

The Ecumenical Councils: From Nicaea I to Vatican II

“Ecumenical” = “general” or “universal”

Historical Overview

The first eight ecumenical councils were all held in the Eastern Roman Empire, which was dominated by the Greek language and culture. Almost all of the Eastern councils were convoked by order of the Emperor in Constantinople, usually in consultation and agreement with the Pope in Rome, though not always. After the Great Schism of 1054, which separated the Eastern and Western parts of the Church, all subsequent councils were convoked by the Pope and took place in Western Europe.

The first four councils, in the 4th and 5th centuries, dealt with fundamental matters of faith. Responding to various heresies, these councils settled several Christological controversies and defined the dogmas and credal formulas that form the basis of Christianity today. The next three councils (in 553, 680 and 787) dealt with lesser doctrinal controversies, including further challenges to the declarations of the earlier councils.

The eighth and final Eastern council (in 869) marked a turning point, as the focus shifted from matters of faith to matters of Church authority, an issue that would dominate the Western councils throughout the Middle Ages. The aftermath of the Fourth Council of Constantinople led to the East-West Schism, in which all the churches in the Eastern Roman Empire rejected the primacy of Rome. They maintained a union of four Patriarchates, with Constantinople being the highest ranking. The national and regional churches under these Patriarchates became known as the Orthodox Churches. When portions of those churches later chose to reestablish communion with Rome, they became known as the Eastern Catholic Churches.

After the Schism of 1054, the Pope no longer shared Church authority with four other Patriarchs. And so, the next four councils, all held at the Cathedral Church in Rome during the 12th century and early 13th century, sought to greatly expand papal power over the Church and the secular world. However, the next six councils, from the 13th through the early 16th centuries, accomplished very little, as the leadership of the Church was in chaos much of the time. Meanwhile, Martin Luther and others were getting increasingly frustrated with the dysfunction in the Church, leading up to the Protestant Reformation.

The Council of Trent (1545-1563), which met off-and-on over a period of 18 years, was both a response to the Protestant Reformation and an attempt to reform many of the problems within the Catholic Church. After Trent, there were no more councils for another 300 years. The First Vatican Council (1869-1870) attempted to address the relationship between the Church and the modern world, but it was abruptly cut short by war. Most of its agenda was left incomplete. Another century passed before the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) took up many of the same issues first raised at Vatican I, and ushered in reforms as dramatic and far-reaching as those of Trent.

Councils I – IV: Christological controversies and formulation of the Creed

I. FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Year: 325

Participation: 318 bishops

Primary issue: The Arian heresy, which denied Christ's divinity.

Result: The original version of the Nicene Creed, which contained both dogmatic statements of faith and an anathema against those who deny them.

We believe in one God the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten of the Father, that is, of the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance with the Father, through whom all things were made both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and our salvation descended, was incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven and comes to judge the living and the dead. And in the Holy Spirit.

Those who say: There was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten; and that He was made out of nothing; or who maintain that He is of another hypostasis or another substance [than the Father], or that the Son of God is created, or mutable, or subject to change, [them] the Catholic Church anathematizes.

II. FIRST COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 381

Participation: 150 bishops. It appears that the Emperor convoked the Council without informing the Pope. Neither the Pope nor any of his legates attended.

Primary issue: The divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Result (according to tradition*): An expanded version of the Nicene Creed, which clearly proclaims the divinity of all three Persons of the Holy Trinity.

*Although the later Council of Chalcedon (451) attributes the revised Nicene Creed to the First Council of Constantinople, that may not be historically accurate.

- The Creed itself does not appear in the written acts of the Council.
- Historians from that time period do not mention a new Creed being adopted by the Council.
- St. Gregory Nazianzen, who presided over part of the Council, writes of the inadequate Nicene formula of 325, but makes no mention of an expanded formula that addresses the divinity of the Holy Spirit.
- After the First Council of Nicaea, several variations of the Creed arose in response to new versions of Arianism. Some scholars believe that our present Creed was one such version, composed in 374.

III. COUNCIL OF EPHESUS

Year: 431

Participation: More than 200 bishops

Primary issue: The Nestorian heresy, which claimed that Christ's divine nature was joined to his human nature only after Mary had given birth. Hence, Nestorius insisted that it was improper to call Mary the "Mother of God" (*theotokos*).

