

THE PROCEDURE OF AN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

"A general meeting of the episcopacy of the whole world in the center of Catholicism" said the Holy Father's Christmas encyclical, "would be most suitable to the coming jubilee year, whence immense advantage might come to the cause of peace after so long and so profound an upheaval. But the reassembling of the Ecumenical Council at the Vatican would be of such a grave event that it is necessary to wait and pray, as did the pious leader of God's elect people, until God gives a clearer sign of His wishes." Within the past few weeks God has answered the prayers of the Holy Father and Pius XI has decided to reconvene the Vatican Council in October of 1925. Preparations are now under way to perfect the technical organization in order that the Council may be able to accomplish its work efficiently.

Naturally there will be a great deal of speculation about the program of the council. So called "special correspondents," "reliable correspondents," etc., from the shadows of the Vatican will feed the public press with their plausible editorials containing, as Cardinal Gibbons wrote some sixty years ago, "Tiny grains of truth and bushels of fiction."

It would be presumptuous to attempt to forecast what subjects will be discussed at the council. Neither can it be asserted with absolute certainty just how the business of the Council will be conducted. The subjects to be discussed and the method of procedure are some of the matters pertaining to a council which the Pope, in virtue of his fulness of power as Supreme Head of the Church, determines (Can. 222). However, since the Vatican Council (1869-1870) confirmed the method of procedure followed at the Council of Trent (1545-1563), it is safe to surmise that the future council will follow the program tested by the experience of the two latest councils of the Church.

Since the Sovereign Pontiff has decided to convene the council in 1925 the intervening time is not too long for the enormous amount of work that must be accomplished before the first sessions can take place. For almost five years before the preliminary session of the Vatican Council preparations were being made by the saintly Pius IX and several committees.



Christ Giving the Keys to St. Peter—Raphael, Vatican Gallery

The first committee appointed by the Pope was known as the "central preparatory commission." At first there were five cardinals on this committee and a little later three more cardinals, seven consultors, and one secretary were added. The first recommendation of this committee was that the bishops of various countries should be called upon for suggestions as to matters that needed to be discussed at the council. And on the 27th of March, 1865, Pius IX commanded thirty-six bishops of the Latin Rite to express their views under the pledge of secrecy. Early in 1866 he also commanded several bishops of the Oriental Rite to do the same under like conditions.

After these suggestions were received, six sub-committees were appointed to discuss thoroughly and to arrange the questions that were to be brought before the council. These sub-committees were composed of eighty-one learned theologians and canonists recommended by the different Papal Nuncios and Apostolical Delegates of various countries. Each sub-committee, under the presidency of a cardinal appointed by the Pope, considered questions on dogma, discipline, religious orders, ceremonies, Oriental churches and missions, ecclesiastical and political subjects. And each sub-committee assembled in that office of the Roman Curia which had the closest relation with the subjects entrusted to it.

These sub-committees were very thorough in their research work. Practically the whole field of theology and canon law was covered by these diligent and learned prelates. The voluminous writings of the Fathers of the Church and the teachings of eminent theologians were carefully gleaned to find solutions for the doctrinal problems to be solved at the council. In canon law the decrees of the Popes and the councils, that were promulgated to correct the abuses of the past, were examined to ascertain the best way to govern the morals of the present.

From the extensive preparations made for a council one is apt to suspect that many of the decrees are cut and dried long before the solemn opening session. But the bishops are conscientious judges. Often it happened at the Vatican Council that a draught of a decree, prepared painstakingly by the sub-committee, was entirely changed or rejected as a whole by the bishops in session. Every sentence, every clause and phrase, every word and punctuation mark had to come up to the pre-

cision required by the bishops of the Church. No stone was left unturned to get at the truth of the matter; no text of Sacred Scripture, no passage in the writings of the Fathers, no page of Ecclesiastical History bearing on the subject, no voice of tradition escaped the vigilant investigations of the bishops, so that the whole truth of God might be brought to light.

After the preliminary work of the preparatory commission is almost completed the Holy Father issues an encyclical of convocation inviting all the bishops of the Church to the council. In the calling of a council the Pope recognizes none of those racial or national distinctions, so destructive of the peace of peoples since the war. The colored bishop of Africa, a cardinal at Rome, an archbishop from devastated Europe, a bishop from the mission fields of China and Japan, a bishop from the poorest diocese in America, an abbot from Asia, in fact all who are entitled to take part in the proceedings of the council will be notified by the Pope to attend the council. This is the reason a council convened by the Pope is called an Ecumenical (from a Greek word meaning "inhabitated world") Council. All cardinals, patriarchs, primates, archbishops, bishops, abbots and superiors of religious orders are invited by the Pope to the council. Beside these a few priests, who are noted for their learning, receive a special invitation from the Holy Father.

