Greetings in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Let me invite you to join me in prayer as we begin. Let us pray. Good and gracious Lord, we ask that You would be with us as we study together today. Guide us by Your Spirit, that all we say and think together would be honoring to your name, for it’s in that great name that we pray. Amen.

As we look at Modern Catholicism, I’d like to invite you to focus with me on the three major concluding councils in the life of the church, namely: (1) The Council of Trent in the 16th century, (2) The First Vatican Council in the 19th century, and (3) The Second Vatican Council very recently in the 20th century. These will form a kind of outline for our discussion together today. And as a background to that, let me remind you of the 21 councils which have marked the history of the church, from Nicaea in 325 AD right through to Vatican II in the 1960s. All 21 are accepted only by the Roman Catholic community. The first seven of the councils are accepted also as authoritative for the Orthodox Churches. And the first four are accepted by virtually all Christians—Protestant, Orthodox, and Roman Catholic.

So we are talking about that final three of that series of councils. And they form a kind of focus for us for understanding and analysis of what has been happening in the Roman Catholic Church over recent years. And those of you who are aware in this area will be also aware of the enormous changes which have taken place within Catholicism, particularly as a result of Vatican II. So we want to focus most of our attention there.

But I ask you to begin with me back in the 16th century with the Council of Trent. The aftermath of Martin Luther’s “95 Theses” precipitated a widespread demand for a general council in the church. Two issues seem to make such an assembly imperative. One was the general state of the church and its ecclesiastical practice. The other was the teaching and doctrine of the church. Luther, of course, had raised his voice on both counts, but the
doctrinal issue increasingly became the most important of these. Because of the political and ecclesiastical controversies, and certain misgivings in Rome as to a general council, the council was not actually convened until December of 1545 and then it met with great periods of interruption down to 1563.

The Council of Trent was the Roman Catholic answer to the Protestant Reformation in a sense, though it is perhaps too simple to interpret it only in that way. It did significantly limit the boundaries of the church by excluding not only the Protestant position but a variety of other positions that had been permissible earlier in Medieval Catholicism. The council was also an answer, at least in part, to the desire for that inner moral and spiritual renewal in the church. Its legislation was concerned not simply with doctrine but also with abuse in the church, and this council was to shape the life of Roman Catholicism for a whole epic. And, in fact, it is one of the most important of all of the Catholic Councils.

There are a lot of good sources available to us for the study of this council and its work. Let me mention several to you: H. J. Schroeder’s [book] *Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* by Herder Book Company, [written in] 1941, is a good place to begin; or Hubert Jedin’s [work] *A History of the Council of Trent*, by Nelson and Sons, 1957; or perhaps, George Tavard’s [book] *Holy Writ Or Holy Church*, by Burns and Oats, 1959.

Now perhaps the best way to come to understand the Council of Trent is through a famous theological statement which emerged as a result of the Council of Trent. It was actually promulgated by Pope Pius IV and came to be known as the Creed of the Council of Trent, produced in 1564. It is a very handy summarization of the positions which the council took on theology and church practice. Let me mention that to you, and I’m drawing again on John Leith’s wonderful little volume *Creeds of the Churches*. This is a little John Knox Press paperback which is available and is a handy one to have on your shelves. This is from page 440 and following. This creed has been used down to very recent times by Roman Catholics for studying the faith and for confessing the faith. In fact, it is one of the documents that, until very recent decades, was required in a number of parishes to be memorized and to be affirmed much as the Apostles’ Creed would be for others of us.

Let me mention some points, starting with the *Bible*: “In like manner, I accept sacred Scripture according to the meaning which
has been held by Holy Mother Church and which she now holds.” In short, the affirmation is clearly as a result of the Council of Trent, an affirmation of the Scripture and the importance that Scripture is interpreted officially by the Church.

The **seven sacraments** are also affirmed: “I also acknowledge that there are truly and properly seven sacraments in the new law. That they are necessary for the salvation of the human race and these include baptism, confirmation, Eucharist, penance, extreme unction, holy orders, and matrimony.” And the creed states that these actually confer grace. So you have the reaffirmation of the notion that the sacraments are sacramental in their meaning in the sense that they convey grace and that they uniquely convey grace within the life of the church.

