THE COUNCIL OF TRENT

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THE little alpine city of Trent is not a very important place today, nor was it in the sixteenth century, apart from its position on a fairly busy line of communication connecting Italy with Germany over the Brenner Pass; and it may well be asked how it came to be the site of an important General Council of the Church. The answer lies in the circumstance that still brings Trent and the Trentino into the news today, their mixed racial character. In the sixteenth century Trent, with an Italian majority and a German minority, was ruled by its Prince-Bishop, usually a prelate of mixed German and Italian connections. It was the capital of a Prince-Bishopric (one of so many in Germany) that formed a constituent principality of the Holy Roman Empire of the German nation, the boundary of which curious organization with the free and sovereign Italian State of Venice lay not far to the south on the road to Verona. Trent was thus technically 'German' soil, and had its German elements of culture and self-consciousness; but its easiest communications were all with the Italian south. As a site for a General Council Trent was a compromise between those who wanted a German city and those who wanted an Italian one. It was not a popular choice with the members of the Council, for it was usually found to be either too hot or too cold. Housing and heating presented difficulties, the air was said to be unhealthy, living was expensive, and Venice was tantalizingly near. If it was difficult to get bishops, of any nationality, to go to Trent, it was even more difficult to keep them there.

The acute and prolonged controversy over the site of the General Council which was all but universally demanded as urgently necessary for the reform of the Church in the early decades of the sixteenth century, reveals the variety of pressures which lay behind the movement. The twentieth century is in no position to laugh at the sixteenth for seeing endless significances in the choice of sites for international conferences. So far as the Papacy was concerned, it seemed vital to avoid giving any handle to a renewed activation of fifteenth-century 'conciliar' doctrines concerning the supremacy of a General Council over the Pope. Such doctrines were closely associated with the German cities of Basle and Constance. They were still very much alive in France, and in Spain, and in Germany

itself, despite incessant papal condemnations since the time of
Eugenius IV; and it seemed that they could best be guarded against
in some Italian city not under foreign control—preferably some city
in the Papal States. The incident of the attempted schismatical
Council at Pisa in 1512, though soon snuffed out and replaced by the
Fifth Lateran at Rome (1512-17), showed that the danger was not
wholly academic; but the pressure for a reform council was not
lessened by the Fifth Lateran with its well-meaning but ineffective
reforms, while it was clear that another Lateran council at Rome
itself—always, of course, the papal ideal—would not do. In addition,
up to the death of Clement VII in 1534, the papacy had usually
been committed politically and militarily to one or other side in the
chronic struggle between the two outstanding powers in Europe,
the Habsburg and the Valois dynasties, whose rivalry and warfare
plagued Europe until 1559. This rivalry was in itself one of the
most formidable obstacles to a General Council, not merely because
an international assembly was difficult to stage anywhere during
hostilities, but also because in spite of the wise resumption of papal
political neutrality by Paul III (1534-49) the project of a General
Council always seemed to the French something calculated to bring
advantage to the Emperor Charles V with whose other natural
enemies—the German Protestant princes and the Turks—the Most
Christian King of France was becoming ever more closely linked
from the early 1530s. So, when after eleven years of chequered and
complex negotiations, involving at least three abortive convocations,
a General Council supported by both Charles V and Francis I of
France at a time of peace between them did really open in Trent in
December 1545, the French support was no more than tepid and
consisted only of three or four bishops; but when the Council in
March, 1547 moved itself to Bologna (the second city of the Papal
States) and was for that reason repudiated by Charles V, the French
support became more active and about a dozen French bishops and
some eminent French theologians graced the busy, but fruitless,
first months of the Bologna meeting.

