Preface and Introduction of COD

Preface

Pope John XXIII's convocation of the second Vatican council has provided an excellent opportunity for publishing the decrees of ecumenical councils. Indeed, in the last three years many works have appeared concerning both the whole history of the councils and particular aspects of individual councils. Nevertheless, no one-volume collection of all the decrees of all the ecumenical councils has appeared, despite the very great importance of the decrees for the church's doctrine and attendant discipline. Hence apart from the major definitions and declarations concerning matters of faith which are to be found in H. Denzinger's *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, the canons of the early councils must be extracted from the editions of Bruns, Lauchert and others, those for Trent from the officially authorised edition of Paul Manutius (which has often been reproduced, sometimes with errors being introduced, in subsequent years), and those for other councils from various ancient collections — I mention especially the Roman edition, Hardouin and Mansi — or from recent critical editions, for example those of E. Schwartz.

Since there still exists no single book which contains all the decrees of all the ecumenical councils concerning matters of faith and church discipline, this book is intended to fill the gap. It is not a collection of extracts for compiling a history of the councils, but rather as accurate a text as is presently possible of the canons and decrees of the twenty councils which are recognised by the Roman catholic church. Some explanation is needed here. For although only the twenty councils which are regarded as "ecumenical" are included, the editors are aware that this numbering is due more to custom than to any declaration of ecclesiastical authority. Moreover, in the early centuries of the church not only were the creeds and canons issued by councils generally considered to be of binding force, so were some other writings. Concerning the latter, it has not always been easy to decide whether to include them. The policy has been to omit particular decrees concerning administration, which are fairly frequent in the early and medieval councils. The editors are well aware that others might judge differently about how the texts should be chosen and collated. At present they limit themselves to saying that the material has been taken from the best printed

---

1 *Conciliorum Oecumenicorum Decreta*, ed. G. Alberigo and others, Bologna 1973 (= COD). Apart from the paragraph in the Preface relating to the third edition, these sections are unchanged from the first (1962) and second (1962) editions.
editions currently available and that manuscript codices have been used only rarely, for example for the two councils of Lyons; that critical apparatus and explanatory notes have been restricted to what is really necessary; that the bibliographies in the introductions include only the more important works; that disputes about the authority and importance of various texts, as well as about theological and juridical questions, have been entirely omitted; and finally that the book is a collection of sources, not an exposition of the teachings and laws which issued from the ecumenical councils.

It only remains for us to say that we hope this book will be of help both to those who will be taking part in the second Vatican council and to theologians, historians and canonists who will need to have a proper knowledge of the decrees of ecumenical councils and to consult them frequently.

The suggestion to publish this book came from the Institute for the promotion of religious studies [in Bologna], called Centro di Documentazione. Cardinal James Lercaro, archbishop of Bologna and distinguished patron of the Institute and its library, has encouraged and supported our work by both word and deed. We thank him greatly for this. The present writer has been responsible for deciding the format of the edition and for apportioning the work among the collaborators. Giuseppe Alberigo, secretary of the Institute and professor of the University of Florence, put into order the various parts of the volume and edited the councils of Basel — Ferrara — Florence — Rome, Lateran V and Vatican I. Professor Perikles-P. Jouannou, of the University of Munich, edited the first eight councils; Claudio Leonardi, of the Vatican Library, edited the medieval councils, Lateran I to Vienne; Professor Paul Prodi, of the University of Bologna, edited Constance and Trent. Each of the four collaborators is responsible for his section of the work.

To conclude, I would like to recall that in the great apse of the council hall of St John Lateran — which no longer exists but in which the five Lateran councils were held — there was a mosaic of Christ together with his mother and the apostles Peter and Paul, and paintings of the other apostles in the smaller apses. By these images the Roman church wished to signify that the councils were assembled there to proclaim the apostolic tradition and were to have supreme authority to teach, the root and foundation of which is contained in those words of the apostles gathered together at the first council of the church, under the guidance of Peter the shepherd of the lambs and sheep: “It has seemed good to the holy Spirit and to us…” (Ac 15, 28).

