

The Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus

Introduction

In the year 412, after the death of Abba Theophilus left the chair of St. Mark vacant, the man who succeeded him was one who achieved high rank in church history. To him we conferred descriptive titles of honor such as "the Daring Lion," "the Burnished Lamp," "the Great" and more specifically "the Pillar of the Faith."

He was deemed worthy of these titles because of the forcefulness of his character, his exceeding zeal for Orthodoxy, and his prolific writings in its defense and its exposition. This man was Kyrillos the first, the twenty-fourth Pope of the church of Alexandria. The English version of his name is Cyril.

Kyrillos was none other than the nephew of Theophilus, his predecessor. He was thirty-six years old when he was unanimously elected to take the helm of his church. He had his eyes alert and a decided air. His words were concise, clear, penetrating and winsomely warm.

As a lad Kyrillos had been sent by his uncle to live in the monastery of St. Macari where he had the opportunity of assimilating the divine wisdom of the desert fathers. With lightning perception and eager attentiveness, he had concentrated on his spiritual preceptors. Moreover he was endowed with such grace and such eagle-like intelligence that he could retain in his memory whatever he read. After having acquired all the education the desert could give, Kyrillos returned to Alexandria where his uncle ordained him a priest.

No sooner had Abba Kyrillos been consecrated Pope than he dedicated all his powers to the defense of the church. Among the favorite readings of the young people of Alexandria at that time were ten essays that had been written by Emperor Julian after his apostasy. Kyrillos directly set himself to refute them in terms that were clear, strong and convincing. From that time onwards, he carried on his writing activities, and the scribes of Alexandria were kept busy copying by hand his sparkling epistles, and forceful books.

The Heresies

1. The Two Natures of our Lord Jesus Christ

One of the main causes that motivated Abba Kyrillos to do so much writing was the rise, during his times, of a new interpretation of the mystery of incarnation which, in the light of the Nicene Creed and of the Orthodox faith was a heresy. The promulgator of this interpretation was Nestorius the bishop of Constantinople. According to the Nestorian concept Christ was two separate persons the one divine and beyond the reach of human frailty and the other human and susceptible to all the fragility of the flesh. The divine Christ could neither suffer nor die and therefore, on the cross it was the human Christ alone who suffered and died apart from the divine Christ.

Kyrillos could neither accept this interpretation nor keep quiet about it. In his paschal letters, special epistles to his own as well as other churches, and in full-length books he expounded the Orthodox doctrine of the indivisible union of the divine and human natures of Christ. He showed how this was the faith that was taught both by the

scriptures and the Nicene fathers, and to which all true believers should adhere. One of the metaphors Kyrillos used to illustrate his defense was that of the iron molten in an excessively high degree of heat. In that state the iron and the heat were united into one, and though there substances were two, there union was complete without mixing, nor fusion nor change. No one could either separate or divide them. Such were the two natures of the Son of God.

2. The Name given to Saint Mary

A further point made by Nestorius and strongly contested by Kyrillos related to the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Orthodox believers glorified and honored her by calling her the "Theotokos" or "Mother-of-God." Nestorius had spoken out against this title and here, again, Kyrillos made his stand crystal clear. "I am astounded," he said in one of his letters, "that some can hesitate to call the blessed Virgin "Theotokos." If our Savior Jesus Christ is God, it follows that His mother is the "mother" who bore Him forever. This is what the Apostles taught us and the doctrine of our Fathers. Not that the nature of the Word originated with Saint Mary, but because within her was formed the sacred Body to which the Word was hypostatically united we exclaim with John the Evangelist, "the Word was made flesh." And just as the human mother has no share in creating the soul of her child yet is considered the mother of the whole person and not merely the mother of his physical nature, so it is with Saint Mary who is the Mother of Christ in His entirety and hence is indeed the Mother of God."

