

Theo 101, Session #07: The 21 Ecumenical Councils of the Roman Catholic Church

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Ecumenical Councils are those to which the bishops, and others entitled to vote, are convoked from the whole world (*oikoumene*) under the presidency of the pope or his legates, and the decrees of which, having received papal confirmation, bind all [Christians](#). A council, Ecumenical in its convocation, may fail to secure the approbation of the whole Church or of the pope, and thus not rank in authority with Ecumenical councils. Such was the case with the Robber Synod of 449 (*Latrocinium Ephesinum*), the Synod of Pisa in 1409, and in part with the Councils of [Constance](#) and [Basle](#).

Prior to the First Ecumenical Council...

The Council of Jerusalem (49)

Found in Acts 15:1 ff., the apostles and “certain presbyters” were present at this council. At issue was Gentile converts who were not following Mosaic law: “Unless you are circumcised according to the Mosaic practice, you cannot be saved” (Acts 15:1). St. Paul argued that the believer’s *faith*, not their circumcision, that warranted an acceptance of the Church. St. James the lesser (the major voice of the Jewish community) affirmed this belief. The Council concluded by saying, “it is the decision of the Holy Spirit and of us not to place on you any burden beyond these necessities” (Acts 15:28).

First Ecumenical Council: Nicaea I (325)

The [Council of Nicaea](#) (now Iznik, Turkey) lasted two months and twelve days. Convened by the Emperor Constantine I and ratified by Pope Sylvester I, 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 Creed (*Symbolum*) of Nicaea, defining against Arianism and Apollinarianism by defending the true Divinity of the [Son of God](#) (*homoousios*), and the fixing of the [date for keeping Easter](#) (against the Quartodecimans).

Second Ecumenical Council: Constantinople I (381)

The [First General Council of Constantinople](#) (now Istanbul, Turkey) 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.

Third Ecumenical Council: Ephesus (431)

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](#).

Fourth Ecumenical Council: Chalcedon (451)

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](#). Combated Monophysitism (advanced by Eutyches), and claimed that Christ had two natures. Used the term "hypostasis" to identify the one Person ("the one who") who exists in two natures.

Fifth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople II (553)

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, who were influenced by Nestorianism (see the Council of Ephesus); it further confirmed the first four general councils, especially that of Chalcedon whose authority was contested by some heretics.

Sixth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople III (680-681)

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.

Seventh Ecumenical Council: Nicaea II (787)

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 and sanctioned image worship, which is considered tantamount to idolatry. Between 300 and 367 bishops assisted.

Eighth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople IV (869)

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.

Ninth Ecumenical Council: Lateran I (1123)

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.

Tenth Ecumenical Council: Lateran II (1139)

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 and attempted to reconcile the division between the Eastern and Western Churches. Attended by St. Bernard of Clairvaux.

Eleventh Ecumenical Council: Lateran III (1179)

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. Decreed that papal elections required two-thirds majority of the cardinals at the conclave.

Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV (1215)

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.

Thirteenth Ecumenical Council: Lyons I (1245)

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.

Fourteenth Ecumenical Council: Lyons II (1274)

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 (including Sts. Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure). 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.

Fifteenth Ecumenical Council: Vienne (1311-1313)

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.

Sixteenth Ecumenical Council: Constance (1414-1418)

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 (XLII-XLV inclusive) and with respect to the decrees of earlier sessions approved by [Martin V](#).

Seventeenth Ecumenical Council: Basle/Ferrara/Florence (1431-1439)

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. The Council of Basle is only ecumenical until the end of the twenty-fifth session, and of its decrees Eugene IV approved only such as dealt with the extirpation of heresy, the peace of [Christendom](#), and the reform of the Church, and which at the same time did not derogate from the rights of the [Holy See](#). (See also the [Council of Florence](#).)

Eighteenth Ecumenical Council: Lateran V (1512-1517)

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 [Martin Luther](#).

Nineteenth Ecumenical Council: Trent (1545-1563)

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.

Twentieth Ecumenical Council: Vatican I (1869-1870)

The Vatican Council was summoned by [Pius IX](#). It met December 8, 1869, and lasted until July 18, 1870, when it was adjourned. 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.

Twenty First Ecumenical Council: Vatican II (1962-1965)

The Vatican Council was summoned by [John XXIII](#) and ratified by [Paul VI](#). There were 2908 bishops present at the Second Vatican Council. The focus of the council centered on the renewal of the Roman liturgy "according to the pristine norm of the Fathers," pastoral decrees on the nature of the Church and its relation to the modern world, restoration of a theology of communion, promotion of Scripture and biblical studies, and ecumenical progress towards reconciliation with other Churches.