Lateran IV: Select Canons, 1215

The Fourth Lateran Council, called by Innocent III, was the most important of the Western Medieval general councils. It addressed a wide range of issues in a series of canons, of which these are a selection.

CANON 1

SUMMARY: the Creed of the Council

Text: We firmly believe and openly confess that there is only one true God, eternal and immense, omnipotent, changeable, incomprehensible, and ineffable, Father, Son, and Holy Ghost; three Persons indeed but one essence, substance, or nature absolutely simple; the Father (proceeding) from no one, but the Son from the Father only, and the Holy Ghost equally from both, always without beginning and end. The Father begetting, the Son begotten, and the Holy Ghost proceeding; consubstantial and coequal, co-omnipotent and coeternal, the one principle of the universe, Creator of all things invisible and visible, spiritual and corporeal, who from the beginning of time and by His omnipotent power made from nothing creatures both spiritual and corporeal, angelic, namely, and mundane, and then human, as it were, common, composed of spirit and body. The devil and the other demons were indeed created by God good by nature but they became bad through themselves; man, however, sinned at the suggestion of the devil. This Holy Trinity in its common essence undivided and in personal properties divided, through Moses, the holy prophets, and other servants gave to the human race at the most opportune intervals of time the doctrine of salvation.

And finally, Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son of God made flesh by the entire Trinity, conceived with the co-operation of the Holy Ghost of Mary ever Virgin, made true man, composed of a rational soul and human flesh, one Person in two natures, pointed out more clearly the way of life. Who according to His divinity is immortal and impassable, according to His humanity was made passable and mortal, suffered on the cross for the salvation of the human race, and being dead descended into hell, rose from the dead, and ascended into heaven. But He descended in soul, arose in flesh, and ascended equally in both; He will come at the end of the world to judge the living and the dead and will render to the reprobate and to the elect according to their works. Who all shall rise with their own bodies which they now have that they may receive according to their merits, whether good or bad, the latter eternal punishment with the devil, the former eternal glory with Christ.

There is one Universal Church of the faithful, outside of which there is absolutely no salvation. In which there is the same priest and sacrifice, Jesus Christ, whose body and blood are truly contained in the sacrament of the altar under the forms of bread and wine; the bread being changed (transubstantiation) by divine power into the body, and the wine into the blood, so that to realize the mystery of unity we may receive of Him what He has received of us. And this sacrament no one can effect except the priest who has been duly ordained in accordance with the keys of the Church, which Jesus Christ Himself gave to the Apostles and their successors. But the sacrament of baptism, which by the invocation of each Person of the Trinity, namely of the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, is effected in water, duly conferred on children and adults in the form prescribed by the Church by anyone whatsoever, leads to salvation. And should anyone after the reception of baptism have fallen into sin, by true repentance he can always be restored. Not only virgins and those practicing chastity, but also those united in marriage, through the right faith and through works pleasing to God, can merit eternal salvation.
CANON 6  
**SUMMARY:** Provincial synod, for the correction of abuses and the enforcement of canonical enactments must be held annually. To ensure this, reliable persons are to be appointed who will investigate such things as need correction.

*Text.* In accordance with the ancient provisions of the holy Fathers, the metropolitans must not neglect to hold with their suffragans the annual provincial synods. In these they should be actuated with a genuine fear of God in correcting abuses and reforming morals, especially the morals of the clergy, familiarizing themselves anew with the canonical rules, particularly those that are enacted in this general council, that they may enforce their observance by imposing due punishment on transgressors. That this may be done more effectively, let them appoint in each and every diocese prudent and upright persons, who throughout the entire year shall informally and without any jurisdiction diligently investigate such things as need correction or reform and faithfully present them to the metropolitan, suffragans, and others in the following synod, so that they may give prudent consideration to these and other matters as circumstances demand; and in reference to those things that they decree, let them enforce observance, publishing the decisions in the episcopal synods to be held annually in each diocese. Whoever shall neglect to comply with this salutary statute, let him be suspended from his office and benefits till it shall please his superior to restore him.

CANON 11  
**SUMMARY:** In every cathedral church and other churches also that have sufficient means, a master is to be appointed to instruct gratis the clerics and poor students. The metropolitan church ought to have a theologian who shall teach the clergy whatever pertains to the cura animarum (i.e. care of souls).