Result: The Council declared that Christ is one person with two natures, and that Mary conceived and gave birth to the whole person of Christ. Therefore, Mary's traditional title of "Mother of God" was reaffirmed.

IV. COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON

Year: 451

Participation: About 630 bishops

Primary issue: The heresy of Eutyches, which claimed that after the Incarnation, Jesus' human nature was subsumed by his divine nature. Hence, Christ was not fully human in the same sense that we are.

Result: The Council declared that after the Incarnation, Christ consisted of two natures united in one "hypostasis" or "person." Hence, his human nature remained identical to our own.

The second session revisited all the central matters of faith that earlier councils had defined. It included the reading of several documents: the Creeds of the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381); two letters of St. Cyril of Alexandria, countering the Nestorian heresy; and, finally, the dogmatic epistle of Pope Leo the Great, which concisely explained the Incarnation and the union of divine and human natures in the one Person of Christ. All of these documents were approved by the Council. When Pope Leo's epistle was read, the members of the Council exclaimed, "Behold the faith of the Fathers, the faith of the Apostles; thus through Leo has Peter spoken!"

Councils V – VII: Lesser doctrinal controversies

V. SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 553

Primary issues: Heretical writings from four theologians, which challenged aspects of the faith already decided at the Council of Chalcedon.

Result: The decrees of the first four ecumenical councils were affirmed, and the heretics were all condemned.

VI. THIRD COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Years: 680-681

Primary issue: Whether Christ had two distinct wills, human and divine, or only one.

Result: The Council declared that Christ's human and divine natures each possessed a distinct will, neither of which was subsumed by the other.

VII. SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAIA

Year: 787

Primary issue: Iconoclasm, which considered the veneration of holy images to be idolatrous.

Result: The practice of venerating holy images was affirmed.

Council VIII: Prelude to the East-West Schism

VIII. FOURTH COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 869

Participation: 102 bishops, 3 papal legates, and the 4 Eastern Patriarchs

Primary issue: A bishop named Photius had attempted to usurp the Patriarchate of Constantinople and to depose the Emperor.

Result: Photius and his followers were condemned, and Ignatius, the legitimate Patriarch of Constantinople, was returned to his position. However, the aftermath of the Council set in motion a schism between the Eastern Patriarchs and the Pope.

The East-West Schism

Ever since Constantinople was founded as the new seat of the Roman Empire in the year 330, the authority of the Pope relative to the four Eastern Patriarchs became an increasing source of tension and conflict. The Eastern Patriarchs acknowledged the special dignity of the Pope as the Patriarch of “Old Rome,” but they considered him to be one of five Patriarchs who govern the Church. For them, the Patriarch of Constantinople (“New Rome”) was a close second in importance, and the other three Patriarchs – in Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem – were of slightly lower rank. However, the Popes claimed universal authority over the entire Church.

This tension came to a head at the conclusion of the Fourth Council of Constantinople, which reiterated a decree from an earlier council that the Patriarch of Constantinople ranks second only to the Patriarch of “Old Rome.” Pope Adrian II was not at the Council. His legates signed the decree, but they insisted that no conciliar decree could become official without the Pope’s approval. All of the Eastern bishops were infuriated.

Shortly after the Council, the Eastern Patriarchs hatched a plot to challenge the Pope’s authority directly. The region of Bulgaria, which was clearly within the Western part of the Empire, had been recently evangelized. So, the Eastern Patriarchs declared Bulgaria to be subject to Constantinople, not to Rome. Ignatius, the Patriarch of Constantinople, consecrated an Archbishop for Bulgaria and sent Greek missionaries to the region, and he expelled all of the Latin priests who had been sent there by the Pope.

The dispute between Rome and Constantinople continued to fester until 1054, when the Patriarch of Constantinople was excommunicated for formally rejecting all papal authority. All the other Patriarchs of the East sided with him and excommunicated the Pope. The schism was complete.

Councils IX – XII: The rise of papal power

IX. FIRST LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1123

Primary issue: The Church's sole authority to rule over spiritual affairs and ecclesiastical offices, without interference from secular authorities.

