

THE 21 CATHOLIC CHURCH ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

Who is Jesus? How can one describe his relationship with God? What is the role of the Holy Spirit? What do Christians believe about Mary, and the saints? What about life and the after-life? What is the relationship of Christianity to Judaism? What books belong in the Bible? What is the Church and how should it be organized? What is the role of the bishops, esp. the bishop of Rome (the Pope)?

Such questions and many others have occupied Christians from the earliest generations. For the first few centuries after the life and death of Jesus, as Christianity slowly grew and spread throughout the Roman Empire, Christian teachings were developed and passed on by wandering preachers and local community leaders. Sometimes the leaders would hold local or regional meetings to discuss problems and debate issues, but large-scale meetings were rarely if ever possible in the first 300 years, due to the great distances, traveling difficulties, and sporadic persecutions of Christians by the Roman Empire.

After Christianity became a legal religion within the Roman Empire under Emperor Constantine (AD 312), the leaders (bishops) of the Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean world could more easily meet to discuss important issues, debate current questions, reject heterodox opinions, and more clearly define their faith. These large meetings of bishops, called "Ecumenical Councils," also produced some of the earliest and most concise statements of belief (called "**Creeds**"), which are still foundational for the Christian religion.

See below for much more info on all the Councils!

I. FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Year: 325

Summary: The Council of Nicaea lasted two months and twelve days. Three hundred and eighteen bishops were present. Hosius, Bishop of Cordova, assisted as legate of Pope Sylvester. The Emperor Constantine was also present. To this council we owe the Nicene Creed, defining against Arius the true Divinity of the Son of God (homoousios), and the fixing of the date for keeping Easter (against the Quartodecimans).

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm

II. FIRST COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 381

Summary: The First General Council of Constantinople, under Pope Damasus and the Emperor Theodosius I, was attended by 150 bishops. It was directed against the followers of Macedonius, who impugned the Divinity of the Holy Ghost. To the above-mentioned Nicene Creed it added the clauses referring to the Holy Ghost (qui simul adoratur) and all that follows to the end.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/04308a.htm

III. COUNCIL OF EPHESUS

Year: 431

Summary: The Council of Ephesus, of more than 200 bishops, presided over by St. Cyril of Alexandria representing Pope Celestine I, defined the true personal unity of Christ, declared Mary the Mother of God (theotokos) against Nestorius, Bishop of Constantinople, and renewed the condemnation of Pelagius.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/05491a.htm

IV. COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON

Year: 451

Summary: The Council of Chalcedon -- 150 bishops under Pope Leo the Great and the Emperor Marcian -- defined the two natures (Divine and human) in Christ against Eutyches, who was excommunicated.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/03555a.htm

V. SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 553

Summary: The Second General Council of Constantinople, of 165 bishops under Pope Vigilius and Emperor Justinian I, condemned the errors of Origen and certain writings (The Three Chapters) of Theodoret, of Theodore, Bishop of Mopsuestia and of Ibas, Bishop of Edessa; it further confirmed the first four general councils, especially that of Chalcedon whose authority was contested by some heretics.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/04308b.htm

VI. THIRD COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Years: 680-681

Summary: The Third General Council of Constantinople, under Pope Agatho and the Emperor Constantine Pogonatus, was attended by the Patriarchs of Constantinople and of Antioch, 174 bishops, and the emperor. It put an end to Monothelism by defining two wills in Christ, the Divine and the human, as two distinct principles of operation. It anathematized Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, Macarius, and all their followers.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/04310a.htm

VII. SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAEA

Year: 787

Summary: The Second Council of Nicaea was convoked by Emperor Constantine VI and his mother Irene, under Pope Adrian I, and was presided over by the legates of Pope Adrian; it regulated the veneration of holy images. Between 300 and 367 bishops assisted.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/11045a.htm

