



Trent: What Happened at the Council

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The Council of Trent (1545-1563), the Catholic Church's attempt to put its house in order in response to the Protestant Reformation, has long been praised and blamed for things it never did. Now, in this first full one-volume history in modern times, John W. O'Malley brings to life the volatile issues that pushed several Holy Roman emperors, kings and queens of France, and five popes and all of Europe with them repeatedly to the brink of disaster.

During the council's eighteen years, war and threat of war among the key players, as well as the Ottoman Turks' onslaught against Christendom, turned the council into a perilous enterprise. Its leaders declined to make a pronouncement on war against infidels, but Trent's most glaring and ironic silence was on the authority of the papacy itself. The popes, who reigned as Italian monarchs while serving as pastors, did everything in their power to keep papal reform out of the council's hands and their power was considerable. O'Malley shows how the council pursued its contentious parallel agenda of reforming the Church while simultaneously asserting Catholic doctrine.

Like "What Happened at Vatican II," O'Malley's "Trent: What Happened at the Council" strips mythology from historical truth while providing a clear, concise, and fascinating account of a pivotal episode in Church history. In celebration of the 450th anniversary of the council's closing, it sets the record straight about the much misunderstood failures and achievements of this critical moment in European history."

Trent: What Happened at the Council Details

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From Reader Review Trent: What Happened at the Council for online ebook

Vicky P says

Despite O'Malley's protestations that he was leaving too much detail out of an enormously complex issue (and he definitely was), this book proceeded to be a relatively easy to follow account of Trent. I've been doing many other readings for a class aside from this one and this particular text continues to be the most clear-cut of all of them, perhaps because it was intended as an overview and introduction rather than any type of groundbreaking scholarship. But it's appropriate that O'Malley wrote such a work, as he is a premier scholar in this specialty. I would highly recommend this to anyone wanting to get their feet wet with this topic, especially if they are under the impression that the Council was as high-minded as many basic high school-level (or even some undergraduate-level) courses lead you to believe.

Joe Boenzi says

Extremely well researched and presented, this volume offers many insights into the life of the Church in the Early Modern period, including the customs, cultural diversity, pastoral orientation, academic preparation, politics, economics and ideologies that had first created divisions in Christianity, but which were also integral in bringing the Church to reform (rather than counter-reform).

Bruce Strom says

John O'Malley argues that Trent was not a reactionary council but was a truly reforming council, a council that agreed in part with the Protestant doctrines on such matters as grace and justification by faith, a council that reinvigorated the Catholic Church, a council that steered the Catholic Church on a path that many centuries later would result in the Vatican II council. Indeed, he sees Vatican II as affirming the doctrines of Trent, he sees Vatican II as a continuation of the reforms begun by the Council of Trent.

The Council of Trent is seen by many historians as a reactionary counter-reformation because soon after the council ended the Vatican gathered as many of the records of the proceedings it could find and locked them up in the Vatican Library. The Vatican was reacting to the Protestant polemics and hostility, they thought that the politics would be misinterpreted and vilified. In the decades before Vatican II the Vatican made these records available to scholars, and these sources enables scholars like O'Malley to have a more balanced view of Trent.

John O'Malley also recorded a series of lectures on the Council of Trent which are a great complement to the book. They begin with the events and politics preceding the calling of the Council of Trent, and why the Popes were so reluctant to call a church council that Trent was finally called into session just before Luther passed away.

Now You Know Media, O'Malley lectures on Trent

Christopher Bellito in this history agrees with O'Malley's assessment that Vatican II built on the decrees of the Council of Trent:

Now You Know Media, Bellito lectures on History of Catholic Church

The following blogs give you a preview of the book and lectures, starting with the events and politics preceding the calling of the Council of Trent, including why .

Blog 1, Trent

The Council of Trent starts slowly with only a handful of bishops meeting at first, but they gather slowly and much is accomplished at the first session. Like Vatican II, attending theologians update the bishops on the current theological thinking. At both these councils the Church is first learning and pondering the theological questions, then the Church teaches the clergy and the laity.

Blog 2, Trent

After an interruption of many years, a new Pope and new Kings and Emperors agree to continue the council, tackling the tough questions of grace, original sin, and justification by faith.

Blog 3, Trent

O'Malley discusses the Trent decrees on the sacraments, why Trent was seen by many Catholics and Protestants as combative and reactionary, and its long term effect and some of the developments immediately after the Council of Trent adjourns.