Summary: This Council ratified the Concordat of Worms, an historic agreement between the Pope and the Emperor, which created a degree of separation between Church and State. As a result, princes were forbidden from appointing bishops in their own territories, a practice known as "lay investiture."

X. SECOND LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1139

Primary issue: Resolving a schism within the Western Church.

Summary: The Council annulled all the acts of the recently deceased antipope, Anacletus II, and condemned all of his followers.

This Council also was notable for mandating celibacy for all ordained ministers of the Western Church. Since the fourth century, the Western Church had allowed married men to be ordained, but had insisted that it was sinful for them to have sexual relations with their wives after ordination. This teaching was never accepted by the clergy. So, the Council finally declared marriage to be an impediment to ordination. This mandate did not apply to the Eastern Church, which still ordains married men. Nor did it apply to Permanent Deacons, because they had disappeared centuries earlier.

XI. THIRD LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1179

Primary issue: Establishing a procedure for papal elections.

Whenever a Pope died, two or more contenders would often try to take his place, and there would be confusion and schism until one person finally won wide acceptance and was proclaimed legitimate.

Summary: This Council decreed, for the first time, that a Pope must be elected by a two-thirds vote of the College of Cardinals. It was further decreed that anyone who tried to assume the papacy without being duly elected by the cardinals would be automatically excommunicated, along with all his supporters.

XII. FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1215

Participation: 71 archbishops, 412 bishops, 900 abbots and priors, the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem, and delegates representing the Patriarchs of Alexandria and Antioch

Primary issues: Pope Innocent III called this Council to have it approve a list of 70 decrees that he had prepared, covering a wide variety of subjects.

Summary: This Council marked the high point of papal power. The Pope drew up his own agenda, wrote his own conciliar decrees, and invited ecclesiastical and secular officials from throughout the Roman Empire to come and rubber stamp what he had already decided, without any consultation. Among the decrees was the infamous claim that there is no salvation outside the Catholic Church.

Councils XIII – XVIII: A series of contentious and ineffectual Councils

XIII. FIRST COUNCIL OF LYONS

Year: 1245

Primary issue: A conflict between the Pope and the Emperor over who should have temporal power over the territory of Italy.

Summary: The Pope, with the Council's blessing, excommunicated and attempted to depose Emperor Frederick II.

XIV. SECOND COUNCIL OF LYONS

Year: 1274

Primary issues: A crusade to conquer the Holy Land, and reunification with the Eastern (Greek) Church.

Summary: Neither goal was achieved. The Council added a key word, *filioque* (from the Son), to the Creed.

The Greek and Latin Church were divided on the question of whether the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father only, or from the Father and the Son. Scriptural references can support either claim. The original Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, formulated in the East, did not include the phrase, "and from the Son." This Council added the phrase, dooming any hope of reunification.

XV. COUNCIL OF VIENNE

Years: 1311-1313

Primary issues: Crimes and heresies imputed to the Knights Templar, a tax to support a crusade to the Holy Land, and reform of the clerical order and of morals.

Summary: The Knights Templar were suppressed and their lands confiscated. The promised crusade never took place. None of the decrees regarding Church reforms have survived.

This Council is the only one to occur during the Avignon Papacy. In 1305, the King of France arrested and killed Pope Boniface VIII and forced the cardinals to elect a French Pope, Clement V. Clement V refused to move to Rome, and in 1309, he moved the whole papal court to Avignon, France.

XVI. COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE

Years: 1414-1418

Primary issue: Ending the Western Schism.

Pope Gregory XI returned the papacy to Rome in 1377. However, after his death in 1378, there were a series of rival claimants to the papacy in Rome and Avignon, and sometimes in other places, until 1417. This time period from 1378-1417 was known as the Western Schism.

Summary: When the Council began, there were three men who all claimed to be the legitimate Pope. All three agreed to abdicate and accept the Council's choice. The election of Pope Martin V finally brought the schism to an end.