When the day assigned for the opening of the council is at hand, and the Fathers of the Church have arrived, the Pope appoints the officials for the council. At the Vatican Council these officials included: five Papal Legates, one of whom was chief presiding officer; a Secretary, one under-secretary, and two assistants; several notaries; eight scrutators; promoters; masters of ceremonies; and several ushers (Multiplices inter, Pii IX). Besides these a Congregation of Petitions was appointed whose duty it was to examine proposals offered to the Pope by the members of the council and then to recommend to the Pope either the consideration or rejection of these same proposals. Then followed the election of the four Deputations, namely: one on dogma, one of Church discipline; one on religious orders; and the one of Oriental Rites. The Pope appointed a cardinal as chairman for each Deputation. At this session the method of procedure and the by-laws of the council were also made known.

Since the Council of Constance there have been two kinds of sessions, private and public, at the councils of the Church. At the Council of Trent and the Vatican Council the meetings of the Deputations were called private sessions. The public sessions were the meetings at which all the bishops assembled to discuss the questions up for debate. These sessions were always preceded by Mass and other prayers. The Shepherds of the Master's flock were ever mindful of His promise, "Where there are two or three gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them" (Math. 18, 20). Often days and weeks intervened between the public sessions. But these days of apparent inactivity were not days of rest for the members of the council, but rather they were days of intense and conscientious study given to the questions to be discussed at the next session.

The public sessions are often called general congregations to distinguish them from the solemn public sessions, at which the Pope presides, to vote on and promulgate the decrees of the council. And it is these solemn public sessions that are better known in history. At the Vatican Council there were four solemn public sessions and eighty-nine general congregations.

After the solemn opening of the Vatican Council by the Pope, printed copies of the tentative decrees or draughts, prepared by the sub-committees under the general supervision of the central commission, were given to each member of the council. The subjects treated in these draughts were not entirely unknown to the members, for, while they were still at home, the Pope had informed them of the doctrinal errors and the disciplinary abuses that would be discussed at the council (*Acta et Decreta Conc. Vat. Cap. II et III*).

If one could transport himself back to a public session of the Vatican Council and from some hidden corner watch the Fathers of the Church while they were in the heat of a debate he would behold a scene unsurpassed at any of the assemblies of the nations. He would have to conceal himself very carefully, because nobody except those who strictly belong to the council are permitted to see and hear what takes place during a session. Even the members of the council are put on their honor not to tell the substance of any debate, for these debates are meant for the Fathers of the council and not for the public at large. Unlike the sessions of the representatives of the

people there are no party programs to fight about. Perfect freedom of speech is enjoyed (*Aterni Patris Pii IX*). And although at times the debates become rather lively the one object is to thrash out the truth. With what thoroughness this is done can be judged from only a glance at the method of procedure followed at the public sessions of the Vatican Council.

From the first to the twenty-ninth session the draught, prepared by the central commission, was read and explained to the members in session. After this was finished the discussion began. All alterations and amendments were sent to the Deputation for revision. Then in another session the revised draught was again discussed. This process was repeated again and again until the draught passed to the satisfaction of the majority of the members. However, this process took up too much time and it had further disadvantages. Many members in a desire to be brief and to the point omitted many things that would throw light upon the matter under discussion. Still other bishops, whose mature and experienced judgments would have been very valuable, hesitated to speak because their voices were too feeble to assure their being heard throughout the large assembly hall, which held over a thousand persons in by no means crowded seats. So the method of procedure was reformed to remedy these defects.

The main points of the reformed regulations are the following. After the draught had been distributed to the bishops, a suitable time was allowed by the presiding Papal Legate for them to study it and write out their remarks and amendments. At an appointed time all remarks and amendments were handed to the Secretary of the council, who sent them to the respective Deputation. Then the Deputation, aided by its preparatory subcommittee and in the light of these proposed amendments, revised the draught. This revised draught, together with a summary of the remarks and amendments, was printed and distributed to the bishops. Then at an appointed time the revised draught was again discussed according to the former by-laws of the general congregation.

This discussion proceeded in the strict order of topics: first, generally; then on the several portions of it, one by one. The speakers who wished to take part in the discussion, in giving their names to the Secretary, stated also whether they intended

to speak on the decree as a whole, or on some special parts of it, and on which ones. All amendments offered by the speaker were written and handed to the Secretary at the conclusion of the speech. The members of the Deputation were free to speak in reply during a debate, if they thought it advisable (Cf. *Acta et Decreta Conc. Vat.* p. 163).

