

## **The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils: 325-1870**

By Mgr. Philip Hughes,

A comprehensive survey of the origins, accomplishments and significance of the twenty General Councils of the Church. Explains the nature and function of General Councils, and tells how each was called and what it accomplished, in the context of the climate of the times, the men who took part, and the intellectual currents which lay behind the final pronouncements.

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### **Introduction – on the Councils and General Councils**

The history of the General Councils of the Church is a fascinating subject, and to those unfamiliar with the history of the Church a subject which bristles with difficulties of all kinds. This, I think, ought to be understood from the beginning. Some of the problems raised by this or that particular council will be considered in the chapter devoted to it. About difficulties general to the subject I would like to say something in this

#### **Introduction.**

It is hardly possible to write the history of these twenty General Councils as though they were sections hewn from the one same log. They are not a unity in the sense in which successive sessions of Congress are a unity. Each of the twenty councils is an individual reality, each has its own special personality. This is partly due to the fact that each had its origin in

a particular crisis of Church affairs, partly to the fact that they are strung out over fifteen hundred years of history, and that, for example, the human beings who constitute the council can be as remote from each other as the victims of the persecution of Diocletian in the fourth century from the victims of Bismarck in the nineteenth. It is not through any mechanical, material similarity of action, then, that the history of such an institution, and its significance, can be understood. Where the total action is spread over such vast spaces of time, and is discontinuous, whoever attempts to relate the whole of the action is faced with problems of a very special kind. And this speciality is, of course, bound up with the fact that the body which threw up this device called the General Council--the Church of Christ-- is itself unique in this, viz., its possession of a recorded, continuous activity of nearly two thousand years.

Some, perhaps superficial, consideration of this vast timetable, 325-1870, may be helpful at the outset, even to the reader who is not, by nature, chronologically minded. Reading the list of the General Councils we can see immediately two obvious groupings: the first eight were all held in eastern Europe or in Asia Minor; all the rest in western Europe, in Italy, France, and Germany. The eastern councils were Greek-speaking, the others Latin. General Councils are frequent in some ages, and in others the centuries go by without a single one. Thus, for the seventy years 381-451 there are three General Councils, then one every hundred years down to 869. For 254 years there is now not a single General Council; then, in 190 years there are seven (1123-1311). Another century goes by without a council, and in the next hundred years (1414-1512) three are summoned. The Council of Trent is called less than thirty years after the last of these three, and then 306 years go by before the twentieth council meets in 1869 ninety-two years ago nearly.

Each of these councils has a history and a character all its own. The history of the next council--how matters will go once the bishops meet--can never be foretold from the history of the last. The powers and the authority of

the new council are, it is recognised, the same as its predecessors possessed. The procedure may, and will, vary. One thing is never constant: the human reaction of the council's component parts.

The first General Council met in 325. The Church had then been an established fact for nearly three hundred years. How did councils begin-- i.e., meetings of bishops to discuss matters of common interest? When and where did the first church councils take place? And what about the beginnings of the "prestige" of these councils? That is, of the idea that what bishops collectively agree is law has a binding force that is greater than any of their individual instructions to their own see.

To begin with the last point, it is a safe statement that from the moment when history first shows us the Church of Christ as an institution, the exclusive right of the Church to state with finality what should be believed as Christ's teaching is manifestly taken for granted. To bring out a theory of belief, or to propose a change in morals which conflicts with what the Church universally holds is, from the very beginning, to put oneself fatally in the wrong. The immediate, spontaneous reaction of the Church to condemn thinkers with new and original views of this kind is perhaps the most general, as it is the most striking, of all the phenomena of the Church's early history, so far back as the record goes.[1]

When it was that bishops first formed the habit of coming together in council, we do not know. It is such an obvious act, on the part of officials with like problems and responsibilities and authority, that to do this was second nature surely. What we do know is that as early as the second century (100-200 A.D.) it was the custom for the bishops who came together for a bishop's funeral to take charge of the election of his successor. Here is one likely source, it is suggested, from which came the council of bishops as a recurring feature of ordinary Christian life.

