Councils Through History

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The Early Pre-Constantinian Church

The wider historical context and the prevailing culture of society in Late Antiquity are important to consider at the beginning of this study. Therefore, before outlining how ecumenical, or general councils of the early Church came into being, it is useful to touch on how the 'civilised' or 'known' world appeared when the Church began. That was the world into which Christ was born as a Palestinian Jew, where the Jewish people had their own special niche. Then the Roman Empire ringed the Mediterranean and it was a time when - following the Death and Resurrection of the Lord and as Christianity gradually took root and spread, that:

"the Mediterranean world passed through a series of profound mutations .... there was a slow shift from one form of public community to another -- from the ancient city to the Christian church...." (Late Antiquity, Peter Brown, Harvard University Press, 1998, Introduction).

In the sub-apostolic period, that is in its first - perhaps two - centuries, Christianity grew steadily, despite the intermittent persecutions.

Constantine the Great

The situation was changed totally, however, by Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 AD when freedom of religion was proclaimed and Christianity was officially encouraged. Like many a secular ruler before him and since, Constantine was not without a mixed motive in using religion as a political tool. Then in control of the re-unified Empire, Constantine was baptised on his death-bed in 337 AD having, while a catechumen, liberated Christianity.

A significant result of the liberation was that in the very broadest of terms, the Christian world had become geographically virtually coterminous with the Roman world. With Constantine's conversion, Christianity ceased to be the 'heresy' it once was and became the religion of the Empire, while paganism survived for a time. The disadvantage of positive recognition was that Christianity tended to absorb some of the social customs and organisation of the Empire. This applied to both the East and West 'wings' of the Empire and to a degree mirrored their political differences. This geographical distinction introduces the further historical point—insufficiently appreciated today—that much of the empire and the Christian world (excepting the not-inconsiderable pagan residue) was then largely united in faith, but divided in language: the East being predominantly Greek and the West Latin. Crudely, a language dividing line, often with a different civil government, either side of the line, ran North to South somewhere to the East of the heel of Italy, although for a thousand years there remained a Greek presence in Italy. There Greek ruins can be seen today, although the Romans had taken over control of the Middle East by the first Century B.C. The general opinion is that the Gospels were originally written in Greek, although Our Lord's language was Aramaic. In the ancient Greek Byzantium, Constantine decided to set up his "New Rome" in Constantinople. However, much cross-fertilisation, as it were, between Latins and Greeks remained for centuries.

The Patriarchates

The ancient Christian world had five Patriarchates: Jerusalem, Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople and Rome; the Patriarchs of Constantinople often sought parity of esteem with Rome. The weight of adherence in the early Church, it is thought, then lay in the Eastern part, but the abiding significance of Rome is that the Blessed Apostles, Peter and Paul were martyred there and the Bishop of Rome, the Patriarch of the West was early recognised as the successor and Vicar of Peter and was, in effect, guardian of the Apostles' tombs. It was for this reason that Rome became the focus of pilgrimage and the 'reference point' for unity. By the third century—and before general councils—it was not uncommon for bishops to meet together to discuss matters, most often regionally or locally, in a Synod or a Council.

What is a Council?

An ecumenical (or general) Council of the Church, in modern times, is an assembly of bishops representing those churches in union with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome in order to determine matters of doctrine, to correct disciplinary matters, and to issue pastoral pronouncements. As already indicated, it was not always quite so, because the process of ecumenical/general councils began with Constantine.

Subsequent circumstances dictated that the first eight Councils were conducted in Greek and were held in the East, when the centre of gravity of the Church, as it were, tended towards the eastern end of the Mediterranean. At the first Council of Nicaea in 325 AD, the then Pope, Sylvester, was not present personally, but was represented by two priest-legates. Most of the bishops were from the East with only a few from the West. The number in total is thought to be around 250-300.