Blog 4, Trent

Louise says

The Council of Trent appears in the background in many 16th century biographies, histories and fictional works. Not much is said of it, and my understanding of it was sketchy. This short volume was a great help in putting it together not just for my understanding of European history, but for general understanding of this important milestone in the development of the Catholic Church.

The first part, describing the political situation, the pressures on the Pope, The Holy Roman Emperor and the monarchs and the impetus for reform was the daunting. I wish I had had more background, because it was not easy reading. After you understand the historical context under which the Council was founded, what follows is easier to grasp.

"The" Council was really three councils spanning 18 years. The first was called to reconcile differences with the Lutherans and respond to Martin Luther's criticisms. Perhaps if this Council had lasted and dealt with the issues, history would have been very different. But the Protestant issues waned in importance as the separation became a done deal. By the third and final meeting of Council, much of northern Europe was Protestant, and the Council focused on doctrine and internal reform.

Reform wasn't easy since the delegates were and/or had ties to those who benefited from the status quo. The book shows how leadership was needed to build consensus. The third and final Council set the organization and laid out the doctrines that took the Church into the modern era.

Author John O'Mally states in the introduction that his goal is to make the work of the Council intelligible to the general reader and he succeeds.

Aaron Carpenter says

Who knew the history of a church council could be so compelling? However, this Jesuit professor has told a delightful story of a foundational event for one of the world's largest religious groups. His skill as a writer is revealed in the way he navigates dozens of unfamiliar names and makes sense of the convoluted geopolitics of Renaissance Europe in order to present a well-paced narrative accessible to even the most devout Protestant. That said, his tone is decidedly neutral throughout, so much so, that I had to check after reading to discover whether the author was, in fact, Catholic! His treatment of Luther is fair, if not deep, and he doesn't shy away from noting the weaknesses of either council or papacy. His primary goal in this book is to demonstrate what Trent did, and did not, actually accomplish for the Catholic world, in the face of legend and myth. Justification, Original Sin, Transubstantiation, and much more, it's all in here, not just the conclusion of the council, but the debates, arguments, and (yes) politics that led them there.

I am no Catholic, but I enjoyed this book about "the other side" of the Protestant Reformation. As mentioned, the greatest strength of this book is the skill of its author. I look forward to reading more by this writer, possibly on any subject of his choosing.

Charlie says

O'Malley's Trent is a solid but utterly unimpressive summary of the council. For the most part, it reads like a book report on Jedin's 4 volume *Geschichte*, with the occasional personal touch thrown in. The style is bland and some transitions are not well marked. Often specific canons are referenced, but it takes some hunting to find which session he is referring to. It's easy to get lost in all the twists and turns of intrigue, which made the lack of chapter summaries more frustrating. Some of the negatives are mitigated by an insightful epilogue. Really, it just seems that O'Malley is out of his element, unable to bring to bear his keen eye for art and culture.

For getting the bare facts straight, this is probably the best single volume in English. But one hopes that a more ambitious project will not be long in arriving.

Jonathan says

I have to say that the story of the Council Of Trent (1545-1563) was not what I expected. My (mistaken) impression was that it was a theological conclave whose purpose was to strengthen the Catholic Church in its core beliefs and rituals in the face of the Reformation, and that as such, it was wildly successful. While that was certainly part of the meeting, it turns out that the real purpose of the Council was to reform the Church; to tighten up its discipline of the clergy, to rid it of abuses such as simony, indulgences, absentee and multiple sees, and nepotism. Here, progress was less than perfect, although it did have a positive effect. Anyway, these and all the other issues are covered with style and grace in Professor O'Malley's (himself a Jesuit, it should be noted) account of the Council. The issues of 16th century power politics in Europe are also touched upon, as they were relevant to the Council's work. One wishes for a few more illustrations of the participants, but that is to quibble. As a person who knows very little about the history of the Church and a non-Catholic, I found this book to be both enriching and entertaining.

Scott Barber says

Great -- O'Malley tells the story of the council well, drawing the reader into its every frustration and success. As a highly readable summation of larger, dense historical work, this book has a lot to offer anyone interested in 16th century European history. For many (myself included) Trent tends towards the mysterious and the ominous, a sad fact that this book helps to remedy.

