

2. THE FOURTH LATERAN COUNCIL (1215)

In 1215 Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) gathered several hundred archbishops, bishops, abbots, and prelates from across Europe at Rome to discuss the state of the church. The decrees issued by this Fourth Lateran Council were a watershed in the pastoral history of the Middle Ages. In fact, it is no exaggeration to say that the Council created the Christian church of the high Middle Ages, for it defined the basic religious duties required of all Christians and established procedures for the administration of the church at the local levels of the diocese and parish. Canon 21, *Omnis utriusque sexus*, was especially important. It obliged all adult Christians to make confession and receive holy communion at least once a year. This obligation, in turn, required priests themselves to be more meticulous in their exercise of the cura animarum, or care of souls. In the decades following the Council a flurry of episcopal legislation and handbooks meant to better train the parish clergy for their pastoral duties circulated across Europe. Though the whole document repays study for students of popular religion, here are a few of the Council's canons especially concerned with everyday religious belief and conduct:

Source: trans. H. J. Schroeder in *Disciplinary Decrees of the General Councils* (London: Herder, 1937), pp. 237-239, 251-52, 255-57, 259-60, 280-81, 286-87, 290-91, Latin.

Canon 1. We firmly believe and openly confess that there is only one true God, eternal and immense, omnipotent, unchangeable, 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; the Son begotten, and the Holy Spirit proceeding; consubstantial and coequal, co-omnipotent and coeternal, the one principle of the universe, Creator of all things visible and invisible, 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 earthly, 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 cooperation 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 unable to suffer, according to his humanity was made able to suffer 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 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 [*transubstantiatis*] 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 10. Among other things that pertain to the salvation of the Christian people, the food of the word of God is above all necessary, because as the body is nourished by material food so is the soul nourished by spiritual food, since "not in bread alone doth man live, but in every word that proceedeth from the mouth of God" [Matt. 4:4]. It often happens that bishops, on account of their manifold duties or bodily infirmities or because of hostile invasions or other reasons, to say nothing of lack of learning, which must be absolutely condemned in them and is not to be tolerated in the future, are themselves unable to minister the word of God to the people, especially in large and widespread dioceses. Wherefore we decree that bishops provide suitable men, powerful in work and word, to exercise with fruitful result the

office of preaching; who in place of the bishops, since these cannot do it, diligently visiting the people committed to them, may instruct them by word and example. And when they are in need, let them be supplied with the necessities, lest for want of these they may be compelled to abandon their work at the very beginning. Wherefore we command that in cathedral churches as well as in conventual churches suitable men be appointed whom the bishops may use as coadjutors and assistants, not only in the office of preaching but also in hearing confessions, imposing penances, and in other matters that pertain to the salvation of souls. If anyone neglect to comply with this, he shall be subject to severe punishment. . . .

Canon 14. That the morals and general conduct of clerics may be better reformed, let all strive to live chastely and virtuously, particularly those in sacred orders, guarding against every vice of desire, especially that on account of which the anger of God came from heaven upon the children of unbelief, so that in the sight of Almighty God they may perform their duties with a pure heart and chaste body. But lest the facility to obtain pardon be an incentive to do wrong, we decree that whoever shall be found to indulge in the vice of incontinence, shall, in proportion to the gravity of his sin, be punished in accordance with the canonical statutes, which we command to be strictly and rigorously observed, so that he whom divine fear does not restrain from evil, may at least be withheld from sin by a temporal penalty. If therefore anyone suspended for this reason shall presume to celebrate the divine mysteries, let him not only be deprived of his ecclesiastical benefices but for this twofold offense let him be forever deposed. Prelates who dare support such in their iniquities, especially in view of money or other temporal advantages, shall be subject to a like punishment. But if those, who according to the practice of their country [i.e., the Latin East] have not renounced the conjugal bond, fall by the vice of impurity, they are to be punished more severely, since they can use matrimony lawfully.

