**First Conference (1545–1547)**

The opening meeting, led by Pope Paul, aimed to reconcile Protestantism with Catholicism as well as reform the Church. For example, Luther's idea of *sola scriptura*, that the Bible alone is the doctrinal authority, was rejected. The council reasserted the customary position that maintained that scripture was to be understood in light of tradition. Additionally, the council defined their doctrinal positions, not only for those areas that Protestants attacked, but also to clarify their own beliefs. Everything from the sacraments to the responsibilities of parish priests was discussed. In this session, the Church outlined its position on the sacraments, rejecting Protestant views that Jesus initiated only the two sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion. The sacraments were clearly defined and firmly established as seven: baptism, confirmation, marriage, [communion](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/311830?terms=council+of+trent) (the Eucharist), penance, ordination of priests, and extreme unction (a rite in which a priest anoints a sick, injured, or dying person). The council also set formal decrees reaffirming the canon of the Old Testament and New Testament, the notion of original sin, and Latin as the official language of the Bible and mass.

**Second Conference (1551–1552)**

Pope Paul died on November 10, 1549, and the second meeting was held by his successor, Pope [Julius III](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/311830?terms=council+of+trent). In this meeting, the council narrowed the definition of the sacrament of the Eucharist, the ceremony involving the partaking of bread and wine as the representation of Jesus's body and blood. While such Protestant reformers as Calvin and Zwingli had defined the Eucharist as a symbolic representation of Christ, the council established the sacrament in terms of transubstantiation, the notion that the bread and wine become the literal elements of Christ. The council also discussed the sacraments of penance and extreme unction and issued decrees on such reforms as clerical discipline. By the last sessions of the second meeting at Trent, several Protestant ambassadors had joined the discussions, but because of growing threats, animosity, and war, the council was suspended for nearly a decade.

**Third Conference (1562–1563)**

The third meeting managed to reconvene under the leadership of Pope [Pius IV](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/311830?terms=council+of+trent). In this convocation, the council members tackled, among other subjects, the veneration and invocation of saints, clerical education, and the troubling issue of absentee priests and bishops. Both sides, Catholic and Protestant, reached a great measure of agreement, in part due to a skillful papal legate named Giovanni Morone. While content that the papacy backed the Protestant position on priestly discipline, the Protestant representatives were less satisfied that no clear statement had been made about the direct role of the pope. Luther, for example, believed in a "priesthood of all believers," the idea that any committed Christians, and not just anointed priests, were special, and that one did not need a priest to hold the Eucharist. Such a view contradicted the traditional view that clerics, and by extension the organized Church, were holier than the laity, and the only ones capable of administering the sacraments. While not every issue discussed in this meeting was resolved by compromise, the council managed to further cement Catholic beliefs.

**A New Statement of Catholicism**

The summation of Catholic doctrine formulated by the Council of Trent was published by Pope Pius as *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*. The impact of the council and its definitions was profound. Many points of contention with Protestant views had been addressed, but more than that, the council inspired the Church with new energy for winning back the hearts and souls of European Christians. Among the agents instrumental in that campaign, often called the Catholic or Counter-Reformation, were the [Jesuits](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/311830?terms=council+of+trent), a number of whom had played key roles in the various sessions of the council. The division between Catholic and Protestant Christians, however, remained. In revitalizing Catholic zeal for reform, the Council of Trent provided a solid, universal statement of belief, one that not only helped Catholic reformers debate Church doctrine with Protestant thinkers, but also clarified and reformed Catholic doctrine until the momentous changes that occurred in the late 20th century with [Vatican II](http://worldhistory.abc-clio.com/Search/Display/311830?terms=council+of+trent).