

Lifestyle & Culture

Catholic Church Councils, parliamentary democracy, women and controversy

■ Dr Simon Mercieca

The Local Church is currently in the spotlight after being in the international news as a result of our bishops' interpretation regarding Pope Francis' *Amoris Letitia*. The controversy regards Communion and whether divorced individuals and those leading a sexual life not according to the teachings of the Catholic Church should be allowed to receive the Sacrament.

What is of interest in this debate is that those opposing this interpretation are referring to a particular Council - that of Trent - concerning the nature of the Eucharist.

The paradox of it all is that those Catholic priests who are challenging the current Pope, are now being threatened by the same decrees promulgated by the Council of Trent. When the current archbishop challenged those seminarians, who do not want to accept Pope Francis' teaching, to leave, he was re-asserting a basic Tridentine principle. It was the Council of Trent that steadfastly affirmed the pyramidal power within the Church. From Trent onwards, the line of command was always from top downwards and not vice-versa. Perhaps, this may sound strange, but it is possible that there was more leeway in the Middle Ages.

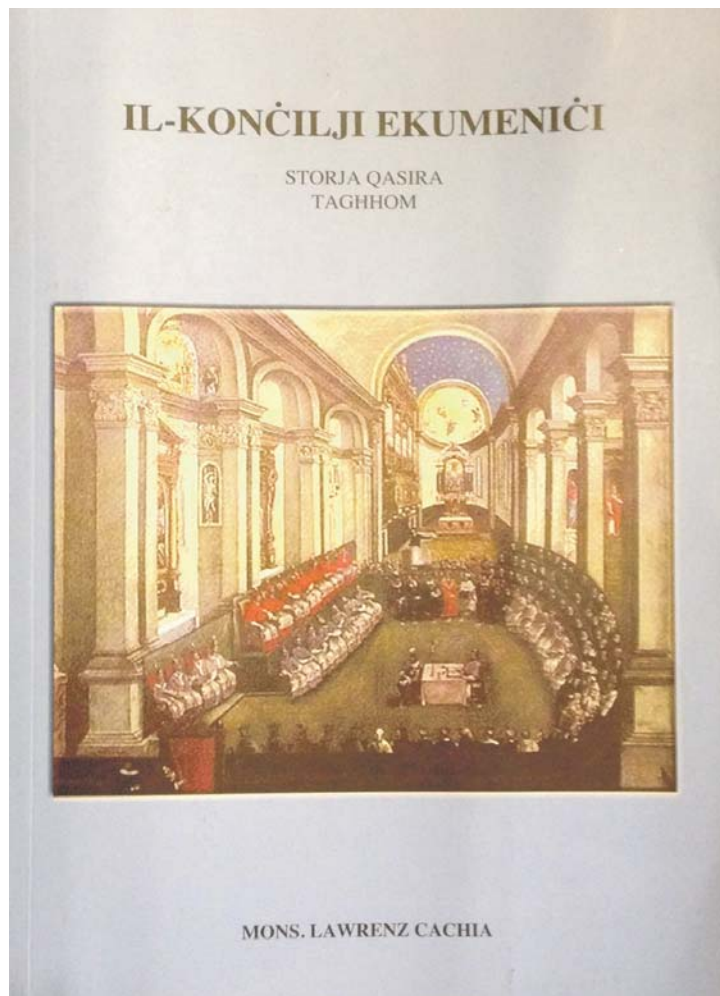
For those interested to learn more about this Council of Trent and the other Councils of the Catholic Church, Mons. Lawrenz Cachia has just published a book entitled *Il-Konċilji Ekumeniċi, Storja Qasira Tagħhom*.

I don't know whether the urge to read this book came from my interest in history or because the author is usually associated with research on the Maltese patriot Mikiel Anton Vassalli. Very few associate Lawrenz Cachia, who happens to be a priest, with writings on Church history.

Cachia discusses twenty-one Councils of the Catholic Church. In truth there were more but the rest are not recognized by the Latin Church, as the form of Christianity headed by Rome is normally known. These Councils are known as "Konciljabboli". This is a word derived from Italian, meaning that these were not Councils led by the Holy Spirit but by the devil.

The author admits from the start of his book that Church history was not always a bed of roses. Without doubt, two thousand years of history have had its ups and downs. Anglo-American literature seeks to emphasize the negative aspects driven by a historiography that was formed at the time of the Protestant Reformation. Cachia seeks to stress the positive aspects of the Church Councils.

The word council means a meeting of bishops to discuss theological or administrative principles. But this aspect of the history of the Church has its peculiar dy-



namics. The first Councils were held in the East. After the schism of 1054, the Latin Church held its own series of Church Councils, with the presence of the Oriental or Orthodox Churches. All in all, 8 official Councils were held in the east, attended by both Latin and Oriental Churches. Another 13 were held in the West.

In reading this book, one realizes that this division is not only geographical but also dogmatic. These past divisions not only condition how the West and the East see each other, but also how certain Catholics look at other religions, including Islam. I am using the word dogmatic in the true meaning of the word. The semantic meaning of this word stands for the tendency of the Catholic Church to lay down principles as irrefutably true. Those who are into Church history would argue that irrespective whether a council was held in the East or the West, it sought to establish incontrovertible theological dogmas. This point stands out very clearly in this book.