*Text.* Since there are some who, on account of the lack of necessary means, are unable to acquire an education or to meet opportunities for perfecting themselves, the Third Lateran Council in a salutary decree provided that in every cathedral church a suitable benefice be assigned to a master who shall instruct gratis the clerics of that church and other poor students, by means of which benefit the material needs of the master might be relieved and to the students a way opened to knowledge. But, since in many churches this is not observed, we, confirming the aforesaid decree, add that, not only in every cathedral church but also in other churches where means are sufficient, a competent master be appointed by the prelate with his chapter, or elected by the greater and more discerning part of the chapter, who shall instruct gratis and to the best of his ability the clerics of those and other churches in the art of grammar and in other branches of knowledge. In addition to a master, let the metropolitan church have also a theologian, who shall instruct the priests and others in the Sacred Scriptures and in those things especially that pertain to the cura animarum. To each master let there be assigned by the chapter the revenue of one benefice, and to the theologian let as much be given by the metropolitan; not that they thereby become canons, but they shall enjoy the revenue only so long as they hold the office of instructor. If the metropolitan church cannot support two masters, then it shall provide for the theologian in the aforesaid manner, but for the one teaching grammar, let it see to it that a sufficiency is provided by another church of its city or diocese.

CANON 15  
**SUMMARY:** Clerics, who after being warned do not abstain from drunkenness, shall be suspended from their office and benefice.

*Text.* All clerics shall carefully abstain from drunkenness. Wherefore, let them accommodate the wine to themselves, and themselves to the wine. Nor shall anyone be encouraged to drink, for drunkenness banishes reason and incites to lust. We decree, therefore, that that abuse be absolutely abolished by which in some localities the drinkers bind themselves suo modo to an equal portion of drink and he in their judgment is the hero of the day who out drinks the others.
Should anyone be culpable in this matter, unless he heeds the warning of the superior and makes suitable satisfaction, let him be suspended from his benefice or office. We forbid hunting and fowling to all clerics; wherefore, let them not presume to keep dogs and birds for these purposes.

**CANON 16**

**SUMMARY:** Clerics are not to engage in secular pursuits, attend unbecoming exhibitions, visit taverns, or play games of chance. Their clothing must be in keeping with their dignity.

**Text.** Clerics shall not hold secular offices or engage in secular and, above all, dishonest pursuits. They shall not attend the performances of mimics and buffoons, or theatrical representations. They shall not visit taverns except in case of necessity, namely, when on a journey. They are forbidden to play games of chance or be present at them. They must have a becoming crown and tonsure and apply themselves diligently to the study of the divine offices and other useful subjects. Their garments must be worn clasped at the top and neither too short nor too long. They are not to use red or green garments or curiously sewed together gloves, or beak-shaped shoes or gilded bridles, saddles, pectoral ornaments (for horses), spurs, or anything else indicative of superfluity. At the divine office in the church they are not to wear cappas with long sleeves, and priests and dignitaries may not wear them elsewhere except in case of danger when circumstances should require a change of outer garments. Buckles may under no condition be worn, nor sashes having ornaments of gold or silver, nor rings, unless it be in keeping with the dignity of their office. All bishops must use in public and in the church outer garments made of linen, except those who are monks, in which case they must wear the habit of their order; in public they must not appear with open mantles, but these must be clasped either on the back of the neck or on the bosom.

**CANON 18**

**SUMMARY:** Clerics may neither pronounce nor execute a sentence of death. Nor may they act as judges in extreme criminal cases, or take part in matters connected with judicial tests and ordeals.

**Text.** No cleric may pronounce a sentence of death, or execute such a sentence, or be present at its execution. If anyone in consequence of this prohibition should presume to inflict damage on churches or injury on ecclesiastical persons, let him be restrained by ecclesiastical censure. Nor may any cleric write or dictate letters destined for the execution of such a sentence. Wherefore, in the chanceries of the princes let this matter be committed to laymen and not to clerics. Neither may a cleric act as judge in the case of the Rotarrii, archers, or other men of this kind devoted to the shedding of blood. No subdeacon, deacon, or priest shall practice that part of surgery involving burning and cutting. Neither shall anyone in judicial tests or ordeals by hot or cold water or hot iron bestow any blessing; the earlier prohibitions in regard to dueling remain in force.

**CANON 21**

**SUMMARY:** Everyone who has attained the age of reason is bound to confess his sins at least once a year to his own parish pastor with his permission to another, and to receive the Eucharist at least at Easter. A priest who reveals a sin confided to him in confession is to be deposed and relegated to a monastery for the remainder of his life.