HUBERT JEDIN

In this third edition, certain texts pertaining to the first five councils have been substituted or added (under the direction of J. A. Dossetti); the texts of the constitutions, decrees and declarations of Vatican II have been included (under the direction of G. Alberigo); the bibliographies have been updated; and the indexes have been completely re-done.

HUBERT JEDIN
Introduction

When, in 1959, pope John XXIII announced the convening of the second Vatican council, he exhorted the whole church to consider the great importance of the major councils and their history; and especially the importance of those decrees which constitute sources of Christian doctrine and tradition. An added impetus has been given to this call by the remarkable progress of interest and activity in the restoring of Christian unity, through which it has become increasingly clear what a powerful influence the councils exercise in increasing the universal church’s own self-understanding.

With these considerations chiefly in view, this Institute, which is called Centro di Documentazione, has undertaken the task of carrying out the research and scholarship necessary to produce the present book. The Institute, from its very beginning ten years ago, chose as its own specialisation within the broader field of religious studies, the critical investigation of the history and teaching of the councils. It was hoped that such a work of scholarship would also help to enrich and illuminate the life of the whole church.

The authoritative character of the decrees of ecumenical councils has not always been properly evaluated. What real influence have these decrees had in the past and especially in our own time on the teaching, legislation and institutes of the church or on the consciousness of Christian people themselves? Indeed, not much. And where there has been some influence, it has usually been indirect. When, for example, in collections of medieval canonical records, we find excerpts from conciliar decrees, these will probably have been chosen not with any reference to their historical context or meaning, but because of their relevance to an emerging doctrinal position. So, in fact, the promulgation of the decrees of Trent, by their very authority, had the effect of bringing into ever increasing neglect, both in discipline and doctrine, the venerable tradition of all the councils that went before it. And in the same way the Code of Canon Law of 1917 seemed by its very structure to consign to oblivion laws and procedures which previously had been determined by very different methods.

Only historians who have specialised within this field have sufficiently pursued research leading to critical editions of the acts of individual councils (Schwartz and editions of Constance, Basel, Florence and Trent). But we are dealing in this area with research either only just begun or completed some time ago, so much so that the most recent edition of conciliar sources is a facsimile edition (still commendable in itself) of the Amplissima Collectio of J. D. Mansi.

Scholarship in this area seems naturally related to the sort of history of the councils which K. J. Hefele produced and which his successor H. Leclercq enlarged and translated into French. This work remains a conspicuous aid to

---

study, but not adequate to meet modern requirements. More recently, following some important editions of sources, such histories as H. Jedin's monumental study of the council of Trent or J. Gill's work on Florence have been published. In works of this kind, light has been shed upon the great tradition of the councils by the application of modern methods of historical scholarship.

The last ten years have seen a flourishing in the publication of articles and monographs designed to meet various specialist requirements — theological, historical, canonical — and dealing with particular historical events or individual texts. Certainly these developments have brought a great advance in scholarship, but they have tended to draw the efforts of the specialist and the attention of the general student towards areas dense with accumulated detail, rather than to a point of vantage from which the full breadth of the tradition of the councils can be comprehended and reflected on.

The events of the past decade have themselves also added new impetus and interest to the study of the councils, indeed to the very question of what place the councils should hold in the mind of the church. Many recent summaries of conciliar history have been produced among which might be mentioned as especially noteworthy those by H. Jedin, F. Dvornik and P. Meinhold. To these should be added written collections of a more occasional nature, generally academic, often designed for teaching purposes.

