

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

CHAPTER 6. The Third General Council of Constantinople, 680-81

What this sixth of the General Councils achieved was to reconcile the churches of the East with the Roman See, and to condemn a heresy. And yet again was the adage warranted that once a General Council meets the unlikeliest things may happen--for this sixth council was to treat a pope as the fifth had treated the Three Chapters. The sixth General Council was, in the intention of the emperor who called it, a "peace conference" that terminated sixty years of grave disorders. And, yet once again, those responsible for the beginnings of the disorder had been conscious rebels in part only. As had happened with Justinian, what had moved a seventh-century emperor to act as a theologian--and had he not so acted the heresy would never have had any importance outside the schools of theology--was the hope of uniting his people to fight, this time, for the empire's very life against an all-victorious enemy, the Persians.

This seventh-century heresy is traditionally called Monothelism: the heresy that Christ our Lord did not possess a human will, or ever act with a force -- an "operation" -- that was human, but that, in Him, all that in us comes from our wills came from His being God. If this were true, then Christ was not really a man. It was the Monophysite claim all over again, and the theory was the outcome of the strongly felt need to tempt the Monophysites back to the spiritual unity from which they had been separated now nearly two hundred years. The practical plan to restore religious unity in the harassed state along these lines had for its authors the emperor Heraclius (610-41) and Sergius, the patriarch of Constantinople.

Heraclius was a man of Armenian extraction--that is to say, sprung of a family from Monophysite territory--but born in Africa, where his father, another Heraclius, was commander in chief of the imperial army in the opening years of the seventh century. The ruling emperor, Phocas, was a barbarous and incompetent tyrant, under whom the state seemed about to disintegrate, at the time the Persians, led by a very able king, Chosroes II, were executing a successful invasion of the Roman East. The elder

Heraclius declared against Phocas, and set his son in command of the armament he sent from Africa against the capital. The rebels were victorious, and the younger Heraclius was crowned emperor, by Sergius the patriarch, October 5, 610. He was thirty-five years of age, and was to rule for thirty years.

Nothing could have been more desperate than the situation the new emperor faced: an empty treasury, a nation impoverished and embittered, hardly any army, and the Persians advancing without any hope for some years of checking them. The list of their uninterrupted victories recalls the events of 1939-41. In 611 they took Antioch, in 613 Damascus, in 614 Jerusalem, and in 617 Alexandria. Meanwhile Heraclius, ably assisted by the patriarch, kept his people from despair and slowly prepared for the offensive. A holy war was preached, for the invaders had taken the Holy Land and had defiled the sacred places; they had captured the most sacred of all possessions, the very Cross on which Christ died. As to military plans, Heraclius proposed to fight his way through Asia Minor and Armenia to the Euphrates, and then down the rivers and across to the heart of Persia. Once the Persian monarchy was destroyed, the recovery of the provinces Rome had lost would not be difficult. The task occupied the emperor a good six years (622-28). But the day came when he dictated terms to the Persians in the heart of their own land, and he had the happiness of escorting the Cross to Jerusalem in 629.

In all these years Heraclius had been busy with theological conferences, binding to the imperial cause--as he hoped--some of his most embittered subjects, the Monophysites of Armenia (622) and the Caucasus (626) very notably, and of Syria (631). At Phasis, a city on the shores of the Black Sea, the modern Poti, he had a long conference with the bishop, Cyrus, whom he found it difficult to persuade that the new point he was urging, about the "unity" of action in the Divine Saviour,[1] was in harmony with the teaching of St. Leo and Chalcedon, that was still, of course, the religion of the State. The emperor advised him to consult Sergius of Constantinople. Cyrus received, in reply, a dossier of literature to support the orthodoxy of the new idea. It included a letter--later proved spurious--of a former patriarch of Constantinople to Pope Vigilius. Cyrus was won

over. When, five years later, the see of Alexandria fell vacant the emperor thought of the able bishop he had met in fabled Colchis, and Cyrus was brought the thousand miles or so to sit in the seat of St. Cyril and St. Athanasius (631). And, as patriarch he brought about, in Egypt of all places, a reunion of Catholics and Monophysites -- all on the strength of the new point that since Catholics believed there was but a single source of the acts done by the saving Christ, there was no reason why Monophysites should anathematize them as though they were really Nestorians. The date of this union was 633.[2] Monothelism was now, as a fact of public life, some ten years old.

It is a curious thing to us, perhaps, that the new system had lived as long as this and never attracted any comment from the Roman See. But in that far-off seventh century, “the Roman See, well-established as was its supremacy, did not in fact ... exercise within the [four] Eastern patriarchates ... that authority which today it exercises everywhere. Then it was only rarely that it intervened in the affairs of these other churches, in moments of crisis; and even so, Rome usually did not intervene until appealed to.”[3]

At the time of the Act of Union of 633 there happened to be living at Alexandria a monk, Sophronius, learned and reputed a saint, who from a lifetime spent in scholarly travel, was well known throughout the East, and at Rome also. His trained mind saw at once that Cyrus had brought peace at the cost of truth. The treaty with the Monophysites had concluded with a number of agreed doctrinal statements, and the seventh of these has been described as the very definition of the new heresy. It condemned and anathematized whoever denied that “there is but a single Christ and Son, whose divine acts and whose human acts are done by a single divine-human operation, as St. Denis[4] says.”

While Cyrus and the patriarch of Constantinople were exchanging messages of joyous satisfaction--Sergius going out of his way to say (with a deft touching up of the quoted text) that this is the very teaching of St. Leo[6] -- Sophronius prepared his criticisms. But Cyrus referred the monk to Constantinople, and Constantinople bade him be silent, and not start a

new controversy, viz., whether in the Word Incarnate there were two “operations” or only one, but keep to the acknowledged teaching that the single person Jesus Christ works acts that are divine and also acts that are human. And with this command laid upon him, the monk returned to Palestine, his home--to find the patriarchal see vacant, and himself, presently, elected. Commands to be silent lost all their authority, of course, by the fact. In the official notification of his election, sent to the pope and to the patriarchs, Sophronius exposed the new heresy, with a wealth of learning[6] and an abundance of strong language about shepherds who were really wolves.

