

The Council of Constantinople and the Nicene Creed

Its 16th Centenary this year

Paulos Mar Gregorios

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed is the only recognized official Creed of the Christian Church (the Athanasian Creed or the Apostle's Creed does not enjoy the same status in the Church, nor do the later "confessions" of the Reformed Churches). It was finally adopted, more or less in its present form in 381 AD, at the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople.

Convened by the Emperor Theodosius in order to overcome the remnants of Arianism in the Church and to reunite the Church on the basis of the Creed of Nicea (325 A.D.), the Council of Constantinople nevertheless had virtually no representation from the West. It is recognized as the Second Ecumenical Council, even by the western churches, despite their absence there.

St. Basil, who was generally opposed to the idea of holding Councils on the ground that they always led to new quarrels, had died on January 1, 379 before he was 50. Emperor Theodosius now recalled all the Orthodox bishops who had been sent into exile by the Arians. The Emperor was young, and was baptized after he became Emperor, by an ardent Nicene Bishop by the name Acholius. It was his desire as a neophyte Christian that the Empire should have a united Church. On February 27, 380 he issued a decree that all Christians should hold the same faith which "the Apostle Peter had taught to the Romans, and which was now followed by Damasus, Bishop of Rome and by Peter, Bishop of Alexandria, a man of Apostolic sanctity (See Codex Theodosianus XVI: 1, 2). Antioch could not be cited as a standard then because the Church there was already in schism, between the Great Church of Meletius and the Little Church of Paulinus. Neither could Constantinople be cited, since the Arian party was too strong there, and its leader, Demophilus was Bishop of Constantinople, contested by the Orthodox.

In 379, after St. Basil had departed St. Gregory Nazianzen was the outstanding theologian-bishop, and he was invited to become bishop of Constantinople. He reluctantly accepted, and set up the small Church of Anastasia, in opposition to St. Sophia where the Arians ruled under Demophilus.

St. Gregory's spotless character and unparalleled eloquence combined with deep knowledge and sanctity rallied the Christians back to the Nicene faith. The Arians were furious and attacked physically the little Church of the Resurrection (Anastasia), throwing stones at people in the Church at Easter while they were baptizing new Christians. They not only attacked St. Gregory, but also dragged him to Court as the instigator of the violence.

Emperor Theodosius took the Church of Constantinople (St. Sophia) and handed it back to the Orthodox. On November 26th 380, he personally conducted St. Gregory Nazianzen to take over the Church of St. Sophia. The Arians tried to demonstrate against this, but the Emperor's army kept them under control. The day was clouded; heavy rain was expected. The interior of St. Sophia was dark and unlighted. As the Emperor and St. Gregory marched into the Church, and took their respective imperial and episcopal thrones, the clouds disappeared, the sun shone through and the crowd shouted "Gregorios episcopus, axios." Gregory the orator, did not make a speech, but silently mounted the steps to begin the celebration of the Eucharistic mysteries.

The saintly bishop sought to reform the Church of Sophia, but found too many obstacles in the form of vested interests. There was an attempt at assassination of the bishop. But by sheer force of character and the power of saintliness, St. Gregory overcame all enemies.

It was in this situation that the Emperor Theodosius called together the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (The Byzantines call this the First Council of Constantinople, because they recognize the second and third Councils of Constantinople held in 553 and 680 respectively. The Oriental Orthodox do not recognize these two Councils as ecumenical).

Who were present at this great Council of Constantinople 1600 years ago? We know some details. Meletius, Bishop of Antioch came with 70 bishops from the "Diocese" of the "Orient" which at that time comprised some six provinces of the Roman Empire (but not Persia or India). Helladius, the successor of St. Basil at Caesarea, came with the two brothers of St. Basil, Bishop St. Gregory of Nyssa and Bishop St.

Peter of Sebaste. Some 50 bishops who came from sothern Asia Minor, were also supporters of the Cappadocians. Some 150 bishops signed the decree.

St. Basil though departed, was the moving spirit behind the Council of Constantinople. Few Arian bishops dared come; or perhaps they were not invited. But there was a group of 36 bishops who belonged to the Semi-Arian or *homoiousion* (as distinct from *homoousion*) position, or a Macedonian (denying the deity of the Holy Spirit) position.

They met at St. Sophia. On May 16th, on the Feast of Pentecost, St. Gregory Nazianzen preached his famous homily on the Holy Spirit seeking to correct the errors of the Semi-Arians and the Macedonians who had fought St. Basil's orthodoxy.

