The year was 1545. The place – a town named Trent near the base of the Dolomite Mountains in northern Italy. Some seven or eight thousand people lived here in the Adige River Valley on the route to the Brenner Pass.¹ In Latin it is called Tridentinum, from which we obtain the English adjective Tridentine. Although located on the Italian side of the Alps, Trent owed its political allegiance to the Emperor, Charles V, and therefore could be considered part of German lands. Its German variant is Trient. In this innocuous setting, much closer to Innsbruck than to Rome, a phenomenon would unfold, unparalleled in modern times, which would greatly strengthen the Catholic Church. The general ecumenical council of Trent was about to begin.

After the close of the fifth Lateran Council in 1517, various impediments to the opening of a new council arose caused by secular governments obstructing the central authority of the Church.² Cardinal Alessandro Farnese, a member of the reform party in the papal court, had often proclaimed the necessity of a new council.³ With his election as Pope Paul III in 1534, he made the convoking of a council the second of his three pontifical goals.⁴ Beginning in 1536, he vied for its proper commencement but endured setbacks, opposition, war, and threats of war. At times he had wavered and imposed his own delays on the timetable.⁵ December thirteenth, Gaudete Sunday, the third Sunday of Advent, marked a breakthrough. “At 9:30 that morning a procession made its way through the streets of Trent from the church of the Most Holy Trinity to the Romanesque cathedral of Saint Vigilius, where the spacious, raised sanctuary had been converted into space for the council to meet.”⁶ Like all of the public ceremonial sessions of the Council, this first session began with Mass. Hours later, when the range of formalities was finished, a final blessing was given, a choir chanted the Te Deum, and in a moment of profound silence the prelates spontaneously turned and embraced one another with tears of joy. They had just participated in the opening of an event they had long thought would never occur.⁷

The town of Trent would be the host for the Council’s three productive periods, 1545–1547, 1551–1552, and 1562–1563. It was Charles V who first recommended Trent for the meetings because it lay on the main road from the German territories into Italy.⁸ Was there any relationship between this monumental ecclesiastical event, the then corruption in the Catholic Church, and the toxic spread of the Protestant revolt in Western Europe? The answer is an unqualified Yes. Although no one yet realized it, heaven was about to rescue the Church from her fall from grace and from the great storm which had broken upon her. Belloch thought that Trent accomplished nothing short of saving the Church from dissolution.⁹ The Holy Spirit had come to personally reaffirm all that the Church holds and teaches and to bring about a true reform of the ecclesiastical offices of pope, bishop, and pastor. However, it would be eighteen years before the amazingly lucid conclusions of this great council would be made known to the world.

For more than a century before the Council of Trent, Church reform had been a burning issue. A popular slogan was, “Reform Rome and you will reform the world.”¹⁰ Savonarola, a fifteenth-century Dominican reform preacher, judged the condition of the Church in his time to be the worst in her history. Martin Luther had petitioned the German political establishment to call meetings to settle the long-held grievances against the popes and the papal curia. Pressure was mounting for clergy whose positions were attached to a benefice to be held accountable for the
job they were supposed to do. In those days clergy were not paid a salary as we understand the term. Benefices, incomes associated with parochial sources such as Masses, church properties, and parish endowments, were how the clergy supported themselves—how they got paid. “As Jedid made clear, the driving motive behind the reform of the bishops and the pastors was pastoral effectiveness. Trent wanted to make them do their jobs, as those jobs were traditionally understood—to transform them from collectors of benefices to shepherds of souls.”

Furthermore, the practice in Rome of Church offices being sold to the highest bidder—the ecclesiastical crime of simony—damaged the perception of those offices. There were instances, even in papal elections, where simony had occurred, and it needed to be condemned. Nepotism, the promotion of prelates’ relatives to lucrative careers, was apparently widespread. As an extreme example of this, Pope Sixtus IV (1471-1484) had made cardinals of six nephews, though several of them were truly unworthy. The Emperor demanded that a crackdown on nepotism be obligatory with the implementation of Trent.

Another issue that had to be dealt with was the granting of dispensations from the canons which required bishops to reside in their dioceses and pastors in their parishes. The diocese of Milan, Italy was without a resident bishop for eighty years. The dispensations encouraged not just non-residence but pluralism, the hording of multiple benefices. Celibacy of the clergy was a vital discipline that needed to be confirmed. Earlier in his life, even Paul III had indulged the spirit of his peers, fathering four children with a mistress, before he was named bishop of Parma (1509), ordained a priest (1519), and elected pope. He separated from the mistress in 1513.

Luther’s Reformation had condemned clerical celibacy in favor of a married clergy. The Church had to respond to this challenge and defend the idea of the spiritual superiority of celibacy to maternity. Holiness had to be promoted in order to prevent clerical concubinage. All of these forms of corruption, which were evident for one hundred or more years, had set off a fury against the papacy and the hierarchy in general. Spurred on by pope and emperor, the Catholic Church had decided to repair herself.