XVII. COUNCIL OF BASLE/FERRARA/FLORENCE

Years: 1431-1439

Summary: Pope Martin V called a Council to meet in Basle, but he died before it began in 1431. His successor, Pope Eugene IV, attempted to dissolve the Council the same year, but was opposed by the Council members. They promulgated several reforms, which the Pope rejected. Eugene IV attempted to convoke a new Council at Ferrara in 1437, with the hope of reunification with the Eastern Church. A majority of the Council members still meeting in Basle had the audacity to reject the Pope's call for a new Council, and even summoned the Pope to appear before them. He went and promptly dissolved the Council and excommunicated its members. He then transferred the Council first to Ferrara in 1438, and then to Florence in 1439. In the end, nothing substantive came of the Council.

XVIII. FIFTH LATERAN COUNCIL

Years: 1512-1517

Summary: Pope Julius II convoked the Council after a rebel group of cardinals attempted to hold their own Council without him in Pisa. Julius II died during the Council, and Pope Leo X continued it. Nothing substantive resulted from the Council. Meanwhile, Martin Luther was preparing to initiate the Protestant Reformation in Germany (October 31, 1517).

Council XIX: The Counter-Reformation

XIX. COUNCIL OF TRENT

Years: 1545-1563 (specifically: 1545-1547, 1551-1552, and 1562-1563)

Primary issues: The errors promulgated by Luther, Calvin and other Reformers, as well as various disciplinary problems within the Church.

Summary: Although the Council of Trent spanned eighteen years and five popes, sessions were held in only four of those eighteen years. The Council issued numerous dogmatic decrees to counter the errors of the Reformers, and it also instituted many reforms, most of them dealing with clerical abuses.

Dogmatic decrees:

- Defined the Canon of Holy Scripture, including the so-called “deutero-canonical books” rejected by the Reformers.
- More carefully defined Original Sin, countering the extremely negative views of Luther and Calvin, who described human beings’ natural state as one of “total depravity.”
- Explained the interaction of faith, divine grace, and human cooperation in a person’s justification, countering the Reformers’ insistence on “justification by faith alone.”
- Defined the seven sacraments of the Church and how grace is imparted through them. Dealt specifically with the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, as opposed to a merely symbolic presence, and the healing efficacy of the Sacraments of “Penance” and “Extreme Unction” (i.e., Reconciliation and the Anointing of the Sick).

Church reforms:

- Required clerics to be trained in theology and the liberal arts. This reform led to the establishment of the first seminaries for priestly formation.
- Established standards for promotion of candidates to Holy Orders.
- Strengthened episcopal oversight of clerics, and dealt with their suspension for various crimes.
- Dealt with various financial abuses common among clerics, especially the misappropriation of Church property.
- Decreed the preparation of a standard Missal for celebrating Mass, and a Breviary for clerics to pray the Liturgy of the Hours.
- Decreed that a Catechism be issued, incorporating all of the doctrinal statements produced by the Council.

Councils XX – XXI: The Church and the modern world

XX. FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL

Years: 1869-1870

Summary: The Council had an ambitious agenda, with many topics suggested by bishops from around the world. However, the outbreak of war forced the Council to adjourn with most of its work still unfinished. In the end, it produced only two documents, the first dealing with the relationship between faith and reason, and the second with papal power and authority.

The Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Catholic Faith was mostly a defense against Rationalism, Materialism and Atheism. It asserted the existence of divinely revealed truth, which exceeds what natural reason can grasp on its own. The second constitution produced by the Council dealt exclusively with the Papacy. It repeated all of the assertions about papal power, authority and jurisdiction that had been made by previous Councils, and further decreed the infallibility of the Pope when speaking *ex cathedra*, i.e. when as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he formally defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals which is believed by the universal Church.