**Text.** All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion faithfully confess all their sins at least once a year to their own (parish) priest and perform to the best of their ability the penance imposed, receiving reverently at least at Easter the sacrament of the Eucharist, unless perchance at the advice of their own priest they may for a good reason abstain for a time from its reception; otherwise they shall be cut off from the Church (excommunicated) during life and deprived of Christian burial in death. Wherefore, let this...
salutary decree be published frequently in the churches, that no one may find in the plea of ignorance a shadow of excuse. But if anyone for a good reason should wish to confess his sins to another priest, let him first seek and obtain permission from his own (parish) priest, since otherwise he (the other priest) cannot loose or bind him. Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the one injured after the manner of a skilful physician, carefully inquiring into the circumstances of the sinner and the sin, from the nature of which he may understand what kind of advice to give and what remedy to apply, making use of different experiments to heal the sick one. But let him exercise the greatest precaution that he does not in any degree by word, sign, or any other manner make known the sinner, but should he need more prudent counsel, let him seek it cautiously without any mention of the person. He who dares to reveal a sin confided to him in the tribunal of penance, we decree that he be not only deposed from the sacerdotal office but also relegated to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life.

CANON 23
SUMMARY: If those to whom it pertains neglect to elect a bishop for a cathedral within three months, then this duty devolves upon the next immediate superior. If he neglects to do so within three months, he shall be punished.

Text. That the ravenous wolf may not invade the Lord's flock that is without a pastor, that a widowed church may not suffer grave loss in its properties, that danger to soul may be averted, and that provision may be made for the security of the churches, we decree that a cathedral or regular church must not be without a bishop for more than three months. If within this time an election has not been held by those to whom it pertains, though there was no impediment, the electors lose their right of voting, and the right to appoint devolves upon the next immediate superior. Let the one upon whom this right to appoint devolves, having God before his eyes, not delay more than three months to provide canonically and with the advice of the chapter and other prudent men the widowed church with a suitable pastor, if he wishes to escape canonical punishment. This pastor is to be chosen from the widowed church itself, or from another in case a suitable one is not found therein.

CANON 27
SUMMARY: Incompetent persons must not be promoted to the priesthood or given the direction of souls.

Text. Since the direction of souls is the art of arts, we strictly command that bishops, either themselves or through other qualified men, diligently prepare and instruct those to be elevated to the priesthood in the divine offices and in the proper administration of the sacraments of the Church. If in the future they presume to ordain ignorant and unformed men (a defect that can easily be discovered), we decree that both those ordaining and those ordained be subject to severe punishment. In the ordination of priests especially, it is better to have a few good ministers than many who are no good, for if the blind lead the blind both will fall into the pit (Matt. 15:14).

CANON 29
SUMMARY: Anyone having a benefice with the cura animarum annexed, if he accepts another, shall lose the first; and if he attempts to retain it, he shall lose the other also. After the reception of the second benefice, the first may be freely conferred on another. If he to whom that collation belongs should delay beyond six months, then it shall devolve on another and the form shall indemnify the church for the losses incurred during the vacancy.

Text. With much foresight it was prohibited in the Lateran Council that no one should, contrary to the sacred canons, accept several ecclesiastical dignities or several parochial churches; otherwise the one receiving should lose what he received, and the one who bestowed be
deprived of the right of collation. But since, on account of the boldness and avarice of some, the aforesaid statute has thus far produced little or no fruit, we, wishing to meet the situation more clearly and emphatically, declare in the present decree that whoever shall accept a benefice to which is annexed the *cura animam* after having previously obtained such a benefice, shall *ipso jure* be deprived of this (the first one); and if perchance he should attempt to retain it, let him be deprived of the other one also. He to whom the collation of the first benefice belongs may freely confer it, after the incumbent has accepted a second, on anyone whom he may deem worthy; should he delay to do so beyond a period of six months, then in accordance with the decree of the Lateran Council, let not only its collation devolve on another, but also let him be compelled to indemnify the church in question from his own resources equal to the amount of the revenues drawn from it during its vacancy. The same we decree is to be observed in regard to dignities (*personatus*), adding, that no one may presume to have several dignities in the same church, even though they have not the *cura animarum* annexed. Only in the case of eminent and learned persons who are to be honored with major benefices, can the Apostolic See, if need be, grant a dispensation.

**CANON 42**

**SUMMARY:** No cleric may so extend his jurisdiction as to become detrimental to secular justice.

**Text.** As desirous as we are that laymen do not usurp the rights of clerics, we are no less desirous that clerics abstain from arrogating to themselves the rights of laymen. Wherefore we forbid all clerics so to extend in the future their jurisdiction under the pretext of ecclesiastical liberty as to prove detrimental to secular justice; but let them be content with the laws and customs thus far approved, that the things that are Caesar's may be rendered to Caesar, and those that are God's may by a just division be rendered to God.


[note 1: B. Herder's list was bought by TAN books, of Rockford IL. TAN confirmed that US copyright was not renewed after the statutory 28 years and that the text is now in the public domain in the US.]

[note 2: Fr. Schroeder accompanied the text with a commentary which, while well informed, was dominated by a concern to defend Catholic positions of his own time, and contained, moreover, a number of verbal attacks on the Orthodox churches. This commentary has not been reproduced here.]