Canon 15. 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 in their manner to an equal portion of drink and he in their judgment is the hero of the day who outdrinks 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. Clerics shall not hold secular offices or engage in secular and, above all, dishonest pursuits. They shall not attend the performances of mimes or buffoons, or theatrical presentations. 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 shaved crown and tonsure and apply themselves diligently to the study of the divine office 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 [cloth] or [long sleeves, or embroidered or pointed] shoes or gilded bridles, saddles, breastplates for their horses, spurs, or anything else indicative of superfluity. At the divine office in the church they are not to wear cloaks 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 [belts ornamented in] 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 were 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 chest. . . .

Canon 20. We decree that in all churches the chrism and the eucharist be kept in properly protected places provided with locks and keys, so that they may not be reached by rash and indiscreet persons and used for impious and blasphemous purposes. But if he to whom such guardianship pertains should leave them unprotected, let him be suspended from office for a period of three months. And if through his negligence an execrable deed should result, let him be punished more severely.

Canon 21. All the faithful of both sexes shall after they have reached the age of discretion [i.e., fourteen] 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 [barred from entering] the church 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 good reason should wish to confess his sins to another priest, let him first seek and obtain permission from his own priest, since otherwise the other priest cannot absolve or bind him.

Let the priest be discreet and cautious that he may pour wine and oil into the wounds of the one injured in the manner of a skillful 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 kind of remedy to apply, making use of different means 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 priestly office but also relegated to a monastery of strict observance to do penance for the remainder of his life. . . .

Canon 27. 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 uninformed men (a defect that can be easily 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. 18.14]. . . .

Canon 51. Since the prohibition of the conjugal union in the three last degrees has been revoked, we wish that it be strictly observed in the other degrees. Whence, following in the footsteps of our predecessors, we absolutely forbid clandestine marriages; and we forbid also that a priest presume to witness such. Wherefore, extending to other localities generally the particular custom that prevails in some, we decree that when marriages are to be contracted they must be announced publicly in the churches by the priests during a suitable and fixed time, so that if legitimate impediments exist, they may be made known. Let the priests nevertheless investigate whether any impediments exist. But when there is ground for doubt concerning the contemplated union, let the marriage be expressly forbidden until it is evident from reliable sources what ought to be done in regard to it. But if anyone should presume to contract a clandestine or forbidden marriage of this kind

within a prohibited degree, even through ignorance, the children from such a union shall be considered illegitimate, nor shall the ignorance of the parents be pleaded as an extenuating circumstance in their behalf, since they by contracting such marriages appear not as wanting in knowledge but rather as affecting ignorance. In like manner the children shall be considered illegitimate if both parents, knowing that a legitimate impediment exists, presume to contract such a marriage in the witness of the church in disregard of every prohibition. The parochial priest who deliberately neglects to forbid such unions or any regular priest who presumes to witness them, let them be suspended from office for a period of three years and, if the nature of their offense demands it, let them be punished more severely. On those also who presume to contract such marriages in a lawful degree, a condign punishment is to be imposed. If anyone maliciously presents an impediment for the purpose of frustrating a legitimate marriage, let him not escape ecclesiastical punishment. . . .

Canon 62. From the fact that some expose for sale and exhibit promiscuously the relics of the saints, great injury is sustained by the Christian religion. That this may not occur hereafter, we ordain in the present decree that in the future old relics may not be exhibited outside of a vessel or exposed for sale. And let no one presume to venerate publicly new ones unless they have been approved by the Roman pontiff. In the future prelates shall not permit those who come to their churches [for the sake of venerating relics] to be deceived by worthless fabrications or false documents as has been done in many places for the sake of gain. We forbid also that seekers [questors] of alms, some of whom, misrepresenting themselves, preach certain abuses, be admitted, unless they exhibit genuine letters either of the Apostolic See or of the diocesan bishop, in which case they may not preach anything to the people but what is contained in those letters. We give herewith a form which the Apostolic See commonly uses in granting such letters, that the diocesan bishops may model their own upon it. [*The form letter is omitted here.*] . . .

Those who are assigned to collect alms must be upright and discreet, must not seek lodging for the night in taverns or in other unbecoming places, nor make useless and extravagant expenses, and must avoid absolutely the wearing of the habit of a false religious.