The Alexandrine Councils

1. Introduction

The letters and writings of Pope Kyrillos circulated far and wide in the Christian world, edifying and thrilling the Orthodox believers. And although he did not specifically mention Nestorius by name, nor make any allusions to what was happening in Constantinople, Nestorius anger was nonetheless greatly aroused. He gave expression to this anger by writing a personal letter to the successor of St. Mark, chiding him for his outspokenness against him. The Alexandrine Pope hastened to answer him. It was not against him as a person that he had spoken out. Rather he was fulfilling his duty as a sheered responsible for leading his flock into the right path. He then expounded the Orthodox Doctrine to Nestorius, told him to search the Scriptures wherein he would find it clearly supported, and then urged him to cease promulgating an idea which was tantamount to blasphemy. He then added, "...you have no power to fight against God Who was crucified for us in truth; and died in the body, although He is continually living in the power of His Godhead; it is He who sits at the Right Hand of the Father while the angels, principalities and powers worship Him."

The correspondence between Kyrillos and Nestorius continued for sometime with Pope Kyrillos trying with all the power of his eloquence and logic to convince Nestorius of his departure from Orthodoxy, and Nestorius obstinately refusing to be convinced or to accede that he had fallen into a heretic way of thinking. A situation developed that was somewhat similar to that which had developed between Athanasius and Arius and Pope Kyrillos was just as able to cope with it and just as full of faith and fiery zeal in his tenacious stand against Nestorius as Athanasius had been against Arius. This is how and why the Orthodox faith was preserved in its integrity and the Nicene Creed remained intact and both were handed down to posterity as a precious legacy that all Eastern Orthodox Churches and some Western Christian Churches still respect and adhere to as the basic foundations of their faith.

2. The first Alexandrine Council

One of the first things Pope Kyrillos did after getting negative answers to the letters he sent to Nestorius was to convoke a council in Alexandria of the bishops and heads of his own See and discuss with them these letters. At this council the fathers re-affirmed the Nicene Creed and approved an introduction, which Kyrillos had written, suggesting it be prefixed to the Creed. To this day the Copts recite this introduction as a preliminary statement to the testimony of their faith.

The introduction says

"WE MAGNIFY THEE, O MOTHER OF THE TRUE LIGHT, AND GLORIFY THEE, O SAINTLY VIRGIN. FOR YOU HAVE GIVEN BIRTH TO THE SAVIOR OF MANKIND WHO CAME AND REDEEMED US AND SAVED OUR SOULS.

GLORY TO THEE, O LORD JESUS THE CHRIST, PRIDE OF THE APOSTLES, CROWN OF THE MARTYRS, JOY OF THE RIGHTEOUS, THE FIRMNESS OF THE CHURCHES, THE FORGIVENESS OF SINS..."

Besides convoking the council at Alexandria, Abba Kyrillos also wrote a number of letters to the heads of other churches (bishop of Antioch, bishop of Jerusalem, bishop of Rome, bishop of Aleppo). The letter sent him an immediate reply, lauding his efforts and siding with him.

On receiving the answer of Celestinus, bishop of Rome, Kyrillos did two things. On the one hand wanting to involve the imperial family in helping to bring an end to the controversy, he wrote letters to the Emperor, the empress and the Emperor's three sisters. The letter to the Emperor, especially, was long and detailed. He explained to him the subtle deviation from Orthodoxy of the Nestorian concept, and appealed to him to try and convince Nestorius of his error.

In the letters to the Empress and the Emperor's sisters, he urged them to use their influence to preserve Orthodoxy and added at the end a list of the verses in the Old and New testaments which speak of Christ as God incarnate, in Whom there is neither separateness nor division.

On the other hand, Kyrillos convoked a second council at Alexandria.

2. The second Alexandrine Council

This second Alexandrine council again resolved to try convincing Nestorius of his error. A decision was taken to write to him another letter the first part of which was to be an exposition of the Nicene Creed, and the second part an affirmation of the true faith, followed by twelve anathema. It read thus like this.