Yet, on reading further, one realizes that the theological premises of those Councils held in the East were different to those convened in the West. I don't think that this was just a question of each Church Council representing the times in which it was held. I think that there is even an issue of language. In the East, the language of the Church Councils was Greek. Those held in the West were conducted in Latin.

Perhaps, very few realize that

the real theological language of Christianity is not Latin but Greek. Even in Roman times, the language of culture and philosophy was Greek. Latin was the language of the Law. If one looks at the topics discussed in those Councils held in the East as well as those held in the West, they were all marked by this language difference.

In the East, the discussion was about the nature of Christ, whether or not Jesus was both God and Man. Beyond this theological debate, there is a vast literature in Classical Greek. Semantics played a role. At this time, the Latin Church accepted the primacy of Greek on theological issues. But not all Oriental Churches looked on Greek with the same reverence. A schism emerged between Christians in the Orient who prayed in Arabic and those who prayed in Greek. This led to a division, which would rebound in the west, between those who came to be known as Nestorians and the Monophysites. They prayed in Arabic. In my opinion, Islam is derived directly from these Christian expressions. This put into question what certain exponents in Latin Christianity are stating, which is that the Christian God is not the Muslim God. My historical research is leading me to conclude that Maltese Christianity is derived from Monophysitism. But this is another matter that goes beyond this study.

Interestingly, what emerges from Cachia's work is the role

played by women when a number of the Church Councils in the East were convened. The wife of the Emperor or his sister had a great say. The natural question would be why were women so interested in Church business? These women tended to side with those religious groups whose mainstream religion, the Pope in Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople, wanted to silence. Unfortunately, as the author notes, the workings of these early Councils have not survived. Cachia does not go into this debate but in the wake of the issue about women priests in the West, this element requires further study. These Councils confirms that the winning Oriental version of Christianity was extensively male dominated. This had repercussions on the theological debate in the West. At this period, the West seems to have been more open to the issue of women priests. It is now confirmed that there were Christian denominations, at least in the West, who allowed women priests. These Councils secured the success of Eastern models of priesthood on the Western world. By the time that Charlemagne re-established the Western Roman Empire, all vestiges of women priesthood in the west were obliterated from historical records.

The Councils held in the West started with the first Lateran Council in 1123. It is not a coincidence that this Council sought to reaffirm the central role of male priesthood in the Latin Church. The figure of the priest, the abuses that this dominant figure started to generate, lead the Church to convene other Councils in an attempt to remedy the situation. In some cases, as in the Council of Constance, the decision was taken to condemn Oxford professor, John Wycliffe, to a cruel death at the stake for his teachings about the Eucharist.

But these Councils also gave importance to issues of governance within the Church. The impact of Latin, in particular its imbedded concepts of canons or law became central to each and every Council held in the West. But the use of Latin led the Church to new controversies. The Greek concepts started to be translated into Latin. But the translations were not always satisfactory. The issue on the Eucharist was a case in point. The Wycliffe controversy was in part due to the interpretation or better still the difficulty to translate Greek concepts about the Eucharist into Latin. In Greek, Armenian and Arabic these notions have a clear meaning. The translation of this concept in the West brought an open debate as Latin had more than one possibility for the translation of this theological premise. The use of two distinct Latin words to describe this Christian mystery gave rise to two distinct schools of thought in the Middle Ages. Eventually, the rift between them became so

marked that it would be one of the causes for a new division in the West. This year, Christianity is marking the 500th anniversary of Martin Luther's attempt at the beginning of Christian reform or what came to be known as the Protestant Reformation.

For those who are not conversed with this issue, I am referring to the debate, whether the bread and the wine become the body and blood of Christ through "transubstantiation" or "consustantiation". Luther went for the latter. The Catholic Church stood for the former. The truth is that in the High Medieval times, the Latin prefixes of "trans" and "cum" had interchangeable meanings. The words were used differently in the Western world. The Council of Trent brought to a close this medieval debate by sanctioning the transubstantiation principle as opposed to the other. It seems that these two principles are still haunting the Catholic Church. One of the reasons why ultra conservative priests are at war over *Amoris Letitia* is in part due to the theological literature that evolved around transubstantiation following the Council of Trent's affirmation of this principle. One needs to thank God that in Maltese, these two words can only be translated in one simple and remarkable word "jinbidlu", and the word "qurbana" or "tqarbin" meaning Holy Communion did not have in Monophysitism these linguistic innuendos, thus both can only be translated by the same Semitic word.

Through this work, one learns how Christianity, from its inception, adopted the Greek concepts of democracy to the ruling of the Church. Irrespective whether these Councils were held in the East or in the West, in case of disagreement, decisions had to be taken after a majority vote. It was thanks to the Latin Church that this principle became a basic element of parliamentary democracy in the West.

What emerges of interest in this book is that at the Council of Constance, the Latin Church proposed the principle that Ecumenical Councils should be held every 10 years. The failure of putting this principle into practice expresses the Orthodox path that the Church took and which this Pope is struggling now to reverse.

Cachia makes a pertinent reflection in his introduction to this book. He reiterates the need for the Latin Church to start holding Councils in regular manner while stating his conviction that the Catholic Church is heading towards a new general Council.

The institution that was the harbinger of such basic democratic principles ended up behind the rest of Europe in their application. But these basic concepts of Greek democracy owe their survival in the West to these Church Councils.