

ECCLESIOLOGICAL ISSUES CONCERNING THE RELATION OF EASTERN ORTHODOX AND ORIENTAL ORTHODOX CHURCHES

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In a perceptive paper presented at the Bristol Conversations in July 1967, Professor Gerasimos Konidaris drew attention to the position of the Orthodox Churches in communion with Constantinople on “The Inner Continuity and Coherence of Trinitarian and Christological dogma in the seven ecumenical councils.”

What was most interesting in his treatment was the division of the Seven Councils into two parts. Nicea (325) and Constantinople (381) belong to the first part - the latter especially was a positive achievement of the “Greek-Christian” spirit in clarifying the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas. The symbol of the faith is now finalized; no further changes are to be effected.

The five later councils including Ephesus (431), Chalcedon (451) and the three subsequent ones, belong to a different class. They regard the symbol of the first two councils as unchangeable. Their task is to further elucidate it, not to reformulate the symbol as was finalized in the perfect Greek of St. Gregory of Nyssa in 381.

This insight of Professor Konidaris is of central significance for the relation between our two churches. We can all agree that the formulations of Nicea and Constantinople have a unique and final quality which it is safest not to tamper with.

These documents were prepared by fathers who are common to our Churches. They were not all necessarily Greeks by ethnic origin or nationality. It is important to point this out. Most of these fathers came from the Churches of Africa and Asia, from what later became the Patriarchates of Alexandria and Antioch. The chief among the fathers of the three councils, Athanasius and Cyril of Alexandria and the Cappadocians came from Egypt or Asia Minor. There is no reason to claim that only the Greek church understood them and their terminology. The literate peoples of Asia and Africa were at least as capable of using Greek terminology as Indians and Americans are capable of using English terminology today.

But the more important point is the inviolable character of the formulation of faith of the first two ecumenical synods. Once this point is adequately grasped by the two sides, some of our ecclesiological differences become capable of resolution.

Historically speaking the question then is what did the third Ecumenical Council, i.e. of Ephesus (431) do, and what did the Council of Chalcedon (451) do, in relation to the first two councils?

In the case of the Third Council, there was a clear heresy against which the council proclaimed itself - that attributed to Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople. The Alexandrian Church led the attack against this heresy as in the case of the Arian heresy more than a century earlier.

They condemned Nestorius and the heresy ascribed to him that in Christ there are two distinct prosopa, two distinct persons - one human and one divine. Whether Nestorius taught this or not, it is a heresy, and the Church still condemns this teaching. In this sense the decision of the Third Council is of high doctrinal value, and clarifies the creed of Nicea-Constantinople.

The case of the Fourth Council seems to be different in several ways. In the first place, the heresy for which the Council of Chalcedon was held in order to combat is still unknown. If it was to condemn the doctrine of Eutyches, we neither know what Eutyches taught nor who followed him in his teaching. On the assumption, however, that there was a heretical teaching which held that the human nature of Christ was not consubstantial with ours, or that it was absorbed by his divine nature, those who accept Chalcedon and those who reject that council agree that Christ is consubstantial with us in his humanity and that the human nature with all its properties and faculties remains distinct and unabsorbed in Christ. We also agree in condemning Eutyches on the assumption that he denied the double consubstantiality. It is clear that on the non-Chalcedonian side we do not do this on the authority of the Council of Chalcedon. It is because our own tradition is authentic and true that we affirm the double consubstantiality and the united divine-human nature of Christ. We are happy that both those Orthodox churches in communion with Constantinople and even our Roman Catholic friends accept this double con-

substantiality. In this respect all of us adhere to the one authentic tradition, even when some of us do not accept the council of Chalcedon. This means that for us Chalcedon is not an essential element of the authentic tradition, and as far as we are concerned, other churches can also reject Chalcedon and still be in the authentic tradition.

