

Ecumenical Councils of the Church

The First Eight Ecumenical Councils:

#	Council Name / Location	Years	Teachers and Teachings Rejected	Orthodox Doctrines Decreed
1	Nicea	325	<i>Arians</i> : Jesus was divine, but slightly inferior to the Father; Jesus was the first being created in time by God; slogan: "there was a time when he was not."	Jesus is divine, "of the same substance" (<i>homo-ousios</i>) as the Father, and was with the Father from the very first moment of creation. Sunday was fixed as the date for celebration of Easter. The "Nicene Creed" was written and adopted.
2	Constantinople I	381	<i>Apollinarians</i> : divided human & divine parts of Jesus; Arianism also still prominent; and followers of Macedonius said the Holy Spirit was a divine messenger, but not fully God.	The teachings of Nicea were confirmed and expanded; the Holy Spirit is also fully divine; thus the Trinity has one divine "nature," but three distinct "persons."
3	Ephesus	431	<i>Nestorians</i> : Mary is the "Mother of Christ," but should not be called the "Mother of God," so that Jesus' humanity is not neglected.	Mary is traditionally and properly called the "Mother of God"; Jesus has both a divine and human nature, but united in his one person.
4	Chalcedon	451	<i>Monophysites</i> : Jesus was both human and divine, but he had only "one nature"; his divinity totally replaced his human nature.	The earthly Jesus was both fully human and fully divine; his two natures and two wills were perfectly united in his one person.
5	Constantinople II	553	<i>Various errors</i> of Origen, Theodoret, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ibas of Edessa.	The teachings of the first four Councils, esp. Chalcedon, are reconfirmed.
6	Constantinople III	680-81	<i>Monothelism</i> : Christ has only one divine "will."	Christ has both a human and a divine will.
7	Nicea II	787	<i>Iconoclasm</i> : all images should be destroyed.	The veneration of icons and images is permitted.
8	Constantinople IV	869	<i>Photian Schism</i> : defenders vs. detractors of Bishop Photius.	This council was ultimately unsuccessful; no further councils were held in the East.

The Rest of the Ecumenical Councils:

#	Council Name / Location	Years	Main Topics / Results
9	Lateran I	1123	Ended the practice of Lay Investiture; implemented other reforms; called a crusade.
10	Lateran II	1139	Condemned the errors of Arnold of Brescia.
11	Lateran III	1179	Condemned the Albigensians and Waldensians; issued other decrees for moral reforms.
12	Lateran IV	1215	Again condemned errors of Albigensians and others; issued over 70 decrees for wide-ranging reforms.
13	Lyons I	1245	Excommunicated and deposed Emperor Frederick II; called a new crusade.
14	Lyons II	1274	Temporarily reunited the Greek and Roman Churches; set rules for papal elections.
15	Vienne	1311-13	Addressed problems of the Knights Templar, Beguines, other groups; planned for another crusade and instituted more clerical and educational reforms.
16	Constance	1414-18	Ended the Western Schism; elected Pope Martin V; issued decrees against John Wycliff & Johan Hus.
17	Basel (& Ferrara & Florence)	1431-39	Addressed problems in Bohemia; attempted reunion with the Eastern Church.
18	Lateran V	1512-17	Issued minor disciplinary decrees; planned another crusade against the Turks.
19	Trent	1545-63	Addressed the challenges of Luther and other Reformers; issued many decrees to define Church doctrine and reform Church discipline.
20	Vatican I	1869-70	Three sessions were planned, but only the first was held, due to wars in Europe; formally defined the infallibility of the Pope when he teaches "ex cathedra."
21	Vatican II	1962-65	Updated the Church for the 20th Century, by rediscovering our roots in Early Christianity; finished and expanded the agenda of Vatican I, focusing not only on the Pope but on all Christians; issued 16 documents (4 "Constitutions"; 9 "Decrees"; 3 "Declarations")
22	Vatican III? or Nairobi I?	20xx ?	Updating the Church for the 21st Century?