Within the context of this general flowering of interest in conciliar history which has occurred in our time, this volume has been produced to provide a complete edition of all the decrees of the general councils from Nicæa I to Vatican I. Our aim has been primarily to provide for the serious student an aid to research and reflection in which the texts might speak for themselves. To this end editorial interference has been kept to an absolute minimum. It is our hope that an edition of this kind will not only fill an obvious bibliographical gap, but

---

3 We cannot here enter into the debate on the underlying methodology of three admirable books on the council of Chalcedon which appeared towards the end of the fifteenth century. Questions concerning the arrangement and harmonising of their parts are far from settled.


5 One early collection of this kind contained the papers read by scholars meeting at the Benedictine monastery of Chevetogne in 1959: Le concile et les conciles, [ed. O. Roosseau], Chevetogne 1960. The authors are: B. Botte, H. Marot, P. T. Camelot, Y. Congar, H. Alivisatos, G. Fransen, F. de Vooght, J. Gill, A. Dupront, R. Aubert; some of these studies are hardly more than historical commentaries.

6 The present edition differs very considerably in methodological principle from Enchiridion Symbolorum of H. Denzinger and other similar books. Our principle has been to provide all the texts in their entirety and not to choose particular extracts to fit a predetermined programme. This is a principle of historical scholarship, and it was never our intention to set forth the fundamentals of systematic theology.
will help to further and inform that widespread interest in the councils of which it is itself an expression. Above all, it has been our particular intention that this collection of decrees — of those very texts through which the authority of the ecumenical councils is solemnly expressed and which, by their very nature, possess a significance transcending the historical conditions in which they were formed — might be of use to the fathers who will be labouring in the present council. For such convenient access to the decrees of past councils will provide a source of reference in which the conciliar tradition of the church can be thoroughly grasped on any given subject.

Obviously a work such as this could not be undertaken until many preliminary issues were settled. Anyone acquainted with conciliar history will have observed the significant differences which exist between one council and another. Thus, in the editing of this work, considerable dissimilarities had frequently to be reckoned with, even between councils which follow close on one another. The editors have adopted a principle of respect for such differences whereby the particular characteristics of each council might be preserved (we have, however, introduced appropriate footnotes for purposes of further reference where this has seemed useful)7. This, then, is the methodological principle by which the many differences and discrepancies, which not only express but indeed form the distinctive character of a particular council, have been preserved for the reader.

These differences are especially noticeable with respect to language and style. No attempt has been made to reduce these elements to some sort of uniformity; rather the language of each period has been preserved8. However, in establishing which are the actual texts containing the decrees, diverse methodologies and criteria had to be adopted, according as the texts were early, medieval or modern. For if the distinction between decrees (decreta) and acts (acta) is an easy one to establish in the more recent councils, this is by no means the case with those of the early9 and medieval periods.

Our purpose in editing the texts has been to present all the decrees of the councils and only the decrees. For this reason some very important texts

---

An edition, with a commentary, of all the decrees of the ecumenical councils up to Lyons II was produced — in Latin only — by J. Catalanus, Sacrosancta concilia oecumenica prolegomenis et commentariis illustrata .... 4 vols. Rome 1736–1749. The work of H. J. Schroeder, Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils. Text, Translation and Commentary, St Louis and London 1937, contains the disciplinary canons of the first eighteen ecumenical councils. 7 Consistent with the historical principles of this edition, we have omitted the concordances of canonists, for example the ancient Byzantine concordance. We have employed capital letters only for the proper names of people and places and for the various names that refer to God. 8 Regarding the conciliar decrees which were originally composed in Greek, we have used those versions which were most widely in ancient use in the eastern church. 9 Regarding the tradition of the eastern church concerning the decrees of the ecumenical councils which possess a sacred trustworthiness and authority, we have examined: I. Karafitis, Τὰ δογματικὰ καὶ συμβολικὰ μνημεία τῆς ὁρθοδόξου καθολικῆς Ἐκκλησίας, Έκδοσις δευτέρα ἐπιμελημένη καὶ βελτιωμένη, I Athens 21960, which provides, for the first seven councils, a collection of the texts containing dogmatic decrees.
have had to be omitted, for example the anathemas against Origen formerly attributed (erroneously) to Constantinople II, or the charges on which pope Honorius was condemned (as these relate to the acts, not the decrees, of Constantinople III), or the profession of faith of pope Hormisdas which was a condition of admittance required of the council fathers at Constantinople IV, but does not appear to have been formally approved by the council. When we come to the councils of the Middle Ages, it becomes very difficult indeed to establish a complete and sound text for a particular council (Vienne is an example) and to distinguish between official conciliar decrees on the one hand and on the other, papal statutes drawn up at the same time but promulgated outside the council. As for Constance and Basel, we felt that the editorial principles we have adopted were best served if many decrees relating to administrative matters, or of a merely occasional nature, or entirely divorced from the real work of the council in question, were omitted. These decrees (especially in the case of Constance) were necessitated by the lack of a single uncontested pope who could carry on the day-to-day business of the church. We have nevertheless indicated these missing texts in their appropriate places.

