Summary Article: Trent, Council of
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1545–47, 1551–52, 1562–63, 19th ecumenical council of the Roman Catholic Church, convoked to meet the crisis of the Protestant Reformation. Earlier efforts at reforming the church had already produced the Fifth Lateran Council (1512–17), but it had proved ineffectual. The rise of Lutheranism brought forth a church-wide reaction that was strongly anti-Lutheran. It hoped for a new council, and when Paul III was elected pope in 1534 such a council seemed assured (see Counter Reformation). The obstacles, however, took 10 years to overcome, for now that a known reformer was pope, those opposing reform were not eager for a meeting.

The Meetings of the Council

The Protestants at first stipulated that it be held in Germany, while the pope insisted on an Italian venue. Mantua was chosen, but its duke refused; then Venice prevented a meeting at Vicenza. Finally Trent, an imperial city, almost in Italy, was selected as a compromise between the papal party and that of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. There was an abortive start in 1542.

In 1544 the pope convened the council definitively. There were no Protestant delegates. The work of the council embraced dogmatic definition and correction of abuses, and it was so planned that discussion of doctrine and of reforms of practices could be carried on at the same time. The 10 years of delay bore good fruit, for the reformers arrived at the council intensively prepared in every question likely to be studied. The chief functions of the council were occasional solemn one-day sessions (25 in all, of which 10 dealt with formalities only) for the purpose of making the final decisions and declarations; the hard work of the council was done at informal, sometimes private, meetings. The council met at first in three great committees, later as a whole.

As with every ecumenical council since antiquity, the presence of the pope or his legates was required, and at Trent they drew up the agenda. The sessions of the council fell into three periods: 1–10 (1545–47), under Paul III; 11–16 (1551–52), under Julius III; and 17–25 (1562–63), under Pius IV. The two great interruptions were chiefly occasioned, first, by an impasse over the place of meeting after most of the bishops had left Trent for fear of the plague (1547), and, second, by the lack of interest of Paul IV (1555–59). Furthermore, the swiftly changing events of German politics often made delays seem wise. The numbers attending the council varied; in the first group of sessions there were less than 200, in the second group somewhat less, and in the third considerably more.

The Work of the Council

The work of the council was confirmed by Pius IV (in the papal bull Benedictus Deus, 1564), and its most important prescription, the issuance of an explicit account of the beliefs of the church, was fulfilled by the publication (1566) of the Catechism of the Council of Trent, or Roman Catechism (which, in fact, was not catechetical but descriptive in form). The dogmatic definitions and the reform decrees of the first group of sessions treated the Scriptures (canon, text, interpretation, and function), original sin, justification, the sacraments in general, baptism, and confirmation; and also the regulation of education, preaching, and alms collecting and the duties and obligations of bishops and beneficiaries. The canons on justification (6th session), the product of seven months of discussion, are among the chief work of the council.
The second period of the council was notable for the work of the Jesuits, especially Diego Lainez. The subjects treated were the Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, episcopal jurisdiction and office, clerical discipline, and benefices. The third period was dominated by St. Charles Borromeo; its definitions and regulations covered communion in both kinds, the Mass, the sacraments of orders and matrimony, the veneration and invocation of the saints, the cult of relics and images, the list of forbidden books, the priesthood in all its phases, ecclesiastical foundations, education, marriage, religious orders, feasts and fasts, and the service books of the church.

Influence

The doctrinal canons of the Council of Trent cover most of the controverted points in Roman Catholic dogma, and the definitions are so clear and lucid that the language of the council is often quoted in definitions. The reform measures of the council were tremendously far-reaching and their enforcement was probably the most thoroughgoing reform in the history of the church. The Counter Reformation afterward was to a great extent occupied with carrying out the principles and requirements laid down at Trent. The modern Roman Catholic Church can be understood only in the light of the work of the Council of Trent.

Bibliography

The most complete history is found in Ludwig Pastor's history of the popes; there is an English translation of the dogmatic canons and decrees and of the Roman Catechism, which includes much from the conciliar canons. See also Jedin, H., History of the Council of Trent (2 vol., tr. 1957-61);

study by J. A. Froude (1896, repr. 1969);