The third area covered by the creed is on **original sin and justification**. You will remember this was the central theme of the Protestant Reformation in many ways. And so, it was obvious that Trent would have to wrestle with this. And, in fact, they did wrestle with this at great length. And out of that comes this very interesting little statement in the creed: “I embrace and accept each and every article on original sin and justification declared and defined in the most Holy Council of Trent.” In other words, there was so much there that it simply had to point back to those earlier documents. Now what are these documents? Let me read little sections of them for you. And I turn back again in the Leith Collection to pages 408 and following. These come out of the sixth session of the Council of Trent in January, 1547, and it is their decree concerning **justification**:  

> The holy council declares first that for a correct and clear understanding of the doctrine of justification, it is necessary that each one recognize and confess that since all men had lost innocence in the prevarication of Adam, having become unclean, and as the Apostle says, by nature, children of wrath, as has been set forth in the decree on original sin, they were so far the servants of sin and under the power of the devil and of death, that not only the Gentiles by the force of nature, but not even the Jews by the very letter of the law of Moses, were able to be liberated or to rise therefrom through free will, weakened as it was in its powers and downward bent, was by no means extinguished in them.

Then Chapter 2 [on the Doctrine of Atonement]:

Once it came to pass that the heavenly Father, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort, when that blessed fullness of time was come, sent to men Jesus Christ, His only son, who had, both before the Law and during the time of the Law, been announced and promised to many of the holy fathers, that He might redeem the Jews who were under the Law and that the Gentiles who followed not after justice might attain justice and that all men might receive adoption as sons. Him has God proposed as a propitiator through faith in his blood, for our sins, and not for our sins only, but for those of the whole world.

Then the statement goes on to talk about those who are justified through Christ:

But though He died for all, yet all do not receive the benefit of His death, but those only to whom the merit of His passion is communicated. Because as truly as men would not be born unjust, if they were not born through propagation of the seed of Adam, since by that propagation they contract through him when they are conceived in justice as their own. So if they were not born again in Christ, they would never be justified, since in that new birth there is bestowed upon them, through the merit of his passion, the grace by which they are made just.

Then it picks up further discussion of this in Chapter 4:

In which words is given a brief description of the justification of the sinner as being a translation from that state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior. This translation, however, cannot take place except through the laver of regeneration, or the desire thereof, as it is written; unless a man be born again of water and the Holy Ghost, he cannot enter into the Kingdom of God.

The affirmation then, going back and picking up some of these biblical themes which sound very familiar to us, is that salvation must take place in and through the church and by means of the sacraments. Thereby [it is] affirming once again the classic position of the Catholic Church, up until very recent time, that “There is no salvation outside of Mother Church.” Therefore, all
Now we are going to see that change because the Second Vatican Council transforms all of that language not only admitting, as we will see, that there is salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church, but they no longer speak of those outside as the heretics or schismatics but as “fellow laborers,” as those who are part of the family of faith, though from another communion. Now that is an enormous change and we will see some of that taking place later on.

Another element of this creed of the Council of Trent focuses upon the Mass:

I likewise profess that the Mass is a true, proper, and propitiatory sacrifice to God on behalf of the living and the dead, and I believe that the body and blood together with the soul and divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ is truly, really, and substantially present in the holy sacrament of the Eucharist.

This is reaffirmed in terms of transubstantiation. And you will remember that discussion—the belief in the Roman Catholic Church that the elements are actually transformed into the true body and blood of our Lord. Martin Luther, of course, had taught the idea of consubstantiation—[the belief] that the presence of Christ is real within those elements. But they aren’t transformed in the same way that the Catholic Church has taught. Of course, others like Zwingli, came to see them as much more symbolic. So you have some of these major divisions, those early divisions, in the Protestant Reformation period over the issue of the Eucharist.

The creed also affirms Purgatory:

I firmly hold that there is a Purgatory and that the souls detained there are helped by the prayers of the faithful. I likewise hold that the saints reigning together with Christ should be honored and invoked, that they offer prayers to God on our behalf and that their relics should be venerated.