This is not so with the Third Council. The Church of the East rejects the Third Council of Ephesus (431). As a result, Nestorius as well as Theodore and Diodore, whose teachings have been condemned by the authentic tradition, continue to be operative in the church of the East. If the Churches of our non-Chalcedonian family were now to seek communion with the Church of the East, the acceptance of the Third Council, or at least the major teachings of that council, would be a necessary condition. The Theotokos formula and the one prosopon formula would also have to be insisted upon. If these doctrines are accepted, we may not insist on their acceptance of the Third Council, but would find our unity on the basis of the Kerygma of Nicea and Constantinople supplemented by a formal repudiation of the two-prosopa doctrine and by the affirmation of the Theotokos formula as well as a Christology of the hypostatic union.

This basic difference between the nature of Ephesus 431 and Chalcedon 451 needs to be further discussed among our churches. The reason why we have not included the Church of the East in these meetings - the only oriental church to be so kept out of our conversations - is simply that there are real Christological differences between both, while among ourselves we find basic agreement about our Christological positions. It is not inconceivable that extended theological conversations with the Church of the East will reveal that they too affirm the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ, and thereby do in fact affirm the single prosopon and that Mary was truly the bearer of the God-Man.

If this were to be the case, then the Third Council as such need not be an obstacle, though condemnation of those heresies condemned by Ephesus 431 may still be necessary to restore communion between us.

It is because some of us have now become convinced that in affirming the two natures of Christ, the Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches also affirm the hypostatic union and all the “four adverbs”, that we are no longer afraid of pursuing further the possibility of restoring communion between our two families of Churches. Professor Tsonievsky of the Bulgarian church was basically right in referring to “the non-Chalcedonian fear”... “that the Orthodox (i.e. Chalcedonian) Church has departed somewhat from the decisions of the Third Ecumenical Council against Nestorius and that it has introduced certain Nestorian elements into the faith” (1). This fear was actually there and is only now being dispelled; just as is the fear also on the Chalcedonian side that we who stand firmly on the Three ecumenical councils, in rejecting the council of Chalcedon, were affirming something less than the full human nature in Christ.

It is now possible for us to do what Professor Tsonievsky asked us to do, namely that we “must stop accusing the Council of Chalcedon of Nestorianism”, especially if we take Chalcedon as corrected by the Fifth Council and its interpretation of Chalcedon.

We can also agree that even the Chalcedonian churches should not separate the Fourth Council from the Fifth. We are not able to say, however, that the Sixth and Seventh Councils of the Chalcedonians are organically or integrally related either to the Fourth and Fifth or to the first three. It was the Fifth Council that could dispel our doubts about the Fourth. For in first refusing to condemn the teachings of Theodore, Theodoret and Ibas, the Roman church at least among the Chalcedonians gave ground to our suspicion that Chalcedon actually did have some Nestorian implications. It took quite a bit of time for Pope Vigilius to accept the Fifth council. If the Decretal epistle of Vigilius (2) is genuine, the Pope admits he was wrong in defending the Three Chapters. It is such kind of defence of the Three Chapters and of teachers like Theodore, Theodoret and Ibas by a large section of those supporting Chalcedon, that made Chalcedon itself suspect. It is also a historical fact that despite the retractions of Pope Vigilius (554/ 555) and the confirmation by his successor Pelagius I of the Acts of the Fifth Council, that council was bitterly opposed in the whole of Northern Italy, in England, France and Spain, and also in parts of Africa and Asia. Milan was in schism until 571 when the Henoticon was published. In Istria the schism continued for a century and a half (3). Even today opinions crop up in western theological manuals which give rise to fears that Nestorianism is still not quite dead among the western Chalcedonians.

The Third Council of Constantinople, called the sixth Ecumenical (680-681), enumerated in its decree and “piously gave its full assent to the five holy and Ecumenical Synods.” This decree also specifies the particular

heresy or heretic against which each council is convened: Chalcedon was against “Eutyches and Dioscurus, hated of God”, while the Fifth Council was against “Theodore of Mopsuestia, Origen, Didymus, Evagrius, and the writings of Theodoret against the Twelve Chapters of the celebrated Cyril, and the Epistile... by Ibas.”

