

THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL; FIRST COUNCIL OF EPHESUS 431¹

A Brief History:

- The council met to clarify the dispute between Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, and Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria who refuted the teachings of Nestorius.
- Nestorius emphasized the disunity between Christ's human and divine natures for every man bears a sinful nature since the Fall. He divided into two the person of Christ. He overemphasized the human nature of Christ at the expense of the divine and therefore he called Mary as *Christotokos* "Birth Giver of Christ" and not *Theotokos* "Birth Giver of God." He taught that Mary gave birth to the incarnate (human) Christ, not the Divine Logos who existed with the Father from before the beginning of time. He questioned how can a baby of 2 or 3 months old called God, so one must either deny the Godhead of the only-begotten to have become man, or else admit the same of the Father and the Holy Spirit for the Divine nature is numerically one. This teaching is against the faith of the Creed that was confessed at the 1st Ecumenical Council in Nicea 325.
- Nestorius wrote to Pope Celestine I about his Christology, but he did not receive any answer.
- Cyril opposed Nestorius' teachings and wrote a letter in 423 to the Monks under his authority repudiating Nestorius teachings, which split Jesus in half denying that Christ is both human and divine. Cyril and Nestorius' opponents claimed that Nestorius is denying the reality of the Incarnation, which is against the decrees of the 2 previous councils.
- Nestorius found in this letter an un-brotherly attitude.
- Cyril in 430 wrote his 2nd letter to Nestorius. This letter was approved and acclaimed as the true teaching of the Orthodox faith by the 3rd Ecumenical council.
- Cyril appealed to Celestine I, Pope of Rome, by sending him with Deacon Poseidonius a full account of Nestorius' teachings and his letters to Nestorius condemning Nestorius as a heretic.
- After receiving the conclusion of Jean Cassian's opinion that Nestorius' opinions were related to the heresy of Paul of Samosata and Pelagius, Celestine I disapproved Nestorius' teachings and accepted that of Cyril who was asked to communicate a notice to Nestorius to renounce his teaching in 10 days or he faces excommunication. The Pope judgment was carried to all the bishops and patriarchs.
- John of Antioch wrote also to his colleague Nestorius urging him to submit to the Pope's judgment and not to lose his head because all the East and Egypt are against him. But Nestorius refused to recant his teachings.
- Emperor Theodosius II, seeing that the whole empire of the East was divided between Cyril and Nestorius, wrote to Cyril that his "will that the holy doctrine be discussed and examined in a sacred synod, and that be ratified which appear agreeable to the right faith, whether the wrong party be pardoned by the Fathers or no."² This letter proves that Theodosius did not consider

¹ Contents of this were taken from various sources as, *The Church of the Ancient Councils, Orthodox Wiki, Wikipedia and The Nicene and the Post-Nicene Fathers.*

² *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series, Vol. XIV, the Seven Ecumenical Councils p. 193.*

the Letter of Celestine I and the 12 anathemas of Cyril as a final decision without getting back to the synod of bishops who should decide the true opinion.

- He called the opening of the council on Pentecost, June 7, 431.
- Cyril and Nestorius were in Ephesus well before the opening of the council, but they did not try to meet. Each considering the other to be accused.
- The council was presided by Cyril of Alexandria³ and was delayed 15 days because of the late arrival of the Roman and Antiochian delegates. The council was convened without the Antiochian's who arrived five days later and the papal's who arrived only in July.

It is Worthy to Note:

- Metropolitan of Ephesus was present with his 52 bishops. Nestorius has 16 bishops. Cyril brought 50 bishops. The Palestinian delegation was of 16 bishops while the papal delegates were very few composed of Arcadius' Projectus and the priest Philip who represented Celestine I. the total of bishops who attended was between 200 and 250. St. Augustine was personally invited, but he died prior to the council (August 28, 430).
- Nestorius was summoned 3 times to be present at the council, but he refused.
- According to the Catholic encyclopedia, it seems from the Acts of the council that 6/7 sessions were held; June 22, July 10, July 11, 16, 17, 22 and 31.⁴
- The first session was opened on June 22; A) The Gospel was set in the centre of the Church. B) The Nicene Creed was recited. C) The 2nd letter of Cyril to Nestorius was read. D) Cyril asked the assembly to judge his letter according to the Nicene Creed. E) The bishops' opinions were in favor of Cyril argument. F) Then, Palladius the bishop of Amasea asked that Nestorius' letter to be read which was G) condemned by the bishops and anathematized Nestorius, his apostles and whoever communicates with him. H) The letter of Celestine I was read at the request of Peter the Presbyter of Alexandria, which was passed without any opinion. I) Then the XII Anathemas of Cyril against Nestorius was read and finally J) a letter of Capreolus, bishop of Carthage in which he wishes that the "ancient dogmas of faith should be confirmed and that novelty, absurdly conceived and impiously brought forth, should be reprobated and proscribed"⁵ was read at the request of Cyril.
- Before the second session which was held on July 10. The Antiochian delegates arrived on June 26 and held a synod of their own in which they deposed Cyril and accused him of espousing Arian, Apollinarian and Eunomian heresies. But they refrained from supporting Nestorius teachings. The Emperor annulled everything that has been decided 7 days ago (June 22) and asked all the bishops to stay in Ephesus.
- At the second session that was held at Memnon's residence on the next day of the arrival of the papal delegates on July 9 asked that the letter that is written in Latin of the Apostolic See of Rome, the Pope, to be read and included in the minutes of the council and their request was

³ L'Huilier in *The Church of the Ancient Councils* states that a group of bishops, Cyril, Memnon of Ephesus, and Juvenal of Jerusalem took a decisive role.

