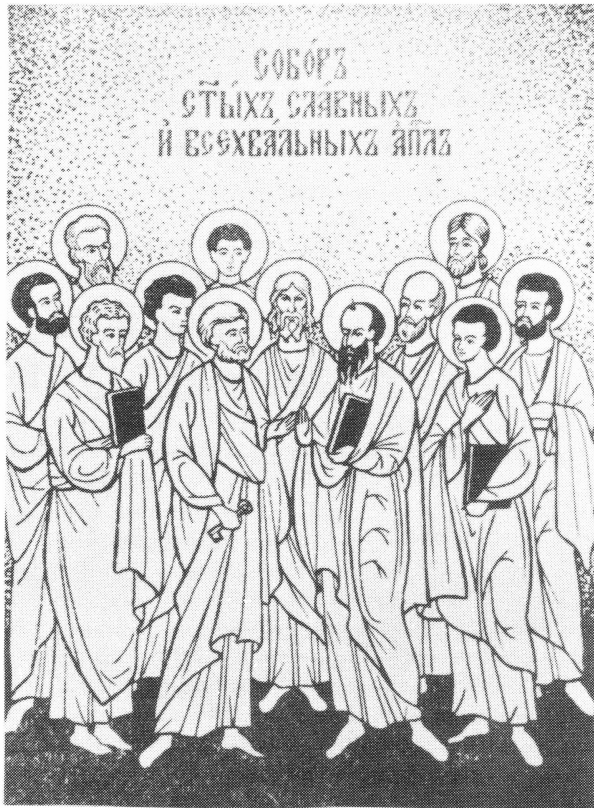


# THE COUNCIL OF THE REVOLVING DOORS: BASLE-FERRARA-FLORENCE-ROME 1431 - 1445



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## **THE COUNCIL OF THE "REVOLVING DOORS": BASLE-FERRARA-FLORENCE-ROME (1431-1445)**

Ecumenical Councils are in fact a rather obscure ecclesial reality, for, neither the official teaching of the ecclesiastical magisterium, nor the canonical legislation of the eastern and western churches supply us with a binding definition of the nature of an ecumenical council. The Biblical message is rather obscure and based mostly on the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:1-35), the prototype of all the ecumenical councils, which was held c. 48-50 A.D. The Fathers of the Church present us with very incomplete information for in the patristic era synods and councils of different kinds were the way of life, a commonly accepted reality. The conciliarist crisis only complicated the issue, which in fact has remained unresolved to the present time. This explains the lack of critical reflection on the intimate nature of the ecumenical councils and on clearly defined criteria of the same.<sup>1</sup>

After lengthy reflection, I have arrived at the following theological and canonical description of an ecumenical council. It is an *assembly* of the divine life, light, and love of the Triadic God, which is initiated by God the Father, celebrated by the authority of the Son, animated by the Holy Spirit; an *assembly* in a designated place of bishops and other representatives of the whole Christian world, or of a substantial part of it but representing morally the whole church which is the Mystical Body of Christ: an *assembly*, which is a transitory and additional mystery and institution; a charisma of unity, truth, and life; a mystery of participation in the divine authority, power, and wisdom; an *assembly* which enjoys the supreme authority in the Church universal and which under the guidance and assistance of the Holy Spirit decides matters of faith, morals, and church discipline, and acts as the supreme judiciary tribunal; an *assembly*, the decisions of which become binding and effective after their approval by the successor of St. Peter and after their reception by the whole church, i.e. by the universal consensus of believers, the People of God; an *assembly* which as a living Gospel is involved in a complex polylogue with God the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit; an *assembly* which transfigures and divinizes the Church as an eschatological community, and by the uncreated divine energies of the Triadic God leads her to her ultimate fulfillment.<sup>2</sup>

The problem of the nature and criteria of the ecumenicity of the ecumenical councils becomes more acute when we realize that no Christian community has an official list of the ecumenical councils based on some solid criteria of ecumenicity. The Nestorian and Monophysite churches recognize the first three ecumenical councils and reject the fourth, the Council of Chalcedon of 451.<sup>3</sup> The Eastern Orthodox churches *semi-officially* but not solemnly accept the first seven ecumenical councils as the rule of faith, morals and church disciplines.<sup>4</sup> The Catholic church accepts twenty-one ecumenical councils. However, this number is unofficial, of recent origin, and extremely doubtful.<sup>5</sup>

With certainty, one can claim that in church history there has never been an ecumenical council which would conform to all the criteria of ecumenicity of which we could think. The only one which could claim this honour is the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem which ironically has never been labelled *ecumenical* and never has appeared on any list of ecumenical councils. The distinction made by Hubert Jedin between the "ecumenical councils" of antiquity and the "papal general councils" of the Middle Ages evidently deserves very serious attention.<sup>6</sup> This distinction should be applied to other councils of the modern era, i.e. Trent, Vatican I and II.

The Council of Basle-Ferrara-Florence-Rome (1431-1445) is the seventeenth ecumenical council according to the unofficial Catholic enumeration. Some eastern Christians looked upon it as the eighth ecumenical council.<sup>7</sup> Generally, however, this council has been, on the one hand, unduly idealized and glorified by western, especially Catholic, church historians<sup>8</sup>, and, on the other hand, unduly and very subjectively vilified and rejected by the Eastern Orthodox churches and their historians.<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, today on both sides there is a tendency towards a more objective treatment of this council.<sup>10</sup>

It is my intention to show that both sides are not objective in their assessment of the council in question. I would also like to prove that it was not an ecumenical council for it falls short even of the criteria of a "papal general council." Furthermore, it exhibits peculiarities and an instability which truly merit for it the designation of "the council of the revolving doors."

First of all, the phenomenon of "the revolving doors" can be detected in the fact that this council, unlike any other council in church history, was celebrated successively in four different cities, namely, Basle, Ferrara, Florence, and finally Rome. Moreover, after a while the papal council of Ferrara-Florence-Rome was opposed by an anti-council at Basle. Evidently, there were defectors from both sides: this emphasizes the "revolving door" character of the council yet further.

The actions of Pope Eugene IV concerning the Council of Basle show quite clearly that the pope and his party were involved in the phenomenon of "the revolving doors." It was Pope Martin V who convoked the Council of Basle and who appointed the capable Cardinal Julian Cesarini to preside over it.<sup>11</sup> However, the pope died on February 20 of the same year. His successor, Eugene IV (1431-1447), the former Cardinal Gabriel Candulmer, and Augustinian Hermit, was a man of great zeal and unfeigned piety but of weak