

## What Difference Did the Councils Make?

EACH OF THE three councils had an impact on the church that resulted in significant changes. Beyond that bland platitude, the impact is often difficult to weigh and almost impossible to disentangle from the cultural and sociopolitical context in which it happened. The councils were complex happenings, so we should not be surprised that their impact was complex. Virtually every generalization made about such impact needs qualification. In a chapter as short as this one, generalizations have another major limitation: they can deal with only a highly selective sample of what happened after a council's closing bell rang.

Nonetheless, the generalizations are helpful and need to be made. At a minimum, they raise issues and provide a starting point for further analysis and

assessment. At best, they articulate and help identify major assumptions underlying the culture of a given era. For that reason alone, these councils cannot be consigned simply to the category of church history. They were major cultural events.

The cultural ferment in which a council took place provided the overall framework in which the council undertook its deliberations, and it provided, sometimes only in embryo, the issues that formed the council's agenda. This is a crucial point. Unlike the Lord God in the first chapter of Genesis, councils did not begin with a void. They had an already existing reality thrust upon them, and it was in relationship to that reality that they acted and reacted in a variety of ways.

The councils sometimes ratified and gave impetus to a movement already well under way. They at other times unwittingly enabled a development to take place that they had not professedly dealt with. Their more important decisions almost inevitably had consequences, for better or for worse, which they did not foresee or intend. Sometimes an important issue, such as papal primacy at Trent, was too controversial to win a place on the agenda. Sometimes such an issue got passed over simply because it fell outside the purview the council had adopted.

Once concluded, councils had no further control over who would interpret and implement their decisions, and they often had to endure criticism for things they never did. Once a council's decisions entered the give-and-take of the historical process—and all decisions perforce entered that process—they were reshaped and refashioned according to the milieu in which they were received. Some decrees became dead letters almost before they hit the printing press. Others had a brief moment of glory and then slipped into oblivion, perhaps to be resurrected by a later generation and given a renewed importance and impact. A few were immediately and lastingly influential.

### *The Council of Trent*

Without apportioning competencies, the Council of Trent indicated three centers for the interpretation and implementation of its decrees. In one of its very last acts, it reminded "all princes" of their duty to see that the council's decrees be "devoutly received and faithfully observed." Such a mandate was possible only in an age before the nineteenth century, when in many countries of the West either a secularizing government was in power or some

degree of separation of church and state had taken place.

In almost the same breath as the mandate to princes, the council stipulated that, should a difficulty arise about the interpretation of a decree, the Holy See was to take measures to resolve it. Finally, in its reform decree on bishops, it had mandated that every bishop hold a synod annually to regulate affairs of the diocese and, quite specifically, to receive and implement the decisions of the Council of Trent.

After the council, these three centers acted both as partners and as rivals regarding the council. In Spain and the Spanish dominions, King Philip II assumed a determining role. He brooked no opposition to his program from a mere bishop, not even the bishop of Rome. But in Milan, though it was under Spanish domination, Cardinal Carlo Borromeo through his diocesan and provincial synods reduced the generalities of the council's decrees to highly specific directives for both the clergy and the laity. When the results of his synods were published as the *Proceedings of the Church of Milan*, they provided a powerful interpretation of how to make the council's decrees practical and operative, and they had an impact on bishops everywhere in the church.

The *Proceedings* became almost indistinguishable from the council's actual decrees.

The papacy saw itself as the principal agent in implementation and interpretation, and it could call upon the council itself to justify that role. The council had committed to the papacy, for instance, several tasks it did not have time to complete, such as a new edition of the Index of Forbidden Books and critical editing of the missal and the breviary. Fulfilling these tasks led to the creation in 1571 of the Congregation of the Index and in 1588 the Congregation of Rites, permanent bureaus that soon claimed absolute authority in their respective areas.

Of even wider import was the Congregation of the Council that Pope Pius IV created immediately after Trent concluded. It continued to expand its remit so as to assume responsibility as the official and final arbiter on the legitimacy of every interpretation and implementation of the council's decrees. It was not disbanded until 1966, a year after the conclusion of Vatican Council II.

When Pius IV established the Congregation of the Council, he also forbade the printing of commentaries or notes on the council's decrees without the explicit permission of the Holy See. In the decades after the council, moreover, the papacy used

its effective network of nuncios to make its view prevail as issues arose in different nations and territories.

