

## **The Seven Councils.**

The conciliar principle of deciding matters of doctrinal and disciplinary importance began with the Council of Jerusalem, described in Acts 15, where the Apostles met to decide whether Gentile converts should be subject to the Mosaic Law. (They were not!). With this Council in mind, and the various local councils which met at diverse parts of the Empire in the period prior to Nicea, the Church established an important principle: In council, the members of the Church, so to speak, can together claim an authority which individually none of them possess. The Seven Ecumenical Councils which met in the period from 325 to 787 performed two basic tasks: 1) They formulated the visible, ecclesiastical organization of the Church, setting the ranking of the Five Patriarchates; and 2) they defined, once and for all, the teachings of the Church on faith, formulating the basic dogmas concerning the Trinity and the Incarnation.

### **Nicea I (325).**

This Council condemned the heresy of Arianism, which had contended that the Son was inferior to the Father and was, in fact, created. The Fathers here declared that the Son is one in essence (homoousios) with the Father, and formulated the first part of what eventually became the Creed the Symbol of Faith. In addition, three great Sees were singled out Rome, Alexandria and Antioch (Canon 6), and the See of Jerusalem, although still subject to the Metropolitan of Caesarea, was given the next place in honor after Antioch (Canon 7).

### **Constantinople I (381).**

This Council expanded the Nicene Creed, developing the teachings concerning the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father; Who, with the Father and Son, is worshipped and glorified..., against the heresy of the Pneumatomachi (Spiritsmashers) and the Macedonians (followers of Macedonius), who could not accept the Third Person of the Trinity as equal to the other Two. It was in this period that we see the activities of the great Cappadocian Fathers, St. Gregory Nazianzus (the Theologian), St. Basil the Great and St. Gregory of Nyssa, as well as the great Alexandrian Father, St. Athanasius the Great. The First Council of Constantinople also decreed that Constantinople, the new capital, should hold the next place of honor after Rome, since it was now the New Rome (Canon 111).

### **Ephesus (431).**

This Council met to discuss the heresy of the Nestorians, who could not accept that God and Man had been united in one Person, Christ, refusing to call the Virgin Mary, Theotokos (or Birthgiver of God). Supported primarily by St. Cyril of Alexandria, this Council affirmed that Mary was truly Theotokos, since, as the Evangelist had proclaimed, the Word was made flesh (John 1:14), and the Virgin had borne a single and undivided Person Who is, at the same time, God and Man.

### **Chalcedon (451).**

This Council met to discuss the heresy of the Monophysites who held that in Christ the human nature had been merged into the divine, so that there was, after the divine union, only one nature. The Bishops of this Council accepted the so-called Tome of Pope St. Leo the Great of Rome, which affirmed the belief that the one and the same son, perfect in Godhead and perfect in manhood, [is] truly God and truly man...acknowledged in two natures unconfused, unchanged, undivided and inseparable. In addition, the place of Constantinople after that of Rome was confirmed, as was that of Jerusalem in the fifth place of honor.

A tragic result of this Council (and that of Ephesus prior) was the splitting apart from the main body of a large group of Christians adhering to either the Nestorian or Monophysite view. The Nestorians were found basically in Persia and Mesopotamia, and were especially decimated by the Islamic and Turkish onslaughts, whereas the Monophysites were strong in Africa (Egypt and Ethiopia the present Coptic Church), Armenia, and India (the Jacobite Church).

### **Constantinople II (553).**

This Council met to further reinterpret the decrees of Chalcedon, seeking to explain how the two natures of Christ unite to form a single person. It affirmed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is one of the Holy Trinity, one and the same divine Person (hypostasis), Who has united personally (hypostatically) in Himself the two natures of God and Man, without fusing them together and without allowing their separation. Certain teachings of Origen, including his teaching concerning the pre-existence of the soul, among other things, were also expressly condemned.

### **Constantinople III (681).**

This Council met to condemn the Monothelite heresy which held that in the union of the two natures in Christ, the human will was merged into the divine as one will, since the two natures were united into one person. The Council, however, held that if Christ has two natures, he also has two wills human and divine.