"Conforming to the faith of the fathers, we declare that the unique Logos of God has taken flesh of the Virgin. Has made this flesh His own, submitting Himself to human birth, passed out of the Virgin's womb as a child without ceasing to be what He is and remaining in the body as He is, namely Very God by nature. The flesh was not changed into the nature of the divine, just as the divine Logos was not changed into the nature of the flesh for It was not submitted to any change. Being yet a child, and even while in the tomb of His Mother, the Logos filled the entire world, He governed it conjointly with His Father and the Holy Spirit, for divinity knows no limit. The Logos is united to the flesh hypostatically. We therefore believe in one single Son and Lord, Jesus Christ; we separate not the man from the God; we do not believe that He is

simply united under the semblance of dignity and power; these are new words alien to the faith.

If we, too, say, as did St. Paul in Colossians 2:9 that in Christ dwells all the fullness of the Godhead bodily, we see that God dwells not in Him as He dwells in His saints. But that the divine and the human were united in our Lord Jesus Christ in the fashion that the soul is united to the body in a human being. There is, therefore, one Christ, one Son, one Lord." If he were really 'Orthodox' as he had claimed, Nestorius was asked to prove it by signing both the letter and the anathema. Thus he would vindicate himself and clarify his attitude before all believers."

The messengers who bore this letter bore simultaneously two other Kyrillian letters: one to the priests, the deacons and the people of Constantinople, and the other to the monks of that same city. Nestorius not only refused his signature, but also exerted every effort to antagonize the Emperor against Kyrillos. His efforts succeeded, at least temporarily, so that Theodosius wrote to the Alexandrine Prelate asking him to relent in his attitude to Nestorius so as to avoid the consequences of his wrath.

The Ecumenical Council

1. Introduction

Besides, the Nestorian controversy had already involved so many people and aroused so much reaction among both the high and the lowly that just an imperial letter carrying a threat to Abba Kyrillos could not resolve it. More decisive action on an ecumenical scale had to be taken, and the Emperor himself realized that. When, therefore, the people of Constantinople themselves urged him to call a council of all the bishops to deal with this subject, he responded to their plea and issued an invitation to the bishops of all churches. They were to attend its gathering at the city of Ephesus in June of the year 431 AD. Pope Kyrillos was invited on the authority of his own dignity but the attitudes of the Emperor and of Nestorius towards him had not been changed.

No sooner did Abba Kyrillos receive the Emperor's invitation than he made plans to sail for Ephesus, he took with him a strong delegation of Coptic ecclesiastics which included his outstanding contemporary Abba Shenouda of Akhmim.

As the date fixed for the council drew near, the bishops gradually collected: two hundred of them hastened to stand and once more defend the faith and prove themselves indeed the worthy successors of the Nicene fathers.

Nestorius came to Ephesus as a man going to a battle, surrounded by forty partisans and a big number of armed men. One of his companions was Irenaeus, an influential nobleman of Constantinople. In addition, Candidianus, the imperial commissioner representing Emperor Theodosius at the council, waived aside his neutrality and stood by Nestorius even though he had been only commissioned to see that order prevailed. Instead of keeping his strict impartiality, however, he allowed his troops to stand sentinels round the house of Nestorius.

Meantime, John of Antioch delayed in arriving. On the day of Pentecost, one day before the date set for the council to open, he sent a letter to Abba Kyrillos, excusing his tardiness on account of the long journey and the death of some of his horses, and affirming his arrival within five or six days. During this time two of John's bishops arrived, and emphatically declared that he had ordered them to say that the opening

of the council should not be deferred because of him, and that the assembled dignitaries should go ahead and do what they deemed best. The fathers concluded that he was loath to attend a council wherein his friend was to be questioned, and their decided to begin their sessions. This was on the twenty-second of June in the church of "the Mother-of-God" at Ephesus.