Therefore, as Bishop Butler noted in a brief review of the early Church for a book on Vatican II: "Thus ecumenical Councils entered the history of the Church, not as a spontaneous development, but in obedience to a secular statesman." (*The Theology of Vatican II*, B C Butler 1967, p.4)

Professor N P Tanner SJ, a leading Council scholar, discusses key issues of definition determining the ecumenical or general status of Councils since the Great Schism between the churches of East and West in 1054. (*The Councils of the Church - A Short history*, N P Tanner, Crossroads 2001. pp. 2-7). These issues are important and are touched on below but, need not overly deflect the narrative at this point, except to note that outside the western - the Roman Catholic Church - not all Councils are regarded as ecumenical/general' , i.e. universal. There is, however, general agreement about the universal nature of seven Councils, with some disagreement about the eighth: Constantinople IV (869-70)

The ratification of the Pope -- the Bishop of Rome -- was always required from the days of the first Council and Council decisions exercised supreme jurisdiction over the Church.

"They [Ecumenical Councils] are a wonderful demonstration of Catholic unity in their formal pronouncements by the whole episcopate, preceded by the most careful deliberation and informed by thorough theological research. They are the most appropriate means of proclaiming revealed truth and refuting error.â€• (The Ecumenical Council, The Church and Christendom, Lorenz Jaeger, Geoffrey Chapman, 1961, p.84)

Councils have their prototype in the 'Apostles Council' in Jerusalem (cf. Acts ch.15), although Jerusalem is not formally listed among the twenty-one councils of which Vatican II is the latest. At Jerusalem the apostles and presbyters under Peter's leadership were asked to

formally consider what, if any obligations of Jewish Law should be placed on gentile converts. The assembly ratified the proposal that neither circumcision nor the law should be imposed on gentiles but at the same time, urged gentile Christians to take care to avoid Jewish - Christian sensitivities. In the intervening 2000 years since that early meeting in Jerusalem, there have been 21 Ecumenical Councils recognised by the Roman Catholic Church. But the Great Schism, normally dated 1054 AD was an unhappy watershed in agreement about Council history.

The Councils of the First Millennium

It has been mentioned that during the early years of the church local synods or councils had become a feature of church governance before Constantine called for the bishops of the *Oikumene* - the whole inhabited world, to meet at Nicea in 325 AD.

Nicea I (325)

At issue was the claim by the Egyptian priest, Arius, that the Son of God was a created being and not therefore fully divine. This heresy was refuted by the assembled bishops, who declared that the Father and Son were of one substance, 'consubstantial' - or, in Greek, '*homoousios*'.

The definitional decree of the council which condemned the teaching of Arius did not altogether end the controversy. Some of the bishops had reservations over the use of a non-scriptural term (i.e. *homoousios*) and the Greek word itself was capable of different interpretations which might be taken to imply that the Father and Son were numerically one. This resulted in several decades of ongoing theological dispute between an almost solidly Nicene Latin West and the more wide ranging opinions in the Eastern Church.

Constantinople I (381)

The Emperor Theodosius called a further council, this time in Constantinople, in order to confirm the 'Nicene Faith' and to add the important proviso that the Holy Spirit is also equal and divine in the Trinity. This council produced a creed, which is still described today as the 'Nicene Creed' (although technically it should be the Niceno - Constantinopolitan creed), and has been used down the centuries at Masses on Sundays and Solemnities and contains the authentic teaching on the Trinity.

Ephesus (431)

Having established the teaching on the Trinity, a third Ecumenical Council was convened at Ephesus in 431 to confront Nestorianism. This heresy was named after Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople (428-431), who was accused of over- emphasising the distinction between the divine and the human in Christ, that He could be considered to be two persons making it heretical to describe Mary as *Theotokos*, God bearer, as she gave birth to a man, Jesus, in whom God dwells. The council affirmed the unity of Christ by recognising that the correct title for the Mary was indeed '*Theotokos*' - Mother of God, and in due course a definitional formula was agreed to present Christ as one person with two natures.

