Introduction: What Are Councils and Why Are They Important?

Throughout history, councils have been moments of divine intervention in the life of the Church. These gatherings of bishops and theologians, convened by the Pope or under his authority, are not merely human meetings but acts of the Holy Spirit that illuminate and guide the Church in her mission of salvation. According to Catholic tradition, councils are divided into two major categories: dogmatic and pastoral.

The former aim to define issues of faith and morals, safeguarding the deposit of faith from errors or heresies. The latter focus on the practical application of that faith in the daily lives of the faithful, adapting it to the challenges of each era. Both categories are complementary and essential for understanding the dynamic yet unchanging nature of the Church founded by Christ.

Dogmatic Councils: The Foundation of Truth

A dogmatic council is the Church's solemn response to essential questions about who God is, what the Church is, and how we are called to live as Christians. Notable examples include the Council of Nicaea (325), which affirmed Christ's divinity against Arianism, and the Council of Trent (1545–1563), which defended Catholic doctrine in response to the Protestant Reformation.

From a Thomistic perspective, the purpose of dogmatic councils is to preserve and clarify the eternal truth that comes from God. St. Thomas Aquinas held that faith does not contradict reason but perfects it. Thus, the dogmas proclaimed by the councils are not arbitrary impositions but truths that bring us closer to God and help us live according to His will.

Practical Applications in Daily Life

1. **Knowing Our Faith**: Studying the dogmas defined by the councils strengthens our relationship with God. A deeper understanding of Christ and the Trinity enriches our prayer life.
2. **Defending the Truth**: In an era dominated by relativism, dogmas act as a compass, helping us navigate a confused world.
3. **Building Strong Communities**: Doctrinal clarity prevents divisions and unites us in faith.

Pastoral Councils: Faith in Action

Unlike dogmatic councils, pastoral councils do not typically define new doctrines but seek to address the cultural, social, and spiritual challenges of their time. A significant example is the Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), which promoted renewal in liturgical life, ecumenism, and the social engagement of Catholics.

St. Thomas Aquinas did not live to witness such councils, but his teachings provide a framework for understanding their importance. For Aquinas, the virtue of prudence is key in the Christian life: applying eternal principles to concrete situations. Pastoral councils, in this sense, are a collective exercise of prudence guided by the Holy Spirit.

Practical Applications in Daily Life

1. **Evangelizing in the Modern World**: Drawing inspiration from pastoral documents to bring the Gospel to the cultural and social margins.
2. **Fully Living the Liturgy**: Actively participating in the Eucharist, understanding its significance, and uniting as the Body of Christ.
3. **Commitment to Social Justice**: Pastoral councils call us to be salt and light in the world, working for a more just and humane society.

The Unity of Dogma and Pastoral Care: An Integral Path

It is a mistake to oppose dogmatic and pastoral councils, as both are manifestations of the Church's singular mission. As St. Thomas teaches, truth and charity cannot be separated. Dogmas are the solid foundation upon which pastoral responses are built, and these, in turn, demonstrate how to live out the dogmas in a changing world.

For instance, the doctrine of human dignity, defined in dogmatic councils such as Trent or Vatican I, finds its pastoral application in the commitment to human rights and peace promoted by Vatican II.

Relevance for Today's Context

We live in an era of great challenges for the Church. Internal divisions, growing secularism, and doctrinal confusion demand from every Catholic a renewed commitment to the faith. Councils, both dogmatic and pastoral, provide us with the necessary tools to face these challenges:

- **For those seeking doctrinal clarity**, dogmatic councils serve as a beacon illuminating the way.
- **For those seeking practical relevance**, pastoral councils show how to apply the faith in today's world.

Conclusion: An Invitation to Live the Conciliar Legacy

Councils are not relics of the past but living sources of divine wisdom that speak to us today. Studying and applying them is an act of love for God and the Church. As St. Thomas Aquinas said, *"Faith is the beginning of eternal life, already begun in this life."*

I invite you to delve into conciliar documents, meditate on their teachings, and put them into practice. With God's grace, we can become faithful witnesses of truth and charity in today's world.