And now Rome comes into the action, through a letter from Sergius of Constantinople to the pope, Honorius I (625-38). This letter will, nearly sixty years later, figure in the proceedings of the sixth General Council, and with it the pope’s reply; and for this reply that council will anathematize the pope. Had Sergius guessed what line the new patriarch of Jerusalem would take, whom he had so lately dismissed with a certain bland insincerity? Did he hope to put himself right with Rome before Rome heard from Sophronius? or was he not that kind of man at all, but just honestly puzzled by the criticism which a professional theologian had made of his move for peace, and anxious to know what Rome thought of it? Both “interpretations” have found favour with the historians. Whatever the truth, the certain thing is that at the highest level there was not too much understanding of what was afoot in the East, and that the pope’s professional advisor was incompetent -- the man who put the pope’s reply into appropriate form. What happened was this.

Sergius, in his letter to the pope, described his interview with the monk, and his command not to make trouble by starting a new controversy, and said that he had written to Alexandria, in the same sense, i.e., not to use the expression “one operation” because there were people whom it would startle, for all that some of the Fathers had used it already; and not to use the expression “two operations,” because this was a novel way of speaking and would scandalize very many. This last phrase might suggest that in the Divine Saviour there were two wills, which could be contrary the one to the other--an outrageously wicked idea, said the patriarch. After some

further argument, Sergius comes to the point. All this discussion, he says, we have determined to set aside, and to keep to the traditional way of speaking. Sophronius has agreed to this, and so has the emperor, to whom our advice has been to keep away from either of the controverted phrases. He concludes by asking the pope, “if there be anything wanting in what has been said ... with your holy syllables and with your desirable assistance to signify your opinion on the matter.”[7]

The letter sent in reply to this by Honorius is something unique in the vast series of papal letters. The reader will have noticed that in Sergius’ letter a second term has now come into controversy--there is question of “one or two wills,” as well as of “one or two operations.” The pope begins by saying, you tell us about “certain discussions, and new controversies about words begun by one Sophronius, a monk (who now, so we hear, has been made bishop of Jerusalem), against our brother Cyrus the bishop of Alexandria, for preaching to those converted from heresy ‘the one operation of Jesus Christ, our Lord.’” He repeats Sergius’ summary of his own action and says of the reply he gave to Sophronius that it was prudent enough and careful,[8] adding, “We praise your doing away with this novel vocabulary which could be a scandal to the uninstructed.” Then follows a correct statement about the way in which the Divine Saviour works divine acts and human acts, a statement innocent of any reference to the new dispute “how” this happens, about which the pope’s advice is asked. From this the pope passes to the statement that in our Lord there is one will. This, he says, is what we believe; and in his exposition of the reason for the belief the pope reveals that he and the patriarch are not talking about the same thing. Our Lord’s nature, Honorius says, being free from the taint of original sin, there can never have been in Him that conflict which all of us experience between the two wills, the will to execute the law of the spirit and the will to serve the law of the members. Sergius’ “two wills,” on the other hand, were not these human contrarieties experienced by sinful man, but (i) a divine will, said to be the source of the operations that are divine, and (ii) a human will, the source, likewise, of the operations that were human. The pope has missed the point, the point which is the centre of the whole controversy. The

answer he gives to Sergius, his decision, is in regard to something altogether different. After this came some healthy generalities about avoiding the pitfalls and traps of heresy, and then a warning to “certain babblers” (who, to win over their hearers, give themselves the airs of doctors) that they are not to set forth their theories as though these were the teaching of the Church--theories on subjects which no council or lawful authority has seen fit so to explain that men have the right to teach that there are either one or two operations in the Lord Christ. The Scriptures tell us plainly that He worked both human and divine things. The question whether, because He so worked, we are to understand He did it through one or through two “operations” is no concern of ours. It is a question we may leave to grammarians and to tutors who earn their living by drilling schoolboys in quibbles of this sort. As for ourselves, we (that is the pope) discover that our Lord and His Holy Spirit worked not “one operation nor two ... but a great variety.”

The pope ends by a warning that the new controversy will revive the old, and that the contending parties will be taken to be either Eutychians or Nestorians, and the faith of ordinary simple people be disturbed. Let Sergius follow the pope’s example and impose silence about these matters on all, keeping to the old way, the truth about the one person and two natures of the Incarnate Word

“The result of the pope’s letter was the so-called heresy of Monothelism, which up to this point can scarcely be said to have existed, except as an opinion under discussion.”[9] Was Honorius indeed the begetter, albeit unwittingly, of the new trouble? Certainly it is not in the pope’s letter that we first meet the topic “one or two wills,” and since this was a logical next point in discussions about “one or two operations” -- the will being the source of operations -- it could only be a matter of time before the controversy shifted to the question of the wills. And this now happened. Again, as to Honorius’ personal responsibility, the General Council that later dealt so drastically with him -- and the pope, Leo II -- condemn him, the council only because “in all things he followed the mind of Sergius,”[10] and the pope because Honorius “by his negligence blew up

the flame of heresy,”[11] and because he “consented that the spotless tradition of Rome should be soiled.”[12]

All this was fifty years or so later. To complete the story of Pope Honorius, it needs to be said that he wrote to Sergius, a second letter of which a few fragments only are known. There is nothing retracted from, or added to, the statements in the first letter. Silence is recommended on the thorny question--the foolish question, Honorius now says, almost violently. The letter relates that the pope has written to Alexandria and to Jerusalem in the same sense,[13] and that the priests who have brought the synodal letter of Sophronius have promised that he will say no more about “two operations” if Cyrus will engage to cease to speak of “one operation.”