Then it goes on to include Mary: “I firmly assert that the images of Christ [remember the Seventh Ecumenical Council] of the
Mother of God ever Virgin, and of the other saints should be owned and kept, and that due honor and veneration should be given to them.”

Now here you have an interesting stage in the development of the idea of Mary, in the theology that surrounded Mary. You may recall that it is not until 1854 that the idea of “The Immaculate Conception of Mary” took place, and this was proclaimed by Pius IX. And it had no sanction of council, but went out simply under the authority of the pope. And that statement actually reads:

All know likewise how anxious the bishops have been to profess openly and publicly, even in ecclesiastical assemblies, that the most holy Mother of God, the Virgin Mary, because of the merits of Christ our Lord and the Savior of mankind which were foreseen, was never subject to original sin, but was entirely preserved free from the original stain and, therefore, was redeemed in a more sublime manner.

Now added to that is the interesting idea of “The Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary,” which was actually adopted in 1950. Let me read it for you from The Dogma of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary, included in the Leith Collection, page 458: “We pronounce, declare, and define it to be a divinely revealed dogma, that the immaculate Mother of God, the ever virgin Mary, having completed the course of her earthly life, was assumed, body and soul, into heavenly glory.” I raise that because in that recent development of the understanding of Mary, we have the backdrop for the very interesting discussion of Mary which takes place under Vatican II, in which Mary is redefined in many ways, in a much more biblical way than we have in the earlier history of the Roman Catholic Church. We will come back to that in just a moment.

The affirmation in the creed is also for the importance and validity of indulgences. Remember, those had been a major matter of dispute for Luther and others. And you have the affirmation now coming out of the Council of Trent of the legitimacy of the use of indulgences: “I affirm that the power of indulgences was left in the keeping of the church by Christ, and that the use of indulgences is very beneficial to Christians.” Very clear statement there.

Then a statement on the true church: “I acknowledge the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Roman Church as the Mother and Teacher
of all churches, and I promise and swear true obedience to the Roman pontiff, vicar of Christ, and successor of blessed Peter, prince of the apostles.”

Now you’re going to begin to hear here some of that distinctive nature of modern Catholicism, which is focused on the power and authority of the Pope, but also the exclusive province in salvation and the life of faith of the Roman Catholic church. The next statement in the creed focuses specifically on the Pope: “I unhesitatingly accept and profess all the doctrines, especially those concerning the primacy of the Roman pontiff and his infallible teaching authority.” Now where did that come from? That actually came from the First Vatican Council in the 19th century, as we will see in a moment, but was added to the creed later on because of the development of the ideas since this creed was used in the life of the parish. This element, then, was added to the creed, coming out of the First Vatican Council in the 19th century.

And it goes on:

I unhesitatingly accept and profess all these doctrines handed down, defined and explained by the sacred canons and ecumenical councils and especially of this most holy Council of Trent (and by the ecumenical Vatican council), and at the same time, I condemn, reject, and anathematize everything that is contrary to these propositions and all heresies without exception that have been condemned, rejected, and anathematized by the church. I promise, vow, and swear that with God’s help, I shall most constantly hold and profess this true Catholic Faith, outside of which no one can be saved and which I now freely profess and truly hold. With the help of God, I shall profess it whole and unblemished to my dying breath.

Now that statement, which is a fascinating one, not only reflects what came out of Trent, but reflects in many ways the kind of Catholicism which many of us have come to know and understand as we’ve worked within our communities and have had contact with Catholic folk, both here and abroad. Now this was further developed, as a result of the findings of Trent, in the propositions and the determinations of the First Vatican Council in the 19th century.