We were not there, the non-Chalcedonians. If we were, we would probably have liked to find out what was the heresy of “Dioscurus, hated of God.” Until we find out, there can be no question of our accepting the sixth council as being in any sense in the right tradition. The condemnation of Didymus and Evagrius must be for their Origenism. That is a question which we need to examine further. There is a whole series of people condemned by the sixth council for their supposedly Monothelite views - Theodorus of Pharan, Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, Peter, Pope Honorius, Cyrus of Alexandria, Macarius of Antioch and Stephen. They are accused of affirming “one will and operation in the two natures of Christ our true God.” I am not sure which is the true heresy to which these men adhered - that of “two natures” or of “one will and operation.” Their heresy is regarded as being “similar to the mad and wicked doctrine of the impious Apollinaris, Severus and Themistius.” Putting Apollinaris and Severus in the same bracket shows how little their thought was understood by the sixth synod. Themistius of Alexandria on the other hand so strongly affirmed the humanity of Christ as to attribute ignorance of certain matters to the human soul of Christ.

If acceptance of the Sixth council thus means our agreeing to condemn Dioscurus and Severus, who are true teachers of the Authentic tradition, then we must choose the two fathers mentioned in preference to the Sixth council which appears to us badly muddled, not to say in grievous error.

Its horos or dogmatic definition we find interesting. The first part of this horos reads; “Our Lord Jesus Christ must be confessed to be very God and very man, one of the holy and consubstantial and life-giving Trinity, perfect in Deity and perfect in humanity, very God and very man, of a reasonable soul and human body subsisting; consubstantial with the Father as touching his Godhead and consubstantial with us as touching his manhood; in all things like unto us, sin only excepted; begotten of his Father before all ages according to his Godhead, but in these last days for us men and for our salvation made man of the Holy Ghost and of the Virgin Mary, strictly and properly the Mother of God according to the flesh; one and the same Christ our Lord, the only-begotten Son, of two natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, inseparably, indivisibly to be recognized, the peculiarities of neither nature being lost by the union but rather the proprieties of each nature being preserved, concurring in one Person and in one subsistence, not parted or divided into two persons but one and the same only-begotten Son of God, the Word, our Lord Jesus Christ, according as the Prophets of old have taught us and as our Lord Jesus Christ himself hath instructed and the creed of the holy Fathers hath delivered to us.”

This we find basically acceptable, though not as a formula of confession like or instead of the Niceno-Constantinopolitan pistis.

The second part is of a different kind, and needs separate examination. “We likewise declare that in him are two natural wills and two natural operations, indivisibly, inconvertibly, inseparably, inconfusedly, according to the teaching of the holy Fathers. And these two natural wills are not contrary the one to the other (God forbid!) as the impious heretics assert, but his human will follows and that not as resisting and reluctant, but rather as subject to his divine and omnipotent will For it was right that the flesh should be moved but subject to the divine will, according to the most wise Athanasius. For as his flesh is called and is the proper will of God the Word, as he himself says; “I came down from heaven, not that I might do mine own will but the will of the Father which sent me!” where he calls his own will the will of his flesh, inasmuch as his flesh was also his own. For as his most holy and immaculate animated flesh was not destroyed because it was deified but continued in its own state and nature, so also his human will, although deified, was not suppressed, but was rather preserved according to the saying of Gregory Theologus: ‘His will (i.e. the Saviour’s) is not contrary to God but altogether deified.’

“We glorify two natural operations indivisibly, immutably, inconfusedly, inseparably in the same our Lord Jesus Christ our true God, that is to say a divine operation and a human operation, according to the divine preacher Leo, who most distinctly asserts as follows: “For each form does in communion with the other what pertains properly to it, the Word, namely, doing that which pertains to the Word, and the flesh that which pertains to the flesh.

“For we will not admit one natural operation in God and in the creature as we will not exalt, into the divine essence what is created, nor will we bring down the glory of the divine nature to the place suited to the creature.”