### **Nicea II (787).**

This Council met to affirm the belief of the Orthodox that veneration of the Holy Icons was proper and necessary for a correct understanding of the Incarnation of Christ, against those who held that Icon-veneration was idolatry and that all Icons should be destroyed (Iconoclasts). This Seventh Council was also the last of the Ecumenical Councils accepted as such by the Orthodox Church, although the possibility does exist that, in principle, more could be convened. The Iconoclast controversy did not end until after another rising of the heretics beginning in 815, which was finally suppressed by the Empress Theodora in 843. This final victory of the Holy Icons in 843 is known as the Triumph of Orthodoxy, and is commemorated on the First Sunday of Great Lent. Thus, with the resolution of the Iconoclast controversy, the Age of the Seven Councils came to an end.

During this same period, there were two other major currents that were to have a profound effect on the Byzantine Empire and Orthodoxy. The first of these was the rise of monasticism. It began as a definite institution in Egypt in the 4th Century and rapidly spread across the Christian world. It literally began at a time when the persecutions had ended, and the Monks, with their austere life, were, in a real sense, martyrs when martyrdom of blood had virtually ceased. At a time when people were in danger of forgetting that life in the world the earthly kingdom was not the Kingdom of God, the Monks and their withdrawal from society, reminded Christians that God's Kingdom, in fact, is not of this world.

The second major current in this period was the rise and rapid spread of Islam, the most striking characteristic of which was the speed of its expansion. Within fifteen years after the death of Mohammed in 632, his followers had captured Syria, Palestine and Egypt, and in fifty years, they were already at the gates of Constantinople. Within 100 years, they had swept across North Africa and through Spain. The Byzantine Empire lost the Patriarchates of Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem, and until the actual fall of Constantinople in 1453, the Empire was never free from attack.

### **The Great Schism.**

In 1054 occurred one of the greatest tragedies of the Christian world the Great Schism between the Orthodox and the Roman Catholic Churches. Officially proclaimed at Constantinople in that year by the Papal Legate, Cardinal Humbert, it was, in a sense, the culmination of a process that had been taking place for several centuries, ultimately centering on two major controversies: Papal authority and the Filioque.

Originally the two branches of Christendom had begun to drift apart because of cultural and language differences. Then, in 800, we see a political split with the proclamation of Charlemagne as the Holy Roman Emperor there were now two! The hegemony of the Arabs over the Mediterranean and their expansion into the Balkans made direct contact difficult, if not impossible, between East and West. And even in theology the two branches of Christendom began to differ in their basic approaches, with the Latins being more practical, the Greeks more speculative; the Latins more influenced by legal ideas nurtured by the basic concepts of Roman law, while the Greeks were influenced by worship and the Holy

Liturgy; the Latins were more concerned with redemption, the Greeks with deification. These different approaches, practiced in greater isolation from each other, eventually led to the two main theological problems outlined earlier.

The first problem was that of Papal authority. The Greeks were willing to ascribe to the Pope of Rome a primacy of honor, considering him to be the first among equals, whereas the Pope believed his power of jurisdiction to extend to the East as well as the West, the Greeks jealously guarding the autonomy of the other Patriarchates. The Pope saw infallibility as his sole prerogative, whereas the Greeks insisted that in matters of faith, the ultimate decisions belonged to an Ecumenical Council consisting of all the Bishops of the Universal Church.

The second great problem was the Filioque (Latin and the Son), first inserted into the Creed at the Council of Toledo in Spain in 589 and later adopted by the whole Western Church. Whereas the original wording of the Creed ran, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father..., the Latin insertion changed it to read, and in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father and the Son\_\_ The Orthodox objected to this insertion on two grounds: 1) the Ecumenical Councils had expressly forbidden any changes to be introduced into the Creed, and 2) this insertion disturbed the balance between the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity, leading to a false understanding of the work of the Holy Spirit in the world.

Prior to the Schism of 1054, there had been another breach, the so-called Photian Schism, in the 9th Century, but it had been officially terminated in the latter years of the reign of Patriarch Photius. The breach of 1054, however, although not universally applied at first, was never healed, even after several attempts to do so, most noticeably at the Council of Lyons in 1274 and the Council of Florence in 1438-9, when the Turks were already threatening Constantinople, but these reunion attempts were doomed to failure. Probably the deciding factor in the permanence of the Schism had been the capture and sack of Constantinople by the Latin Crusaders in 1204, which forever after remained indelibly imprinted on the consciousness of the Orthodox.