We come to the second major focus of the councils for our study of Modern Catholicism. This took place between 1869
and several years following when these deliberations took place and, in fact, grew out in part of this vigorous debate between the “Ultramontanist forces,” those who advocated papal authority, and the “Gallicans,” those who wanted to see the authority of the council in addition to the Pope made prominent in the life of the church. Vatican II, however, indicated as a result of this discussion, the clear determination of Vatican I, and that is that the Gallicans were defeated and that the Ultramontanist forces clearly had won the day in the 19th century. In fact, one of the most important statements that emerges out of the First Vatican Council is the statement on papal infallibility, which passed by a whopping vote of 533-2, and you can see the overwhelming power of those forces. Let me read that statement for you which comes out of Vatican I in the 19th century. It is an interesting statement because it has often been repeated, at least in part, and we need to understand it correctly. This is the statement that includes that famous *ex cathedra* phrase:

We teach and define that it is a dogma divinely revealed that the Roman Pontiff, when he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, when in discharge of the office of pastor and doctor of all Christians by virtue of his supreme apostolic authority, he defines the doctrine regarding faith or morals to be held by the universal church. By the divine assistance promised to him in blessed Peter is possessed of that infallibility with which the divine redeemer will that his church should be endowed for defining doctrine regarding faith and morals and that, therefore, such definitions of the Roman pontiff are irreformable of themselves and not from the consent of the church. But if anyone, which may God avert, presume to contradict this, our definition, let him then be anathema.

What we see emerging then in Vatican I is a strong affirmation of papal authority given within tight limits. And there have only been a few *ex cathedra* statements made across the history of the church. So, this isn’t something that is often thought in popular terms as the affirmation that “Whatever the Pope says, goes.” These are only carefully prescribed statements of doctrine regarding faith and morals, and they are carefully limited. But the clear affirmation is there, that the Pope can speak in an irreformable manner within the life of the church.

Now Vatican I also affirmed a number of other elements. It produced *Constitutions of the Catholic Faith*. Chapter 1 of that constitution is the Doctrine of God as Creator. And then that
is followed by discussions and affirmations regarding faith and reason. You have other interesting discussions in Vatican I relating to the mood of the times and the concern for the kind of movement toward Modernism within Catholicism, the same kinds of concerns that we heard earlier within many of the Protestant bodies.

We come then, with that kind of background of reaffirmation of classic Roman Catholic doctrine in Trent, the affirmation of the power and authority in a special way, of the Pope in Vatican I, we come [now] to Vatican II. And, in fact, nobody had imagined that there would even be a Vatican II. In part, because of the actions of Vatican I, it would have made the necessity of that kind of council discussion, in the mind of some, unnecessary. But they didn’t reckon with Pope John XXIII. He is the one who called the Council [in] January of 1959. Very few in the Catholic Church expected that he would make such a move.

The reasons for this call really rest in the personality of John XXIII, and I would encourage any of you who might be interested to read his *Journal of A Soul*. It is probably the best place to come to understand this very fascinating individual. He was born in November of 1881. He had already past his 80th year when the Council opened in October of 1962, [yet] he had great vitality and charisma. And when Pope Pius died, October 9, 1958, the choice of Roncalli to succeed him was taken to be a decision for a kind of interim pope, a short-term pope, until they could actually decide who they wanted to have in that office. John wrote, “Since my childhood, I have wanted nothing other than to be a common pastor.” The calling of the Council is to be seen in light of this ambition to be a genuine pastor. He wanted to see the church brought “up to date.” The term, *aggiornamento*, the bringing up to date, is the one that was frequently used in discussing why the Council was to be called. And you find in that deep desire for the faithfulness of the church in the modern world, you find there the rootages of his reasons and rationale for calling such a Council.

Now the Council itself is a very fascinating and enormously important event, and I would encourage those of you who have any inclination to do so to pick up a little volume. It is in paperback form, fairly inexpensive, a little volume that recounts all of the findings of this Second Vatican Council. It actually produced 16 separate documents and these are included together. I think the best edition is the Abbott-Gallagher edition of *The Documents of Vatican II*, put out by Guild Press. You can find it in many
other forms as well. What we find in these documents are three categories: (1) Four constitutions: A constitution on the church, on revelation, on liturgy, on the church and the world; (2) Three declarations: On religious freedom, non-Christian religions, and Christian education; and (3) Nine decrees: Ecumenism, communication, the Eastern Catholic churches, on missions, the lay apostolate, on bishops, on renewal of religious life, on priests, and on priestly formation.

