

The Church in Crisis: A History of the General Councils: 325-1870

CHAPTER 2. The First General Council of Constantinople, 381

The second General Council of the Church, which met at Constantinople in the year 381, was summoned primarily as a solemn demonstration of the unshaken loyalty of the eastern bishops to the faith as set forth at Nicaea, a demonstration that the church of the East had never gone over to Arianism, that the Arians were no more than a heretical faction--had never been anything more, despite their power--and were now finally discredited. Why was such a declaration necessary, fifty-six years after the bishops of the East, with the enthusiastic support of the all-powerful emperor, had condemned Arius as a falsifier of the truth and had provided, in the homo-ousion, a sure touchstone to test the orthodoxy of future bishops? The answer to this question is one of the strangest and most involved chapters in all Church History. The simplest way perhaps, to set out as much of it as is essential to the story of the General Council of 381, will be to list the turning points of the story, and then attempt some explanation of the "why" of it all.

On the morrow of the Council of Nicaea three bishops revoked their signatures to the condemnation of Arius--the bishops of the neighbouring sees of Nicaea, Nicomedia, and Chalcedon. They were promptly banished by the emperor, and others elected in their stead (325). In 328 the bishop of Alexandria died, and the young deacon Athanasius, who had been his main advisor at the great council, was chosen to succeed him, and despite the active hostility of the Meletian faction, he was consecrated. That same year Constantine recalled the exiled bishops and reinstated them--why, we do not know; it may have been for personal reasons only. From the moment, until his death in 341, the ex-Lucianist, Eusebius of Nicomedia, becomes the leading figure in the movement to undo the work of Nicaea. After the emperor founded his new capital city, Constantinople, Eusebius became its bishop.

Eusebius never openly attacked the achievement of 325. His line was to work for the destruction of the leading bishops who had supported the homo-ousion, on the plea that they were heretics, but of a different kind, i.e., men who did not really believe in the Trinity, who by the word homo-ousion meant that the Father and the Logos were one. The first victim of this campaign was the second greatest prelate in the empire of the East, the bishop of Antioch, Eustathius by name. It was, possibly, he who had presided at Nicaea. A carefully chosen council of bishops now met at Antioch, condemned and deposed him. And, once again, the emperor followed up the ecclesiastical judgment by a sentence of exile. Nine other leading bishops were similarly removed in the course of the next year or so (330- 32). In 332 the intrigue to remove Athanasius began. The agents of this were the Meletians of Alexandria. The point of attack was not the orthodoxy of his belief but his loyalty to the emperor. Athanasius was summoned to the court, and cleared himself easily, returning home with a letter of high commendation from Constantine. Two further attempts to disgrace him, in the next two years, also failed.

Then, in 334, Constantine did the most astonishing thing of all--astonishing to us who know, really, so very little of the day-to-day history of these events. He recalled Arius from banishment, and received him at court. And while a council was ordered to "investigate" what we may call "the Athanasius problem"--why it was that the greatest city of the eastern world had never known peace since this young prelate had been its bishop--Arius persuaded the emperor that he was as orthodox as the best, and on the strength of a formula drawn up by himself (in which the homo-ousion did not appear) he was received back into the church, 335. As to the council, it was held at Tyre, and it deposed Athanasius; and the emperor, after a personal hearing, banished him to Trier, in Germany, as far almost as a man could travel from Alexandria and still be in the emperor's territory. It was now ten years since the farewell ceremonies at Nicaea.

In 336 Arius died, on the eve of a solemn ceremony of rehabilitation prepared in the cathedral of Constantinople, and in 337 Constantine, too, died.

Constantine's death brought the Arian party a still greater freedom of action. He was succeeded by his three young sons as joint emperors, and to none of these could the upholding of Nicaea be the matter of personal prestige it was to him. Certain it is that it is from this time that the party begins to propose alternatives to, or substitutes for, the Nicaean formula; more or less innocuous substitutes in the first years--had they not been put out by known opponents of the homo-ousion, and by men who were the declared foes of the bishop, Athanasius, who had become the very symbol of all that the categorical test word stood for.