As at Nicea more than a century before, the teaching of the Ephesus council did not totally end the controversy. Nestorians went their own way but new divisions arose over the manner in which the divine and human natures were united in Christ and these eventually developed into Monophysitism, which held that although there may have been two natures before the incarnation of the Son, there was only one nature afterwards.

Chalcedon (451)

A further council was called, therefore, at Chalcedon in 451 which condemned both of the above heresies and formalised the doctrine of the 'Hypostatic Union', namely the union of two distinct natures of God and man in the person of Jesus Christ who is true God and true man. The council statement to a large extent, owed much to the foundation of faith which was presented by Pope St. Leo I, (440-461) and which the assembled prelates had judged to be in harmony with the teachings of earlier councils. Pope St Leo's significance in this matter requires study as some historian's have perhaps overstressed papal involvement, whereas the 'Formula of Union' of 433 was also of considerable importance. (See Tanner: *Short History*, p.31 and *Decrees of Ecumenical Councils*, Ed. Tanner, pp. 69,70)

The Importance of Councils for Christian Unity

Collectively, the above four Ecumenical Councils formulated the Trinitarian and Christological dogma of the church and are of particular significance in the cause of Christian unity as their teachings are accepted by Roman Catholics, the Orthodox and most Protestant Churches. However, and not negating their importance, the politics and rivalry between different Patriarchs at the time resulted in a continuing debate on the divine and human natures of Christ and led to two further generally acknowledged ecumenical councils at Constantinople.

Constantinople II (553)

The civil, the religious and the theological times remained troubled:

"This fifth of the General Councils.....[was the result of].... a Catholic Emperor's [Justinian (527 -565)] policy to reconcile the Monophysites; an emperor who came in after some fifty years of Monophysite domination, and at the end of thirty-five years when, even the pro-Chalcedon party had been out of communion with Rome; ....." (The Church in Crisis, Philip Hughes, Burns and Oates, London 1961, p 76).

Mgr. Hughes continues to explain for another twenty-five pages, see his article here.

Constantinople III (680)

Such were the theological uncertainties, made more complex by the political turbulence, that the Monophysite battle had, virtually, to be fought again, but on only slightly different ground as Monothelitism. The period can be read in Hughes (*ibid.* pp 121-*22, see* here), but the overarching conclusion is that Constantinople III reconciled the Churches of the East with the Roman See. Risking distortion through brevity, it was this Council which condemned Pope Honorius I 625-638. This event is referred to in the summary below and will perhaps repay further attention elsewhere in the site. Before Nicaea II, which follows, a further, but unrecognised Council had been held at Contantinople, called the council of Trullo, in 692.

Nicaea II (787)

The next generally accepted council at Nicaea in 787 was called to answer very different questions relating to the use of icons that had given rise to claims of idolatry. Nicea II specified that adoration was due to God alone but at the same time accepted the tradition of venerating icons which were described as 'pointing beyond' themselves to the person they portray.

A Contemporary Political Note

It is worth interjecting at this point that only twenty years earlier, Constantinople, with Leo III as Emperor, had withstood a year-long siege from the developing Saracen threat, which was beaten off then, but developed again later and ultimately changed the shape of the Christian Church.

Constantinople IV (869-70)

The eighth and last council of the first millennium marked yet a further return to Constantinople in 869. It was mainly the product of ecclesiastical and imperial politics and after many uncertainties was accepted as ecumenical in the West, but rapidly repudiated in the East. The issue was that the Emperor had appointed Photius as Patriarch of Constantinople, but subsequently, there were many confusing factors exacerbated by the distance and slowness of communication between Rome and Constantinople. A full account is given by Mgr. Philip Hughes, (*The Church in Crisis*, Cardinal Books, Burns and Oates, London 1961 pp. 141-156 see here.)

