# Interpreting the Intentional Inaccessibility of the Early Modern Roman Catholic Church

Kristen P. Quesada
Brown University

With the effects of the Protestant Reformation still at the heels of the Catholic Church, the Church Fathers had to act quickly. Thus, the Counter-Reformation was born, starting when the Church Fathers united at the Council of Trent to address the challenges raised by Protestants.[1] Convoked by Pope Paul III in the Italian city of Trent in December 1545, the Council of Trent met in twenty-five sessions occurring over the span of eighteen years from 1545 to 1563 during three separate periods between those dates. While calls for assembly began in 1519 as soon as the seriousness of Luther's challenge became obvious, nothing happened for over twenty-five years due to politics and inertia.[2] Though beginning inauspiciously with fewer than thirty bishops in attendance, this official council of the Roman Catholic Church would set forth decrees that lasted well into the modern era, definitively shaping the history of Catholicism and, thus, the world.[3] The Council assigned attendees three primary objectives to resolve: first, solving the Protestant "problem"; second, clarifying several points of doctrine and ritual, specifically in response to the challenges raised by reformers; third, the "herculean" task of eliminating the corruption and abuses that sparked the Reformation in the first place.[4] In addressing these issues, the Council committed to radical changes to homogenize the system, such as unambiguously affixing the Biblical canon, declaring the Latin Vulgate the authoritative standard for Biblical use, and delineating universal mass practices. As Sir Francis Bacon once wrote in his *Meditationes Sacrae*, "knowledge is power"[5] – and the Church well understood this, which is why they set out to limit public knowledge of Scripture with the Council of Trent. This paper will investigate the Roman Catholic Church's reliance on Latin tradition being reinforced at the Council of Trent as a means of maintaining control.

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[1] "Council of Trent," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, https://www.britannica.com/event/Council-of-Trent.
[2] Carlos Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*. (Yale University Press, 2018), 378.
[3] Eire, *Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450-1650*, 378.
[4] Ibid, 379.
[5] Francis Bacon, *Meditationes sacrae*. (London: Excusum impensis Humfredi Hooper, 1597).

With Christianity continuing to spread across the Roman Empire as of 382 CE, a standard, authoritative translation of the Bible was needed. Hence, Pope Damasus I asked Jerome of Stridon to revise the existing Latin translations of the Gospel using the original Greek manuscripts. Jerome went beyond this initial task, however, later undertaking a complete Latin translation of the Old Testament and entire Hebrew Bible from the original Hebrew.[6] This version was known as the *editio vulgate*, eponymously named from his use of the contemporary vulgar language. While vernacular Bibles had already begun publicly circulating prior to Johannes Gutenberg's fifteenth century invention of the printing press, production of Bibles in different languages exploded alongside the "Gutenberg Revolution," spurred by his original creation of the first type-printed book in Europe and mass-production of the Bible.[7] The Church feared the possibility of the printing press facilitating widespread circulation of ideas across Europe, with Pope Alexander VI asserting in 1501 that "it will be necessary to maintain full control over the printers so that they may be prevented from bringing into print writings which are antagonistic to the Catholic faith."[8] As such, in the Fourth Session's "Decree Concerning the Edition, and the Use, of the Sacred Books," the Council officially declared the Latin Vulgate Bible the only authentic edition to be used in all matters. Further, the Church Fathers added the warning "that no one is to dare, or presume to reject it [the Vulgate] under any pretext whatever."[9] The Fourth Session's decree to officialize the Latin Vulgate may seem innocuous enough on its own, but important attention should be paid to the very specific wording that the Council implemented in doing so.

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[6] Philip Kosloski, "What Is the Vulgate and Why Is It Important?", (*Aleteia*, 30 Sept. 2019),
    https://aleteia.org/2019/09/30/what-is-the-vulgate-and-why-is-it-important/.
[7] John Jeffries Martin, *A Beautiful Ending: The Apocalyptic Imagination and the Making of the Modern World*.
    (2022), 35.
[8] Martin, *A Beautiful Ending*, 40.
[9] Council Fathers, "Fourth Session," *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, Ed. & trans. by James
Waterworth, (London: Dolman, 1848), 17-21.