About the year 190 a furious controversy as to the date at which the feast of Easter should be kept, shook the whole Church, and the pope, St. Victor

I, sent orders to the places most troubled that the bishops should meet and report to him their findings. And a series of councils were then held, in Palestine, in Asia Minor, and in Gaul. Sixty years later when, with the great career of St. Cyprian, the mists clear away from Roman Africa, we perceive that the bishops' council is already a long-established practice there. The bishops of Africa meet in council, indeed, twice every year. What they decreed on these occasions was law for the whole of Christian Africa. These councils were well attended; in 220 there were seventy-one bishops present, and at another council, ninety. At St. Cyprian's council of Carthage in 256, there were eighty-seven. There was a similar, systematic conciliar action in Egypt and in Syria and Palestine.

In the early years of the next century we have records of councils in Spain (Elvira, 300) and in France (Arles, 314) with the names of bishops present and a list of the laws they enacted. The Catholic Church may, indeed, be a Church made up of churches (i.e., dioceses) but never, so this history seems to show, of dioceses where each bishop acts without any reference to the rest.

When the emperor Constantine publicly became a follower of Christ (312) he was immediately faced with the grave African problem known to history as the Donatist Schism. Necessarily, and in a very brief space of time, he was familiarised with the function of the council of the bishops, as an instrument of church government. It was natural, inevitable indeed, that when a few years later the Arian crisis arose, all concerned, the emperor and the bishops, should think of a great council as the first move in the restoration of order. The novel feature in 325 was that not only the bishops of the locality affected were convoked, but the bishops of the whole Catholic world.[2] This was to be not a regional or provincial council, but a council for the church in general--a General Council.

The universal belief that the Church of Christ, in its day-to-day business of teaching the doctrine of Christ, is divinely preserved from teaching

erroneously, entailed the consequence that (to use a modern terminology) the General Council is considered infallible in its decisions about belief. If the official teachers as a body are infallible as they teach, scattered about the world in their hundreds of sees, they do not lose the promised, divine, preserving guidance once they have come together in a General Council. And once General Councils have taken place we begin to meet explicit statements of this truth. The councils themselves are explicitly conscious of it when, making their statement of the truth denied by the innovator, they bluntly say of those who will not accept their decision, Let him be anathema. St. Athanasius, who as a young cleric was present at Nicaea, can refer to its decree about Arianism as something final, the last all-decisive word: “The word of the Lord, put forth by the Oecumenical Council at Nicaea is an eternal word, enduring for ever.”[3] Eighty years or so later than this the pope, St. Leo I, warning the bishops assembled at the General Council of Chalcedon to leave untouched the decisions of Nicaea about the rank of the great sees of the East, speaks of Nicaea as “having fixed these arrangements by decrees that are inviolable,” and says, “These arrangements were made by the bishops at Nicaea under divine inspiration.”[4] This was in the year 451. His successor, St. Gregory the Great, writing about 594 to the patriarch of Constantinople, has a reference to the special prestige of the first, doctrine-defining General Councils which equates their work with that of Holy Scripture: “I profess that as I receive and venerate the four books of the Gospels, so I do the four councils,” which he proceeds to list: Nicaea in 325, Constantinople in 381, Ephesus 431, Chalcedon 451. These, he says, “are the four squared stone on which the structure of the holy faith arises.”[5]

Nowhere in these early centuries, in fact, do we find any member of the Church questioning the truth as the General Councils have defined it. What they teach as the truth is taken to be as true as though it were a statement of Scripture itself. The question was never raised, seemingly, that the greater or smaller number of bishops who in response to the summons attended, in any way affected the peculiar authority of the

General Council; nor the fact that all but all of these bishops were from the Greek-speaking East.