What I’d like to do with you is to go through those documents and talk to you about some of the elements of these, hoping that I can whet your appetite to actually going out and getting this volume from the library or from the bookstore and beginning to read it. Most all of you will be working in areas that have intimate contact or interaction with Roman Catholic parishes, and it is very important, I think, for us to understand what has been going on within the life of the church, so that we can communicate freely and we can do our work together as creatively and constructively as possible. And one can’t understand Roman Catholicism without understanding the Second Vatican Council, because it has had enormous impact upon the life of the church, generally, and upon each individual parish and, in fact, each individual Roman Catholic member. There is no event in recent history that has had such a powerful influence upon the life of the church and we need to understand that. And I would encourage you to read about it. Let me see if I can whet your appetite by talking about these documents: the four constitutions, the three declarations and then the nine decrees.

The four constitutions include, first of all, a constitution on the church. From a theological point of view, this is perhaps the most important of all of the documents. It focuses upon collegiality. A debate over collegiality, of course, had emerged as a result of Vatican I—the matter of the degree to which the other bishops share in the rule of the church with the bishop of Rome. Given the statement on the Pope, one might explain the life of the church as being dominated by the Roman Pontiff and a lesser importance being given to the college of bishops. The fact is, however, that Vatican II reaffirmed the principle of collegiality, making clear that teaching authority is vested in the whole church, represented through its bishops with the bishop of Rome at its head. And that neither Pope nor College is truly comprehended apart from one another. Now that is a major change and a rather striking change when one begins to look at the history of the development of Catholicism. I think never again will there be a dominance, at least in the foreseeable
future, of one over against the other. I think we will probably see additional councils as a result of this kind of action and this perspective.

The church is seen by Vatican II as “The People of God.” That is, all the people of God. It is much less exclusive than it had been in earlier years. The stress is upon, and listen to these words, “The priesthood of all the faithful.” Do you remember the phrase in the 16th century of the Protestant reformers, “The priesthood of the believers.” Here you have the very same concept essentially being reintroduced now and reaffirmed as a part of the Roman Catholic Church. Much more emphasis upon the laity, and those of you who go to a Catholic Church today will discover that there is great participation of lay members within the life of that parish and leadership of worship and leadership generally within the life of the church.

In the constitution on the church, there is also a chapter on Mary, and I mentioned this earlier on. But here is the place where you can find this discussion of a much more biblical, a much more straightforward and simple, view of Mary than we find developing over earlier centuries. I encourage you to take a look at that as well.

The second of the constitutions is on divine revelation. I want to come back, if we have time, to talk about this a bit more later. But this moves beyond the old two-source view, the belief that there are two basic sources for authoritative judgments in the church. There is Tradition and Scripture. This old view now has been remolded. So the understanding within the church is that both Tradition and Scripture are important, but that Scripture is to be the central focus interpreted within its tradition. Now that is an enormously important development and has opened up the area of biblical scholarship within Catholicism almost like an explosion. And there is a great deal of work now being done in Old and New Testament studies by Roman Catholic scholars as a result of Vatican II. And the impact is going to be seen and felt for many, many decades to come.

The third of the constitutions is on sacred liturgy. This is maybe one of the most visible if you are to visit a Roman Catholic parish. The Mass is celebrated now in the language of the people, in the vernacular. You will hear the Mass celebrated in English in virtually every parish within the Catholic Church here in America and in the language of the people wherever you have the church existing and worshiping in other parts of the
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world. Now this is quite different from the traditional practice of the church, that the Mass is celebrated only in Latin. That had gone on for centuries. Now it is rare that you will find the Mass celebrated in Latin and virtually always in the vernacular.

There is also a greater attention to Scripture in the worship of the church. You will see Scripture given a very prominent place if you go to visit one of the churches today. You will also see sermons emerging as a much more central element in the life of the church than before, and there’s increased involvement of laity in worship. Those things are marked differences from earlier years and are clearly part of life in Catholicism today.