Here, as earlier in the decree, the Tome of Leo is expressly affirmed. The decree actually calls the Tome “the pillar of the right faith.” You can perhaps understand that all this is rather difficult for us to accept. For us Leo is still a heretic. It may be possible for us to refrain from condemning him by name, in the interests of restoring communion between us. But we can not in good conscience accept the Tome of Leo as “the pillar of the right faith” or accept a council which made such a declaration. The council approves explicitly what I clearly regard as heresy in the Tome of Leo. “Each form does in communion with the other what pertains properly to it, the Word, namely doing that which pertains to the Word, and the flesh that which pertains to the flesh” (4). If one rightly understands the hypostatic union, it is not possible to say that the flesh does something on its own, even if it is said to be in union with the Word. The flesh does not have its own hypostasis. It is the hypostasis of the Word which acts through the flesh. It is the same hypostasis of the Word which does the actions of the Word and of his own flesh.

The argument in the horos of this Sixth council is basically unacceptable to us. The reason it gives for not admitting one natural operation in Christ which is both divine and human, proceeding from the divine and human natures of the same hypostasis, is that they would “not exalt into the divine essence what is created, nor... bring down the glory of the divine nature to the place suited to the creature.”

One can understand the first part of this objection, though not the conclusion drawn from it. The creature is not to participate in the divine ousia, but only in the uncreated energeia of the Divine essence. But in Jesus Christ, man the creature is united to the divine person or hypostasis. If we deny that, we are not Christians. The operation of the incarnate Logos is a divine-human energeia and we cannot say that it was only the flesh or the human nature that was crucified. **They crucified the Lord of Glory.** What is the point of saying: “We will not bring down the glory of the divine nature to the place suited to the creature”, unless the Sixth council wanted to deny the incarnation itself?

It seems to us that the Sixth council was much more based on the Tome of Leo than on the writings of St. Cyril. Where it is based on Cyrilline teaching, it is acceptable, as for example, where it says both the miracles and the sufferings were performed by one entity, Christ our true God who became man. We are unable to say what this council says when it affirms “two wills and two operations concurring most fitly in him.” We are not sure that “each nature wills and does the things proper to it”, for we believe that it is the hypostasis of Christ who wills and operates through his divine-human nature. The natures have no subsistence of their own apart from the hypostasis who operates in both natures. We would thus prefer to speak of the one incarnate nature of the Logos, both divine and human natures united in the one hypostasis of the Logos, with a divine-human will and operation.

To summarise: Acceptance of the Sixth Council is much more difficult for us than the acceptance of Chalcedon. The following are the chief reasons:

a) Quite apart from the fact that our own fathers were not present at this council, we observe that this council explicitly and unjustifiedly condemns our fathers Dioscurus and Severus, and calls the former “hated of God”, and the doctrine of the latter “mad and wicked” (5).

b) We are unable to accept the dithelete formula, attributing will and energy to the natures rather than to the hypostasis. We can only affirm the one united and unconfused divine-human nature, will and energy of Christ the incarnate Lord.

c) We find that this Sixth council exalts as its standard mainly the teaching of Leo and Agatho, popes of Rome, paying only lip-service to the teachings of the Blessed Cyril. We regard Leo as a heretic for his teaching that the will and operation of Christ is to be attributed to the two natures of Christ rather than to the one hypostasis. The human nature is as “natural” to Christ the incarnate Word as is the divine. It is one hypostasis who now is both divine and human, and all the activities come from the one hypostasis. We therefore insist on the one theandric nature, will and energy of Christ the Incarnate Lord, and condemn the teachings of Leo. We cannot therefore accept the horos of the Sixth council based on the teachings of Leo. This subject of course

deserves further and more detailed study.