After three years' deadlock between Paul III and Charles V over
this transference to Bologna, during which Charles V tried the
expedient of the Interim in Germany, Paul's successor, Julius III,
who as Cardinal del Monte had been his first Presiding Legate at
Trent and Bologna, made his peace with the Emperor and recon-
voked the Council to Trent. He hoped also for French support. But
Henry II of France saw in the new friendship of Pope and Emperor
something hostile to French interests. This time the Council at
Trent would be, it was thought in France, conducted too much by

the Emperor for the strengthening of his own power in Germany. In the event the French refused to recognize the new assembly (1551-52) as a General Council. They intervened in Italy in the complicated question (originating from Paul III's family ambitions to found a dynasty in Italy) of the Duchies of Parma and Piacenza, and finally stimulated and allied themselves with the rising in Germany against Charles V early in 1552 which completely upset his supremacy there, caused the hasty dispersal of the Council at Trent, and brought to an end the period of truce between Habsburg and Valois which had prevailed since 1544 and had been the indispensable political background to the first two of the three periods of the Council of Trent's sessions.

But the rivalry between the two leading Catholic powers in Europe (for Charles V was also King of Spain and of Naples and Sicily, Lord of the Netherlands Provinces and in control of the Duchy of Milan) was not the only way, nor yet the most deeply significant, in which lay politics influenced the course of the Council of Trent. Even more insistent, perhaps, than the general desire for a Council to reform the Church, was the special demand in Germany for a General Council of a kind that might restore unity of religion there after the first successes of Lutheranism. From the late 1520s when Lutheranism was taken up by a number of German princes and towns, each forming its state-controlled church, the progressive division of Germany into a diminishing number of Catholic and an increasing number of Lutheran principalities became a factor of prime political importance. The external control of the Church and of ecclesiastical persons and politics by the State had gone very far in the Catholic countries of late medieval Europe. The promotion of Church reform and the appointment and control of bishops by kings and princes were features of Spanish, French, Neapolitan and to some extent German life, though in the Lutheran states, of course, the control went much further into the spiritual sphere. But if the attendance of French, Spanish or Neapolitan prelates at a General Council depended on the green light from the monarchs concerned, those monarchs were also asked and expected to send their political ambassadors to the Assembly. They were not loath to give their advice on ecclesiastical matters, and the Emperor Charles V, as Lay Head of the Christian Commonwealth, Emperor over the German Confederation, and King of Spain, Naples and Sicily, took very seriously his religious responsibility in all three capacities. As Emperor, what seemed to him paramount was religious reconciliation in Germany. This was a task both spiritual and political in nature, the achievement of which, said his enemies, would be

calculated to enhance too greatly his authority within Germany and
therefore in Europe as a whole. But, in any case, how was reconcilia-
tion between Lutherans and Catholics to be gone about? Charles
and his advisors worked out elaborate plans in which the General
Council was to play its part—almost at his dictation; plans of a
sort that often caused grave apprehension to Rome and led to
periods of Papal-Imperial friction between Paul III and Charles V
which almost recall the great medieval conflicts. The first essential
for Charles was for the General Council to be within Germany. All
turned on this—for both Catholics and Lutherans at successive Diets
had reiterated this demand for a General Council to be held on
German soil, and the Lutherans would simply not consider one else-
where at all. It mattered not that the Lutheran definition of the
'free, General Council of Christendom' to which alone they would
bring their doctrines, to be tested *sola scriptura*, represented an
assembly of a kind which no Pope could countenance. If a General
Council of *some* sort—thought Charles—could be arranged on
German soil, then progress might be made. Trent *just* fulfilled the
condition of 'German soil' and hence the Emperor's grim adherence
to it once it had been rather unwillingly agreed to by Paul III. For
Site implied Control—or was thought to—and though Trent was
on the Italian side of the watershed, indeed inside Italy for all
practical purposes, it was the possibility of Imperial control that
frightened Rome. For second in the Imperial plan of action was the
reform of the over-active, over-grasping Papal Curia, the practices
of whose various branches stood in the way of general reform; and
together with this such drastic reconstructions of church life,
liturgy, and discipline as recommended themselves to a considerable
number of liberal-minded German Catholics influenced by Eras-
mian thought who believed that changes like a married clergy, lay
communion under both kinds, the abolition of fasting, a vernacular
liturgy and a general simplification of ecclesiastical ceremonies and
obligations, would stem the flow of converts to Lutheranism and
prepare minds and tempers all round for an eventual agreement on
matters of basic doctrine. Trent then was to be—in Charles' plans—
the great Reunion Council, which, as the culminating act of the
drama, was to set the seal on doctrinal agreement between Catholic
and Lutheran cemented by previous concessions of a new and less
exacting discipline which would meet in things mutable the demands
of the new religious psychology. It was the threat, made indirectly
from time to time, of all this perhaps coming about on an autono-
mous national basis under Imperial direction (failing a suitable
General Council) that drew down the most severe papal rebukes,

