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Review of *Trent: What Happened at the Council* by
John W. O'Malley

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Trent: What Happened at the Council. By John W. O'Malley. Cambridge: Harvard/Belknap, 2013. 352 pp.

Sooner or later just about everyone who teaches Reformation history and theology will pause to wonder at the relative dearth of books on the Council of Trent. By contrast, the number of works that treat the history and theology of the Lutheran confessions is relatively large. Studies that lead readers into that exceedingly long and complex event we glibly designate "The Council of Trent (1545-63)" are rare. A serviceable English translation (Schroeder) is available as well as several excellent collections of sixteenth-century Catholic sources and some historical studies of early modern Catholicism, including works by R. Po-chia Hsia, Robert Bireley, and O'Malley himself. For more determined readers, Hubert Jedin's *Geschichte des Konzils von Trient* (1949-75) is essential, but it is lengthy and arguably showing its age. Since essential materials related to the council were inaccessible prior to the opening of the Vatican archives in 1880, scholars have been unable until quite recently to develop a full historical account. Only in recent years have these materials become fully available, which means that we cannot rest content even with the results of such a magisterial work as Jedin's. Trent remains difficult to master, much less to teach.

Readers of the present work will understand much better why this is so. O'Malley provides a fine historical narrative that tells us, as he puts it, "what happened at the Council." The short answer? A great deal, over a very long time, and at great cost in both financial and human terms. Following a masterful introduction to the wide scope of problems encompassed by any attempt to tell the story of the Council, O'Malley steps back and offers an illuminating survey of the western church on the eve of the Reformation, particularly the conciliarist movement and the quite understandable fears it raised in the Roman See. Throughout, the story is told in rich but not overwhelming detail.

Three further chapters each treat an historical phase: 1545-47, when the Council was first convened at the little town of Trent, in imperial and not papal territory; 1547-52, when the Council was moved to Bologna on account of fears of an outbreak of illness in

Trent, only to be moved back there in 1551-52; and a final phase, 1562-63, in which the Council was reconvened and brought to a conclusion. An epilogue considers the meaning of Trent and includes a discussion of the problem of the historical event that is Trent, as opposed to the historical phenomenon Italian scholars have dubbed "*Tridentinismo*," or "Tridentinism," that is, the ongoing development and application of the work of the Council for centuries after its conclusion.

O'Malley has a gift for historical narrative, and his knowledge of the period and the Council is vast. Thus, the focus typically falls on historical events, including the wrangling that went on between an ever-changing cast of papal legates, the men who came (the popes remained in Rome) with the sole power to propose topics and formulas for discussion, and the bishops—often only a tiny fraction of the Catholic episcopacy—who somewhat reluctantly gathered. French, Portuguese, and even the Spanish were frequently significantly underrepresented, but the German bishops were nearly always almost entirely absent, which is particularly striking given that their territories had typically the most to gain from developing a solution to the problem Protestantism posed. O'Malley's flair for historical prose illuminates the interactions between bishops, legates, and Rome, as well as with an evolving cast of secular rulers including the Holy Roman Emperors Charles V and his successor, Ferdinand I. Add to that the five popes who reigned during the Council—Paul III, Julius III, Marcellus II, Paul IV, and Pius IV—and one begins to get a sense for the almost overwhelming complexity of the event, for which O'Malley proves a sure-footed guide.

For the theologian, however, O'Malley's account may prove somewhat less satisfying. To be sure, he gives us great insight into the working methodology of the Council, especially the way the "congregations" or meetings of theologians and canonists were related to the typically subsequent congregations of bishops, and then at last to the solemn "Sessions" in which the Council's canons and decrees were adopted by the bishops. We see the background and impact of the bishops' early decision to treat doctrine and church reform in parallel, typically producing a decision on one right alongside the other. Much historical insight on the development of

such crucial theological pronouncements as those on Scripture and tradition, on original sin and justification, and even on the sacraments, is here. But relatively little detail is offered on the theological arguments. Admittedly, however, this is a book about the "what happened" of the Council and not so much about the "what it meant." Or is it? Perhaps it is the genius of O'Malley to so historicize the Council's decisions as to invite the ongoing reception of their meaning, rather than to foreclose that reception by offering the historian's authoritative pronouncements. If that is so then perhaps others now need to do for the theology of the Council what O'Malley has done here so brilliantly for its history.

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