The Documents of the Second Vatican Council

Pope John XXIII announced his intention to call an Ecumenical Council on Jan. 25, 1959. The Council formally opened on Oct. 11, 1962, closed on Dec. 8, 1965, and met in four sessions (each autumn). Attendance varied between 2100 and 2400 bishops, in addition to hundreds of theological experts and dozens of official observers from other Christian denominations

The bishops assembled at Vatican II debated, amended, voted on, and eventually approved and published sixteen documents covering a wide variety of topics, some on internal ecclesial issues and some on the relationship of the Church to various other people in our world. The four largest and most important documents are called “Constitutions,” while the shorter documents dealing with more particular issues are either called “Decrees” or “Declarations.” These documents are foundational for a proper understanding of Catholic Christianity today, but are still in the process of being implemented fully.

Document Title in English	Official Title in Latin	Date	# Words	Votes
Constitution on Sacred Liturgy	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i>	12/4/1963	8,066 +182	2147 / 4
Dogmatic Constitution on the Church	<i>Lumen Gentium</i>	11/21/1964	17,489 +912	2151 / 5
Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation	<i>Dei Verbum</i>	11/18/1965	3,420	2344 / 6
Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i>	12/7/1965	24,076	2307 / 75
Decree on Means of Social Communication	<i>Inter Mirifica</i>	12/4/1963	2312	1960 / 164
Decree on the Churches of the Eastern Rite	<i>Orientalium Ecclesiarum</i>	11/21/1964	1911 +912	2110 / 39
Decree on Ecumenism	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i>	11/21/1964	4932 +897	2137 / 11
Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops	<i>Christus Dominus</i>	10/28/1965	6216	2319 / 2
Decree on Renewal of Religious Life	<i>Perfectae Caritatis</i>	10/28/1965	3406	2321 / 4
Decree on Priestly Training	<i>Optatam Totius</i>	10/28/1965	3118	2318 / 3
Decree on Apostolate of Laity	<i>Apostolicam Actuositatem</i>	11/18/1965	7254	2340 / 2
Decree on Mission Activity of the Church	<i>Ad Gentes</i>	12/7/1965	9961	2394 / 5
Decree on Ministry of Priests	<i>Presbyterorum Ordinis</i>	12/7/1965	8112	2390 / 4
Declaration on Christian Education	<i>Gravissum Educationis</i>	10/28/1965	2735	2290 / 35
Declaration on the Relation to Non-Christian Religions	<i>Nostra Aetate</i>	10/28/1965	1217	2221 / 88
Declaration on Religious Freedom	<i>Dignitatis Humanae</i>	12/7/1965	3307	2308 / 70

For the full texts of these documents, in multiple languages, see the Vatican Website (<https://vatican.va>).

In 1985, twenty years after the conclusion of Vatican II, the Second Extraordinary Synod of Bishops met to reflect on the importance and the implementation of the teachings of the Council. The Synod’s “Final Report” (“The Church, in the Word of God, Celebrates the Mysteries of Christ for the Salvation of the World”; par. 5) includes several criteria for the proper interpretation of the Documents of Vatican II:

1. The theological interpretation of the conciliar doctrine must show attention to all the documents, in themselves and in their close inter-relationship, in such a way that the integral meaning of the Council’s affirmations—often very complex—might be understood and expressed.
2. Special attention must be paid to the four major Constitutions of the Council, which contain the interpretative key for the other Decrees and Declarations.
3. It is not licit to separate the pastoral character from the doctrinal vigor of the documents.
4. In the same way, it is not licit to separate the spirit and the letter of the Council.
5. Moreover, the Council must be understood in continuity with the great tradition of the Church,
6. and at the same time we must receive light from the Council’s own doctrine for today’s Church and the people of our time. The Church is one and the same throughout all the councils.