The distinction between acts and decrees rests on this: the decrees possess on their own merit an authoritative force and validity which exists within the context of the whole of revelation (the analogy of faith) and are not simply products of the historical circumstances from which they originate. For this reason they are proper objects of consultation by the faithful.

This does not mean that either the discussions or the debates, or any of the historically and socially conditioned features which the acts of the councils reveal to us, should be neglected. Nevertheless, the altogether special status of those declarations which have been formally and solemnly approved by the councils is to be acknowledged as distinct from all other indications of opinion and intention, of whatever significance, which, for whatever reasons, did not receive official conciliar approbation. This distinction is of utmost importance to those who profess the mystery of the church and its essential character as something which transcends the merely human.

A further question concerns sources. Sometimes we have used existing critical editions, providing only those variant readings which are of importance to the understanding of a passage. This procedure has been followed thoroughly in the case of the decrees of Ephesus, Chalcedon, Florence, Trent and Vatican I, and furthermore with the canons of the other early councils, which have been taken from the critical edition of P-P. Joannou. For the rest, we have tried to

---

10 We had thought of including a glossary, which would have been an obviously useful aid in the correct interpretation of the texts, but we were compelled by considerations of the time available to us, and the space, to postpone the project to a future date. [Editor's note. — For Vatican II, see Indices verborum et locutionum, 15 vols. so far, Istituto per le Scienze Religiose, Bologna and Florence 1968--; and for Lateran I to Vienne, see the concordances by M. Mollat and P. Tombeur mentioned below in the bibliographies of these councils.]

11 Les canons des conciles oecuméniques, ed. P-P. Joannou (Pontificia commissione per la redazione del codice di diritto canonico orientale. Fonti. Fasc. IX: Discipline générale antique
establish the texts ourselves, using the most trustworthy editions available and applying the results of recent critical scholarship. Where necessary the entire body of manuscript tradition has been consulted in order to provide the first critical text; this has been undertaken by C. Leonardi. It should be evident that, with regard to textual criticism, we could not always handle our materials in the same way, but were obliged to adapt ourselves to the varying states of existing research and to the various difficulties which the effect of time and circumstance have imposed on many of the sources. Thus while, on the one hand, the decrees of Trent are to be found in an admirably complete and correct form in the official text approved by Pius IV, the decrees of Lyons and Vienne, on the other hand, have, through the subsequent emendations and alterations of papal canonists, lost much of their original form. These problems are treated in the individual introductions.  

As far as the arrangement of the material is concerned, our method is based purely on historical (rather than dogmatic or canonical) considerations. Thus the decrees are presented to the reader just as they are to be found in the original approved texts of the councils. We have omitted later adaptations and alterations, coming especially from the medieval period onwards, which in most cases were made by canonists. Neither have we entered into the controversies surrounding some decrees as to whether or not they received the approval of the bishop of Rome. For this reason, plainly, we have included canon 28 of the council of Chalcidon, the decree “This holy synod...” (Haec sancta...) of the 5th session of the council of Constance, and the decrees of sessions 1–25 of the council of Basel. Questions arising from these passages are treated briefly in the introductions to these councils, and further discussion is indicated in the respective bibliographies. By the same criterion we have included, as a matter of historical record, the decrees of certain councils whose ecumenical status and authority have been much contested (perhaps rightly), for example the first, second and fifth Lateran councils.