After establishing the order of the meetings and electing Kyrillos to preside over them, they sent a triple summons to Nestorius, in obedience to canon law. Nestorius decided to disregard these summons, however, and refused to come and attend the meetings. In face of his obstinate refusal, the council met without him.

2. *The Sessions*

a. The first session

At the inaugural session, Juvenal of Jerusalem requested that they begin with the reading of the creed declaring that it was the basis on which to build all their discussions as well as their final judgment. Thereupon, Peter, a priest from Alexandria and chief notary to the council, read the creed. He followed this by reading the last two letters exchanged between Kyrillos and Nestorius. The letter of Abba Kyrillos at the end of which were the twelve anathema, and the reply of Nestorius to it.

This first session of the council lasted throughout the day and far into the night. The members debated every detail of the case for which they convened, and then passed the sentence of excommunication, degradation and deposition on Nestorius. Abba Kyrillos, aware of what his opponents were capable of, had the minutes recorded with meticulous care.

Abba Kyrillos wrote immediately to the clergy and people of the church of Constantinople informing them of the proceedings of the council. He also preached two sermons in the church of the Mother-of-God, both of which centered round the perfect union of Christ's divinity with His humanity; and on Mary who is both virgin and mother at one and the same time.

b. The second session

After few days after the first session of the council of Ephesus, John of Antioch arrived with thirty-two of his bishops. As they approached the city Candidianus and Nestorius send an escort of soldiers to meet them, apparently to honor them but in actual fact to bar the way before the delegates of the council, who were compelled to follow in the near until John reached his lodging, and were left at the gate two whole hours to be met for only a few minutes by bishop John. They returned and reported of their treatment to the council, which held an immediate session, and carefully noted all that had happened.

In compliance with his Nestorian partisans, John held a conventicle of forty-three bishops under his own presidency. They accused Abba Kyrillos and Memnon, bishop of Ephesus, of having hastened to open the sessions instead of waiting for them. Then after making their own deliberations on the twelve anathema set forth by the Alexandrine Pope, they decided to depose him together with Memnon.

Candidianus then attempted to raise a new bishop over Ephesus, but the populace was so roused that he had to forego this though he ordered his troops to beat them.

Failing to impose a minion of theirs on the See of Ephesus, the Antiochenes requested Candidianus to prevent Abba Kyrillos and all his supporters from celebrating the Holy Liturgy in the city. Once more they failed.

Nestorius and his partisans continued their intrigues to disrupt or annul the council's meetings and decisions. They saw to it that their own letters reached the Emperor whereas those of the fathers were intercepted. Consequently the Emperor sent a letter to the council annulling its verdict, and forbidding the fathers from leaving Ephesus.

All this roused the fury of the Ephesians who remained loyal to their bishop and barred the way to the churches before the Antiochene and his group.

Amidst this turbulence, Arcadius and Projectus, delegates of the Roman church, with Philip the personal envoy of Celestinus arrived. The council met at the house of Memnon to receive them. At this second session Philip spoke in the name of the Roman bishop and read his letter to the council.

c. The third session

The following morning the fathers met for the third session. The delegates of the west asked to hear the minutes of the first session. On hearing them, they readily signed the excommunication of Nestorius. A letter was sent to Emperor Theodosius in which he was informed that the church, in the east and the west, agreed on excommunicating Nestorius. All those present signed the letter and also requested the Emperor to withdraw his annulment and to permit them to go back to their respective Sees.

The council sent another letter to the clergy and the people of Constantinople to notify them of the sentence passed on their bishop.