Since, through indiscreet and superfluous indulgences which some prelates of churches do not hesitate to grant, contempt is brought on the keys of the church, and the penitential discipline is weakened, we decree that on the occasion of the dedication of a church an indulgence of not more than one year may be granted, whether it be dedicated by one bishop only or by

many, and on the anniversary of the dedication, the remission granted for penances enjoined is not to exceed forty days. We command also that in each case this number of days be made the rule in issuing letters of indulgences which are granted from time to time, since the Roman pontiff who possesses the plenitude of power customarily observes this rule in such matters. . . .

Canon 68. In some provinces a difference of dress distinguishes the Jews and Saracens from the Christians, but in others confusion has developed to such a degree that no difference is discernible. Whence it happens sometimes through error that Christians mingle with the women of Jews and Saracens, and, on the other hand, Jews and Saracens mingle with those of the Christians. Therefore, that such religious commingling through error of this kind may not serve as a refuge for further excuse for excesses, we decree that such people of both sexes (that is, Jews and Saracens) in every Christian province and at all times be distinguished in public from other people by a difference in dress, since this was also enjoined on them by Moses. On the days of the Lamentations and on Passion Sunday they may not appear in public, because some of them, as we understand, on those days are not ashamed to show themselves more ornately attired and do not fear to amuse themselves at the expense of Christians, who in memory of the sacred passion go about attired in robes of mourning. That we most strictly forbid, lest they should presume in some measure to burst forth in contempt of the Redeemer. And, since we ought not be ashamed of him who blotted out our offenses, we command that the secular princes restrain presumptuous persons of this kind by condign punishment, lest they presume to blaspheme in some degree the one crucified for us.

3. A SERMON ON THE ARTICLES OF FAITH (c. 1410)

Sermons were the principal method the clergy used to instruct people in the rudiments of Christianity. The following outline of basic Christian belief comes from a book of sermons — some in Latin, some in Middle English, some model sermons, others transcriptions of actual sermons — assembled at Oxford, probably in the first decade of the fifteenth century. The twelve articles of faith, each attributed by medieval tradition to one of the apostles, could vary. Here, for example, there is no mention of the belief in the Holy Spirit as the Third Person.

Source: modernized by J. Shinner from Woodburn O. Ross, *Middle English Sermons*, Early English Text Society, Original Series, No. 209 (London: Humphrey Milford, Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 12-15. Middle English.

"Attend, O my people, to my law" [Ps. 77.1].

Good men and women, our Lord God Jesus by his prophet commands all Christian people to understand and know his law, which all who shall come to heaven need in order to be saved, and by no other way. For Christ himself says in the Gospel, "He who believes in his law and follows it shall be saved, but he who will not believe shall be condemned" [see Mark 16.16]. This is God's own law, which we call Holy Writ; this law suffices to govern the people of God. In the Psalms, David writes of this law, "*Lex Domini immaculata*," etc. — "the law of our Lord," he says, "is without blemish, turning souls to good" [Ps. 18.8]. This law should "be more desired than gold" or silver or any other precious thing, for it is "sweeter than any honey or the honeycomb." "Truly," says David furthermore, "all your servants keep this law, for in keeping it there is great reward" [see Ps. 118.11-12]. This is the law that our Lord God, by the words of my theme, bids everyone to understand.

"Sir," perhaps you say, "it is forbidden by your priests and prelates of the holy church for any uneducated man to meddle in Holy Writ." No sir, I say; but it is forbidden for any uneducated man to misuse Holy Writ, for God himself bids his people to understand it. If his people are to understand it, they must concern themselves with it; and if God bids you to know or understand it, truly, I dare not forbid you to meddle in it. You are bound to meddle in this law on pain of everlasting damnation, for you must know the Our Father, which is in the Gospel; the Hail Mary; the Creed; the Ten Commandments; and to fulfill the seven works of mercy, corporal and spiritual, to the best of your ability according to the determination of holy church. God gave us grace; then, to know and keep his law well. . . .