but which eventually played a perhaps decisive part in bringing the
General Council at Trent into being at all. The many 'reunion'
conferences between well-disposed Catholic and Lutheran theologians
in Germany, of which the Ratisbon conference of 1541 graced by
Cardinal Contarini as papal legate is the best-known example, are
all part of the same pattern. But the acceptance by both sides at
Ratisbon of the debatable doctrine of Double Justification, after-
wards rejected by Trent, was off-set by disagreement over the
Church, the Papacy and the Eucharist.

Charles V, then, was looking at the Council of Trent, and hoping
to influence it, from the point of view of what became more and
more clearly an illusion. In 1546 he turned, in military alliance with
Paul III, to an armed attack on the German Protestant Princes,
hoping to soften them through defeat in the field into accepting the
Council's doctrinal decisions, but also hoping to persuade the Coun-
cil to defer for a while and then perhaps soften up those decisions to
meet Lutheran susceptibilities. In this he was frustrated by the
action of the Council (to which no German bishops went) in making
decisions on fundamental matters of doctrine in its first sessions of
1545-47, condemning the root Protestant theses on Sin and Grace
and Justification while the Schmalkaldic War was only in prepara-
tion or in its initial stages, instead of turning its attention, as the
Emperor wished, to wide schemes of reform before broaching
doctrine at all. If the Council did give some attention to reform
of a rather limited kind, at this stage, it was because the Fathers
insisted (against the initial orders of Paul III). But the main reform
matter—the enforcement of episcopal residence—soon brought up
delicate and dangerous issues regarding the relationship of papal
and episcopal authority and the prerogatives of the Roman Curia
which the Pope did not wish the Council to deal with. In such
circumstances the fury of Charles V can be understood when in
March 1547 the Council, under legatine inspiration (but not direct
papal order), took the opportunity of an outbreak of infectious
disease from which one bishop died, and many wished to flee, to
move itself to Bologna, a consummation which the legates had long
and increasingly wished to effect. Thirteen Spanish, or South
Italian, bishops under Imperial control, refused to move, and nine
of these remained *in situ* until Julius III recalled the Council to Trent
four years later. The translation was the last straw to Charles, who
refused to recognize it, forbade his bishops to leave Trent and at
length protested officially against the translation both in Rome and
Bologna. He used the supremacy which the battle of Mühlberg gave
him in Germany a month after the translation to move forward in

1548 to the imposition there of his own 'interim' settlement of religion—an arrangement which failed to satisfy anyone. His repudiation of Bologna and his repeated insistence on the Council coming back to Trent, for the sake of Germany, made it impossible for any effective conciliar pronouncements to be made at Bologna and in effect forced Paul III's successor to summon the Council again to Trent. The Tridentine sessions of 1551-52 were marked by an unwonted harmony between Pope and Emperor, but only served finally to demonstrate the complete unreality of the latter's illusions. Though about a dozen German bishops came this time, to a gathering predominantly Spanish (few Italians came, most were now too poor), the great design of bringing the Protestants to Trent for discussion and eventual submission completely failed. They would come only on their own terms, as equals. The pipe-dream of Charles of Habsburg was over. Ten years later, when the Council reassembled for the third time at Trent under Pius IV in 1562, the political background was completely changed. Valois and Habsburg had buried the hatchet in 1559; internal German affairs had been temporarily settled by the Peace of Augsburg of 1555 and no one wished to disturb it, unsatisfactory though it might be; Charles V was dead, and Spain detached from the Empire: there were thus three main Catholic powers instead of two. The main pressure for the renewal of the Council came now from France, where the sudden spread of Calvinism caused the French Government to adopt in regard to the third convocation of Trent in 1562-63 a policy that was very much a restatement in French terms of Charles V's earlier ideas for Germany. There is no space to develop this further here.