The Macedonians who do not respect the Deity of the Holy Spirit, and who were like many western theologians, binitarian rather than trinitarian in their faith, refused to acknowledge the Orthodox position. The Church decided to rule out the Macedonian heresy and other prevailing heresies like *anomoianism* and *apollinarianism*. Canon 1 re-affirms the faith of the 318 Fathers who assembled at Nicea, but we have difficulty in ascertaining the precise text which was approved by the Council of Constantinople 56 years after Nicea, with its own additions and amendments. We have the text of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed as cited by the Council of Chalcedon in 451 in the minutes of that Council; we can only assume that the drafters at Chalcedon had a text of the decree of Constantinople before them.

Its most controversial decision came in Canon III, which is brief, but extremely significant, and still constitutes a major ecumenical problem:

“The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour (*ta presbeia tes times*) after the Bishop of Rome, because Constantinople is New Rome.”

This Canon III is ecumenically controversial for several reasons:

1. This was clearly intended as a rebuff to the Alexandrians and the Antiocheans, who had the second and third ranks in the protocol of the Church. To put Constantinople ahead of both Alexandria and Antioch was a violation of the Nicene protocol, and is still not accepted by the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

2. It was also unacceptable to the West. The Roman Church does not acknowledge Canon III of Constantinople, not because it violates the Nicene protocol, but rather on account of its implications for the basis of the Primacy of Rome. If Constantinople is “New Rome”, then it is clear that its claim to that status is based on the fact that it is the new imperial Capital. This implies that the claim a the Old Rome to primacy is based on the civil fact of that city being first in imperial protocol as the first imperial City. This is not what the Church of Rome claims. They derive the primacy of Rome and contend for it on ecclesiastical and theological grounds, not on a civil protocol basis.

This is a major issue between Roman Catholics, Byzantine Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox, and the Oriental Orthodox alone insist on the Nicene Protocol as being fundamental - i.e. Rome first, Alexandria second, Antioch third, Jerusalem fourth and then Constantinople. This is based on historical factors of imperial protocol, and does have ecclesial sanction only on the ground of the Nicene decree.

But the Oriental Orthodox as well as the Roman Catholics have to answer the question: “If you accept the Nicene decree, should you not also accept the decree of the Council of Constantinople which you acknowledge as ecumenical?” And that answer is difficult.

Rome does today accept the Patriarchate of Constantinople second in rank, but only after they had founded a Latin Patriarchate there in 1204. The twelfth general Council in the Roman Church (1215) formally acknowledged the second rank of Constantinople. but not on the basis of Canon III of Constantinople, which they cannot acknowledge without compromising their official theological basis for the Roman primacy. Pope Leo's delegate even declared at the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD - 70 years later) that this Canon III of Constantinople had not even been communicated to them. This may not have been actually the case, but Leo saw the implications of this Canon for his own claims to primacy.

Alexandria also contested this decision of Constantinople. At Constantinople (381) Alexandria was in disfavour with the Emperor Theodosius because of the shameful affair of Maximus the Cynic whom Peter of Alexandria had tried to put on the episcopal throne of Constantinople.

It is difficult to say who presided at Constantinople. It was certainly not the Bishop of Rome or his delegate, for neither was present. It seems Meletius of Antioch presided first; then when Nectarius was consecrated as Bishop of Constantinople in place of Gregory Nazianzen who had left St. Sophia in disgust before completing a year, it was Nectarius of Constantinople rather than Timothy of Alexandria who presided. St. Gregory of Nyssa also seems to have presided over certain sessions. Rome and the West were virtually absent at this Council, and played no great role at it. Despite this fact, the Western Church of Rome fully acknowledged this Council as an ecumenical Council. But this took time.

At first the Latins objected to two of the Council's decisions - they did not approve (a) the recognition given to Meletius of Antioch who was a schismatic for them and (b) the consecration and recognition of Nectarius as Bishop of Constantinople, and the deposition of Maximus the Cynic.

The Synod had therefore to reassemble in 382 (See Hefele, *History of the Councils*, Vol: II, pp. 370ff) at Constantinople, and having considered the disputation of the Latins, re-affirmed the decisions of the Council of 381 as ecumenical (*oikoumenike*). Pope Damasus then acknowledged the decision on the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, but not the decisions on Canonical matters. His successor, especially Leo and Gregory also approved only the credal definition but not the canonical decisions.