Christine says

The Council of Trent lasted 30 years. I felt like I lived every minute of it reading this book. Now, I'd like to say right off the bat that I think O'Malley did an excellent job with a very difficult subject. He's careful to expand or give details on subjects that the reader might not be familiar with, as well as put the Council's pronouncements into perspective with background and current events. Quite often this put the decree of the Council in a very different light than when viewed with modern eyes. But I felt there were many places throughout the book where the writing could have been more precise. I'm not an editor, but if the function of grammar is to make sure the message comes across clearly, there were many spots where the writing in this book fell short. And I think readers should be pondering the deep philosophical, religious, and spiritual questions the Council of Trent was wrangling with. Not wondering what exactly the author is talking about. The Council of Trent isn't really an easy subject, and the difficulty of getting through this book was compounded by intermittent inarticulateness.

Dr Matt says

An excellent introduction to the history of the Council. Trent serves not only as the basis for the Catholic Church's response to the Reformation but it went on to underpin much of Catholic doctrinal interpretation for the next 400 years. As such it is pivotal to any understanding of the evolution of Catholic doctrine and practice.

O'Malley does an excellent job in laying out the critical political issues and how they intermingled with the mandates of doctrinal and practical reform that faced the council. It is amazing he was able to do so much in the space of so few pages. One immediately begins to understand the roots of both the council's accomplishments but also its tremendous failure in the face of the Reformation.

Highly recommended.

Steve says

Meticulously researched and well-written, this is the first modern study of the Council in English. The author carefully (and successfully) places details of what happened at Trent into the context of the times. Particularly helpful in the distinction of what the Council actually accomplished, and the succeeding developments of the "Tridentine" Church.

MargCal says

Finished reading ... Trent : What Happened at the Council / John W O'Malley ... 28 December 2017
ISBN: 9780674066977 ... 275 pp. + notes, index, etc (335 pp. in total)

I started 2017 with Yves Congar's diaries, pre-Vatican II (1962-1965) and I've ended the year with O'Malley's impressive summary of the Council of Trent (1545-1563). This volume is more detailed than anything I've read on Trent in the distant past and have now mostly forgotten – but impressions always remained, most of those impressions 'not' having their origins in Council decrees, I've now discovered.

The Council was complex yet O'Malley makes a good fist of rendering it comprehensible. (A minor quibble. A few extra commas wouldn't have gone amiss in some of the longer sentences.)

Whilst ostensibly a response to the Reformation, the Council took place years later in an atmosphere more political than religious, although religion did influence the politics. In fact, 'heresies' of the Reformation barely got a look in. But foundations were laid that had long-lasting repercussions – more through following the post-Council practices of a few truly reforming bishops than in the decrees themselves.

One particularly interesting item in view of the clamour from the Latin Mass set ... Trent was silent on, i.e. did not rule out, Mass in the vernacular. Hmmmmmm.

In the Epilogue, O'Malley gives an excellent overview of Trent and what followed. It could easily be read as a most helpful stand-alone piece.

Well worth the read although it will appeal to a quite limited audience. :-)

Andrew says

John O'Malley's *Trent* will attract an obscure audience. I'm one of them.

I bought this little volume (I've already praised short histories) while browsing, which isn't something I do enough. Fr. O'Malley describes both the birth, progress, and decisions of the council in the midst of stormy political and religious changes. Germany, France, Spain, and the Roman Curia tried to pull the council in favourable directions as expected, but their priorities reveal the sixteenth-century yearning for spiritual and ecclesiastical reform. We tend to be cynical about historical and religious motives. *Trent* convinces readers that people, even politicians and priests, often do seek change to improve lives.

Follow me on Twitter: @Dr_A_Taubman

Jack says

This is a wonderful book on the Council of Trent. The author, John W. O'Malley, shows how "messy" this long council was. It was amazing to me to read how the bishops, theologians, and other churchmen who attended the council really struggled with the doctrine of justification. There were some who articulated a position very close to that of Luther. If the council had taken place 30 years earlier, the split between the "Lutherans" and the "papalists" might not have occurred. O'Malley introduces the major and minor characters involved and shows how political struggles between the Pope, the Holy Roman Emperor, and the French King shaped the council. He clearly grasps the history of the council and the political issues, but also the doctrinal issues as well. This is a must for anyone who wants to learn about The Council of Trent--it is so readable and very interesting.

Andreas F says

O livro é muito informativo e bem escrito, apoiado em inúmeras fontes.. O concílio de Trento foi convocado pela Igreja Católica para lidar não só com a questão da "Reforma Protestante", mas também com questões doutrinárias e políticas próprias. Foi uma época bem complexa (vide que o concílio demorou longos 18 anos para ser finalizado), mas que rendeu bons frutos para a Igreja Católica. Recomendo a todos que queiram conhecer mais não só sobre o concílio em si, mas também sobre a administração e a influência da Igreja Católica na época.
