

Pope Dioscorus 1St (444-458AD)

Background

Pope Dioscorus is the twenty-fifth patriarch of the See of Saint Mark (444 – 458) succeeding Pope Cyril The Great. He is regarded as one of the chief architects of Coptic Christianity and the Egyptian Church. Born in Alexandria towards the end of the fourth century, he showed a great deal of devotion to the faith and resilience in adherence to his Christian principles. As a result, he was chosen by Pope Cyril to be his disciple and close companion in his religious meetings and accompanied him in attending the famous first ecumenical council of Ephesus in 431.

The strength of Dioscorus's personality, leadership and character was unanimously recognised within his own church and throughout the Byzantine empire, which explains the ease and unanimity with which he was elected to succeed his mentor Pope Cyril in 444.

At that time, the Alexandrian See had reached great heights in the Christian world, paralleled only by the Roman See with which it shared an amicable and mutual relationship.

Upon his assumption to the throne of Saint Mark, Pope Dioscorus dispatched a special envoy to Rome to convey the news of his assumption to Pope Leo. Pope Leo responded by sending Pope Dioscorus an epistle confirming the uniformity between the two sees in all matters of Christian belief and dogma.

Second Council of Ephesus

The 2nd council of Ephesus was convened to confront the teachings of a monk from the city of Constantinople by the name of *Eutyches* who declared that the nature of Christ was only divine and consequently, depriving the Lord of His Human nature. The Archbishops of Rome and Constantinople (Leo and Flavian) strongly opposed this Christological misconception whilst Pope Dioscorus favoring a more conciliatory approach towards Eutyches and remaining non-aligned. Thus the Christian world became divided into two camps, with Leo and Flavian on one side and Dioscorus on the other. Emperor Theodosius II summoned another council in Ephesus in 449 under the chairmanship of Pope

Dioscorus to address the issue. A delegation from Rome came armed with a message from Pope Leo asserting his opposition to Eutyches teachings. Moving from his earlier position, Eutyches proclaimed in writing his adherence to the Nicene Creed and to the theology of Saint Cyril which are both recognised as Orthodox doctrine. As a result, Eutyches was acquitted by the council and returned to his former position unscathed.

This proved to be a further step towards the assertion of the Alexandrian supremacy and it further antagonised the relations between Pope Leo and Pope Dioscorus whose message was not even presented for consideration at the council. This was probably an unwise action by Pope Dioscorus and an unnecessary provocation of the Roman Pope.

Council of Chalcedon

With the death of Emperor Theodosius II in 450 who was a supporter of Dioscorus and the accession to the throne of Marcian, an old senator and general of the Roman army who was credited with quelling a great rebellion in Upper Egypt, an atmosphere of hostility erupted towards the “Eutychians” in Constantinople and towards Dioscorus. This suited the Roman Pope who requested the issuance of a special decree declaring the acts of the Council of Ephesus II null and void, forbidding even the mention of its name. Leo suggested the convening of a new council in Italy, and Emperor Marcian issued a formal invitation to the bishops of the East and West to attend the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

Rather than discussing “Eutychanism”, Leo issued a new form of ‘faith’ and the Roman delegation in conjunction with the imperial commissioners moved to trial Dioscorus and a list of charges against him was read out. As it became clear that the motive from convening the Council was the humiliation of Dioscorus, who having presented his defense affirming his conformance to the theology of the fathers Athanasius and Cyril, refrained from attending the third session that was convened essentially against him. A delegation from the Council was sent to him with the purpose of obtaining his signature on the new form of faith of Pope Leo in exchange for his rehabilitation and reinstatement to the patriarchal see of Alexandria. But Pope Dioscorus was not a man of compromises . He insisted on the form of faith of Pope Cyril ‘ ***one nature for the incarnated God*** ’ , and rejected the new form of faith set by Leo which separate the two natures of Christ . He was adamant against the minutest change in the terms or words of the Nicene Creed. He was summoned three times to accept the Roman “innovations” and thrice he refused to conform. Consequently, Pope Dioscorus was declared fallen and was exiled to the island of Gangra in Paphlagonia. He was humiliated

and slapped on the face by the Empress for the sake of the faith delivered by the fathers.

Though formally deposed at Chalcedon, Pope Dioscorus remained for the Coptic people their legal patriarch until his death in exile. To the Copts, Chalcedon was an infamous gathering of misguided bishops. In this council the first Church division occurred .

Pope Dioscorus died in 454 approximately four years after his exile. He was canonized by the Copts and his name appears in the Synaxarion containing the names of saints and martyrs recognised by the Coptic Church , and given the title of ‘ the hero of Orthodoxy’