And here it needs to be said that there were many bishops, as little Arian as Athanasius himself, who, nevertheless, had no love for the famous Nicaean word--as there had been many such bishops at Nicaea. These Catholic bishops, supporting the various alternatives of the kind described, played the Arian game of course, albeit unconsciously. Their dislike of the test word arose from the fact that, in the East, as has been said already, the word homo-ousion had a bad history. Its first use, by Clement of Alexandria and by Origen too (around 230-50), was seemingly in the Nicaean sense; and when a bishop of Alexandria, answering heretics, seemed to critics so to defend the distinction of persons in the Holy Trinity, that he obscured the truth that there is only one God, it was made a point against him that he had not explicitly said the Logos was homo-ousion with the Father. And this bishop, Denis, explains to his namesake, the pope, in his defence, why he had not used the useful word: it was a word nowhere found in Holy Scripture. This was about the year 257, nearly seventy years earlier than Nicaea. But eleven years only after this interchange between the two Denises, when the bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata, was condemned (268) for the heresy of teaching that the Father and the Logos are one person, he actually used the word homo-

ousion to express this oneness, and so his condemnation gave the word an ill sound in the East.

Whoever first proposed the use of the term at Nicaea, it was surely not any bishop from the East. To these it stank of heresy, ever since the council of 268, even when it had, so to speak, been disinfected by the Council of Nicaea, and given an undoubtedly orthodox employment. Sabellianism, the denial that there is a Trinity, was the great scare heresy of the East to the generation upon which Arianism came, and homo-ousion had been the heresy's shibboleth, in eastern ears.[1]

Again, there is latent a first class difficulty in the Nicaean council's formal condemnation[2] of those "who say that the Son is of another hypostasis or ousia [substantia, in Latin] than the Father"; and this was fully exploited in the troublous years after Constantine's death. The latent difficulty is that to Greeks these two terms did not necessarily and always mean exactly the same thing, as they did to Latins. Hypostasis to the Greeks came to mean what the Latin call "person"; ousia meant "nature" rather. The sentence "The Son is not of another hypostasis than the Father," a Greek might take to mean, "Father and Son are one person"; while the Latin understood by it, "are of the same nature."

All this is set down to convey something of the causes that held quite orthodox minds in doubt about their practical action during these controversies--a state of doubt which for years played into the hands of the radically unorthodox. This was an especially dangerous condition of things, seeing that it was these radicals--the real Arians--who had the ear of the court, and who stood to the world of officials and administrators for the ideal type of Christian believer, the kind that should be officially supported. For in this first generation that followed the personal conversion of Constantine, the official world was very far from being Christianised in belief. Though the emperor, especially after he had become sole emperor, turned his back very definitely on the pagan rites, these were by no means forbidden. The whole life of official paganism

went on as before. And the cult of Sol Invictus and Summus Deus still held very many of its adherents. To these enlightened monotheistic foes of polytheism, the Arian version of the Christian idea of God naturally appealed. On a first view it was simpler, more logical--terms meaning just what they appeared to mean--its language non-mysterious, rational.[3]

It is not, of course, suggested that there was a carefully worked out plan, in all this, on the part of high officials. But the two tendencies existed side by side in these years, and it was this accidental coincidence that did much, so it is suggested,[4] to make Arianism the highly dangerous threat it proved to be, and to give it a toughness out of all proportion to the number of its real adherents.

As to its quality as a danger to Catholicism, let Harnack's judgment be recalled, that Arianism, had it been victorious, must have ruined Christianity completely, emptying it of all religious content, leaving it a mere system of cosmology and ethics. It was, in the circumstances, one of the greatest dangers that true religion has ever had to face, and this despite the fact that, in the critical fourth century, Arianism was never a popular thing. "The laity, as a whole, revolted from it in every part of Christendom. It was an epidemic of the schools and of theologians, and to them it was mainly confined.... The classes which had furnished martyrs in the persecutions were in no sense the seat of the heresy." [5]