Targeted against the Protestant *ad fontes* principle by pronouncing the Latin Vulgate translation to be "held as authentic" in its own right, the decree came in objection to Protestant Reformers' insistence to examine the original Hebrew and Greek scriptures for doctrinal proofs. The Council further qualified this decree by making specific mention that it applies to "the Latin editions, now in circulation" as forthwith being "held as authentic," but not necessarily "inerrant." The deliberate wording used implies a fear of different translations exposing parts of the Vulgate Bible as imperfect, de facto undermining the Church's own credibility. Especially following the Protestant Reformation, the Church held the assumption that if ordinary people, such as artisans and merchants, began to read the Bible for themselves, they would read it in a way that was disruptive to society. Literacy was closely tied to the clergy for most of early European history, but European literacy rates skyrocketed in the sixteenth century. This fear of the Church was directly purveyed by the societal effects of the printing press, since it lowered the cost to own a personal Christian Bible and thereby allowed the public firsthand access to Scripture, of which there existed more than two thousand editions published throughout Europe at the time.[10] While many of these editions were in Latin, the vernacular Bibles had the widest effect, "bringing the Word of God directly to an increasingly literate public" through access to personal copies of Scripture translated into the most prolific European languages.[11] In retaliation against these developments, the Fourth Session's decree hid a veiled motive of barring the common person from crafting their own interpretations of Scripture and, subsequently, from dissenting against the Church's interpretation in any informed capacity.

Due to this growing public availability of the Bible, the Church demanded exclusive authority to interpret the text, arguing that the Bible needed to be interpreted only by priests who

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[10] Martin, 31.
[11] Ibid, 41.

had been to seminary and would thus read it in a pre-approved way. Accordingly, the Council of Trent issued the creation of seminaries, ensuring that all subsequent generations would have priests proficient in Catholic theology.[12] With its objective to control the interpretation and legitimacy of the Bible, the Church sought to secure its infallible rule in society by extension. To make this censorship official, the Council of Trent attacked the effects of the printing press in the Fourth Session, with specific language that "it shall not be lawful for anyone to print any books whatever on scared matters, without the name of the author; nor to sell them in the future, or even to keep them, unless they shall have been first examined, and approved of, by the Ordinary."[13] Beyond this, in 1559, Pope Paul IV issued the Pauline Index, a comprehensive list of banned books effectively banning all translations of the Bible into the vernacular. The index was a product of two inextricable objectives: "protecting the Catholic faithful from heresy and safeguarding unity within the church itself."[14]

A common thread found throughout the rest of *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent* is the Council's repeated use of the phrase and other similar wordings of "let him be anathema" when ending decrees and declaring other such Church beliefs, referring to those who may contradict whatever the Council laid out. The church fathers imbued a threat into the very decrees of the Church through this language – and this threat was not empty. The Church organized inquisitions across Europe during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, "establishing a paradigm for the suppression of deviance."[15] Taking the case of the Roman Inquisition, which was initiated in hopes of stamping out any public form of non-approved religious thinking in Italy, we stumble upon the trial of sixteenth century Friuli miller Domenico Scandella, known as

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[12] Eire, 382.
[13] Council Fathers, "Fourth Session," *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 17-21.
[14] Eire, 385.
[15] Ibid, 388.

Menocchio, who was charged with heresy.[16] Menocchio, a man of the village, boldly shared his heretical beliefs, which were loosely based on the Bible and mixed with other oral traditions, with his local community. Witnesses seemed to deny sharing his beliefs and found them distasteful, but it was not until the Church came hanging the threat of death over the heads of dissidents that they spoke up against him. Whereas Christ told His believers to "Love thy neighbor as thyself,"[17] the Church took a fundamentally opposing stance, turning neighbor against neighbor, all for the sake of suppressing any opposition to its monopoly on scriptural interpretation.