How these fundamental, primitive notions developed, how all that they seminally contained matured and expanded through the centuries, this is the very subject-matter of the chapters that follow. And here will be found, in its due place, some account of the controversies that later arose as to the relation (the constitutional relation, so to speak) of the General Council to its president the pope. What the role of the pope has been in the General Council is, necessarily, a main topic of all these chapters. But it may be useful to say a word about this here, and something also about the nature of the bishops' role.

The General Council is then a purely human arrangement whereby a divinely founded institution functions in a particular way for a particular purpose. That divinely founded thing is the teaching Church, i.e., the pope and the diocesan bishops of the Church of Christ. The teaching is an activity of the Church that is continuous, never ceasing. The General Council of the teaching Church, in all the sessions of the occasions on which it has met, in the nineteen hundred years and more of the Church's history, has sat for perhaps thirty years in all, at most. It is an exceptional phenomenon in the life of the Church, and usually it appears in connection with some great crisis of that life.

Ever since the popes were first articulate about the General Council, they have claimed the right to control its action and, to take their place in it (whether personally or by legates sent in their name) or by their subsequent acceptance of the council, to give or withhold an approbation of its decisions, which stamps them as the authentic teaching of the Church of Christ. Only through their summoning it, or through their consenting to take their place at it, does the assembly of bishops become a General Council. No member of the Church has ever proposed that a General Council shall be summoned and the pope be left out, nor that the

pope should take any other position at the General Council but as its president. The history of the twenty General Councils shows that the bishops--a section of them-- not infrequently fought at the council the policies of the popes who had summoned the council, and fought even bitterly. But in no council has it been moved that the bishop of X be promoted to the place of the Bishop of Rome, or that the Bishop of Rome's views be disregarded, and held of no more account than those of the bishop of any other major see. There are, indeed, gaps in our knowledge of the detail of all these events; the mist of antiquity, at times, no doubt obscures our view, but through the mist at its worst the general shape is ever discernible of a Roman Primacy universally recognised, and submitted to, albeit (at times) unwillingly-- recognised and submitted to because, so the bishops believed, it was set up by God Himself.

To the General Councils of the Church there have been summoned, in the last 850 years, as well as the bishops, other ecclesiastics of importance, the General Superiors of religious orders, for example, and abbots of particular monasteries. But these are present by concession. The essential elements of the General Council are, in addition to the pope, the bishops ruling their sees. And the bishops are present as the accredited witnesses of what is believed throughout the Church. This is the traditional, standard conception of their role on these occasions. And for typical modern statements, contained in well-known textbooks used throughout the Church today in hundreds of theological classrooms, this from Christian Pesch, S.J.,[6] may be quoted: "The bishops do not come together in order to think up something new out of their own minds, but in order to be witnesses of the teaching received from Christ and handed out by the Church"; and this too from Fr. Dominic Prummer, O.P.: The bishops gathered in a General Council are not mere counsellors of the pope, but real legislators; which is why each bishop signs the acta of the council as follows: 'I, James, bishop of X, defining have subscribed my name.'"[7]

As to the role of the General Council vis-a-vis any controversy about the Christian Faith, in connection with which it may have been summoned, this has never been more luminously stated, in a single sentence, than by John Henry Newman, with reference, indeed, to the first council of the great series, but, as history alone would show, a statement true of them all. “. . . it must be borne in mind that the great Council at Nicaea was summoned, not to decide for the first time what was to be held concerning our Lord’s divine nature, but, as far as inquiry came into its work, to determine the fact whether Arius did or did not contradict the Church’s teaching, and, if he did, by what sufficient tessera[8] he and his party could be excluded from the communion of the faithful.”[9] And Newman’s own great hero, St. Athanasius, writing only thirty-four years after Nicaea, has a similar thought when he draws attention to the different way the Council of Nicaea spoke when it was making laws about ecclesiastical discipline and when it was facing the problem of Arius. “The fathers at Nicaea speaking of the Easter feast say ‘We have decided as follows.’ But about the faith they do not say ‘We have decided,’ but ‘This is what the Catholic Church believes.’ And immediately they proclaim how they believe, in order to declare, not some novelty, but that their belief is apostolic, and that what they write down is not something they have discovered, but those very things which the Apostles taught.”[10]