The fourth of the constitutions is the church and the world today. This is a focus upon the need for Catholics to engage such subjects as education, marriage, poverty, illiteracy, economic justice. Pope Paul’s *populorum progressio* in 1967 is an indication of that growing interest of the church in its obligation toward the underprivileged or the needy of the world.

Now in addition to those four constitutions on the church (revelation, liturgy, and the church and the world), there are the three declarations.

First, on religious freedom: This is the statement that there can, in fact, be salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church. And for non-Catholics, of course, this is an enormously important open door now for new discussion and interaction.

The second of the declarations is on the relationship of the church to non-Christian religions. And here is the desire expressed to engage with Hindus and Buddhists, Muslims, Jews, and others. [It was] an open discussion now which has been activated on many levels, as you know, depending on the part of the world that you’re talking about for interactions between Roman Catholics and people of other faiths. In fact, a special secretariat for non-Christian religions has been established by the Vatican to help implement this dialogue.

The third of the declarations is on Christian education. This doesn’t break much new ground, but reaffirms parochial school education and the like.

Then you have the nine decrees—the first on ecumenism. This is a statement of openness toward ecumenical dialogue. And, of course, this has opened the door clearly for dialogue not only
with Orthodox Christians but with Protestant Christians of many different stripes. And that, of course, continues to go on today.

The second of the decrees, *the instruments of social communication*. This is the decree that deals specifically with media. Those of you who may be interested in the use of media in the life of the church and in the communication of the faith may want to take a look at that particular section.

The third deals with the Eastern Catholic Churches, the so-called *Uniate churches*. And in this decree, approval was given for the distinctive rights of these churches (these are Roman Catholic Churches that exist largely within Orthodox communities). Honor was accorded to their patriarchs, and guidelines were established concerning the sharing of common worship between these Churches and the Orthodox churches of the East. It is a very interesting development.

The fourth of the decrees deals with *missionary activity*. More autonomy was given to those who were actually in the field doing missionary work. Missions became more decentralized. This opened the door for joint translations of the Bible - the work between Roman Catholic missions and Protestant missions, those they called the “separated brethren.”

The fifth of the decrees focused on *lay apostolate*. This is the emphasis on “the priesthood of all the faithful,” and it spells out some of the dimensions of that new emphasis on lay activity in the life of the church.

The sixth decree, the *bishop’s pastoral office*. It gives the bishops more voice in the actual life of the church. And, of course, this has been occurring with great frequency since Vatican II in the life of the church worldwide.

The seventh decree is on the *renewal of the religious life*. Here are the changes that took place within religious orders. It used to be that nuns always wore habits—these special uniforms that they had for marking out themselves as set aside for the service of God. Now it is very regular that you would see nuns without any kind of special habit. They would wear just normal street clothes in many cases.

The eighth of the decrees is on the *ministry and life of the priests*. This updates the function and the role of the priest.
The ninth is on *priestly formation*. This deals with seminary education. And theological education among the Catholics is a very different kind of element than what we saw in earlier years. More biblical studies in the curriculum, the introduction of psychology and sociology into the training of people for ministry, the stress is upon training people for ministry in the world today, and it’s updated and upgraded seminary education.

Now this is a brief survey of some very fascinating developments that have brought about massive changes in the life of the church. There are still, of course, a number of difficult issues which the church continues to face and will probably face into the future as well. One of these very difficult issues is in how you deal with change in theology in a changeless kind of theological structure. Another concern is with that interrelation between Tradition and Scripture. Another concern is in terms of the authority structures in the life of the church.

These and many other issues will continue to engage the interest and the debate of the church over the next years, but for many of us who are Protestants, Vatican II becomes especially important in understanding some of these enormous transformations that are going on in the life of the Roman Catholic Community. And I would strongly encourage you to go back and look through some of the developments from Trent through Vatican I to Vatican II. And perhaps even to read through the documents of Vatican II so that you can become not only informed, but that you can open up new avenues for communication and ministry and communities now that are very pluralistic including not only Orthodox and Catholic but many stripes of Protestants as well.