Subsequent to his apparent outrage regarding the abuse of indulgences, Luther had, in a sense, set the agenda for the Council of Trent with his cry for reform of the hierarchy and of certain religious practices, and with his challenging the Church’s teaching on justification (how a person is made righteous and holy before God). Was Luther’s infamous doctrine of justification by faith alone in the merits of Christ truly the lightning rod for a new outburst of revolutionary enthusiasm? According to Bellloc, sola fide was not a cause of the original Lutheran movement but an afterthought which proceeded from the denial of the power of the priesthood. Anti-clericalism—reaction against clerical power—was one of the main motives of Protestantism. The institution of a privileged clergy with the papacy as its head and symbol caused much discontent. Priests were seen as remiss in their duties and because of this the claim of a sacrificing priesthood was despised. For Luther, the doctrine of the ministerial priesthood had to go. Sola fide was perhaps a pretext he invented to facilitate the elimination of the priesthood. A competing religious system was in the works, set up against the Catholic sacramental system. It would take twenty years for this new system of religion to be finalized under John Calvin, when Calvin's Institutes of Religion was published in 1536. Until then, because of anger against priestly abuses, the new spirit was content to compete against the old by attacking the priesthood. "Abolition of the Mass and priesthood was the set policy of the men in power at this time."

Later on, the Council of Trent anathematized five of Luther’s teachings: (1) that man was passively subjected to both grace and wickedness; (2) that after the fall of Adam and Eve the human will had no freedom; (3) that the good works man thought he did were really worthy of damnation; (4) that man was justified only by receiving the gift of faith; (5) that grace was extrinsic to man and did not penetrate his being or his totally depraved nature.

In its first seven sessions Trent hammered out decrees on Scripture and tradition, original sin, justification, freedom, faith, and the sacraments. Tradition is a valid source of the Word of God, yet it does not contest with Scripture in proclaiming the Gospel. Regarding original sin, Trent confirmed that the grace of baptism washes it away. Concupiscence, which remains after baptism, is not sinful, a la Luther, but a tendency to sin. It can be brought into check. Human nature is not totally corrupt. Much good in it remains which, super-naturalized by grace, is built up to make it flower and bloom. Man is not depraved, but depraved, and is definitively justified and truly reborn via the purifying waters of baptism. Yet justification and holiness for a person are a
process over time, and not a single event. Regarding faith, for Trent it means believing all that God has revealed. The theological virtue of faith is infused into the soul at baptism, and thus even faith has a prerequisite. By identifying the chief articles of faith, the traditional creeds are beacons of belief. Regarding the sacraments, the sacramental system is necessary for salvation and is the normative way that we find our way home to heaven. God created us by His act alone, but He won’t save us without our cooperation. The Eucharist is the sacrament par excellence to which all the others are geared. Through transubstantiation the substance of bread and wine is transformed into the substance of Christ’s body, blood, soul, and divinity. Only the “accidents” of bread and wine remain. This is a real ontological change. It is always the body of Christ, even if you don’t believe it and receive the Eucharist to your condemnation. The reality is that in receiving the Eucharist with the proper disposition you are united with the substance of God.

There wasn’t an assembly on earth that remotely compared with the gathering of bishops and theologians at Trent at this time. The Council left no stone unturned, defining everything that needed to be defined, ruling precisely, and inspiring a rigid discipline of reform. “Beginning with the election of Paul IV in 1555, the popes, strengthened by the doctrinal clarity and the ecclesiastical reform that Trent enabled, exercised their office in a way unheard of for decades if not centuries.” Paul IV denounced the Peace of Augsburg agreement which gave lay rulers the power to determine the religion in their realms. By the time the council was over, simony, pluralities, non-residence, and nepotism were forbidden by the new administration. A blueprint now existed that future leaders could use to safeguard against abuse.

Pius V succeeded Paul IV in 1566, imposed order on the clergy, forced bishops to reside in their dioceses, ended concubinage, and ordered seminaries to raise the level of instruction. A series of equally remarkable popes followed Pius V, all united in implementing the same program, contributing to the most significant about face in the history of the Church, and it happened not a moment too soon.

In conclusion, the Council of Trent was an instance of divine intervention. The Holy Spirit had led the bishops out of every theological blind alley. Because of its coherent definitions the Council was a great success and the Church was able to put into place an impressive defense against her enemies. It clarified, ordered, and imposed so much that to this day it is verbally abused and accused of having insulated Catholics from the world in a religious ghetto. The enemies are forever cynical because the Catholic Church enacted a true reform and saved the sacraments, the papacy, the episcopate, the hierarchy, and, last but not least, it saved the job of the ministerial priests, ordained to offer up the sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ upon the altar. In the end, what liberated the Church from its corrupt prelates’ temptation to wealth and power was the critical temptation to virtue by so many others, by the idea that sainthood was the only thing that mattered, and by the work of those who were overt instruments of God’s grace, Saint Charles Borromeo, Saint Teresa of Avila, Saint Ignatius of Loyola, Saint Philip Neri, and many others. It was the intrusion of the supernatural into the communion of sinners by the communion of saints. What Luther and the lay powers never knew was that when we see the Church weak and failing, love and prayer are the only acceptable responses. True reformation always implies a staying within the family, so to speak. Today the traditional Catholic world with its emphasis on faith, reason, and mystery stands rejected. Dogma and moral law have been replaced with indifferatism, skepticisms, apostasies, and man-made religion. The canons and decrees of the Council of Trent are heaven’s solution for the crises of today. Now it is up to us. How we respond will determine the future of our generation.

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Notes
3. O'Malley, loc. 943.
4. Ibid., loc. 944.
6. O'Malley, loc. 1188.
7. Ibid., loc. 1205.
8. Belloc, 140.
9. Ibid., 143.
10. O'Malley, loc. 209.
11. Ibid., loc. 258.
12. Ibid., loc. 3213.
13. Ibid., loc. 259.
15. O'Malley, loc. 199.
16. Belloc, 49.
17. Ibid., 46.
19. c.f. 1 Cor. 11:29.
21. Ibid., 359.
22. Belloc, 143.