This little book of mine – “little,” surely, for it surveys twenty General Councils and fifteen hundred years of history--has no claim on the reader’s notice beyond its purpose to say how each of these councils came to be, and what each achieved. Many questions about General Councils as such, and about particular General Councils, are inevitably not even alluded to. I have no ambition to write a survey course in which everything is mentioned and nothing taught. Nevertheless there are some serious matters that cannot be omitted, and yet can only be dealt with summarily--the new theories which became heresies, for example, and the orthodox statements of the truth which the theories perverted. In summary accounts



of such things the impression is easily conveyed that these disputes are a mere war of words. Actually, what any study of the voluminous writings on both sides reveals is that the conflicting minds are of the first order, that the points at issue are the fundamentals of revealed truth, and (a very important circumstance that often has escaped the historian's notice) that the contestants are passionately in earnest, not as rivals in scholarship or philosophy, but as pastoral-minded bishops, anxious about the salvation of men's souls. A master mind, reviewing a situation we shall shortly be studying, affords an illustration of this.

“Cyril, it may be, was overharsh in the words he used, words used without enough reflexion. Deep within him his passionate attachment to the truth that Christ is a single being was intertwined with the innermost strands of the mysticism of the East. For the disciple of Theodore of Mopsuestia, as for the disciple of Pelagius, the question of the relations between man and God is, above all, a question of merit and no-merit. In the great book of deserts each man's account is kept in two columns, debit and credit. As a man's merits pile up, as he lessens his faults, so does his situation improve. At the end God balances the account, and places us according to the excess of credit over debit. Moralism pure and simple, this way of looking at things, and not religion at all. Where, in such a system, does the Incarnation come in? or the cross of Christ? Here, Jesus Christ is our model, nothing more. Here we never meet our true saviour, our redeemer, He who by His divine presence purifies everything, lifts all to a higher plane, consecrates all, makes divine beings of us so far as the limits of our nature allow this communication of divinity.

“Very, very different is the spirit that gives life to the theology of St. Cyril. Here, Jesus Christ is truly God-within-us. The Christian makes a direct contact with Him, by a union of natures, a mysterious union indeed, under the sacramental veil of the Eucharist. Through this body and this blood he comes to make the contact with God, for these have, in Jesus Christ, a union (equally a union of natures ) with divinity. . . . To the poor peasant

working in the fields of the Delta, to the dock labourer at the port of Pharos, Cyril gives the message that, in this world, he can touch God. And that through this contact, whence springs a mystical kinship, he can receive an assurance about the life hereafter; not only the guarantee that he is immortal, but that he will be immortal joined with God.”[11] Such can be the practical importance of “abstract theological thought.”

And, with reference to the stormy history of the first eight councils, events of a thousand to sixteen hundred years ago, we may remind ourselves that the actors here are Greeks, Egyptians, Syrians; their natural temperament and sense of nationality was not a whit less ardent than it can show itself to be in their descendants of this mid-twentieth century.

And now, to bring these introductory remarks to an end, it will perhaps be helpful to draw attention to one feature particularly of the history of the first seven councils. This is not so much the serious differences of opinion as to the interpretation of the basic mysteries of the Christian religion, which is their main concern, but rather the way these differences, at times, seem to turn so largely on different ways of understanding the terms used to express or explain the doctrine. Since all this is likely to be unfamiliar to the general reader, to him I would say some words of the great authority I have already made use of, a writer who all his life was ever conscious that the course of true historical study is strewn with difficulties.