The status of the Council of Constantinople remained uncertain for some time after. Ephesus (431) affirms Nicea and its creed, but says nothing about the Council of Constantinople. Even Ephesus (449) convened by Dioscorus and referred to by the West as 'Robber Synod' mentions only two ecumenical Councils - Nicea 325 and Ephesus 431, but not Constantinople 381. In fact the 449 Synod calls Ephesus 431 the Second Synod (*he deuteria synodos*).

Constantinople 381 gets its full recognition only at Chalcedon in 451, where it was solemnly recognized as the second ecumenical Council.

Its Significance Today

The 16th centenary of the Council of Constantinople was celebrated with special solemnity by the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople from June 5th to 7th this year. This is not difficult to understand, because the importance of Constantinople and its overshadowing of Alexandria and Antioch begins with this Council.

On the other hand, 381 was also the beginning of a growing rift between Constantinople and the other primatial sees. Rome was already being marginalized, and Pope Leo was soon to react vigorously to assert its own primacy. Alexandria kept fighting Constantinople, often with means and methods not qualitatively different from some of the worst of Byzantine intrigues. The Condemnation of Nestorius (who was Bishop of Constantinople) in 431 and the leading role played by Cyril of Alexandria in that condemnation, have to be seen in this context of Alexandrian-Byzantine hostility. Even the silver-tongued ascetic John Chrysostom (Bishop of Constantinople 398-407) was not free from the mean attacks of Theophilus of Alexandria, who had the audacity to condemn the bishop of Constantinople on 29 charges, many of them false.

Antioch on the other hand, was divided in its attitude to Constantinople. The majority of Christians in the city of Antioch being Greeks were pro-Byzantine while the Syriac-speaking group of the city along with the Syriac-speaking people of the Syrian provinces were intensely anti-Byzantine.

Constantinople prospered at the expense of Antioch. At the end of the 4th century, the domain of the Patriarch of Antioch extended over a wide area. Apart from Antioch, the third city of the Empire and residence of many Emperors, the whole 'diocese' of the East, which comprised at least six Roman provinces - was largely Syriac-speaking and anti-hellenistic and anti-Latin. At the Council of Constantinople the Metropolitan sees were redefined - Antioch becoming simply one of the eight in the East (Alexandria, Jerusalem, Cyprus, Antioch, Caesarea in Cappadocia, Constantinople, Thessaonica, Sirmium).

If Islam were later to sweep through most of these eight Metropolitanates of the East as well as through the Persian empire, part of the reason was the anti-hellenism and anti-latinism of the Asian and African peoples, which first expressed itself through the opposition to Chalcedon and then later to Christianity itself as a Graeco-Roman religion of domination.

Constantinople and Chalcedon, at least for the Asian-African peoples, became the symbol of Melchitism or compromise with the domination by imperial Byzantine hellenistic civil and cultural forces. As Henri Marrou says:

“From the purely religious point of view it is certain that a theology suffers as well as gains from the protection accorded it by an oppressive power with its army and police. The Chalcedonian Melchite Church depended too closely on such a power not to appear quite often as an over-official Church too tied to the world, in some sense part of the civil service. The bishops on the whole were too inclined to follow the fluctuations of religious policy adopted in the Palace of Constantinople” (J. Danielou & H. Marrou, *The Christian Centuries*, Vol: 1, Dartman Longman & Todd, London, 1964, p. 355).

Neither Henri Marrou nor the present writer wants to raise the bogey of Caesaropapism, a charge too grossly oversimplified to be worth pursuing. The genius of Eastern Christianity lay rather in the resistance to Byzantine imperial authority - on the part of the Cappadocians and St. John Chrysostom first, and then by a vast mass of Asian - African Christians.

The imperial power of Byzantium which began to assert itself ecclesiastically with the Council of Constantinople in 381 is no longer here today in 1981. But the wounds and scars of that period remain a crucial issue, not simply for the unity of the Church today, but also for the unity of humanity. For behind the negative animus of the Arab world against the Graeco - Latin West lie the significant developments of fourth and fifth century Church history.

Perhaps the best we can do on the 16th centenary of the Council of Constantinople is to begin a restudy of 4th and 5th century Church history, as a basis for the settlement of the conflict between Asian - African and European - American peoples today.