The next news of the affair to survive is that Sergius now prepared an imperial edict in which the policy of silence should be made obligatory for all. The emperor, once more, was away with his armies in the East, and Sergius, as so often before, was acting as regent. Only when Heraclius returned, three or four years later, was the edict published (638). It is known as the Ecthesis, or Declaration about the Faith.[14] What it does is to give force of law to the policy of “prudent silence” devised by Sergius once the reaction had begun against the reconciliation movement, the policy for which he had ingeniously secured the patronage of Honorius. Silence on the whole dispute about “operations,” lest the reunited Monophysites take fright and race off once again, silence and oblivion. But the Ecthesis took a different line about the question, “will” or “wills.” To avoid the danger of people thinking that in the Incarnate Word there could be strife between the divine and the human, said the Declaration, “we profess that there is but a single will.”

Sophronius had died before the Ecthesis was published, Honorius also (October 12, 638). Sergius lived long enough to give it the solemn approval of a synod, and then he too died (December 638).

Throughout the East the bishops signed the new creed, so to call it, without difficulty. As to the West, after the death of Honorius the action of the Holy See was sterilised for a good eighteen months by the fact that

the pope-elect, Severinus, could not obtain confirmation of his election from the emperor--a formality without which (since the time of Justinian) he could not be consecrated. Then, four months after his consecration, the new pope died. With the election of his successor, John IV (December 24, 640) the Roman See reverts to its traditional ways, for John's first act was to hold a council and condemn as heresy the new theory that in the Incarnate Word there is but a single will. This decision he sent to the emperor. Heraclius replied that he was not the author of the Ecthesis, he had but signed it, and the Declaration had been the cause of troubles innumerable. This must have been one of the emperor's last acts, for on February 11, 641, he died.

His eldest son and successor, Constantine III, a young man in his twenties, was already dying of consumption, and a dispute about the succession lay ahead when John IV's letter arrived, acknowledging him as emperor, and dealing with the slanders already in circulation that charged Honorius with heresy. The letter ended with a demand that the Ecthesis be withdrawn. To this the emperor replied that already the text had been taken down from its place in the church of St. Sophia. Then, May 25, Constantine III died, and for the rest of the year the rival factions within the imperial family fought it out. By November the faction that supported the heir of Constantine III had won, and his eldest son reigned as Constans II, a child of eleven. It was in his name that an answer was now sent to John IV's last letter to Constantine III[15]--a resolute statement of the emperor's resolve to defend the new Monothelism and the Council of Chalcedon. Whereupon the pope--not John IV but his successor, Theodore[16]--condemned the Ecthesis, and expressed his surprise that the promises of Constantine III had not been kept.

The pope had changed, the policy remained firm.

The new pope had the unusual experience of receiving the patriarch of Constantinople, come to Rome to abjure his heresy and seek reconciliation. This was Pyrrhus, successor to Sergius and part author of the Ecthesis. It was by a strange route that Pyrrhus had come to Rome. He had, in 641, been deposed by the new emperor for political reasons. When

his successor, Paul, applied for recognition to the pope, Theodore explained that since Pyrrhus had been uncanonically thrust out he could not recognise Paul. Meanwhile he would be obliged if the emperor would despatch Pyrrhus to Rome, to clear himself of the charge of heresy. At this stage Pyrrhus fled from Constantinople to Africa. This province was a boiling hot centre of opposition to the new heresies, the heart of which was the Greek abbot honoured today as St. Maximus the Confessor.[17] He immediately engaged the fugitive patriarch in controversy, and converted him. So it was that Pyrrhus made his way to Rome and Pope Theodore (645 or 6).

Councils of bishops began to be held in various parts of Africa, denouncing the heresy, begging the patriarch Paul to return to the traditional faith, and the emperor to suppress the Ecthesis, and calling on the pope to make use of his great authority vis-a-vis the patriarch, who, if he will not submit, they say, should be cut off from the Church by the pope, "like a diseased limb." To the pope's summons, sent to Constantinople by a solemn embassy, the patriarch replied with a renewal of his heresy, in which he claimed Honorius as one of his patrons! Whereupon Theodore excommunicated him.

And now, once again, the emperor intervened with an edict--not this time a mere statement, but a rule, imposed under severe penalties for the disobedient, varying from deposition for bishops to fines and floggings for the ordinary public. The rule (typos is the Greek word, so that historians call this edict the Type of Constans II) was a simple prohibition of all discussions, lectures, sermons, writings on both the question of the "operations" and that of the "wills." This appeared in the last months of 648.

On the part of the emperor or his advisors (Constans II was now a youth of 18) it would seem to have been a police measure pure and simple, behind which was the fear of what such movements as the Catholic reaction in Africa, for example, might bring about. Already there had been in that province a widespread revolt, led by the emperor's commander in chief, the exarch. Only the accident that he was killed in a battle with the

Arabs had halted its progress. It was not yet forty years since the hero of a similar revolt in that province had won through to the imperial crown -- the present young emperor's grandfather, Heraclius. As it was, Africa was to be quasi-independent for the next ten years or so.

To the pope the new law initiated a persecution, the drastic punishment of all who protested that it was vital that Christians be taught and believe the truth about who and what the Divine Saviour was; or that error had not the same rights as truth; or who objected to the official government thesis that the difference between truth and error, in this fundamental belief, was of no importance. The truth was to be stifled, because Caesar had so willed. And Caesar had so willed--to placate the Monophysites? Hardly, for except for the fashionables, the intellectual mystics, the self-segregated elect who shunned the vulgarity of being as the rest, except for these the Monophysite had disappeared. Rather the lands where he dwelt by the million and flourished, Egypt, Palestine, Syria, Armenia, had now, finally and forever, been wrenched from the imperial rule; had lapsed, after a thousand years, from Hellenism too. Barely recovered by Heraclius in 628-29, these countries had become, in the next ten years after his triumph, the spoil of a power whose very name the victor of 629 had never heard--Islam. Once again, a brief list of dates and places with the note "lost irrevocably," will show the world of the emperor at Constantinople as remodelled more drastically than any internal revolution could have changed it.

