the faithful looked for leadership. Of course, there were sincere and saintly adherents of the Faith calling out for genuine reform but, by and large, like voices in the wilderness, they went unheeded. With such a spiritual vacuum throughout Europe it is easy to understand why the various Protestant, or, if you will, Reform churches, attracted large numbers of followers. For various reasons they were adopted by powerful political interests, and, with the lack of any meaningful or coordinated response from Rome, they embedded themselves as permanent masters of the religious landscapes where Catholicism had once held sway. The Catholic Church was in total disarray and by the time it had regrouped its leaders and reasserted its heritage in the Council, it was, in effect, fighting a rearguard action. Its weakness and ineptitude had given the reform churches more than adequate time to put down roots and, in so doing, immunize themselves from the Counter Reformation. The historian Hubert Jedin, who wrote a 2400 page history in four volumes of the COUNCIL OF TRENT, is frequently quoted as affirming that the Protestant Reformation owed its success to the fact that the attempts at reform which sprouted from the soil of the Church did not come to maturity.

Why was the Church so ill-prepared to counteract the universal discontent which resulted in the Reformation? Why was the Church incapable of supporting its own members who were willing and able to promote the renewal that was so badly needed at the time? Why was the Church historian, Father Thomas Bokenkotter, in his best-selling *Concise History of the Church*, able to answer these two questions with the chapter heading, "The Church Fails to Reform Itself in Time." (Chapter 18, page 197) the operative words are "in time." History tells us that the Council of Trent was effective but it would have been far more effective had it come a generation earlier. Its tardiness guaranteed the splintering of Christendom and five centuries later most of the divisions and many of the antagonisms still remain.

In the early 1500s the Papacy had not recovered from the impact of the Great Schism (1378-1418) when, for a period of forty years, there were, on occasion, no less than three popes reigning simultaneously with each one vigorously condemning the other two. The popes and their curia officials had lost their credibility and authority and to support the Papal States they resorted to simony, the selling of ecclesiastical benefices to the highest bidder. Most bishops, many of them totally unworthy and theologically ignorant, obtained their dioceses in this way and some had no qualms of conscience about purchasing more than one diocese or failing to reside within their ecclesiastical jurisdictions. Quite simply, they were in it for the money and, in turn, they sold smaller benefices within their dioceses to finance their investments. Local nobilities consolidated their control over the Church by ensuring that family members obtained the crozier with the result that some of the most important cities of the continent were ruled by these so-called prince bishops. In some places, children with the appropriate family connections, were named to vacant dioceses. Should we be surprised that most of these candidates demonstrated no interest in spiritual leadership or pastoral concerns? In many cases, even among the popes, they were a source of scandal to the faithful by the public and blatant immorality of their lives. At a time when a Council should have been called, welfare of the Church was a low priority. Many of them were capable but are today remembered as military leaders, political insiders, city planners, patrons of the arts and, unfortunately, in too many cases, totally immoral. Having secured the papacy they used every means possible to ensure that their successors would be family members. They had mistresses and children. Some of the latter they named Cardinals while still minors and others they married off to seal political alliances. Among the most notorious at this time were Alexander VI, Leo X, a Cardinal at 13, and Julius II. The main ingredient in most papal elections was bribery and certainly not

the worthiness of the candidate. By and large, these men were probably insensitive to the dangers posed by the various reformers to the unity of the Church. Indeed, strong papal leadership was probably at its lowest ebb at a time when it was most needed. Some voiced the excuse that they were reluctant to call a council because they were afraid that the movement known as Conciliarism would compromise the supreme power which they considered rightfully theirs. And so, we ended up with the Lutherans in northern Germany and all of Scandinavia, the Anglicans in England and Wales, the Calvinists in Switzerland and Scotland while further to the east and south the Orthodox were being infiltrated by the Moslems from the expanding Ottoman Empire.

Time does not allow me to deal with the doctrines and the personalities of the reform churches and I do not wish to repeat what Mary Ellen Bork\* covered in yesterday's lecture. When I list the subjects treated and the decisions made at the Council you will have an insight into some of the doctrinal differences at issue.

In 1545 Pope Paul III, despite opposition from many quarters, called the Council and it met here in Trent, at that time a part of the Holy Roman Empire. Selecting a site was in itself a source of controversy. There were 30 bishops present at the opening session which began in December of 1545. It ended two years later when the Emperor, Charles V, insisted that he favored a policy of getting the Catholics and Protestants together to forge a compromise of some sort. This didn't work and six years passed. The second meeting ended in about a year when a new pope, Paul IV, maintained that he could address the problems without the assistance of a council. His successor, Pius IV, reversed his predecessor's policy and with extraordinary skill, and after a lapse of ten years, the Council reconvened in 1552 and worked assiduously for almost two years. A future saint, then the Papal Secretary of State and later the Cardinal Archbishop of Milan, Charles Borromeo, used all his skills to keep the Council in session and he, above all others, was responsible for most of the decisions it endorsed. The Council crafted and the Pope eventually approved a long list of decrees, often directly contradicting the beliefs of Luther, long since dead at this time. There was no wish to compromise on anything even though some churchmen, admittedly a somewhat liberal minority, actually liked some of the changes the Reform churches had adopted. In a series of short pithy statements they clarified, point by point, the Church's teaching on justification, the divine origin of the seven Sacraments, the traditional teaching on the Real Presence and Transubstantiation. They affirmed the nature of the Church and henceforth decreed that bishops should reside in their dioceses and priests should receive training in seminaries before ordination. Abuses in the celebration of Mass, widespread up to this time, were controlled by the imposition of a ritual where every word, movement and gesture was rubrically structured in great detail and celebrated only in Latin. This is known today as the Tridentine Mass and it's the only one I knew during the first fourteen years of my priesthood.

Let me give you just two examples of the way the decrees were constructed. Each one began with the phrase, *Si quis dixerit*, the Latin for "if anyone says," and then, after stating the heretical or offending opinion, it ended with the words, *Anathema sit*, the Latin phrase meaning, "let him be anathema."

As my first example, let me cite Canon 5 of the Canons on Baptism, which reads "If anyone says that baptism is optional, that is, not necessary for salvation, let him be anathema."

My second example is Canon 5 from the Canons on the Sacrifice of the Mass. "If anyone says that it is a deception to celebrate masses in honor of the saints and in order to obtain

their intercession with God, as the Church intends, let him be anathema.”

The Council of Trent shaped the structure of the Church for four centuries and the short-lived First Vatican Council continued its philosophy. But the development of doctrine is a fact and disciplines have to be modified as times change so when Blessed Pope John XXIII called for the Second Vatican Council he was not disowning the Council of Trent but insisting that it don a new suit of clothes to make Christ’s timeless message more appealing to the modern world. And, so, the beat goes on.

*This lecture was preceded by another delivered by Mary Ellen Bork on August 5, 2011 on the same pilgrimage. Her lecture was entitled, “Catholic Reformation - the Role of Trent.”*

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