⁴ The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers cite 3 interrupted sessions.

⁵ *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, Vol. XIV, the Seven Ecumenical Councils p. 218.

fulfilled. Then, and in compliance of Cyril's request, the same letter was translated and read in Greek because "not a few who do not understand Latin." At the end of the reading, all the bishops cried "This is a just judgment...one faith of the synod, one faith of the world."⁶ Hence, the papal delegates reminded Cyril that he should carry on the judgment set by Celestine, which was declined because it was done at the first session.

- The third session was on the next day in which the papal delegates confirmed reading the Acts of the first synod and decided that the Holy Synod was in accordance with the canons and ecclesiastical discipline. Then the three delegates signed the minutes of the 3 sessions and the letter to the Emperor of the decision of the synod was sent.
- At session 4 on July 16, two summonses were sent asking John of Antioch to come forward to the synod because of his separate council. He did not even receive the synod's convoy.
- At session 5 on July 17 another summon was sent to John, but to no avail. As such, the council excommunicated John and his followers, but did not depose them.
- Session 6 approved canon 7 which condemned any departure from the Creed that was established by the first Ecumenical Council.
- In session 7 the bishops agreed that the See of Cyprus is been anciently and rightly exempted from the jurisdiction of Antioch.

Right after the Council:

- Count John arrived to Ephesus as the new imperial representative on August 1 having a letter from the Emperor. Theodosius approved the deposition of Nestorius, Cyril and Memnon.
- Nestorius withdrew to a monastery.
- Cyril and Memnon were held as prisoners in Ephesus, but Cyril managed to escape to Alexandria.
- Theodosius issued another imperial edict that allowed Cyril and Memnon to take up again their duties as bishops.
- John of Antioch in spring of 433 recognized Nestorius' deposition and condemned his teachings.
- A law of August 8, 435 prohibited the adherents of Nestorianism to call themselves Christians. The Nestorian theologians took refuge in Persia.

Canons:

- 7/8 canons were declared:⁷
- Canon 1 excommunicates and suspends any metropolitan who took side of the counter-council that was held by John of Antioch. This decision was made at the request of 2 bishops of the province of Europe.
- Canon 2 separates from priesthood all bishops of a province who have abandoned or were trying to find ways of getting around the council although they already have signed Nestorius' deposition.

⁶ Ibid., p. 222.

⁷ 8 Canons according to *The Church of the Ancient Councils, the Disciplinary Work of the First Ecumenical Councils*, Archbishop Peter L'Huiier, SVSPRESS, NY 1996, pp.154- 170. And thus here, we follow this reference.

- Canon 3 reintegrates the clerics who were deposed by Nestorius and in agreement with the Orthodox and ecumenical council and ordains them not to be submissive to the bishops who are supporting Nestorius.
- Canon 4 deposes clergy (priests, deacons and lower ministers) who dare to take side of Nestorius or Celestius.
- Canon 5 demands that those who were condemned for evil deeds should not be allowed to return to communion or to their own rank.⁸
- Canon 6 excommunicates any layman and deposes any cleric who resists the Synod.
- Canon 7 condemns any departure from the Creed that was established by the Nicene ecumenical council. So, no alteration nor editing or adding.
- Canon 8 stops the Church of Antioch from interfering in the affairs of the Church of Cyprus which was given the status of an independent church. This also regulates the relationship between the dioceses.

Remarks:

- This council was taken as a proof for both the Roman Church and the Orthodox Church in regards of the rank of the Pope of Rome. The Roman Church takes the preceding history (the correspondence prior to the council) to emphasize the superiority of the Pope of Rome over all other Patriarchs and Metropolitans; seeking the advice of Pope Celestine by Cyril of Alexandria and the letter of condemnation of the Pope and his charge to Cyril to carry on and distribute the judgment on Nestorius, and the acceptance of Cyril to do so, were taken as a proof of this superiority.
- On the other side, the Orthodox Church sees the acts of the council as a proof that the Pope of Rome is a “first among equals” for three reasons: 1- although the judgment of Celestine was received the excommunication was communicated, but was not executed waiting for the decision of the council;⁹ 2- the Fathers of the council will judge and decide; and 3- this decision will be final and therefore executed.

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⁸ This canon is not very clear according to all resources.

⁹ Some resources as the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers mention that Nestorius was attending the council and was called by his title as bishop. While some other resources do not confirm his presence. This Council of Ephesus requires more researches, if it is not done yet.