Mahomet died June 8, 632 -- three years or so after Heraclius had triumphantly restored the Cross to Jerusalem. In 634 his Arabs began to raid Syria. Damascus fell to them in 635. The next year the last imperial forces capable of containing them were wiped out. In 637 they took Jerusalem, in 638 Antioch, in 639 Caesarea. Other Arabian forces, in 637, overthrew the Sassanid empire of Persia. In 639 they began their drive towards Egypt--the economic heart of the Roman Empire for centuries. Babylon fell to them in 641 and, in 642, Alexandria. By 651 other Arab armies had reached the frontiers of India.

It was a new pope who had to meet the new edict, Martin I (649-55). He was thoroughly versed in the controversy, and knew well the personalities opposed to him, for he had spent several years as the pope's representative at the imperial court. His reaction to the appearance of the Type was immediate and vigorous. Within a few weeks of his election -- for which no confirmation was asked at Constantinople--the pope sent out summonses to a council to be held at Rome, under his own presidency, that should definitively sum up all that the various local councils throughout the West had been declaring. This Lateran Council of 649, to which 105 bishops came, is the most spectacular demonstration of the Roman principatus since the Tome of St. Leo, just two hundred years before. And it was staged with the State already arrayed in opposition. This pope was to pay for his boldness with his life.

The council sat for three weeks (October 5-26) and the results of its deliberations were twenty canons,[18] which yet once again state, point by point, with great clarity, the fundamentals of the faith regarding the mystery of the Incarnation, as tradition and the five General Councils set it out, introducing, in its proper place, a condemnation of the novelties about "one operation" and "one will" (canons 10-20). Those who have propagated the new ideas are in each case stigmatised as, "the wicked heretics." In the canon (no. 18)[19] that lists the heretics whom the various general councils have condemned, a place is found--"rightly, since they are similar to all these" -- or Cyrus of Alexandria, for Sergius of Constantinople and his two successors, Pyrrhus and Paul (all by name), and for all others who hold what they held or hold; condemned also is "the most wicked Ecthesis which the emperor Heraclius put out against the orthodox faith, at the persuasion of Sergius." Along with all these the canon condemns also "the most wicked Typos, lately published by the serenissimus emperor Constans, [a law] hostile to the Catholic Church, namely by promulgating that a like silence and refusal shall bind [all], in respect, both of what the holy Fathers have preached and what the heretics are wickedly venerating--thus deciding that the wicked heretics shall, against all justice, be freed from blame and condemnation; which is as

much as to cut away from the Catholic Church its definitions and its rules.”

The decision of the council, addressed in its final letter to “all our spiritual brethren, bishops, priests, monks ... and to the entire sacred fullness of the Catholic Church,” was sent broadcast over the West by the pope’s orders, to places as various as Africa and Holland. The news of what was afoot reached the emperor, of course, and orders were sent to his chief officer in Italy, the exarch at Ravenna, to march on Rome, seize the pope, and force the bishops to accept the Type. But the exarch arrived with his army to find the council in session, and the feeling in Rome so strong against the emperor that he conceived the idea of setting himself up as ruler of an independent state. It was to be charged later against the pope that he had a hand in this scheme. Actually, he gave the pretender less than no encouragement, and the exarch passed on to try his fate in Sicily, where the plague eventually carried him off.

But in the year 653 the emperor struck again. This time the pope was kidnapped, carried bodily from before the high altar of St. Peter’s, loaded with chains and shipped as a common criminal to Constantinople. When the ship arrived Martin was thrown on the deck, half starved, in rags, and exposed for some days to the derision of the scum of the town. After three months in a dungeon he was brought to trial -- not for anything done or spoken in the council, but for high treason, for plotting to deprive the emperor of his Italian lands. He was condemned, and then unceremoniously degraded of his rank by the public executioners, the young emperor looking on from behind a lattice. The pope was not executed, but thrown into the gaol, chained with the murderers and the rest. Meanwhile the emperor went to relate his triumph to the patriarch Paul, then seriously ill. The terrified prelate begged him to cease the persecution. “I am so soon to answer for so much,” he said. And the pope was exiled to the wilds of the Crimea. There, worn out by his sufferings, he died September 16, 655.

Simultaneously with the pope's ordeal, Constans II had ordered the arrest of Maximus and two of his associates. They, too, were brought to the capital to face the like accusations, but at one stage the true reason for the trial was forced from the court by the abbot. In the end they were sentenced to be flogged, have their hands cut off and their tongues torn out, and to be imprisoned till they died.

Constans II had exceeded the worst of his predecessors.

Between the martyrdom of St. Martin I[20] and the sixth General Council there lies a more or less uneventful quarter of a century -- for the Church. For the empire, these were years of continuous crisis before the ever-closer menace of the now Mohammedan Arabs, culminating in the famous siege -- or succession of sieges -- of Constantinople, for the Arab fleets returned every spring for five successive years. Constans II was by this time no more. Wearied of life, and of a capital that hated him for his morbid cruelty, he spent his last years in Italy and Sicily, and here in 668 he had met his death, murdered by one of his officers while he took a bath. His successor was his eldest son, Constantine IV (668-85), who at the time of the first siege was twenty.

Between the court and the Holy See there had never been any formal reconciliation. Both seem tacitly to have agreed to say nothing about the past. The long-lived pope Vitalian (657-72) did not open his reign by condemning the Type anew. And with the new emperor it seemed banished to the attic. The patriarch Paul was long since dead, and Pyrrhus his rival also. Their successors had ceased to mention Monothelism in their inaugural letters. Constantine IV, admittedly grateful for the pope's support in the first years of his reign, when Sicily seemed about to be lost to the empire, was no sooner free of the terrible menace from the Arab fleets than he turned to Rome with proposals to end the long misunderstanding (August 12, 678).