A Note on The Councils of the First Millennium

To summarise the status of Councils of the first millennium, the Eastern Church does not recognise Constantinople IV as ecumenical but they judge the first seven councils as representing the basic criteria upon which all subsequent councils should base their findings. In the words of the Orthodox theologian George Recoveanu:

'If throughout the first eight centuries infallibility characterised the ecumenical councils then for centuries that followed the years of schism, infallibility must imply agreement. It cannot be maintained that the properties that made a council "ecumenical" vanished after 787 [i.e. following Nicea II], or 1054 [the year of the formal split between the Eastern and Western churches] for that would mean that the Holy Spirit was no longer present in Christ's Church, that he had ceased to operate in her;' (George Recoveanu, L'Oecumenicite, Point de vue de l'Orthodoxie roumaine in The Ecumenical Council, the Church and Christendom, L. Jaeger, 1961, p.7)

Notes on Criteria concerning Ecumenical status

All of the councils of the early period were called by reigning emperors and took place in the East with limited representation by Western prelates. It is clear nevertheless that a decisive factor - although there were also other important factors besides union with Rome - in determining an ecumenical council was not the proportion of bishops present relative to the entire episcopate, but their organic union with their head and centre of unity, namely the Bishop of Rome:

" ....assembled bishops were considered as the bearers and representatives of tradition and the rightful exponents of scripture who could negotiate as successors of the apostles in union with the successor of Peter. Their agreement, reached through the guidance of the Holy Spirit is judged to infallibly proclaim the Church's faith." (L. Jaeger, The Ecumenical Council: the Church and Christendom, 1961 p.10 & 11).

Archbishop Jaeger of Paderborn was then writing largely in accordance with the current Roman Catholic teaching on Councils before Vatican II, as in the 1917 Code of Canon Law (cf. *History of Vatican II,* Alberigo Vol. I p,26). Given his enthusiastic presence as a Father at Vatican II, the eventual Cardinal Jaeger would no doubt subscribe to the additional later scholarship, for example:

"Regarding ecumenical Councils, four issues have to be confronted. First. which Councils have to be regarded as ecumenical? ...." "Second, which documents are to be regarded as the decrees of a given ecumenical (or general) Council? ....". " Third and linked to the second question, what was the intended authority of a given decree? There is a basic distinction recognised even in the early Councils, between doctrinal decrees and disciplinary ones ...." "Fourth, establishing the texts of the decrees. In other words, after it has been decided which councils are to be regarded as ecumenical and which decrees are to be regarded as having been promulgated by them, the work remains of establishing the texts of the decrees. (The Councils of the Church - A Short History, N.P. Tanner, Crossroads 2001 pp 4&5).

Needless to say that Tanner enlarged in his book on the four factors enumerated, Earlier in his book, he noted that there is little difficulty in establishing which are the decrees of Trent, Vatican I and Vatican II as the decrees were published shortly after the Council closed. (*ibid.* p. 4)

The Great Schism of 1054 was indeed a tragedy. But the rapprochement launched by Pope John XXIII and following him, particularly by Pope Paul VI, in regard to relations between West and East, Vatican II began the healing process. Since John, Paul, and more recently John Paul II, there can be no doubt in the Western Church about the apostolicity of the major eastern Orthodox Churches. A striving for re-union with them is a major feature of the post-conciliar western Catholic Church.

The Councils of the medieval period (Lateran I 1123 to Lateran V, 1512-17)

To continue with the historical narrative of the Councils, the second Christian millennium began with the split between the Eastern and Western Churches and witnessed attempts by the papacy to reform the church in a climate of serious interference from secular authorities. A series of distinctly papal councils were called, five of which were held at the Lateran Palace in Rome. The list of those invited was extended beyond bishops to include the heads of monastic orders, theologians and even lay people. Although, other Councils intervened chronologically, it is convenient to describe the first four as a group.

Lateran I (1123)

The first Lateran Council ratified the right of the Church as opposed to monarchs or nobles to invest bishops with the insignia of office.