“First of all,” says Newman, “and in as few words as possible, and *ex abundanti cautela*: Every Catholic holds that the Christian dogmas were in the Church from the time of the Apostles; that they were ever in their substance what they are now; that they existed before the formulas were publicly adopted, in which, as time went on, they were defined and recorded, and that such formulas, when sanctioned by the due ecclesiastical acts, are binding on the faith of Catholics, and have a dogmatic authority....

“Even before we take into account the effect which would naturally be produced on the first Christians by the novelty and mysteriousness of doctrines which depend for their reception simply upon Revelation, we have reason to anticipate that there would be difficulties and mistakes in expressing them, when they first came to be set forth by unauthoritative writers. Even in secular sciences, inaccuracy of thought and language is but gradually corrected; that is, in proportion as their subject-matter is thoroughly scrutinized and mastered by the co-operation of many independent intellects, successively engaged upon it. Thus, for instance, the word Person requires the rejection of various popular senses, and a careful definition, before it can serve for philosophical uses. We sometimes use it for an individual as contrasted with a class or multitude, as when we speak of having ‘personal objections’ to another; sometimes for the body, in contrast to the soul, as when we speak of ‘beauty of person.’ We sometimes use it in the abstract, as when we speak of another as ‘insignificant in person.’ How divergent in meaning are the derivatives, personable, personalities, personify, personation, personage, parsonage! This variety arises partly from our own carelessness, partly from the necessary developments of language, partly from the defects of our vernacular tongue.

“Language then requires to be refashioned even for sciences which are based on the senses and the reason; but much more will this be the case, when we are concerned with subject-matters, of which, in our present state, we cannot possibly form any complete or consistent conception, such as the Catholic doctrines of the Trinity and Incarnation. Since they are from the nature of the case above our intellectual reach, and were unknown till the preaching of Christianity, they required on their first promulgation new words, or words used in new senses, for their due enunciation; and, since these were not definitely supplied by Scripture or by tradition, nor for centuries by ecclesiastical authority, variety in the use, and confusion in the apprehension of them, were unavoidable in the interval.... Not only had the words to be adjusted and explained which

were peculiar to different schools or traditional in different places, but there was the formidable necessity of creating a common measure between two, or rather three languages--Latin, Greek, and Syriac.”[12]

## NOTES

1. For a succinct, popular account of which cf. my own History of the Church, vol. I, chaps. III, IV, passim. For an authoritative, documented account cf. Pierre Batiffol, *L’Eglise Naissante* (the whole book). This has been translated into English as *Primitive Christianity*.
2. The Greek word for “the whole world” is *oikoumene*, whence our modern adjective “oecumenical,” which is used with reference to councils of the Church as an equivalent for “general.”
3. Letter to the Africans, in Rouet de Journel S.J., *Enchiridion Patristicum*, no. 792. The full titles of all books quoted will be found in Appendix II.
4. *Ibid.*, no. 2185.
5. *Ibid.*, no. 2291.
6. *Praelectiones Dogmaticae* (5th ed., 1915) vol. 1, p. 313. The footnotes in this book do not give the authorities for the statements in the text, but only the source of the quotations.
7. *Definiens subscripsi*. The passage I have translated is in Prummer, *Manuale Theologiae Moralis*, 5th ed., 1928, I, 119.
8. Testing token.
9. “Apostolical Tradition,” an article in the *British Critic*, July 1836, reprinted (1871, and many times since) in *Essays, Critical and Historical*, vol. I, 125.
10. *Epistola de Synodis*, par. 5, in Rouet de Journel, S.J., *Enchiridion Patristicum*, no. 785.
11. Monseigneur Louis Duchesne, *Les Eglises separees*, 38-40. I came across this passage in Bardy, *Les Luites Christologiques apres le Concile de Chalcedoine*, i.e., Fliche and Martin, vol. 5, 273, n. 1.
12. J.H. Newman, *On St. Cyril’s Formula* (1858), reprinted in *Tracts, Theological and Ecclesiastical* (1874), pp. 287-90.