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TRS 621C – Early & Modern Church History
April 4, 2006

“The First Vatican Council – What Was It All About?”

Like many of the movements and earlier councils we have already studied in this class, the First Vatican Council is often not fully appreciated for what it did or at least attempted to do. Prior to this semester, my own understanding of the first Vatican Council was centered on the issue of papal infallibility. Ironically, while the teaching on papal infallibility was one of the few things approved by the Council, it was not on the original agenda. According to Holmes and Bickers papal infallibility was already accepted by most theologians as early as 1842.¹ Yet it remained an unsettled issue.

Further, the First Vatican Council is believed by some (as is Vatican II) to be a swift council, announced in 1868 with no previous warning. The Council did not arise as a single moment in time. As is obvious in our study of church history this semester, historical events do not arise spontaneously. The period of the 19th Century was a time of turmoil within the Catholic Church following the French Revolution and the changes forced on the Church by the revolution. Movements ranged from Liberal Catholicism that sought a new ideal, bringing the Catholic Church into the modern world led by people like Lamennais from France.² There was Ultramontanism that supported papal authority and Social Catholicism.³

The first known mention of a Council was by Cardinal Lambruschini who quietly mentioned the idea to the pope in 1849 but no action was taken. Through the turmoil, the Holy See responded to each issue case by case. Responses to issues included the proclamation by

¹ J. Derek Holmes and Bernard W. Bickers, *A Short History of the Catholic Church* (with new concluding chapter by Peter Doyle, 2002), New York: Burns & Oates. 1983, 243.

² *Ibid.*, 233ff.

³ *Ibid.* 238.

Pope Pius IX on December 8, 1854 of the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception. Holmes and Bickers see this form of promulgation of dogma as rising evidence of the influence of Ultramontaniam.⁴ With the beginnings of modern transportation with trains, all the bishops were invited to Rome so that this proclamation may be done in union.

This issue of unity is very important to be able to understand the need for the First Vatican Council. There were many different approaches and something was needed to bring the Church together. On December 8, 1864, Pope Pius IX, promulgated the *Syllabus of Errors* in attempt to put all the answers to the various issues of the 19th Century into one document. However, the document was lacking in that it contained no teaching itself but rather was simply a series of quotations from the various documents issued by the Holy See on each issue. Thus, this led to a desire for a more definitive document.

Also, in 1864, Pope Pius IX had summoned the Cardinals to a meeting in Rome. During this meeting, he asked the cardinals if they thought a Council was a good idea. We must remember at this time most of the cardinals would have been members of the Roman Curia so a council could be seen as taking away some of their power. Thus, the response from the cardinals was that a council *could* be a good idea.

Then, in 1865, Pius formed ante-preparatory commissions to begin to prepare for a council. This was done privately with no public announcement. The commissions consisted of Roman theologians. In 1867, the bishops gathered in Rome for the canonization of Japanese Martyrs. During this time, the bishops spoke in favor of a council. So, public preparatory commissions were formed to officially prepare documents for approval at the Council. At this time, there was still no public announcement of the convening of a council. It was not until

⁴ Ibid., 241.

December 8, 1868 that Pius IX made public the interdiction of the First Vatican Council in *Aeterni Patris*.

Some people see the formation of these commissions as a means for the Holy See to prepare the documents and simply convene the bishops to give their stamp of approval. This would seem unlikely since one of the movements that the Holy See was against was that of Gallicanism. One of the issues of Gallicanism was that while it recognized papal authority to issue teaching, it believed that to be official all material from the Holy See had to be approved by the bishops. Simply convening Vatican I to approve the documents could have been seen as accepting Gallicanism.

Thus, while I would agree that the Holy See was attempting to provide a firm hand in directing the work of the Council, there must be another reason for the preparatory commissions. For this we look at the Council of Trent. Trent began with no preparatory documents, no regulations, and no definitive agenda except to address issues raised by the Protestant Reformation. The Council of Trent lasted for twenty years. Thus, it would seem that the preparatory commissions *could* be a good thing. They developed an agenda and brought into the focus what issues needed to be addressed. There was incorporation of some suggestions by bishops into these draft documents. This was all done to allow the Council to complete its work more quickly.

In 1869, regulations for the First Vatican Council were issued. Again, this can be understood as either an attempt to control the Council or to help it get started quicker. Remember, one of the first things the Council of Trent had to do *after* convening was to develop its own regulations.

It is important to understand that neither the drafts prepared by the preparatory commissions nor the regulations were absolute definitive documents. We will discuss how the draft documents were edited below. The regulations were revised *during* the Council in February 1870. The original regulations were formulated to eliminate some of the problems of previous councils. For example, only bishops, abbots and major superiors were allowed at the council. No theologians were allowed to eliminate some of the rivalry. Furthermore, no secular heads of state were allowed at the Council to eliminate political influence.

There was an attempt by the Holy See to address the question of participation by Protestants in the council by them sending out letters of notice of the council. These letters did not invite them to the council but did say that if they would like to accept Catholic teaching as is they would be welcome to rejoin the Catholic Church but no opportunity for dialogue was presented.

The Council convened on December 8, 1869. During the first series of meetings the bishops spoke their objections to the documents. Then, the bishops elected the membership of Deputations, which were four commissions to work on how to incorporate the bishops' suggestions into the appropriate documents. Polarization began early in the Council. The issue of papal infallibility was added to the agenda early. The majority of the council members were Ultramontanists supported papal authority while the vast minority were Gallicans and Liberals with a few moderates. Thus, the question of papal infallibility became a litmus test for which side you were on. These was most evident in the election of the Deputations when two lists, one from each side, came into being suggesting which bishops would be good for which commission.

So, after discussion each document would be voted on. One could vote yes, no, or yes with modification. The document would then be sent to its proper commission for editing and returned after edited for new discussion and could be approved with a two-thirds majority. To aid the process this was changed to a simple majority in the revised regulations and comments had to be made in writing.

So, regardless of how much control the Holy See would have liked to have maintained over the Council (clearly not absolute control), the bishops' input had to be taken into account for any document to be approved. Papal support was clearly not enough. However, it is interesting to note that when it was evident a document would be approved the opposing side did not vote no. Rather, they left the council without placing a vote.

For those who believe the central issue of the First Vatican Council was papal infallibility we must first realize that *Pastor Aeternus*, the document on papal authority was not the first document approved. *Dei Filius* was the first document approved and promulgated on April 24, 1870. It addressed the issues of the existence of God, revelation, faith, and the relationship of faith and reason. *Pastor Aeternus* was the second document promulgated (June 18, 1870).

Lastly, to understand the full intent of the First Vatican Council we must realize there were several documents such as *De Episcopis*, *De Sede Episcopali Vacante*, *De Vita et Honestate Clericorum*, and *De Missionibus* that the Council was not able to complete before the Council was suspended. The Council was not suspended because of papal disapproval or disagreement between sides. It was suspended because Rome was **invaded**. They had to leave for their safety. Thus, one could surmise the First Vatican Council could have accomplished much more had it been able to continue. The material continued within the unfinished documents was later incorporated into papal documents and the 1917 Code of Canon Law.

Thus, it is clear that while papal authority and infallibility was a major issue for the First Vatican Council, it is incorrect to say that it was the sole purpose of the Council. Did the Holy See attempt to control and steer the Council? It is likely they did attempt to steer it but it was not under definitive control. There was some honest attempt to hear what the bishops had to say and that is always a good place to begin. While papal infallibility was defined, the bishops still had a major role to play in the formation and approval of the documents of the First Vatican Council.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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