XXI. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

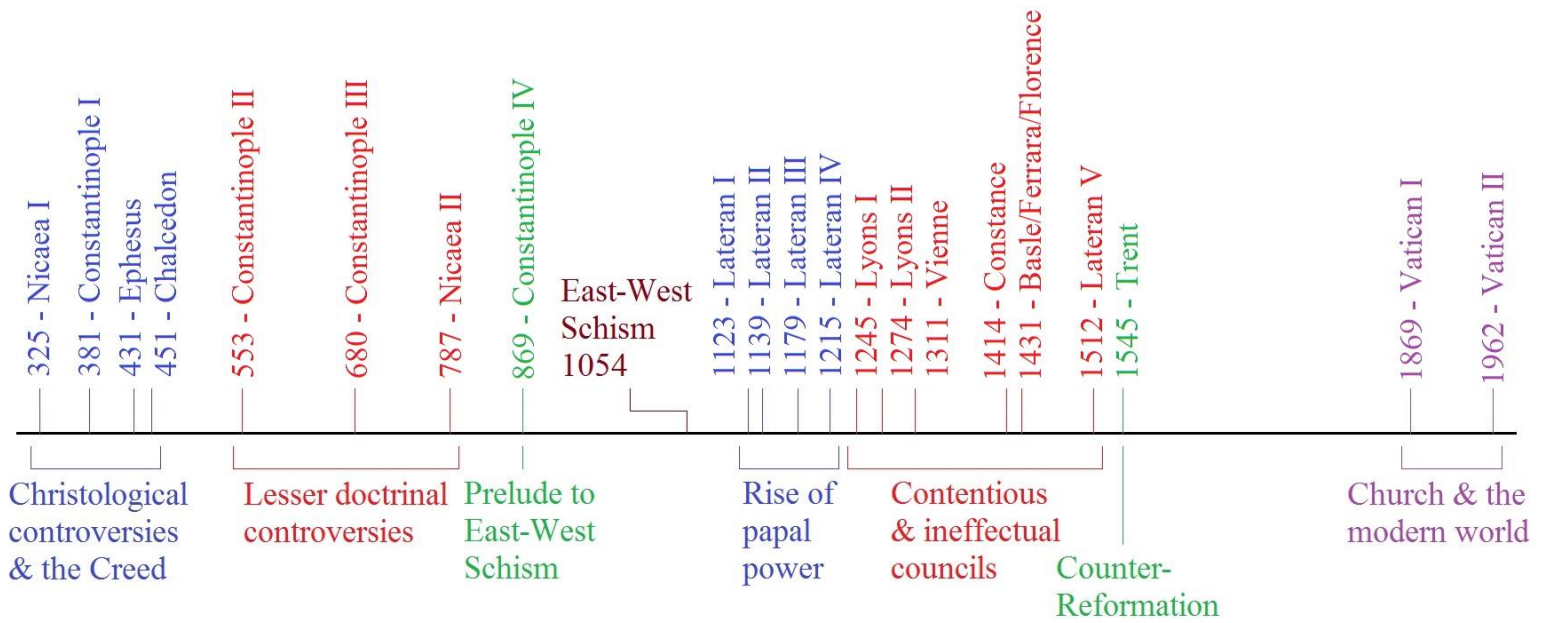
Years: 1962-1965

Participation: About 2300 bishops, and thousands of theologians to assist them.

Summary: This Council truly took a fresh look at all aspects of the Church, in the light of modern scholarship and a careful review of Church history. It instituted sweeping reforms, many of them correcting teachings and practices that had developed during the Middle Ages.

Key reforms:

- Mandated a major reform of the sacred liturgy, especially the Mass, emphasizing above all the “full, active, conscious participation of the faithful.” Removed from the rite many accretions from earlier centuries, restored the use of vernacular languages, and called for a much broader use of Scripture. Resulted in a new Missal, a new Lectionary, and a new Breviary, all of them available in all modern languages.
- Reinterpreted the concept of “Church” as a mystery that transcends the hierarchical institution and as the messianic “People of God,” which includes non-Catholic Christians.
- Acknowledged, contrary to earlier teaching, that elements of truth and means that lead to salvation are present in other Christian churches and even in non-Christian religions. Strongly encouraged ecumenical dialogue, with the goal of reuniting separated Christians, and also encouraged religious freedom for all peoples of faith.
- Corrected the Council of Trent’s teaching about Scripture and Church Tradition being two distinct sources of Divine Revelation. Said that the Word of God is a single fount of revelation, manifested in Scripture and Tradition.
- Emphasized the collegial relationship among bishops, including the Pope, and the pastoral responsibilities of bishops.
- Highlighted the indispensable role of the laity in the mission of the Church, not just as a participation in the clergy’s ministry, but as their own particular “lay apostolate.”
- Described the Church as being in dialogue with the rest of the modern world, interpreting the signs of the times in light of the Gospel, rather than being simply a critic which judges the modern world from the outside.



Timeline of Ecumenical Councils