As mentioned in Chapter 4, Pope Sixtus V in 1588 completely reorganized the Roman curia into fifteen congregations, the equivalent of departments of state. He thus created one of the first modern bureaucracies. This is a good example of how a council's measures helped catalyze a development altogether unintended by the council. The Congregation of the Council and the Congregation of the Index, along with the earlier (1542) Congregation of the Holy Office of the Roman Inquisition, provided the first building blocks for Sixtus V's edifice.

The measures undertaken by rulers, bishops, and popes to interpret and implement the council had considerable impact, yet they got reinterpreted, re-fashioned, and sometimes nullified by the circumstances in which they were received. Upon the urgent petition of Emperor Ferdinand I and Duke Albrecht V of Bavaria, for instance, Pius IV granted the Eucharistic cup to the laity in their realms, a decision the council had handed over to him. But by that time the cup had become such a powerful sign of differentiation between Catholics and Protestants that after a short while the indulgent had to be with-

drawn. The council's decree forbidding dueling had no impact. It flew in the face of social conventions too deeply entrenched.

The decree *Tametsi* that stipulated that henceforth the church would consider no marriage between Catholics as valid unless witnessed by a priest "in open church" received at first only spotty implementation. In time, however, it gained force and became a requirement that Catholics took for granted and conformed to without second thought. The decree substantially refashioned marriage practices common before the council, and, as the exchange of vows became incorporated into the liturgy of the mass, it imbued Catholic marriage ceremonies with a distinctive character.

As the decades and the centuries passed, several of the council's reform decrees took on an immense importance. The first was certainly the decree in the Twenty-Third Session requiring that bishops reside in their dioceses and pastors in their parishes. Although the decree was not as strong as ardent reformers wanted, the long debate on it ensured that no bishop could leave the council thinking that residency was nothing more than a stipulation of canon law, easily dispensed with. Nonetheless, had it not been for the strong example given by a handful

of exemplary bishops after the council, such as Borromeo in Milan and Gabriele Paleotti in Bologna, the mere letter of the law might have remained as ineffectual as earlier decrees on residency had been.

The council also handed bishops a clear job description. Bishops were to visit the institutions of the diocese, they were to see that church buildings be kept in repair, and they were, as mentioned, to hold annual synods. These were tasks traditional to the episcopal office as specified in canon law, but the council marshaled them and thus gave them new force. One of the most important items of the job description, however, was the new mandate for each bishop to establish a seminary in his diocese for the training of poor boys aspiring to the priesthood. Here the council acted as a catalyst in universalizing an institution already in operation in a few places. It had in mind an extremely modest training center, a fallback alternative for boys or young men who could not do better.

These seminaries became a standard feature on the ecclesiastical landscape, but they were destined to have a difficult and very uneven history. Some emerged as exemplary in the quality of the instruction and overall training, but most fell far short of

that ideal. They perhaps achieved their best forms only in the middle years of the twentieth century. Nonetheless, despite their problems and often glaring inadequacies, they raised the educational level of a large number of clerics and must be numbered among the successes of the council.

In a hasty, last-minute reform decree, the council affirmed the legitimacy and usefulness of sacred images. It ordered that churches and other places be adorned with them. In this afterthought decree, the council unwittingly made a cultural statement that helped solidify a crucial aesthetic difference between Catholicism and most churches of the Reformation. Nonetheless, only because the Catholic church held sway in the two most generative centers of art production in Europe—Italy and Flanders, soon to be followed by Spain—was the decree to have the ultimate significance it did.

Trent's doctrinal decrees fall into two major categories—the decree on justification (and Original Sin) and the decrees on the sacraments. Although the decree on justification had many merits, it was too long and complex to have direct impact except in the generic sense of being perceived as anti-Luther. Some interpreters argue, however, that the decree's insistence on the necessity of active cooperation with

grace helped imbue post-Reformation Catholicism with its dynamism.

The decrees on the sacraments, basically confirmations of medieval speculation on them, reinforced the strongly symbolic and performative character of Catholic worship and understanding of the nature of religion. They were thus consonant with the decree on images. The interiors of Catholic churches were notably different from the interiors of most Protestant churches, and they made evident that between Catholicism and Protestantism the divide was as deeply cultural as it was religious.