With the Church only legitimizing Latin Scripture, the Council of Trent codified Latin as the new exclusive language of mass and the Roman Missal, which dictated the prescribed prayers and rites examined in mass.[18] As a result, mass universally occurred in Latin, disregarding the emergence of the new Romance languages as the use of spoken Latin declined over the centuries in non-academic settings. One of the reasons for this was that "the power of Latin itself as a mysterious language could lend the mass a transcendent feel and an immediacy unequaled by any vernacular liturgy."[19] For Catholics, this paradoxical ritual of Latin made it a tongue simultaneously common and alien to all, solidifying its presence as a universalizing force for Catholics as an exalted sacred code that would be recognizable by Catholics across the globe. For Protestants, though, "the continued use of Latin only deepened their conviction that Catholic ritual was dead wrong, useless, riddled with priestcraft and superstition, and not much different from magic."[20] Interestingly enough, while reading of scripture and the prayers spoken by the

[16] Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, (The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).
[17] Matt. 22:39 (NIV).
[18] "Facts on Latin in the Roman Catholic Church," *Reuters*, (Thomson Reuters, 13 May 2011), https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pope-latin-facts/facts-on-latin-in-the-roman-catholic-church-idUSTRE74 C2C220110513.
[19] Eire, 397.
[20] Ibid.

congregation during mass were required to occur in Latin, the Council of Trent took no apparent issue with priests then interpreting the verses in the common tongue of the people.[21] Chapter VIII of the Twenty-Second Session particularly demands dissection with this qualification, as it is left unclear what made teaching in the vernacular "not expedient to the Fathers," despite the acknowledgement that "the mass contains great instruction for the faithful people."[22] It seems the Council knew the people would leave mass without understanding, considering most of mass was in Latin. As such, to remedy this new ordinance, the Council of Trent specified that the pastors ought to "frequently expound some portion of those things which are read at mass."[23] This implies the explanation be in the people's tongue, so "that the sheep of Christ may not suffer hunger," receiving their fill of the Word in an understandable language. [24] Although this lets them be "fed," it does not allow them to discern for themselves.

According to Catholic theology, the Sacraments and liturgy could not only edify people by performing them, but they could also change the spiritual state. Through celebration of these rituals, a sacrament or ceremony could forgive sins, increase grace, and sanctify people, independent of any actual comprehension from the people performing them. In the eyes of the Church, lack of comprehension of the words spoken did not hinder the effectiveness of these on the congregation through the Catholic principle of *ex opere operato*.[25] The Church cared less about popular understanding of the message being preached and more about having warm seats in the pews. This impersonal style of religion contributed to the Church's success, especially since it could now also be globally facilitated through these new standardized practices.

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[21] Council Fathers, "Twenty-Second Session," *The Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent*, 152-170.
[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] Karl Keating, "What Does the Expression 'Ex Opere Operato' Mean?", *Catholic Answers*, 24 Sept. 2019,
    https://www.catholic.com/qa/what-does-the-expression-ex-opere-operato-mean.

The final sessions of the first phase of the Council of Trent centered on the sacraments, reaffirming the efficacy of *ex opere operato*, with the decree insisting that "the sacraments were made effective by God himself, and that their power was never nullified if the priest or the recipient was in a state of sin."[26] Contrary to this view, reformers believed that the meaning of the liturgy was to increase faith, which meant parishioners had to understand what was going on for it to be more than show. Because of this belief, Protestants held that sermons in the vulgar language were absolutely necessary. As Yale Professor of History and Religious Studies Carlos Eire puts it, "the success of Protestantism can be attributed in a large measure to its popular appeal, and to the pamphlets and sermons that spread the Protestant message in the vernacular."[27] By standing its ground on such issues and leaving the general populace outside of the realm of such matters, the Catholic Church only hurt itself in its battle against the Reformation.