At all periods of its history, then, the Council of Trent worked against a disturbed political background in which the rivalries, ambitions, ecclesiastical claims, illusions about 'reunion', or veiled threats of 'national settlements' of Emperors and Kings desperate at the disastrous political effects of religious differences within their realms, affected it powerfully at all turns. Every authority concerned cast it for a different role. Charles V in the earlier periods, the French in the last, saw it as a 'reunion council'—that long-clinging illusion in sixteenth, indeed even in seventeenth-century religious idealism. The Spaniards—even when loyal to Charles V—visualized it always as the promised Catholic Reform Council—stringent, rigid, austere, releasing the rightful independence of diocesan bishops from the strangling toils of curial and other interferences. Considering all the manifold and at times almost intolerable tensions under which the Council functioned in all its periods it is quite remarkable with what success it performed that main function for

which the Papacy had always cast it—the clarification of Catholic doctrine *vis-à-vis* the errors of 'the modern heretics'. If it were powerless to heal the existing breach, it did indeed show more precisely where the breach lay. But the effort in terms of strain and endurance and persistence that went to produce the dogmatic decrees of Trent can only be realized by those who have followed the advisory theologians and the bishops day by day, week by week, month by month, through their laborious work (often made heavier by unnecessary loquacity). Draft after draft was meticulously revised in the intense effort to get every word absolutely right, and in the desire to achieve unanimity without canonizing mere 'school-opinions'. Much of the *modus procedendi* was worked out by improvisation and there is much of interest in the form of the decrees, and in the systematic use of advisory theologians not belonging to the 'plenum' publicly to discuss and sort out the points before the actual drafting of canons—a valuable innovation in conciliar procedure. The addition of Chapters of Positive Teaching in preface to the traditional Canons condemning errors was (where employed) also a new feature. Readers of BLACKFRIARS may regret to hear that the old story of the Bible and the *Summa* of St Thomas being placed side by side in the council room for consultation is no more than a story. St Thomas was indeed always quoted with the greatest respect— often decisively, but, in the earlier stages at least, Franciscan theologians (predominantly Conventuals) were numerically in a majority over Dominicans, and in all Thomist-Scotist contests the Scotists found much support. There were, however, I think, all in all, more Dominican than Franciscan bishops. The professional advisory theologians were predominantly Friars, the main exceptions being, of course, the Jesuits, sent by the Holy See, whose views were very influential, and a group of secular Louvain theologians who appeared in 1551-52.

The dogmatic work of Trent covered the Canon of the Bible, the value of 'apostolic traditions', Original Sin, Justification, and the Sacraments both collectively and individually. Very interesting discussions on Purgatory and Indulgences took place at Bologna in 1547, but were not drawn upon in the final short decrees rushed through at the very end in December 1563. There are no Tridentine decrees on the Church or on the Papacy and its authority. This may seem strange in view of the Protestant Reformers' teaching on these subjects. But the explanation is that views at the Council on the relationship between papal and diocesan episcopal authority were too much divided, and the whole subject too heavily charged with emotion, for an official defining pronouncement to be possible. The