It was from this letter that the sixth General Council developed. There ensued first, of course, one of the incredible delays of those times. The pope to whom the letter was addressed had died four months to the day before it was written. His successor, Agatho, had been reigning since June

27. He was a Greek, born in Sicily. And before he accepted the emperor's invitation--to send representatives to a kind of conference which should work out a reconciliation between Constantinople and Rome -- Agatho proposed to consult the whole Latin episcopate, much as had been done before the Lateran Council of 649. At his bidding councils were held in various places--one we know at Hatfield, under the presidency of the Archbishop of Canterbury -- and their findings were studied and put into the shape of a reply to the emperor, at a gathering of bishops at Rome at Easter (March 25) 680; a year and a half since the emperor had written, considerably less, perhaps, since his letter had reached the pope. The delay had caused some anxiety at Constantinople and, on the part of the patriarch, Theodore, a revival of antipapal feeling, for he took the opportunity of removing from the diptychs the name of the last pope who figured there, Vitalian, dead seven years now. For this the emperor deposed him.

The final results of Pope Agatho's consultation of the bishops, and of the work done in Rome, was a profession of faith signed by the pope and 125 bishops,[21] and a letter to the emperor from the pope accrediting his representatives to the conference, three bishops, two priests, and a deacon--specialists from the Curia Romana, these last three, and sent as legates personally representing the pope -- and four Greek monks from Greek monasteries in Sicily and Rome (the emperor having especially asked for this).

This convoy reached Constantinople in September, and the emperor forthwith ordered his new patriarch to summon all the metropolitans and bishops subject to him to attend a conference where the theory of "one operation" and "one will" would be examined. This conference, which held its first session on November 7, in the emperor's palace, developed insensibly into the sixth General Council.

The council held, in all, eighteen sessions, concluding its work September 16, 681. The number of bishops present varied. At the first session there were only forty-three present, at the last 174. The young emperor

presided, in person, at the first eleven sessions, with the pope's personal representatives in the place of honour, on his left.

It was the legates who opened the proceedings. Beginning with a reference to the dissensions of the last forty-six years -- since the time when Sergius wrote for advice to Pope Honorius -- all these, they said, had been due to the acts of various patriarchs of Constantinople. They asked therefore what justification, it was thought, these prelates had had for the novel views whence all the troubles had come.

It was the patriarch of Antioch, Macarius, who replied. "We did not publish any new expressions," he said. All they had had to say was what they had been taught by the General Councils of the past, and by saintly bishops like Sergius, and Cyrus, "and also Honorius, who was Pope of Old Rome." Whereupon the emperor asked for proofs of this, from the synods and the Fathers; and from now the council hall became something of a university classroom. The official records of all the proceedings at Ephesus, Chalcedon, and at the council of 553, with all the documentation -- letters of popes and so forth -- were read out, a business that occupied the bishops for some days. During the reading of the acta of Justinian's council of 553 the papal legates interrupted. Three of the documents read out did not figure in the official proceedings, they objected; they were forgeries interpolated many years later. These three documents were an alleged letter from Mennas, patriarch in 553, to Pope Vigilius, and letters from Vigilius to Justinian and to Theodora, in all three of which there was mention of "the one will," and a recommendation of this as orthodox teaching, i.e., plain Monothelism, eighty years before Sergius. Archivists and palaeographers were brought in, the actual originals of the proceedings of 553 were taken from the library of the see of Constantinople and examined. It was discovered that, in these authentic originals, the sheets on which the three letters were written were indeed of later date than the council, and had at some time been surreptitiously slipped into the genuine acta.

At this stage (November 15, the fourth session) the patriarch of Constantinople asked that the letter of Pope Agatho to the emperor be read, and the profession of faith which the 125 bishops had signed. This was assented to, these bulky treatises[22] were read out, and Agatho's authoritative statement of the traditional faith, modelled on the Tome of St. Leo, was greeted with shouts that recall the triumphs of 451: "It is Peter who is speaking through Agatho." [23]

The unanimous, spontaneous applause with which the bishops--halfway through Macarius' defence -- hailed this statement of the belief which the Monothelites had laboured for fifty years to destroy, may have been discouraging, but in the next two sessions (December 7 and February 12) Macarius took up his task again of proving, this time from the Fathers, that the primitive belief of the church was indeed "one operation" and "one will." Again the legates interrupted. His quotations were not what the originals said. The texts had been altered to make them prove the Monothelite theories. Passages were quoted as applying to the Incarnate Word which, in the originals, referred to something else altogether. When Macarius had finished, the emperor ordered all his papers to be locked up and sealed. And he made the same order the next day (February 13) about the dossier read out by the legates, from the councils and the Fathers and from the Monothelite writers also. All these papers were then taken away to be compared with the originals, or the standard copies in the Patriarchal Library.[24]

This task took time. It is not surprising that it was three weeks before the council met for the next -- eighth -- session, March 7. The emperor, on this day, put the question point-blank to the patriarch of Constantinople, whether the doctrine of the passages, as actually found in the Fathers and in the General Councils, tallied with the letter of Agatho and the profession of faith of the western bishops. The patriarch answered that all this mass of testimony did indeed bear out that what Agatho taught was the truth of the matter, "and so I profess and believe," he said. And all the bishops present, save a handful, assented likewise. The pope's name was then restored to the diptychs. The schism of recent years--whatever that had amounted to -- was ended.