Lateran II (1139)

Lateran II introduced compulsory celibacy for clerics from sub-deacon upwards and declared that the marriage of a cleric was not only unlawful but also invalid.

Lateran III (1179)

This Council brought to an end the power struggle between the papacy and the German king, Barbarossa, laid down the voting procedure for the election of the pope and set agreed qualitative requirements for the ordination of bishops. These first three Lateran Councils were judged to be ecumenical; they were mainly disciplinary but they dealt with matters pertinent to the church as a whole. The subject matter, however, was not as critical as the earlier Trinitarian and Christological councils concerned with essential doctrine. They are also seen as a prelude to the Fourth Lateran Council.

Lateran IV (1215)

This Council was called by Pope Innocent III in 1215 and included formal invitations to Eastern bishops. Lateran IV, was forced to confront and condemn the Cathar, or Albigensian, heresy with its aversion to all things of the flesh, which by implication would include a rejection of Christ's incarnation, of marriage and of the resurrection of the flesh. The council also produced decrees for the minimum annual reception of the sacraments of penance and communion. It required bishops of large dioceses to appoint teachers to help them fulfil their preaching responsibilities, and sought to end abuses involving relics. Unfortunately, the overall positive record of Lateran IV was tarnished by the inclusion of several anti-semitic canons. The date 1215 recalls the contemporary event of Magna Carta at Runnymede by the River Thames.

Lyons I (1245) and Lyons II (1274)

The thirteenth Ecumenical Council was held in Lyons in 1245 with the chief subject being the conflict between the pope and German emperor, although some canons were agreed involving reforms of the clergy. A second council of Lyons was opened in 1274 by Pope Gregory X (the finally chosen candidate for election following a three year selection debate by the cardinals) with invitations extended to abbots, cathedral chapters, representatives of orders of knights, kings, princes and the Eastern Emperor, Michael VIII Paleologous. During the course of the council, an act of union which acknowledged the primacy of the popes was agreed with the Greek Church but this was ultimately rejected by the overwhelming majority of the Greek hierarchy.

Vienne (1311-12)

The next council, the fifteenth, took place in Vienne, South of Lyons, effectively at the prompting of the French king (Pope Clement V was French) and with only a selected number of bishops present. The principal item on the agenda was to secure the condemnation and suppression of the Knights Templar which had become a powerful and wealthy religious order whose assets had been targeted by Philip of France. Vienne marked the beginning of a long 'exile' from Rome.

The Avignon Papacy

This present narrative is about Councils rather than about the papacy and a brief account of Avignon is best left to another expert:

"In the late thirteenth and fourteenth centuries other rulers, especially the Kings of France, loomed on the papal horizon and posed a threat to papal independence"... "For most of the fourteenth century, the bishops of Rome lived far away from Rome in the fortified city of Avignon. The seventy-year exile was a disaster for the Church and came to be known as the Babylonian Captivity..." (Saints and Sinners - A History of the Popes, Eamon Duffy, Yale University Press, 1997 p. 122).

The exile ended partly due to the relentless interventions of St Catherine of Siena and eventually the last Frenchman to be elected pope - Gregory XI (1370-78) - returned to Rome in 1377. There ensued an unhappy period of contention for the papacy, with two and later three candidates claiming to be the true pope, and the obvious way forward was judged to be an Ecumenical Council which was duly convened in Constance in south Germany.

Constance (1414-18)

That calling of a council to resolve difficulties relating to the papacy was a high risk exercise as it could be taken to imply the supremacy of a council over a pope. This is exactly what happened at Constance with the passing two decrees; *Sacrosancta* which proclaimed the supremacy of the council over the pope, and *Frequens* calling for future councils to be held at regular intervals. On positive note, the assembled cardinals elected Martin V as pope for the whole church in succession to the Roman Pontiff (Gregory XII) who had resigned in 1415 and in place of the two other rivals, thereby bringing the schism to an end. The council itself closed in 1418, but it had introduced a form of organisational thinking called conciliarism. Conciliarism contends that a Council is superior to a pope. However, in conformity with the decree *Frequens* Pope Martin V called a council at Pavia five years later but this was so poorly attended that it was quickly closed.