After the council ended, even Catholics who had derided it during its long and difficult history rallied to it and identified themselves with it. This development helped give Catholics a sharper sense of identity and of common front against the threat of the Reformation. The council thus contributed unwittingly to the development of the confessional state and thereby to the political divide that marked Europe for centuries to come. That the council contributed to both the cultural divide and the political divide that took ever firmer shape was another of the council's great ironies. Trent, originally convoked with the hope of reconciliation, became an emblem and an instrument of alienation.

Although all the Protestant churches rejected papal authority outright, the council did not issue a decree *De Romano Pontifice* because the bishops at Trent could never have agreed on it. All bishops present at Trent believed in papal primacy, otherwise they would not have been there, but disagreement was rife over what its scope and limits might be. This is a glaring instance of an important issue too hot for a council to handle.

The council also had not a word to say about the great missionary ventures in the New World, certainly one of the most important aspects of Catholicism in the era, whose lasting impact was immense. The council did not address it because it never occurred to the bishops or the legates that it was any of its business. Missions were the business of the mendicant orders such as the Dominicans and Franciscans and of the rulers who supported them. Only in 1622 when Pope Gregory XV created the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith did the papacy itself assume a systematic and proactive role in that regard.

When considered as a totality, Trent's decrees had the larger significance of drawing clear lines of demarcation between Catholicism and the churches of the Reformation. The result is ironic, in that both

Charles V and, reluctantly and skeptically, Pope Paul III conceived the council as an instrument of reconciliation. The times simply were not ready for achieving such an urgent goal.

Protestants rejected the council absolutely because its papal sponsorship rendered it illegitimate in its very essence. They paid scarce attention to it and, with few exceptions, proceeded as if it never happened. But Protestants were not the only ones to reject the council. As mentioned earlier, Paolo Sarpi's history of the council interpreted Trent altogether negatively. It convinced at least some Catholics that Trent was a fraud.

### *Vatican I*

In contrast with the large number of decrees issued by both Trent and Vatican II, Vatican I issued only *Dei Filius* and *Pastor Aeternus*, both doctrinal decrees. Both were statements against the modern world. Vatican I thus stood as a symbol and standard-bearer for all those in the nineteenth century who were bewildered and frightened by the great changes taking place before their eyes and who looked for remedies that would provide them with stability and certainty amid a seemingly inexorable flux. In the

nineteenth century, modernity no longer meant simply the way things currently were but had become an ideology. In reacting against it negatively, Catholicism took on the guise of its reverse-image ideology.

Even as the council assumed an antimodernity stance, it was itself a remarkably modern happening. For the first time in history, bishops from the remotest parts of the world were able to participate, which was possible only through modern means of transportation. On a deeper level, the centralization of authority promoted by *Pastor Aeternus* was an ecclesiastical version of the centralization taking place in the secular sphere. In the church, this process resulted in a very modern standardization of procedures, as is most obvious in the elimination or significant curtailing of local liturgical practices and in 1918 by the publication for the first time ever of a Code of Canon Law for the entire church.

At the same time, the centralizing impulse called Catholics out of their provincialism into a more expansive vision of the church and, consequently, of the world. It was, to that extent, an early prelude and stimulant to contemporary global awareness. It helped make Catholics more catholic.

The council gave no directions regarding agents or modes of interpretation and implementation. But the very fact of a decree on primacy and infallibility suggests that the Holy See held all authority over the meaning and practical significance of the decrees. Although that interpretation largely explains what happened after the council, controversies in the trenches played a large role in formulating an interpretation that became more or less a consensus. It was an interpretation that rejected the extreme understanding some ultramontanes proposed for *Pastor Aeternus*. When for instance the German bishops responded publicly to the extreme interpretation Chancellor Bismarck gave the decree, Pius IX felt compelled to agree with them and follow their lead.

*Dei Filius*, the decree on the relationship between faith and reason, made its way easily through the council. It reflected what the bishops had learned in their seminary days and contained a message they all thought necessary for the age in which they lived. As mentioned, it provided a solid center for the church amidst the confusing intellectual currents of the times and was especially important in the positive appreciation it conveyed of the relationship between faith and reason, that is, between Christianity and human culture.