From the first preparatory stages of this work we considered, as the weightiest of the questions we had to deal with, the question of conciliar ecumenicity; nor does any clear resolution of the matter yet seem possible. The investigations of scholarship, involving in this case both historical and theological considerations of great complexity, remain in an uncertain state. They are far from being able to provide certain and reliable criteria by which the ecumenical authority of a

[II–IX s.] tome I part I), Grottaferrata 1962. We thank cardinal Peter Gregory XV Agaianian, president of the said pontifical commission, for enabling Perikles Jouannou to become a collaborator in our work.

12 On this subject the works of S. Kuttner are an outstanding guide; we also recommend a recent study by C. Andreesen, Geschichte der abendländischen Konzile des Mittelalters, in Die Ökumenischen Konzile der Christenheit, ed. H. J. Margull, Stuttgart 1961, 75–200.

13 For this reason we have omitted headings of the decrees, principally those of the Middle Ages and of the council of Trent, which were added by later generations of editors and canonists, chiefly for use in the courts, and which often distort the substance of the decrees.
particular council can be determined. This being the case, we considered the fairest course to be (though this is at best a provisional solution) to hold to the list of councils which, on the authority of Cesare Baronius, has come to be accepted in the common usage of Catholics. For this reason, and for others which are explained in the appropriate places, we have included the fourth council of Constantinople (869–870) summoned against Photius, which, although it was the first of those rejected by the eastern churches and was abrogated by another council in 879–880, was accepted into the official corpus of decrees by Roman canonists as early as the Gregorian period. Likewise are included, as mentioned above, the first, second and fifth Lateran councils, while other councils, in themselves of great importance historically, must be omitted, for example Toledo XI and the council of Trullo (Quinisext).

It seems undeniable that theological investigations into the problem of conciliar ecumenicity, at a time of ardent and growing concern among all Christians for the unity of Christ’s church (even if we cannot see the end results), reveal a tendency to arrange the councils in a particular order of importance and to distinguish among them according to the degree in which they embody a greater or lesser ecumenical authority. So far from rejecting such a fruitful principle, we desire in this work to encourage it and give it wider scope. Anyone who examines these texts, even seeing them for the first time gathered together in one place, cannot fail to notice the great differences between them which the astonishing range and variety of historical circumstances have occasioned. For those who are conscious of these differences, it will be easy to see how broad is that principle of ecumenicity which accords with the mystery of the church in all the wonder of its historical character, the mystery within which the manifold events of the councils actually took place.

The scholarly efforts of the editors and the members of our Institute will not have been in vain if in any way this work helps to recall the minds of christian people to the distinguished tradition of the councils and reveals to them something of its richness, power and efficaciousness in the life of the church.

Sincerest thanks are due to J. Dossetti and H. Jedin for the kindly and most helpful advice with which they have accompanied this work at every stage, from its beginning to its completion. Thanks are likewise due to C. Colombo, A. Franceschini, S. Kuttner, J. Leclerq and J. Sraub; and to A. Ghiselli, C. Mercier, P. S. Zanetti, B. Ulianich, G. Wiet and G. Zoffoli, who helped in the revising and correcting of the texts.


15 See the excellent study of Y. Congar, La primauté des quatre premiers conciles œcuméniques. Origine, destin, sens et portée d’un thème traditionnel, in Le concile, 75–109.
Oskar Köhler, on behalf of Herder, has served us with great skill in the publication of the book.
Finally, we wish to acknowledge the great and indispensable help of our colleagues at the Institute.

GIUSEPPE ALBERIGO