



A faith ancient and modern

Jesus founded one Church – the community of believers in Him as the Son of God and Redeemer of fallen humanity. What happened after that was simply that fallen humanity has had a long time to distort the message and turn the Church from an assembly into an institution.

There are some basic and solid issues that were thrashed out very early in the life of the Church. If we look to Scripture we find in the Acts of the Apostles the dispute between the Jewish Church, based in Jerusalem, and the Gentile Church of Paul's missions (Acts 15: 5-12). These disputes were about observance – nothing of theology, just practice – and yet they give us the truth of the early Church. Paul "went up to Jerusalem again" (Galatians 2:1) and in discussion with the other Apostles reached agreement on how they should act towards those they called "pagans".

Throughout the first several centuries of the life of the Church this was the way all decisions were made – by meeting, discussion and consensus. The process we now call "collegiality". As the Church spread through the Roman Empire and numbers of communities grew these meetings became what we now call Ecumenical Councils. Ecumenical because they involved **all** the leaders of the communities and what was agreed at these Councils was binding on all the faithful. Throughout this period the Bishop of Rome was considered as successor

of Saint Peter to have a primacy of honour that meant he was, effectively, the chairman at these Councils.

The First Seven Ecumenical Councils, as commonly understood, are:

1. First Council of Nicaea (325)
2. First Council of Constantinople (381)
3. Council of Ephesus (431)
4. Council of Chalcedon (451)
5. Second Council of Constantinople (553)
6. Third Council of Constantinople (680)
7. Second Council of Nicaea (787)

These Councils, all Christians agreed, were the meetings that defined what was necessary to be believed for salvation. The faith they agreed was summed up in what we now call the Nicene Creed. It was also understood that nothing could be added to or taken away from that Creed without the agreement of an Ecumenical Council.

As the Roman Empire went into decline divisions started to appear in the Church that mirrored the politics of the Empire, the main division being between East and West, between Constantinople and Rome. Things came to a head in 1085 when the Rome-based Church wished to change the Nicene Creed by adding one word “filioque” in the passage referring to the Holy Spirit. The Eastern Churches saw this as making the Holy Spirit inferior to the Father and Son, and they objected. Cutting a long story short this bitter dispute ended in mutual excommunication that lasted until the 1970s and a division and mistrust that still endure.

The central point is that the essentials of faith were defined by Ecumenical Council and no such gathering has happened since 787. The later Roman Councils have been called Ecumenical but truly are not because of the exclusion of the Eastern Churches. Their proclamations and decrees cannot be seen as binding on the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church that contains and embraces the whole of Christendom.

For this reason alone any later decrees of Popes and Councils may be seen as mere guidance and not true dogma.

The most contentious statements of Rome are regarding the issues of Papal Supremacy and Infallibility. In order to understand these more fully we must look at the First Vatican Council, its context and its history.

The context of the Council is an imperial church under threat – the unifying armies of Italy were swallowing up the Papal States and Pius IX was losing his worldly realm. The Council was primarily a political attempt to re-assert the position of the Roman Church in a changing world. The Council convened in December 1869 and lasted until September 1870. It produced only two agreed Constitutions – one on the Catholic Faith and the second on Papal Primacy and Infallibility.

The first of these documents was intended to bolster the position of the Roman Catholic Church, but its wording is such that it can be seen as an understanding of the “Catholic” faith in the wider sense and therefore is not for deeper consideration here.

The second topic caused wide and uncomfortable dispute among the assembled bishops and it is apparent from the documents and transcripts of that Council that agreement was unlikely. In fact it was more than likely that the concept of personal primacy and infallibility would be rejected, primarily by the bishops of what we now call the new and emerging worlds. In the summer of 1870 Pius suspended the Council and the bishops began their journeys homeward. When Pius then unexpectedly re-convened the Council it was almost entirely the European bishops that attended the final sessions – the very bishops who had aligned themselves with Pius in the earlier sessions. This “rump” of the Council acclaimed the personal primacy and – worse – the personal infallibility of the Pope as Supreme Head of the Universal Church.

All of this history is documented fact to be found in the records of the Council itself. Even without the absence of the Eastern churches this final session of the first Council of the Vatican was a sham, an artifice to provide a politically weak

institution with a moral stature that it would utilise to replace the political power it had so long wielded with a moral one.

I have not touched on other dogmas declared by Rome, such as the Immaculate Conception and Assumption of Mary since both of these were wide-spread pious beliefs held throughout the whole church and its history and simply did not need to be declared “essential to salvation”.

Most certainly it is not a part of the ancient faith that we preach to the modern world that belief in the supremacy and infallibility of one man (other than Jesus, of course!) should be essential to salvation.