The long-range impact of *Pastor Aeternus* imbued papal statements with a new dignity and doctrinal weight, even when they made no claims to being infallible. But the decree did not turn back the tide of history, and it made no palpable inroads into the political developments of society at large as its promoters had hoped. Outside Catholicism, the decree was largely irrelevant, but on occasion it broke into public controversy, most notably in the United States when in 1960 John Kennedy ran for the presidency. No Catholic could be president, it was said, because he had to accept what the pope pronounced and be more loyal to him than to the American people.

Within Catholicism, it was not in infallibility but in primacy where the most palpable and significant developments took place, not without a certain irony: as the papacy's direct political authority decreased, its ecclesiastical authority increased. There can be no doubt that after the conclusion of Vatican I, the papacy assumed ever greater authority over virtually every aspect of church life. But how much of that gain can be attributed to *Pastor Aeternus* and how much to factors outside the church's direct control is the question.

Of absolutely capital importance in that regard is the almost untrammelled control the papacy



assumed after the council over the appointment of bishops. Beginning in the Middle Ages, secular rulers played an important, often determining, role in such appointments, a tradition that in time came to be regulated by concordats between the papacy and the rulers. Although there were tensions, conflicts, and sometimes notorious abuses, the system was not altogether without merit. Things began to change after 1870—not because the church had changed but because the political system had begun to change.

When by 1870 the new Italian monarchy had absorbed into itself the smaller states in Italy, the concordats with those states that gave the state a say in episcopal appointments became dead letters. This new situation provided the papacy with an unanticipated opportunity to act unilaterally in episcopal appointments, with relatively minor oversight by the new Italian government. In seven months between 1871 and 1872, Pope Pius IX chose 102 new bishops, thus filling half the dioceses of Italy. In 1905, the French government unilaterally abrogated the Concordat of 1801, which had given the French government the authority to nominate bishops. Pope Pius X denounced the act but now had a free hand in the appointment of French bishops. And so it went until

the process was virtually complete by the middle of the twentieth century. The pope's exclusive right to appoint bishops is now taken for granted, as if it had always been thus.

Beginning in 1819 with de Maistre's *Du pape*, the ardent promoters of infallibility showed that in the modern world a 180-degree turn in social consciousness could be effected in a remarkably short time if the social and political situation somehow supported it. In the eighteenth century, most bishops and leading Catholic thinkers held a much more bishop-centered understanding of church governance and teaching authority than that expressed in *Pastor Aeternus*. The shift within just a few decades was dramatic, as most bishops and thinkers became ultramontane.

Even for ordinary Catholics, the popes achieved a strikingly new prominence in their awareness. After the seizure of Rome in 1870, Pope Pius IX retired to the Vatican quarter of the city and declared himself a prisoner in it, as did his successors until the Lateran Treaty of 1929, which established the independent state of Vatican City. The popes' imprisonment in the Vatican, self-imposed though it was, called attention to them and aroused sympathy among Catholics worldwide. The invention of

photography, radio, television, jet travel, and the Internet incalculably intensified awareness of the pope and the papacy. Ordinary Catholics came to recognize the pope's face, know his name, and accept that he "runs the church." That was new.

### *Vatican II*

Vatican II had an immediate impact on the church incomparably greater, faster, and more immediate than any of its predecessors. Unlike those councils, the ordinary faithful could through radio, television, and fast newsprint follow the council on almost a daily basis. More important, they felt its impact in a dramatic way even before the council ended. On the first Sunday of Advent, 1964, most Catholics were startled when they went to mass to discover that large portions of it were now in the vernacular. A rite many believed unchangeable had changed, seemingly overnight, and changed in a drastic and undeniable way. Everybody knew the council was responsible.

The decrees of previous councils had directly affected only the leaders of church and society and had affected the rank and file only in a trickle-down process. Vatican II was in that regard altogether

different. The change in the mass was only the beginning. Catholics were now encouraged, for instance, to pray with persons of other Christian denominations, a practice strictly forbidden until the council. They could even attend funerals and marriage ceremonies in other churches, something they previously could do only with the local bishop's permission.