In his letter to Pope Leo X entitled "On the Freedom of a Christian," Martin Luther dances around the open secret of Pope Leo's own involvement in this corruption, instead imploring him to "impose a curb upon those flatterers who are enemies of peace, while they pretend peace."[28] The Catholic Church established itself upon the hill of human tradition and leaned into the sacred nature that develops from it over time. Luther tears this foundation down, asserting that "it will profit nothing that the body should be adorned with sacred vestments, or dwell in holy places, or be occupied in sacred offices, or pray, fast, and abstain from certain meat, or do whatever works can be done through the body and in the body."[29] The Church believed that it was beholden to not solely Scripture, but also to "the unwritten tradition which, received by the Apostles from the mouth of Christ Himself, the Holy Ghost dictating, has come

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[26] Eire, 380.
[27] Ibid, 373.
[28] Martin Luther, "On the Freedom of a Christian," Received by Pope Leo X, *Modern History Sourcebook*, (Fordham University, 6 Sept. 1520), https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/luther-freedomchristian.asp.
[29] Ibid.

down to us, transmitted as it were from hand to hand."[30] The Church views its tradition as consistent with Scripture and equal to Scripture in authority, thus various of its doctrines are derived from tradition rather than from Scripture. Contrary to this, Luther staunchly believed that "a simple layman armed with scripture is to be believed above a pope or council without it,"[31] alluding to the Protestant doctrine of *sola scriptura*, meaning "by scripture alone." While Protestants viewed *sola scriptura* as a freedom of the people and vernacular teaching as integral to increasing faith, the ritual reforms of Trent contrarily saw the matter as that worship was not to be "slavishly tethered to the Bible alone, or to vernacular tongues, that curse of Babel."[32]

During the first phase of the council, attendees first attacked Protestant theological claims, affirming the Church's authority to interpret Scripture and the role of tradition in Christian life, countering the Protestant principle of *sola scriptura.* On account of this stance, however, when the Protestants and Catholics turned to public, in-person debate on doctrine between each side's respective clergy, "more often than not, Protestants would win […] because they set the agenda for discussion in terms of *sola scriptura*, closing off all arguments from Catholic tradition.[33] An instance of Catholic independence from Scripture can be seen in the issue of indulgences that set off the Reformation; despite not being scripturally sound, the Church endorsed this practice regardless and put forth indulgences as having a key role in salvation. By its very own ideology, Protestantism appealed far more to the average person, as salvation was no longer dependent on traditions, or "works," that happened in church, but on an independent relationship that could be readily fostered with God; simply an extension of divine grace that no human could earn – "by grace, through faith." Beyond this, though, Catholic

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[30] Martin, 42.
[31] Ibid.
[32] Eire, 398.
[33] Ibid, 376.

polemicists did not help in this battle, writing for a theologically sophisticated audience, often in Latin, and missing wider reception as a result. It is no wonder that they struggled to reach the laity since the Church itself prevented its members from truly grasping Scripture through its staunch reforms.[34]

The reason Protestantism was able to spread like wildfire in sixteenth century Europe went beyond the novel accessibility ingrained in its very belief system of personal religion, reaching the public on a level like never before through its embracing of the vernacular in sermons and Scripture. With the Council of Trent decreeing the Latin Vulgate to be the only acceptable translation, disapproving of reading of printed Bibles, and ensuring that mass be scripturally performed in Latin with only Church-approved explanation in the common tongue, Catholics were subject to any "truth" the Church decided for them. One of such "truths" was a step too far with the payment of indulgences, based not on Scripture but instead on Catholic tradition. Martin Luther's profound anger at the Catholic Church for its growing corruption made indulgences "the nail" in the Ninety-Five Theses that ignited the Protestant Reformation in 1517. With the Reformation, Luther sought to redirect the Church's focus on worldly power and financial gain back to the core of the Bible: *sola scriptura.* However, the Church was too heavily entrenched in the nexus of religion and all other matters of early modern Europe to change centuries worth of its way of doing things. Although the Council of Trent's main focus was on doctrinal decrees, it did not turn a blind to the ongoing blatant corruption that called for institutional reform. Alongside its intent to defang the arguments of the Protestant Reformation, it also made efforts to reform the Church from within. The support of the Church hierarchy and secular rulers across Europe made genuine reform of Church corruption possible, with the most significant changes occurring at the local level through the efforts of specific individuals. The

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[34] Ibid, 374.

Catholic Reformation, thus, "was effected in large measure by the limbs themselves, thanks to a healthier head."[35]

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[35] Eire, 384.

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