At this juncture the fathers considered their work terminated, and only awaited the Emperor's reply. But both popes Kyrillos and Memnon, requested them to examine the sentence passed on them by the Antiochenes. Consequently, they met for the fourth session in the church of the Mother of God. Kyrillos and Memnon absented themselves so that the fathers may be able to discuss them freely. The presidency was ceded to Juvenal of Jerusalem who came next in rank to the Alexandrian Pope. Messengers were sent to summon John of Antioch, but he did not listen to the triple summons. At his refusal, the session began. After discussing the matter, the council members concluded that John was reprehensible for two errors: he had no right to pass judgement on the president of an ecumenical council; he had detached himself and formed a separatist council.

d. The fifth session

The following day, the council met for the fifth session, again under the presidency of Juvenal. Once more they sent their messengers thrice to the Antiochene, who persisted in his refusal. In consequence, the council decreed that John and his supporters be cut off from the communion of the church, and affirmed their appreciation of Kyrillos and Memnon. A letter containing the proceedings of these sessions was sent to Emperor Theodosius with the request that he validates them.

e. The sixth session

Five days later, the council met for the sixth sessions, this time under the presidency

of Abba Kyrillos. After examining the doctrinal teachings, they affirmed their adherence to the Creed of Nicea and Constantinople and set their anathema on whomsoever adds or detracts a word from it.

f. The final session

The following day, the council met for the seventh and last session in which they settled the administrative problem of the church of Cyprus, granting it independence. Six canons were also laid down relating to matters of discipline.

3. *Evil behind the scenes*

Meanwhile Ireneus, the nobleman, went to meet the Emperor, before whom he attacked "the Egyptian and his friends" deluding him into the belief that Kyrillos and Memnon had been deposed with Nestorius.

Theodosius had his misgivings on the veracity of this news, so he sent another courtier, Count John (the State treasurer), to Ephesus bearing the order endorsing the deposition and imprisonment of Kyrillos and Memnon.

When the imperial message became known, anger and consternation seized the people. As for the Antiochenes they were elated, thinking they had scored a triumph.

The Emperor, however, accorded the Ephesian Council Fathers the permission to send a deputation to the imperial city. Subsequently, Abba Kyrillos addressed, from his prison, a letter to the clergy and people of Constantinople. With it he sent another to the three Egyptian Bishops who were his at Constantinople, two of whom had attended the first session of the council.

The council sent a third letter to all the bishops and other clergymen who were present at Constantinople, which ended on this note. "Rest assured that if those in authority will that we die, we will not change our resolution concerning the Lord Jesus Christ. " This letter was signed by Juvenal of Jerusalem, who, since the imprisonment of Abba Kyrillos, had resumed the council's presidency.

The letters of the Alexandrine Pope and the council were entrusted to a courageous Orthodox disguised as a mendicant. He hid them in a hollow cane, and thus carried them to those for whom they were destined.

4. *God will always triumph*

When the letters became known at Constantinople, clergy and people staunchly supported the Ephesian Council Fathers. At their head was the hermit Dalmatius who had never gone out of his cell for forty-eight years, and whom Emperor Theodosius venerated highly and frequently visited. At this moment, Dalmatius realized that it was incumbent on him to break his habit and lead the people to the palace. They walked through the streets chanting the psalms. When they arrived in front of the imperial palace, they all stopped while Dalmatius went in. After the interview, the Emperor sent a letter to Ephesus, summoning each of the two parties to send eight delegates to meet him.

As soon as the Emperor's letter was read, the Council chose their delegates and sent them speedily. But when the Antiochene delegates reached Chalcedon, they received an imperial message to remain where they were, lest their appearance at

the capital cause a riot. The Emperor, in company with the fathers joined them. When they all met, the Antiochenes endeavored to start the doctrinal discussions anew. The Emperor, now completely changed, discountenanced them, declaring that the ecumenical council's verdict should be considered final, and that he had therefore ratified the sentence passed on Nestorius and ordered his exile. He had also ordered the release of popes Kyrillos and Memnon.

He, then, invited all the Bishops of the Ephesians council to come to Constantinople in order to consecrate a new Bishop for it, granting his permission to those who wished to return to their Sees to do so. Pope Kyrillos participated in the consecration ceremony and then immediately returned to his See.

Then, a reconciliation was realized between the Apostolic Sees of Alexandria and Antioch, and no one rejoiced over it as much as Abba Kyrillos himself.