Such changes can stand as symbols for all the other particular changes that took place after the council. Some, though in a broad sense due to the council, were only indirect results of it. Among them was how nonclerics began to obtain degrees in theology and thus notably modify the makeup of the profession. This could be considered a new mode of the lay apostolate. Important though changes like these were, they distract us from the larger perspectives needed to understand the full impact of Vatican II. We must therefore leave such particulars behind and rise to higher perspectives.

We need to realize, for instance, that the council had a considerable impact on other churches and generally resulted in their taking a less negative attitude toward Catholicism, which included a willingness to engage in dialogue with Catholic groups. The constitution "On the Sacred Liturgy" led some

churches to restore weekly communion services and revise their liturgical texts; *Nostra Aetate* provided a model for those churches in expressing their relationship to Jews and Muslims; and other enactments of the council also affected other churches.

Within the Catholic church itself, three interrelated changes already stand out as being of overriding importance. The first, the most basic, and the most expansive is how the council's decisions strove to respond to the fact that the church is a reality living in the world and not living in some timeless space. Every document of the council is a document on the church in the modern world. That is the framework that conditions them and that explains the stance they take on the issues under consideration. Every document needs to be read as an expression of the church's struggle to come to terms with the modern world while at the same time remaining faithful to a Gospel proclaimed long ago.

Like the bishops at Vatican I, the bishops at Vatican II realized they were in a cultural, political, and social situation that had no precedent in human history, a situation that challenged the foundations upon which church and society had securely rested. Unlike the bishops at Vatican I, however, the bishops at Vatican II were convinced the clock could not be

turned back. The modern world was a reality, ongoing and dynamic, with which the church had to come to terms. Moreover, the two world wars, the Holocaust, and other events had shattered some of the most cherished dogmas of Liberalism and modernity, making it possible for the church to recognize and promote positive features in the new situation.

This constituted another 180-degree shift in social consciousness, a shift in how the church related to everything outside it. Of course, in its actual dealings, the church had always and perforce accepted as a given the world around it and had dealt with it in constructive ways. On a deeper level, especially since the thirteenth century, the church, unofficially and not always consistently, had operated on a grace-perfecting-nature paradigm, articulated most pointedly by Thomas Aquinas. That is, it had operated on the assumption of a friendly relationship between the church and human culture, an assumption codified and made official in *Dei Filius* of Vatican I.

Nonetheless, since the nineteenth century and despite *Dei Filius*, the official stance was largely prophetic and anti-world. The *Syllabus of Errors* (1864) had codified the stance into policy. The campaign

against the Modernists turned the policy into action. In the decades between then and Vatican II, the anti-modern world policy, though selectively mitigated, remained strong. Vatican II decidedly reversed it and implicitly set a Thomistic reconciliation in its place. There is no more conclusive proof of how fully the council adopted that stance than when *Gaudium et Spes* taught the mutuality of the relationship between “the church and the world” (nn. 40, 44).

The second pervasive reorientation resulting from the council was the new centrality of social issues in Catholic ethical thinking and action. This reorientation sprang most immediately from *Gaudium et Spes*, “On the Church in the Modern World,” and from *Dignitatis Humanae*, “On Religious Liberty.” It sprang less immediately but most powerfully from the social encyclicals of recent popes—Leo XIII’s *Rerum Novarum* (1891), Pius XI’s *Quadragesimo Anno* (1931), and John XXIII’s *Pacem in Terris* (1963), which was the first papal encyclical ever to be addressed “to all persons of good will.”

Well before the council, Catholic moralists recognized the importance of the social encyclicals, but they did not see them as intrinsic to their profession. They dealt with the implications of the Ten Commandments for the life of the individual believer, es-

pecially as the priest faced the believer in confession and the believer as he faced the priest. Both confessor and penitent were focused on personal behavior and misbehavior. In this perspective, social issues as such played no role in Catholic moral theology.

But the encyclicals could not be ignored, especially in the training of future priests. The solution often hit upon in seminaries was to relegate them to a special course, usually worth a single academic credit and taught as part of the philosophical (not theological) curriculum. This marginal role began to change as the council was in progress. The “Message to the World” that the council published in the early days of the first period signified a new centrality for social issues in the church’s awareness. Then Pope John published *Pacem in Terris* between the first and second periods, thus directly confronting the council fathers with its social message.