VIII. FOURTH COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

Year: 869

Summary: The Fourth General Council of Constantinople, under Pope Adrian II and Emperor Basil numbering 102 bishops, 3 papal legates, and 4 patriarchs, consigned to the flames the Acts of an irregular council (conciliabulum) brought together by Photius against Pope Nicholas and Ignatius the legitimate Patriarch of Constantinople; it condemned Photius who had unlawfully seized the patriarchal dignity. The Photian Schism, however, triumphed in the Greek Church, and no other general council took place in the East.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/04310b.htm

IX. FIRST LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1123

Summary: The First Lateran Council, the first held at Rome, met under Pope Callistus II. About 900 bishops and abbots assisted. It abolished the right claimed by lay princes, of investiture with ring and crosier to ecclesiastical benefices and dealt with church discipline and the recovery of the Holy Land from the infidels.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09016b.htm

X. SECOND LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1139

Summary: The Second Lateran Council was held at Rome under Pope Innocent II, with an attendance of about 1000 prelates and the Emperor Conrad. Its object was to put an end to the errors of Arnold of Brescia.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09017a.htm

XI. THIRD LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1179

Summary: The Third Lateran Council took place under Pope Alexander III, Frederick I being emperor. There were 302 bishops present. It condemned the Albigenses and Waldenses and issued numerous decrees for the reformation of morals.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09017b.htm

XII. FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL

Year: 1215

Summary: The Fourth Lateran Council was held under Innocent III. There were present the Patriarchs of Constantinople and Jerusalem, 71 archbishops, 412 bishops, and 800 abbots the Primate of the Maronites, and St. Dominic. It issued an enlarged creed (symbol) against the Albigenses (Firmiter credimus), condemned the Trinitarian errors of Abbot Joachim, and published 70 important reformatory decrees. This is the most important council of the Middle Ages, and it marks the culminating point of ecclesiastical life and papal power.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018a.htm

XIII. FIRST COUNCIL OF LYONS

Year: 1245

Summary: The First General Council of Lyons was presided over by Innocent IV; the Patriarchs of Constantinople, Antioch, and Aquileia (Venice), 140 bishops, Baldwin II, Emperor of the East, and St. Louis, King of France, assisted. It excommunicated and deposed Emperor Frederick II and directed a new crusade, under the command of St. Louis, against the Saracens and Mongols.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09476b.htm

XIV. SECOND COUNCIL OF LYONS

Year: 1274

Summary: The Second General Council of Lyons was held by Pope Gregory X, the Patriarchs of Antioch and Constantinople, 15 cardinals, 500 bishops, and more than 1000 other dignitaries. It effected a temporary reunion of the Greek Church with Rome. The word filioque was added to the symbol of Constantinople and means were sought for recovering Palestine from the Turks. It also laid down the rules for papal elections.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09476c.htm

XV. COUNCIL OF VIENNE

Years: 1311-1313

Summary: The Council of Vienne was held in that town in France by order of Clement V, the first of the Avignon popes. The Patriarchs of Antioch and Alexandria, 300 bishops (114 according to some authorities), and 3 kings -- Philip IV of France, Edward II of England, and James II of Aragon -- were present. The synod dealt with the crimes and errors imputed to the Knights Templars, the Fraticelli, the Beghards, and the Beguines, with projects of a new crusade, the reformation of the clergy, and the teaching of Oriental languages in the universities.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/15423a.htm

<http://cmvic.net/21-ecumenical-councils>

XVI. COUNCIL OF CONSTANCE

Years: 1414-1418

Summary: The Council of Constance was held during the great Schism of the West, with the object of ending the divisions in the Church. It became legitimate only when Gregory XI had formally convoked it. Owing to this circumstance it succeeded in putting an end to the schism by the election of Pope Martin V, which the Council of Pisa (1403) had failed to accomplish on account of its illegality. The rightful pope confirmed the former decrees of the synod against Wyclif and Hus. This council is thus ecumenical only in its last sessions (42-45 inclusive) and with respect to the decrees of earlier sessions approved by Martin V.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/04288a.htm

