

Fourth Council of Constantinople

(EIGHTH GENERAL COUNCIL)

The Eighth General Council was opened, 5 October, 869, in the Cathedral of Saint Sophia, under the presidency of the legates of Adrian II. During the preceding decade grave irregularities had occurred at Constantinople, among them the deposition of the Patriarch Ignatius and the intrusion of Photius, whose violent measures against the Roman Church culminated in the attempted deposition (867) of Nicholas I. The accession that year of a new emperor, Basil the Macedonian, changed the situation, political and ecclesiastical. Photius was interned in a monastery; Ignatius was recalled, and friendly relations were resumed with the Apostolic See. Both Ignatius and Basil sent representatives to Rome asking for a general council. After holding a Roman synod (June, 869) in which Photius was again condemned, the pope sent to Constantinople three legates to preside in his name over the council. Besides the Patriarch of Constantinople there were present the representatives of the Patriarchs of Antioch and Jerusalem and, towards the end, also the representatives of the Patriarch of Alexandria. The attendance of Ignatian bishops was small enough in the beginning; indeed there were never more than 102 bishops present.

The legates were asked to exhibit their commission, which they did; then they presented to the members of the council the famous formula (libellus) of Pope Hormisdas (514-23), binding its signatories "to follow in everything the Apostolic See of Rome and teach all its laws . . . in which communion is the whole, real, and perfect solidity of the Christian religion". The Fathers of the council were required to sign this document, which had originally been drawn up to close the Acacian schism. The earlier sessions were occupied with the reading of important documents, the reconciliation of Ignatian bishops who had fallen away to Photius, the exclusion of some Photian prelates, and the refutation of the false statements of two former envoys of Photius to Rome. In the fifth session Photius himself unwillingly appeared, but when questioned observed a

deep silence or answered only in a few brief words, pretending blasphemously to imitate the attitude and speech of Christ before Caiphas and Pilate. Through his representatives he was given another hearing in the next session; they appealed to the canons as above the pope. In the seventh session he appeared again, this time with his consecrator George Asbestas. They appealed, as before, to the ancient canons, refused to recognize the presence or authority of the Roman legates, and rejected the authority of the Roman Church, though they offered to render an account to the emperor. As Photius would not renounce his usurped claim and recognize the rightful patriarch Ignatius, the former Roman excommunications of him were renewed by the council, and he was banished to a monastery on the Bosphorus, whence he did not cease to denounce the council as a triumph of lying and impiety, and by a very active correspondence kept up the courage of his followers, until in 877 the death of Ignatius opened the way for his return to power. Iconoclasm, in its last remnants, and the interference of the civil authority in ecclesiastical affairs were denounced by the council. The tenth and last session was held in the presence of the emperor, his son Constantine, the Bulgarian king, Michael, and the ambassadors of Emperor Louis II.

The twenty-seven canons of this council deal partly with the situation created by Photius and partly with general points of discipline or abuses. The decrees of Nicholas I and Adrian II against Photius and in favour of Ignatius were read and confirmed, the Photian clerics deposed, and those ordained by Photius reduced to lay communion. The council issued an Encyclical to all the faithful, and wrote to the pope requesting his confirmation of its Acts. The papal legates signed its decrees, but with reservation of the papal action. Here, for the first time, Rome recognized the ancient claim of Constantinople to the second place among the five great patriarchates. Greek pride, however, was offended by the compulsory signature of the aforesaid Roman formulary of reconciliation, and in a subsequent conference of Greek ecclesiastical and civil authorities the newly-converted Bulgarians were declared subject to the

Patriarchate of Constantinople and not to Rome. Though restored by the Apostolic See, Ignatius proved ungrateful, and in this important matter sided with the other Eastern patriarchs in consummating, for political reasons, a notable injustice; the territory henceforth known as Bulgaria was in reality part of the ancient Illyria that had always belonged to the Roman patriarchate until the Iconoclast Leo III (718-41) violently withdrew it and made it subject to Constantinople. Ignatius very soon consecrated an archbishop for the Bulgarians and sent thither many Greek missionaries, whereupon the Latin bishops and priests were obliged to retire. On their way home the papal legates were plundered and imprisoned; they had, however, given to the care of Anastasius, Librarian of the Roman Church (present as a member of the Frankish embassy) most of the submission-signatures of the Greek bishops. We owe to him the Latin version of these documents and a copy of the Greek Acts of the council which he also translated and to which is due most of our documentary knowledge of the proceedings. It was in vain that Adrian II and his successor threatened Ignatius with severe penalties if he did not withdraw from Bulgaria his Greek bishops and priests. The Roman Church never regained the vast regions she then lost.

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