A major turning point came on October 4, 1965, when during the council’s fourth period Pope Paul VI addressed the United Nations. This was an unprecedented occasion, the first time a reigning pope had set foot in the New World and only the third time a pope had left the Vatican for a foreign country since 1870. All eyes were on Paul VI. He did not disappoint. His message was simple, direct,

and delivered in elegant French. It was about social issues, the most basic of which was the necessity of cooperation among nations to secure the common good of all peoples insofar as that was possible. Of great importance was his emphasis on human rights, a theme of the encyclicals, but the high-profile situation of the UN made it striking almost beyond compare.

Paul was able to make a human rights plea because the council, after a difficult and passionate debate, had in principle just ratified *Dignitatis Humanae* with its assertion that freedom of religious choice was a human right. Paul therefore said to the United Nations, “What we proclaim here is the rights and fundamental dignity of human beings—their dignity, their liberty, and above all their religious liberty.” A few years earlier such a statement from a pope would have been unthinkable.

The most moving and emphatic moment came when Paul spoke of the horrors of war and of the absolute necessity of world peace. With deep emotion in his voice, he pleaded, “No more war! War never again! It is peace, peace that must guide the destiny of the peoples of the world and of all humanity.” The speech was inspired by *Dignitatis Humanae* and *Gaudium et Spes*.

A turning point for the Catholic church and for the church’s face to the world had been reached. In the decades since the council, social issues have moved from the margin to a major place in Catholic moral theology. More important, the church has emerged as one of the most consistent and forceful voices in the world pleading for peace, compassion, religious liberty, and human rights. This is a massively important development for both the church and the world. In a newly emphatic way, the popes extended the flock with whose fate they were vitally concerned beyond the Catholic faithful. Pope Francis’s encyclical *Laudato Si’*, “On Care for Our Common Home,” is a striking example of the new role for the papacy resulting from the council.

If after Vatican II the Catholic church emerged as a major voice promoting human rights, it also emerged as the most conspicuous and important voice urging reconciliation among religious traditions. The church became an agent in promoting it. This is the third great orientation the council effected. It was another 180-degree turn, due directly to *Unitatis Redintegratio*, “On Ecumenism,” and especially to *Nostra Aetate*, “On Non-Christian Religions.” The latter document provoked some of the acricest and almost desperate debate in the course

of the council, a sure indication of how radical it seemed and how important.

Until the council, the church had abstained from the ecumenical movement, and, indeed, Pius XI had condemned it in 1928 in the encyclical *Mortalium Animos*. Pius XII did the same in less stringent terms in 1950 in the encyclical *Humani Generis*. Nonetheless, by the time of the council, Catholics were involved in ecumenism in limited ways, and the Holy See itself had taken a less negative stance. For that reason, *Unitatis Redintegratio* made its way through the council relatively easily, even though it marked a significant turn in attitude and practice and had important theological ramifications.

It was, however, *Nostra Aetate* that made the biggest impact on the church. It gave Catholics a new job description. They were now to be agents of reconciliation among the religions of the world. No more crusades! Indeed, no more belittling other religions or persecuting their faithful. On the contrary, Catholics needed to make every effort to understand them and work with them for the good of society at large. That need was to play a newly central role in how they understood their call to holiness.

While the council directed all members of the church to act as agents of reconciliation, the duty

fell especially on the popes. In that regard, John Paul II and now Pope Francis have sometimes been dramatic in the gestures they have made and the actions they have taken. While he was still archbishop of Buenos Aires, Pope Francis entered into an ongoing public dialogue with Rabbi Abraham Skorka, later published as a book. Never in the entire annals of Christian history had a Catholic prelate ever engaged in such an encounter.

Reconciliation is the impulse behind all three of these major changes that the council effected. It is the basic impulse animating Vatican II, and it is a major clue for understanding the council as a whole, a way of rising above specific measures to see the overall orientation of the council. It pins down that sometimes slippery reality known as “the spirit of the council.”

Moreover, when an organization undertakes new tasks, especially tasks that entail reversing or radically modifying earlier modes of self-presentation, it to some extent redefines itself. We are what we do. The new tasks Vatican II imposed on the church resulted in a new self-understanding that was both continuous and discontinuous with the past.