

The Church Councils

Overview

When appropriate, leaders of the church have gathered together to discuss issues and make decisions. There are 3 major categories of these meetings as follows:

1. Ecumenical Council
2. Other Non-Ecumenical Councils
3. Synods

Ecumenical Councils

An ecumenical council is an assembly of the college of bishops, with and under the presidency of the pope, which has supreme authority over the Church in matters pertaining to faith, morals, worship and discipline. The church recognizes 21 of these official councils. Scriptures (Acts) also records an ecumenical type – but unofficial - of the gathering between Peter and Paul in the year 49 or 51 to discuss the issues of incorporation of the Gentiles into the new church.

The Second Vatican Council stated: “The supreme authority with which this college (of bishops) is empowered over the whole Church is exercised in a solemn way through an ecumenical council. A council is never ecumenical unless it is confirmed or at least accepted as such by the successor of Peter. It is the prerogative of the Roman Pontiff to convoke these councils, to preside over them, and to confirm them” (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, No. 22).

Other Non-Ecumenical Councils

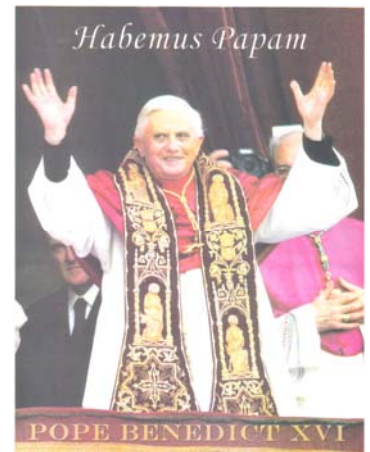
Throughout history other meetings have taken place and sometimes are confused as being an ecumenical council. As stated above – it is only ecumenical when convened by the Pope. These councils tend to be less in importance if that is the right way to define them. As examples there were the councils of: France (314), Milan (355) and three plenary councils of Baltimore in 1852, 1866 and 1884.

Synods

This is typically a gathering of Church leaders intended to give advice on matters touching the life of the church. It also can be a gathering of Bishops in a country or region. Topics covered by synods have included: the family, ordained ministry, the effects of Vatican II, lay ministry and the religious life.

The Pope Presides

The pope is the head of an ecumenical council; he presides over it either personally or through appointees. Decrees and other actions have binding force only when confirmed by him. If a pope dies during a council, it is suspended until reconvened by another pope. An ecumenical council is not superior to a pope. The bishops with the pope represent the whole Church. They do this - not as democratic representatives of the faithful in a kind of church government - but as the successors of the Apostles with divinely given authority, care and responsibility over the whole Church.



Only bishops are council participants and can vote. The supreme authority of the Church can invite others and determine the manner of their participation. Basic legislation concerning ecumenical councils is contained in Canons 337-41 of the Code of Canon Law. Basic doctrinal considerations were stated by the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.