When the other patriarch present, Macarius, was asked whether he now agreed that Agatho's teaching was that of the councils and the Fathers, he bluntly declared himself a Monothelite. "I do not say two wills or operations in the mysterious Incarnation of our Lord, Jesus Christ, but one will and a single divine-human[25] operation." The council then demanded that Macarius justify himself. He thereupon read a declaration which asserted that those who held to the two wills, revealed themselves thereby as Nestorians; and to the list of the heretics of the past whom he anathematized he added the name of Maximus, for "his dogma of division" of the Incarnate Word, a dogma, he said, "rejected before our time by our blessed Fathers, I mean Honorius and Sergius and Cyrus ... and [to the emperor] by Heraclius of pious memory, your own great-grandfather." Never, he said, would he acknowledge there were two wills or two operations, not even if he were to be torn limb from limb, and cast into the sea. It was next proved against Macarius that he had garbled the testimonies he was quoting, upon which he admitted he had quoted them in this way in order to prove his own belief. At which bold defiance the bishops shouted him down, with cries of "Dioscoros again," "Another Apollinaris." He was immediately stripped of the badge of his patriarchal rank, and placed standing in the midst of the council--for trial. And the following day, March 8, the council deposed him.

Two weeks later, at the twelfth session, yet more of the documents put in by Macarius under seal were examined and read out. Among them was the fatal reply of Honorius to Sergius. On March 28 (thirteenth session) judgment was given on the letters read on March 22, and on the writers. The letters of Sergius were condemned as against the true faith and heretical, and, as though they were still alive, the council voted that "the names of those whose wicked teaching we execrate shall be cast out of the holy church of God, that is, Sergius, Cyrus of Alexandria, Pyrrhus, Paul and Peter, patriarchs of Constantinople ... persons, all of them, mentioned by Agatho in his letter and cast out by him." Then came one whom Agatho had not named. "And in addition to these we decide that Honorius also, who was Pope of the Older Rome, be with them cast out of the holy church of God, and be anathematized with them, because we

have found by his letter to Sergius that he followed his opinion in all things and confirmed his wicked teaching.” Grim moment in the history of the councils when the presiding Roman legates put this sentence to the bishops! At a later stage of the council (sixteenth session, August 9) a group of bishops, led by the patriarch of Constantinople, made a move to annul the anathematizing of the dead patriarchs Sergius, Pyrrhus, Paul, and Peter. This, if accepted, would have saved the name of Honorius too. We do not read that the legates welcomed the opportunity thus given. The council voted that the sentences stand, and the legates made no objection.

The session which followed the stern business of these condemnations saw a strange sight indeed, when the bishops transferred themselves into one of the public places of the town for the spectacle of a leading Monothelite essaying a miracle in proof that the doctrine was true. This was a priest, Polychronius, who claimed that the Monothelite profession of faith would raise the dead to life. A corpse was procured, and the Monothelite, in the presence of an immense crowd, laid the document upon it. For two hours, he was allowed to pray, and to whisper in the dead man’s ear, but nothing happened except the jeers of the spectators -- not even the recantation of the would-be wonder worker, and the bishops added him nominatim to the list of the condemned. This was on April 26.

At the seventeenth session, September 11, the text of the council’s profession of faith was settled: “We teach that in our Lord, Jesus Christ, there are two natural wills, and two natural operations, indivisibly, inconvertibly, inseparably, without any fusion, as the holy fathers have taught, and that these two natural wills are not contrary, as wicked heretics have said.”[26] On September 16 it was solemnly voted and signed by 174 bishops. The sixth General Council was over.

It had been a novel feature, in this particular council, that at the initiative of the papal legates, the heresy, to condemn which the council had been called, had been given a full hearing. This was new. No Arian expounded his theories at Nicaea, no one spoke for Nestorius at Ephesus, or for Eutyches at Chalcedon. At each of these councils the bishops, before they came together, were all but unanimously opposed to the new theories and

set on their condemnation. And so, it was at Constantinople in 680. It was to an audience in no need of being persuaded that Pope Agatho's letter was read out--a letter not indeed addressed to the council, for at the time it was written there had been no thought of more than a small conference of bishops. It was to the emperor that the pope addressed his statement of the true doctrine, and his message that this was the doctrine of salvation, and that this is what the patriarch of Constantinople must profess, if there is to be peace. Whether or not the pope understood the realities of the eastern situation, this teaching was in fact what all already believed, there also; it was what, if untroubled by imperial interference or the manoeuvres of the patriarchal diplomacy vis-a-vis the Monophysites, all the bishops had always professed, as well after the fatal year 634 as before. Whence the spontaneity of the applause that greeted Agatho's categorical statements and his strikingly phrased reminder of the special privilege of his own see, the privilege now in very evident operation.

Something of what the pope said to the bishops, and of the words they used in their gratitude to him, ought to find a place here, not because this is a history of Catholic doctrine -- for it is not that of course--but for the reason that this particular interchange is an important event in the gradual development of that new, "post-Persecutions" institution of the Church of Christ, the General Council.

It is today a thousand years and more since a General Council last met at the summons of an emperor, since any emperor played any part in the conduct of a council. The emperors have gone, the empires too, and the very conception of empire which then gave cohesion to the state; all this has gone. And in that thousand years twelve General Councils have been held. The very term suggests to us an institution whose life derives from some pope's fiat, an institution where the pope's action is all-important, and the suggestion that an emperor has, or ever had, a role to play is incredible, save to the ecclesiastical archaeologist. But the pope was always all-important in the General Council, from the beginning. From the time of the first council whose history is at all really known to us in detail -- Ephesus -- although the emperor may call the council, and the pope assent to and support his initiative, it is the pope who, before the

council meets, decides the point of belief, who directs the bishops of the council that this is the truth, and that it is not to be called into question: Celestine I in 431, Leo I in 451, Agatho in 680. So instinctive is this papal action, with regard to the General Council facing a revolt against the traditional belief, that were it one day to be discovered that Silvester I sent with his legates to Nicaea the famous phrase *homousion toi patri* for the council's acceptance, we should scarcely be surprised at the news--it would be so perfectly in keeping with the rest of the history.

