

# Sixth Question: Whether Councils Can Err

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## Chapter I. On the State of the Question

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This question, which we now approach, concerning the faith and authority of councils, is the most serious of all the questions in this controversy. For since many councils have been held in the Church in the past, and may perhaps be held in the future, it can rightly be asked whether whatever they have decreed is necessary, and whether all their decrees should be accepted without examination, as if they could never err in their opinions and decisions. Our adversaries do not share our view on this matter. First, therefore, we will inquire what their opinion is, then what ours is, and afterward we will come to the arguments of both sides.

It is known that there have been many impious councils in which heresy was approved, such as the Council of Seleucia, of Rimini, and the Second Council of Ephesus, as our adversaries admit. In these, if we consider the number, there were many more bishops than in some other legitimate and Catholic councils.

Melchior Canus, in Book 5, Chapter 4 of his *Common Places*, proposes various types of councils and distinctly recites certain propositions or conclusions:

1. *The first* is that a general council which is neither convened nor confirmed by the authority of the Roman Pontiff can err in faith, such as were the Council of Rimini and the Second Council of Constantinople under Leo.
2. *The second* is that a general council, even if convened by the Roman Pontiff, can err unless it has been confirmed by him, such as was the Second Council of Ephesus, where the legates of Leo were present, and yet the opinion of the heretic Dioscorus prevailed.
3. *The third conclusion of Canus* is that a general council convened and at the same time confirmed by the Roman Pontiff establishes certain faith of Catholic dogmas, and to hold the contrary is heretical.

Concerning provincial councils, he states that those which are not confirmed by the Pope can err, but those which are confirmed by the Pope cannot, so that he makes the entire force of both general and particular councils depend on the Pope.

It is not necessary to repeat the opinions of other Papists. This is the view of all who wish to be seen as Catholic. For Bellarmine, in Book 2 On Councils, pursues two propositions:

- The first, in Chapter 2, is that it must be held by Catholic faith that general councils confirmed by the supreme Pontiff cannot err, neither in faith nor in morals, that is, in handing down precepts of morals common to the whole Church.
- The second, in Chapter 5, is that particular councils approved and confirmed by the supreme pontiff cannot err in faith and morals. But he says that this proposition has less certainty than the other, which he affirms without any reason if the entire force of a council depends on the approval and confirmation of the Roman Pontiff.

Indeed, he says this because he knows that many Papists doubt this proposition. Therefore, he says the former proposition must be held by Catholic faith, but not this one. But if the Pontificals are mindful of their own opinion, by which they state that the Pope cannot err in matters of faith, it is necessary that they confess that all things which are confirmed by him concerning matters of faith are valid, whether they are done in a general or in a particular council.

Now, since there is so much importance in the Pope, that without him no council, neither provincial nor general, has any force in itself, it can rightly be asked what parts the bishops have in a council: are they only advisors or counselors, or are they judges? For if they are only counselors, why are none but bishops admitted to councils? Why not rather others who are much more learned than many bishops?

Naclantus of Chioggia, in his treatise *On the Power of the Pope and Council*, says, "The power of the Pope is royal, that of the council is advisory; the former is entirely definitive, the latter of ambulatory definition." But the Papists now want bishops to be judges. But what, I ask, is this judgment of theirs? Is it divine? This is what they want: that God has made none but bishops judges in councils, that they cannot err in judging because they are bishops, while others can, however much more learned they may be than the bishops. Therefore, if the judgment of bishops is divine, does it require the authority of the Pope to be ratified and confirmed? But enough about the opinion of our adversaries.

Our opinion, however, is that councils can err, not only particular ones, but also general ones, whether they have been convened and confirmed by the Pope or not, and this not only in fact (which our adversaries admit) but also in faith and morals. And we teach that many councils have erred in this way. But let us see by what arguments the Papists prove that councils confirmed by the Roman Pontiff cannot err.