Basel - Ferrara - Florence (1431-1445)

Seven years later in 1431, Martin V called a further council at Basel which was adequately attended. However, Martin's successor, Pope Eugene IV, moved for a dissolution. On this occasion however the few conciliar fathers who had finally begun to gather refused to accept the pope's decision and for two years they continued to process council business until Eugene withdrew his dissolution.

A major issue to emerge during this period was a politically driven but ecclesiastically tempting opportunity for a reunion with the Greek Church. For the sake of convenience, Eugene proposed to transfer the council from Basel to Ferrara in Italy but the majority of the council refused to go and restating conciliar authority over the pope they deposed Eugene and appointed their own pope (anti-pope) creating a second schism, which on this occasion involved two popes and two live councils. The reconvened council of Pope Eugene actually moved to Florence and following extensive theological debate produced a Bull of Reunion, *Laetentur Caeli*, within only 12 months which received the assent of the council fathers in 1439. This second and highly focused attempt at church renewal was also short lived. The underlying lesson was not lost on Pope John XXIII when speaking many centuries later when he cautioned:

'Catholics and Orthodox must meet first as brothers and grow closer and more accustomed to one another before there can be any thought of reunion. Humility and charity must be made the mark of all discussions between separated brothers about the unity of faith' (The Ecumenical Council, the Church and Christendom, Lorenz Jaeger, 1961. p.47).

In terms of the ongoing councils, the assembly at Florence moved yet again, this time to Rome where it concluded in 1445 - some 14 years after its original opening. The 'Basel Pope' eventually resigned and the problem resolved.

Lateran V (1512-17)

The eighteenth general Council was called by Pope Julius II in 1512 in response to a decision two years earlier by the French King to call his own council on the grounds that the papacy on its own was unable to reform the church. Julius's council was held at the Lateran in Rome and the predominantly Italian bishops in attendance sought and received support from most European monarchs in condemning the French king's council.

Lateran V did pass a number of reform measures but many serious ongoing abuses appeared to have been ignored, confirming the worst fears of some conciliarists. In the event, this last council of the late medieval period can be seen to have achieved too little too late as within six months of its closure Martin Luther had posted his 95 Theses at Wittenberg, proposing a

different approach to church reform. The Protestant Reformation had begun, although - certainly after The Emperor Charles V had met Luther at Worms (1521) - had Rome been more perceptive and active, the ultimate splits of the sixteenth century might have been averted. There was another important meeting between Catholics and Protestants at Worms (1540-1), which made some progress in reconciliation, but the calling of the Council of Trent (1545-63) was further delayed and Christian Unity received a further blow.

Summary

The councils of the modern, post-Reformation era, Trent and Vatican I and their contribution to the contemporary church are covered in Vatican II - The Historical Context in this section of *Vatican II in Focus*. The wide opinion is that Ecumenical Councils are not an absolute necessity for the church in the same way as are the pope and bishops. However, there is also a strong body of opinion which holds that Councils are a desirable development in a world very different from that in which Christ's Church began. It remains the case that while the Pope has a unique role as Successor of Peter, it makes practical sense that Collegiality is a necessity in the modern world. This Collegiality is clearly expressed in a general Council, but could equally, perhaps necessarily, be expressed in an on-going way which has yet to be devised. The lonely decision which Honorius I was called upon to take, and for which he was subsequently condemned at Constantinople III, might have been avoided with wider consultation.

For their part, and returning to present purposes, the Popes of the Second Vatican Council and their successors have firmly endorsed Vatican II. This account should be concluded by emphasising that the first twenty Councils were called to settle particular problems, or for disciplinary purposes. The sole exception is Vatican II which was called to examine the Church itself and this developed, rationally, into a consideration of the Church in relation to the world it serves.