Never, so far, had this doctrine of the role of the pope been set forth, to a council itself, so completely and so explicitly, by the pope himself as in the letter of Pope Agatho. It is thereby a main landmark in the history of the development of the General Council, and since (from lack of translations) this vital documentary source is all but unknown, outside ecclesiastical circles, I make no apology for the extensive quotations that follow.[27]

In the first place, to show exactly how the letter of Agatho was received, here are quotations from letters of the council of 680, and of the emperor Constantine IV. There is, first, the letter of the bishops to the emperor, written at the close of the council, congratulating him on the victory of the true faith. In this victory the pope's action was all-important, they proceed to explain: "Assenting to the letter of our most blessed father, and most high pope, Agatho ... we have followed his teaching, and he the Apostolic and Patristic tradition, and we have found nothing that was not consonant with what they have laid down.... Who has ever beheld such wondrous things? The spiritual lists were arrayed, and the champion of the false teaching was disarmed beforehand, [i.e., by the pope's letter], and he knew not that he would not obtain the crown of victory, but be stripped of the sacerdotal crown. But with us fought the Prince of the Apostles, for to assist us we had his imitator and the successor to his chair, who exhibited to us the mystery of theology in his letter. The ancient city of Rome proffered to you a divinely written confession and caused the daylight of dogmas to rise by the Western parchment.[23] And the ink shone, and through Agatho it was Peter who was speaking." [29]

The bishops also wrote to the pope. Their letter makes clear what these Easterns believed his place in the universal church to be: “The greatest diseases demand the greatest remedies, as you know, most blessed one. Wherefore, Christ, our true God, has revealed your Holiness as a wise physician, mightily driving away the disease of heresy by the medicine of orthodoxy, and bestowing health on the members of the Church. We therefore leave to you what is to be done,[30] since you occupy the first see of the universal Church, and stand on the firm rock of the faith, after we have dwelt with pleasure upon the writings of the true confession sent from your fatherly blessedness to the most pious emperor, which also we recognize as pronounced by the chiefest head of the Apostles, and by which we have put to flight the dangerous opinion of the heresy which lately arose....”[31]

The same ideas about the unique role of the Papacy in the Church, with regard to disputes concerning doctrine, are found in the edict by which the emperor published to all his people the findings of the council: “These are the teachings of the voices of the Gospels and Apostles, these the doctrines of the holy Synods, and of the elect and patristic tongues; these have been preserved untainted by Peter, the rock of the faith, the head of the Apostles; in this faith we live and reign....”[32] And again the emperor says, in his letter to the pope,[33] describing the events of the council: “We ordered the letter of Pope Agatho ... to our majesty ... to be read in the hearing of all ... we perceived in it the word of the true confession [i.e., of Peter] unaltered. And with the eyes of our understanding we saw it as if it were the very ruler of the Apostolic choir, the first chair, Peter himself, declaring the mystery of the whole dispensation, and addressing Christ by this letter: ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God’; for his holy letter described in word for us the whole Christ. We all received it willingly and sincerely, and embraced it, as though the letter were Peter himself ... Glory be to God, who does wondrous things, Who has kept safe the faith among you unharmed. For how should He not do so [with regard to] that rock on which He founded His church, and prophesied that the gates of hell, all the ambushes of heretics, should not prevail against it?

From it, as from the vault of heaven, the word of the true confession flashed forth, and ... brought warmth to frozen orthodoxy.”

And in his letter to the 125 western bishops, the emperor wrote, “We admired the writing of Agatho as the voice of St. Peter, for nobody disagreed save one.”

And now, what was the message of Pope Agatho[34] which aroused so much enthusiasm in the churches of the East? As what did the pope propose himself to them? and take for granted that he would be listened to?

Let it first be recalled that Agatho is writing not to Constantine IV proposing a General Council to celebrate union and peace, but to Constantine IV proposing a conference on the present situation, a discussion of differences with a view to peace. Agatho’s letter is, in itself, a reply to this invitation of the emperor. His first business is to explain the long delay in answering and to accredit those whom he has sent as his representatives. In doing this, Agatho tells the emperor that the function of his legates is to explain what the Roman Church teaches. They do not come as learned theologians, but as bringing testimony of what is believed, charged to state “the tradition of this Apostolic See, as it has been taught by our apostolic predecessors.” And they have been commanded not to presume to add or take away or change anything. It is in a plain statement, a kind of creed, that the pope sets out the tradition, “We believe one, holy, undivided Trinity”, and so forth. At the appropriate point he sets down as part of the belief the doctrine of the two wills and the two “operations,” and then proceeds to say: “This is the true and undefiled profession of the Christian religion, which no human cleverness invented, but which the Holy Ghost taught by the Prince of the Apostles. This is the firm and irreprehensible doctrine of the apostles....

“And therefore, I beseech you, deign to stretch forth the right hand of your clemency to the apostolic doctrine which Peter the Apostle has handed down, that it be proclaimed more loudly than by a trumpet in the whole world: because Peter’s true confession was revealed from heaven by the Father, and for it Peter was pronounced blessed by the Lord of all[35];

and he received also, from the Redeemer of us all, by a threefold commendation, the spiritual sheep of the Church that he might feed them. Resting on his protection, this Apostolic Church of his has never turned aside from the way of truth to any part of error, and her authority has always been faithfully followed and embraced as that of the Prince of the Apostles, by the whole Catholic Church and all Councils, and by all the venerable Fathers who embraced her doctrine, by which they have shone as most approved lights of the Church of Christ, and has been venerated and followed by all orthodox doctors, while the heretics have attacked it [i.e., the authority of Peter's Apostolic Church] with false accusations and hatred. This is the living tradition of the apostles of Christ, which His Church holds everywhere, which is to be loved and cherished above all things and faithfully preached....