CONCLUSION

This paper has been written subject to correction by my learned brethren on the Chalcedonian and non-Chalcedonian sides. Its implications are quite serious. If the restoration of communion between our two families of Churches were to be dependent on our acceptance of the four councils now rejected by the non-Chalcedonian family, then we have little reason at present to hope that this condition can be fulfilled. If this is the *conditio sine qua non* in the minds of theologians on the non-Chalcedonian side, we would like to be told so, in order that we may communicate this to the holy synods of our churches and await further instruction from them as to whether we continue our bi-lateral conversations. My own view would be that we should so continue, because despite our basic disagreement on this point of the four councils, we do still have so much in common, and we have a significant contribution to make together as Eastern Orthodox Churches to the world-wide ecumenical discussion.

On the other hand, if we take seriously the valuable insight of Professor Konidaris, that the formulations of the First and Second Councils are of a decisive character, and later councils are to be seen only as exegetical to the meaning of the faith of Nicea and Constantinople, then it is possible for us to recommend to our parent churches to begin formal conversations with a view to restoring communion between our two families. The following is proffered as a basis or starting point for such conversations:

1. In a substantially common statement, to be formally declared by the Holy Episcopal Synods of all the autocephalous churches, with any necessary changes to suit the condition of each Church, we should state clearly that we share, between our two families, substantially the same authentic tradition of the undivided Christian church in relation to our understanding of and teaching on the Blessed and Holy Trinity, the Incarnation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the procession and activity of the Holy Spirit, the nature of the Church and the place of the blessed Virgin Mary, the saints and all the faithful departed in it, the nature of the ministry and sacraments in the Church, and our expectation of the world to come with the advent in glory of our Lord and the resurrection of the dead.

2. This common statement would also include a page on our common Christology, emphasizing mainly those things which we have in common, but also speaking of our different formulations in regard to nature, will and energy in our Lord Jesus Christ. It would be stated that variety in forms of worship, language and culture, and in formulations of faith can within certain prescribed limits serve to enrich rather than impoverish the common tradition of the church.

3. The statement would also make clear that while it is not possible for the Chalcedonian Churches to repudiate or reject any of the seven councils, it is equally difficult for the non-Chalcedonians now to formally accept the fourth, fifth, sixth and seventh councils recognized by the Chalcedonian family. It could be made clear that the non-Chalcedonians would refrain from formally condemning either the council of Chalcedon or Pope Leo. The statement will also make clear that the Chalcedonian churches would refrain from condemning Dioscurus and Severus as heretics. It could also be made clear that our two families agree in condemning the teachings of both Nestorius and Eutyches as heretical.

The statement would also say that at least for the time being, the jurisdictions would remain distinct on the basis of the different liturgical traditions, e.g. the two Patriarchates of Antioch and Alexandria, as well as of Constantinople could continue with their different jurisdictions. The hope should be expressed in the statement that as mutual confidence grows between the various liturgical traditions a reorganization of the jurisdictions would become possible. Clear assurances can be given to certain churches that entering into communion with another church will not violate its administrative or jurisdictional integrity.

The next immediate step is the appointment of a Joint Commission by the two families, who will meet officially and work out the statement along the suggested lines. The standing committee of the Oriental Orthodox Churches has already been so authorized to act on behalf of the Oriental Orthodox Churches. As soon as similar action is announced by the churches of the Chalcedonian family, we could proceed to the convening of a joint meeting of the two commissions. One of our jobs here at the present meeting would be to prepare an agenda for the joint meeting, and to nominate a small group of people who will be prepared to assist in the organization of

the joint meeting.

I even venture to suggest that the first meeting of the Joint Commission should be held in January 1971 in Addis Ababa.

Footnotes

1. Bristol Report, p. 179.
2. Patrologia Latina (Migne) Tome LXIX Col. 122 sqq.
3. See note in The Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers, Series Two, Volume XIV, p. 323.
4. agit enim utraque forma cum alterius communione quod proprium est; Verbo scilicet operante quod Verbi est, et carne exequente quod carnis est.”
5. Severus is also called “God-hated” in the letter of the Sixth Council to the Pope Agatho.