The only one of Constantine's sons who really favoured the anti-Nicaean party was Constantius II, and once he became sole master of the empire (350) the Radicals really threw off the mask, and Arianism proper--the explicit renunciation of the doctrine that the Logos is truly God--was now propounded in councils and, with great violence and persecution, imposed by the emperor. And it was in these years (350-61) that the heresy was first thrust upon the bishops of the still largely pagan West, of Illyricum, Italy, and Gaul. In council after council, in the west and in the east, whether perplexed by the confusion of the issues, whether terrified by the threats of the emperor and the knowledge that bishops had been murdered

who opposed him, whether overcome by the specious argument that it was all, in reality, a matter of ridding the Church of Athanasius, "whom they were taught to consider a restless, violent, party-spirited man, and of his arbitrary formula"[6]--in council after council the bishops gave way wholesale, at Arles (353), Milan (355), Sirmium (357), and, most spectacularly, at the simultaneous councils of Rimini-Seleucia[7] (359) about the morrow of which St. Jerome wrote a celebrated phrase, that the whole world woke up one morning, lamenting and marvelling to find itself Arian.

In 361 Constantius disappeared, baptised (just in time) by an Arian. He was followed by Julian the Apostate, who set about a systematic revival of Paganism. Then came Jovian, a Catholic, and after him Valentinian, a "liberal," with Valens, his brother, co-emperor for the East. Valens (365-78) a true Arian, of the political type, returned to the policy of Constantius, and a real persecution of Catholics followed. But the cloudiness of the early period had been dissipated. The issue was now clear to the bishops, that only by insistence on the homo-ousion could the Church rid itself of the crypto-Arians whose influence meant death. And when to Valens, killed in a war with the Goths (378), a Catholic general, from Spain, succeeded--Theodosius--the way was at last open to a real restoration of the traditional belief. Nicaea, for the first time in fifty years, was to come into full operation in all the sees of the East.

The General Council of 381 is an epilogue to a drama just concluded. It does little more than register a *fait accompli*, and its essential importance is its demonstration to the world that the Christians of the "East," after more than fifty years of continuous disturbance and of oppression on the part of their rulers, remain Catholics, are not Arians; it is a demonstration that the council of Nicaea was no mere ecclesiastical pageant, but a source of strong and unfailing leadership.

No two general councils follow the same historical pattern--not even when a bare fifty years separates them, and when the matter of their

discussions is the same. In this council Rome, the West, was not represented at all-- was not so much as invited. The same problems had for years now vexed the churches of the West. The same political revolution--the appearance of sovereigns who were wholeheartedly Catholic--was to be their salvation also. And they, too, demanded a council, and it took place, at Aquileia some weeks after the council we are dealing with. And why the council which met at Constantinople came, in after years, to be regarded as a General Council is something that may puzzle the legists and the theologians.[8]

The bishops who sat in the council were 150 in all. There were none from Egypt, only half of them from Thrace and Asia. Almost one half of the bishops came from the vast (civil) diocese called the East, Oriens, whose chief see was Antioch. And it was the bishop of Antioch, Meletius, who presided at the council.

Once again the crosscurrents and misunderstandings of these much troubled years had borne strange fruit. At Antioch there was a rival claimant to the see, Paulinus. And it was Paulinus whom Rome (and Alexandria also) recognised as the lawful bishop. But the Catholic East was solidly behind Meletius, and this meant the support (among others) of the three great Cappadocian bishops, St. Basil, St. Gregory of Nyssa, his brother, and St. Gregory of Nazianzen, the greatest theologian of the day and one of the greatest preachers of all time.[8a]

Meletius died before the council had been long in session, and it was the last named Gregory who was elected president in his place. The actual business before the council was slight, and now, with the see of Antioch vacant and seventy-one bishops of its "jurisdiction" already assembled (to say nothing of the no less interested eighty bishops from other provinces), it is not surprising that the question of the successor of Meletius took the first place in the minds of all. The president of the council had the happy idea that the bishop whom Rome and Alexandria recognised, Paulinus, should be chosen, and so the schism be ended. But of this the

bishops would not hear. And then there arrived the bishop of Alexandria himself, the successor of Athanasius, with some of his suffragans, and he made such a bitter attack on the president because he had consented, being already bishop of Sasima, to become bishop of Constantinople,[9] that Gregory, already discouraged by the revelation of what ecclesiastical politics could be at a high level, resigned both his see and his presidency.