Again in the light of these proposed amendments to the revised draught, and after carefully reconsidering the minutes of the session, the Deputation made its final report, accepting or rejecting the several amendments, and assigning their reasons to the general congregation on each point.

Then followed the voting. Each portion of the decree was voted on separately. The amendments touching each portion were either adopted or rejected, and then the whole portion was voted on. One after another each portion was taken up and voted on in the same manner. Finally all the adopted amendments were put together and a more solemn vote was cast on the whole decree. This concluded the consultative action of the council on that draught of decrees. It was now ready for a solemn enactment and promulgation in the next solemn public session.

The Pope presides personally over the public session at which the final voting on a draught is held. These sessions take on a grandeur not seen at the general congregations. At the proper time the cardinals, patriarchs, primates, archbishops, bishops, mitred abbots, and the superiors of religious orders take their places in the assembly hall according to their respective dignity and seniority. Only these prelates of the Church have a vote. At the farthest end of the hall, on his elevated throne sits the Pope, on his head a precious mitre glittering with jewels, on his shoulders a cope rich with golden embroidery. On either hand are seated the venerable cardinals, arrayed in white mitres and wearing their richest robes of office. In front of them sit the patriarchs, mostly Easterners, in the rich and bright-colored robes of their respective rites, wearing tiaras radiant with jewels. Down either side run the manifold lines of primates, archbishops, bishops and other prelates all in white mitres and in copes of red lama. Scattered here and there in that venerable assembly are the Oriental prelates who wear many-colored vestments and rich tiaras. And in

sharp contrast to all this brilliancy are the superiors of religious orders in their plain habits.

As at the other sessions so at the solemn public sessions prayers for enlightenment are said. After the High Mass, celebrated in the assembly hall, the open book of the Gospels is enthroned on the altar. The Holy Father intones the "Veni Creator Spiritus" and the verses of this sublime hymn are sung alternately by the choir and the assembly. Then the Sovereign Pontiff sings some special prayers and the Litany of the Saints is chanted according to the melodies of Gregorian chant. At this point of the services all those who do not strictly belong to the council are sent away and the doors are locked. And the work of the solemn public session is finished with only the officials of the council and the voters present.

One of the secretaries of the council ascends the pulpit and reads the entire Constitution to be voted on. At the conclusion he asks: "Most Eminent and Reverend Fathers, do you approve of the canons and decrees contained in this Constitution?" Then beginning at the senior member of the council each one is called upon to stand in his place and vote. If he approves the decrees he answers, *Placet*; and if he does not approve he votes, *Non placet*. An usher standing near the voter repeats the "*Placet*," or "*Non placet*." Another usher standing close by does the same. And then the ushers send the vote echoing three times through the assembly hall. Thus there can be no mistake as to the vote, for not only the notaries, but anybody who wishes can keep a correct tally. At the conclusion of the voting there is a pause in which the notaries count the votes and then announce the results (Cf. *Acta et Decreta Conc. Vat. Cap. XX*).

The Pope, being superior to a council, is in no way obliged to confirm the decisions of the majority. But since the reason a Pope convokes an ecumenical council is to call the bishops of Christendom to one place that they can assist him to pass judgments on matters pertaining to faith and morals the Holy Father generally confirms the decisions of the majority (*maior aut sanior pars*) of the bishops. And when the decrees and canons of a council receive the personal (Can. 227) confirmation of the Holy Father they must be observed by the entire Church. This confirmation of the Pope is the official sanction given to

the work of the council. It is the signature of the Vicar of Jesus Christ who said to the Apostles and their successors, "Who hears you, hears Me" Luke, X, 16.

—Bro. Henry Barthelemy, O. P.

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THE ROSES OF CHRIST

The breath of roses comes again,
 And as I see their lovely heads
 In crimson beauty grace the vine,
 I think, perhaps, that Jesus too
 Loved roses when a little boy,
 And picked them with his baby hands:
 Then tears start quickly to my eyes,
 For roses grow on bitter thorns
 That stain the fingers breaking them:
 And Jesus' hands were stained, I know,
 For when he hung upon the cross,
 A veil of roses sweetly lay
 About his shoulders, and a rose
 Adorned each tender hand and foot;
 A crown of roses wreathed his brow,
 And O, a rose bloomed in his heart!

—Bro. Gregory Herold, O. P.