tension between the 'curialists' and the 'episcopalians' (which was
not altogether a case of Italians versus the rest, for the Italians were
divided) was always only just below the surface. It broke through
from time to time in a number of little incidents but made itself
chiefly felt in regard to the issue of enforcing episcopal residence—
recognized by all as the keystone of reform and discussed both in
1546 and 1562. Was residence an obligation *de jure divino* or only *de
jure ecclesiastico*? The more advanced reformers of all nationalities
thought that the acceptance of the *jus divinum* was a *sine qua non* of a
real, pastorally fruitful enforcement of residence. Rome, who saw
what implications lay behind, would have none of it. And late in
1562 the issue came up again in a more far-reaching way when, in
dealing with the Sacrament of Holy Orders, a large party—
Spaniards, French, Italians—insisted that a bishop received his
jurisdiction direct from God and not mediately through the Pope.
For six months the Council was in deadlock over this matter, and
came near to breaking up. The supporters of *Jus Divinum* would
allow nothing to be done unless their view were accepted. Behind
them lay the King of Spain, the King of France, and the Emperor
Ferdinand I; and in the spring of 1563 plans began to be concerted
for sending further non-Italian bishops to Trent. On the other side
the Papacy was adamant against the *Jus Divinum* and episcopal
authority. But an attempt to insert into the draft decree a phrase
from the Union-Decree of Florence (with the Greeks) ascribing to
the Pope '*potestatem pascendi, regendi et gubernandi universalem ecclesiam*'
was totally rejected by the Gallican bishops and the *Jus Divinum*
party in general.

From this lamentable and perilous state the Council was saved by
a new President, Cardinal Morone, who succeeded Cardinal
Gonzaga early in 1563 on the latter's death, Morone was a skilful
diplomat with nearly thirty years' experience of German and con-
ciliar problems. He saw that the key to the situation lay with the
secular powers behind most of the bishops. He laid siege to Philip of
Spain and the Emperor Ferdinand. Other papal diplomatists
fastened on to the Cardinal of Lorraine, the real power with the
French. At length a *détente* was produced. In order to get *something*
out of the Council and save it from breaking up, extreme positions
on both sides were abandoned. The decree would merely state that
'bishops are placed by the Holy Ghost to rule the Church of God'
(cf. Acts, xx, 28). Morone in return, after consultation with Rome,
promised the most extensive reforms possible, provided the Council
gave up all claim to reform the Papal Curia. There were to be no
radical transformations or reconstitutions of liturgy or discipline on

'Erasmian' principles such as the Germans originally, and the French more recently, had wanted as bait for possible Protestant returners or stabilizers for wavering Catholics. Nevertheless it is in the reform decrees of the last sessions of Trent following the resolution of the crisis over the *Jus Divinum* of bishops that we find the bulk of the real reform achievements of the Council, those provisions, limited indeed in some respects, but eventually effective, that cleansed the face of the Church and renovated her pastoral efficiency. They contained a very reasonable 'New Deal' for the episcopate, though Spanish ideals were not satisfied and it did not pass unnoticed that in some thirty or so cases bishops were given powers in their own dioceses as 'delegates of the Apostolic See'. They sketched in effect a new model for a new episcopal generation; gave a new 'code' for the religious orders and contained the famous decree instituting seminaries.

Does the absence of a Tridentine decree on the Papacy mean that the Council had no effect on papal development? By no means. The Papacy has evolved historically through its own self-assured initiative. On its own momentum it went ahead after Trent. The staging, managing, interpreting and finally the securing of the implementation of Trent was an immense task and one which completely renovated the Papacy—though the financial expense was a heavy drain. The difference in the Papacy even between 1534 and 1564 is immeasurable. Trent caused the Papacy not only to exercize again old muscles, as it were, but to draw once more on the inexhaustible reservoir of papal potential. The tasks of putting into operation the New Model episcopate, of fostering the growth of the New Model parochial clergy springing from the Tridentine seminaries and the influence of Jesuit spirituality, of performing the specific tasks left over to the Papacy by the Council (Catechism, Index, Liturgical Revision), all helped the evolution of the New Model Counter-Reformation Papacy with its new spirit and its new organs, principally the permanent Congregations of Cardinals, systematized by Sixtus V into the government offices of the modern Church, the permanent Diplomatic Nuntios and the Secretariat of State, organs which in some sense paralleled new developments in the governments of the leading secular states of Europe. Though it was unable to reaffirm by Conciliar Decree the doctrine of the universal pastorate of the Holy See, the Council of Trent was nevertheless one of the most powerful factors in its functional restoration and further development at a moment of the gravest crisis in Catholic history.