XVII. COUNCIL OF BASLE/FERRARA/FLORENCE

Years: 1431-1439

Summary: The Council of Basle met first in that town, Eugene IV being pope, and Sigismund Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Its object was the religious pacification of Bohemia. Quarrels with the pope having arisen, the council was transferred first to Ferrara (1438), then to Florence (1439), where a short-lived union with the Greek Church was effected, the Greeks accepting the council's definition of controverted points.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/06111a.htm

XVIII. FIFTH LATERAN COUNCIL

Years: 1512-1517

Summary: The Fifth Lateran Council sat from 1512 to 1517 under Popes Julius II and Leo X, the emperor being Maximilian I. Fifteen cardinals and about eighty archbishops and bishops took part in it. Its decrees are chiefly disciplinary. A new crusade against the Turks was also planned, but came to naught, owing to the religious upheaval in Germany caused by Luther.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/09018b.htm

XIX. COUNCIL OF TRENT

Years: 1545-1563

Summary: The Council of Trent lasted eighteen years (1545-1563) under five popes: Paul III, Julius III, Marcellus II, Paul IV and Pius IV, and under the Emperors Charles V and Ferdinand. There were present 5 cardinal legates of the Holy See, 3 patriarchs, 33 archbishops, 235 bishops, 7 abbots, 7 generals of monastic orders, and 160 doctors of divinity. It was convoked to examine and condemn the errors promulgated by Luther and other Reformers, and to reform the discipline of the Church. Of all councils it lasted longest, issued the largest number of dogmatic and reformatory decrees, and produced the most beneficial results.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/15030c.htm

XX. FIRST VATICAN COUNCIL

Years: 1869-1870

Summary: The Vatican Council was summoned by Pius IX. It met 8 December, 1869, and lasted till 18 July, 1870, when it was adjourned; it is still (1908) unfinished. There were present 6 archbishop-princes, 49 cardinals, 11 patriarchs, 680 archbishops and bishops, 28 abbots, 29 generals of orders, in all 803. Besides important canons relating to the Faith and the constitution of the Church, the council decreed the infallibility of the pope when speaking ex cathedra, i.e. when as shepherd and teacher of all Christians, he defines a doctrine concerning faith or morals to be held by the whole Church.

Further Reading: www.newadvent.org/cathen/15303a.htm

XXI. SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

Years: 1962-1965

Summary: The Second Vatican Council (also known as Vatican II) addressed relations between the Roman Catholic Church and the modern world. It was the twenty-first Ecumenical Council of the Catholic Church and the second to be held at St. Peter's Basilica in the Vatican. It opened under Pope John XXIII on October 11, 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI on December 8, 1965. Of those who took part in the council's opening session, four have become pontiffs to date: Cardinal Giovanni Battista Montini, who on succeeding Pope John XXIII took the name of Paul VI; Bishop Albino Luciani, the future Pope John Paul I; Bishop Karol Wojtyla, who became Pope John Paul II; and Father Joseph Ratzinger, present as a theological consultant, who became Pope Benedict XVI.

The bishops assembled at Vatican II debated, amended, voted on, and eventually approved and published sixteen documents covering a wide variety of topics, some on internal ecclesial issues and some on the relationship of the Church to various other people in our world. The four largest and most important documents are called "Constitutions," while the shorter documents dealing with more particular issues are either called "Decrees" or "Declarations." These documents are foundational for a proper understanding of Catholic Christianity today, but are still in the process of being implemented fully. Those documents can be read/viewed/printed from the link below:

<http://cmvic.net/vatican-ii-documents>

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http://www.newadvent.org/library/almanac_14388a.htm

<http://catholic-resources.org/ChurchDocs/EcumenicalCouncils.htm>

<http://cmvic.net/21-ecumenical-councils>