The council closed on July 9. What it had accomplished was, first, to issue a statement of belief which explicitly renewed the homo-ousion definition of Nicaea, and then, naming the many varieties of Arianism, to condemn each and every one of them as heretical. The bishops next published (what has long been lost) a detailed statement of their faith in the consubstantiality of the Divine Logos with the Father, in the distinctness of the three Persons of the Holy Trinity, and in the reality of the Incarnation of the Second Person. These statements about belief involved the condemnation of two other theories related to Arianism, namely, the denial, by Macedonius and his followers, that the Holy Ghost is really God, and the theory of Apollinaris, bishop of Laodicea, that in the Logos Incarnate--in the God-man, Jesus Christ--the Divine Logos functions in place of a human soul: Christ, who is truly God, is not truly a man. This last heresy was to have a famous history in the next seventy years, to be the occasion of two later General Councils, and, ultimately, in one form or another, so to divide the Catholics of the East as to paralyse their resistance to the assault of Islam.

There are four canons enacted by this council.[10] The first is the declaration renewing the work of Nicaea, and condemning these various heresies. The second, between the lines of which can be read much of the history since that council, forbids bishops to cross the frontiers of another [civil] diocese, or to interfere in another bishop's administration. The bishop of Alexandria, it is explicitly laid down, is to confine himself to Egypt; the bishops of the East (i.e., Oriens) shall confine their joint action to the East, with the reservation that the bishop of Antioch keeps the rights

acknowledged at Nicaea; and statements no less explicit restrict the bishops of Asia, Pontus, and Thrace to those three [civil] dioceses, respectively. The bishops are reminded of the Nicæan rule that the affairs of the sees of any given province are to be regulated by a twice-yearly meeting of the bishops.

About the time that St. Gregory Nazianzen was invited to become bishop of Constantinople, the efforts of the bishop of Alexandria, Peter II, had brought about the "election" of an Alexandrian philosopher, Maximus, and his unlawful, clandestine consecration. The council (canon 4) now declared that Maximus was not a bishop, and that whatever ordinations he had ever performed were worthless, and the candidates "in truth not ordained at all."

There remains the third canon, the most famous action, in its historical effects, of this council: "The bishop of Constantinople shall have the primacy of honour after the bishop of Rome, because [Constantinople] is New Rome."

NOTES

1. Cf. Newman, Tracts (as before), p. 100 "We cannot be surprised then that the homoousion, which perplexed the Western bishops, should have irritated the Orientals, the only wonder is, that East and West had concurred in accepting it at Nicea."

2. As a conclusion to the creed.

3. See Newman, Tracts (as before), p. 102: "It must be added that to statesmen, lawyers and military chiefs, who had lately been Pagans, a religious teaching such as Arianism, which was clear and intelligible, was more acceptable than doctrines which described the Divine Being in language, self-contradictory in its letter, and which exacted a belief in truths which were absolutely above their comprehension."

4. See Msgr. Pierre Batiffol, *La Paix Constantinienne et le Catholicisme* (1914), p. 310.
5. Newman, as before, pp. 97-98.
6. Newman, as before, p. 100.
7. Rimini, on the Adriatic coast of Italy, for the bishops of the West; Seleucia, then the chief city of Isauria, is the modern Turkish port of Silifke on the Mediterranean.
8. The first stage in the development of its recognition as oecumenical was the unanimous vote of the General Council of Chalcedon, 4th session (451), taking as the rule of faith, "that fixed by the council of Nicaea, and which the 150 bishops of the council assembled at Constantinople by Theodosius the Great confirmed."
- 8a. Barry, no. 17, prints a translation of his speech to the council.
9. A breach of the law enacted at Nicaea.
- 10 Schroeder, *op. cit.*, prints the text and a translation.