“This is the rule of the true faith, which in prosperity and adversity this spiritual Mother of your most serene Empire, the Apostolic Church of Christ, has ever held, and defends; and she, by the grace of Almighty God, will be proved never to have wandered from the path of the apostolic tradition, nor to have succumbed to the novelties of heretics; but even as, in the beginning of the Christian faith, she received it from her founders, the princes of the apostles of Christ, so she remains unspotted to the end, according to the divine promise of our Lord and Saviour Himself, which He spake to the prince of His disciples in the holy Gospels: ‘Peter, Peter,’ saith He, ‘behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat; but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not, and thou being once converted, strengthen thy brethren.’[36] Let your clemency therefore consider that the Lord and Saviour of all, to whom faith belongs, who promised that the faith of Peter should not fail, admonished him to strengthen his brethren; and it is known to all men that the apostolic pontiffs, the predecessors of my littleness, have always done this with confidence.

“Woe is me, if I cover the truth in silence, when I am bidden ... to instruct the Christian folk therewith.... Wherefore also my predecessors, of apostolic memory, being furnished with the teachings of the Lord, never neglected to exhort the prelates of the Church of Constantinople, who tried

to introduce heretical novelties into the immaculate Church of Christ, and to warn them with entreaties to desist from the heretical error of teaching falsehood at least by their silence.

“Consequently, the holy Church of God, the Mother of your most Christian Empire, must be freed from the errors of teachers like these, and in order to please God and save their souls, the whole number of prelates and priests, and clergy and people must confess with us the formula of truth and Apostolic tradition, the evangelical and Apostolic rule of faith, which is founded upon the firm rock of blessed Peter, the Prince of the Apostles, which by his favour remains free from all error.”

The pope concludes by declaring that “if the prelate of the Church of Constantinople shall elect to hold with us, and to preach this irreprehensible rule of the Apostolic teaching of the Holy Scriptures, of the venerable Synods, of the spiritual Fathers, according to their evangelical interpretations, by which the formula of the truth has been shown to us through the revelation of the Holy Ghost,” then there will indeed be peace. But if he should refuse, “let him know that of such contempt he will have to make satisfaction to the divine judgment of Christ before the Judge of all, who is in heaven, to whom we ourselves shall give an account, when He shall come to judgment, for the ministry we have received.”

NOTES

1. I.e., that there is only one “action” or “operation” in Him.
2. “If this is really Catholicism,” Duchesne represents the Monophysites as saying in their hearts, “Chalcedon and Leo will soon be going the way of the Three Chapters.” *L’Eglise au VI^{me} Siecle*, p. 401.
3. *Ibid.*, 268-69.
4. “St. Denis” being the sixth century theologian who passed (and for many centuries to come) as St. Paul’s disciple, Denis the Areopagite, Acts 17:34.
5. Tixeront, III, 163 who gives the passage.

6. This synodal letter runs to 24 folio columns, Mansi, XI, 461-509, Migne, P.G., vol. 87, pt. 3, 3148-3200.

7. Abbot John Chapman, *The Condemnation of Pope Hononus*, 15.

8. *Satis provide circumspecteque fraternitatem vestram scripsisse*. The letter is printed, in part, in Denzinger, nos. 1057-64.

9. Chapman, 17.

10. Kirch, no. 1084.

11. *Ibid.*, no. 1087, letter to the bishops of Spain.

12. *Ibid.*, no. 1085, letter to the emperor, Constantine IV.

13. These two letters have not survived.

14. The text is in Mansi, X, 992-97. Kirch, nos. 1070-73, publishes extracts from it.

15. This letter of John IV did not reach Constantinople until the summer of 642. The emperor to whom it was addressed had been then dead a year or so. When the official correspondence of popes and emperors could suffer such delays, misunderstanding was likely to be a permanent factor of life, and the action of any central authority ineffective. Another fact to be borne in mind is the short reign of the average pope, in these sixth and seventh centuries. In the 182 years from 526 to 708, there were 34 popes. Eight of these had "long" reigns, the other 26 averaged three years each.

16. John had died, October 12, 642. Theodore was consecrated November 24 following, without awaiting any imperial approval of his election. He was a Greek, born in Jerusalem. Theodore (642-49) is one of the "long-reigned" popes of the period.

17. This great saint, one day to pay with his life for his defence of true doctrine, had many years before this been a secretary of the emperor Heraclius. He was personally acquainted with the two chiefs, Sergius and Pyrrhus, and had been keenly critical of the "one operation" theory since its first appearance. The sack of his monastery, in the Persian invasion, had driven him to Africa, and here he met Sophronius, his senior by a

good forty years perhaps. For his high place as a theological writer, cf. Tixeront, III, 188-92 (180-84). It was the publication of the *Ecthesis* that brought Maximus into open opposition.

18. Denzinger, nos. 254-74 for the text. Chapman, as quoted, gives a good general account of the pope's speeches at the council.

19. Denzinger, no. 271.

20. Both the Catholics and the Orthodox keep his feast on the same date, November 12.

21. One of these was St. Wilfrid, bishop of York.

22. For the texts, the letter of Agatho to Constantine IV, Mansi, XI, 234 - 86, the profession of faith of the 125 bishops, *ibid.*, 286-315.

23. Something more must be said of Agatho's letter later.

24. As were the letters of Agatho and the western bishops which the legates had brought.

25. Theandric.

26. Denzinger (nos. 289[^]93) prints a six-page extract from the decree, the Greek text and the Latin. It is from this, no. 291, that my quotation is taken.

27. The translation is taken from Chapman, *op. cit.*, whose language I have occasionally simplified.

28. The profession of faith, signed by Agatho and the 125 bishops of the west.

29. Chapman, 100-1.

30. With Macarius and other heretics left to the pope's discretion.

31. *Ibid.*, 102.

32. *Ibid.*, 104.

33. To Leo II, successor to Agatho, who died before the council ended. The translation is Chapman, 105-6.

34. For the text see Mansi, XI, 286-315; the extracts here are Chapman, 77- 82.

35. He said to them, "But whom do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God." Then Jesus answered and said, "Blessed art thou, Simon Bar-Jona, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to thee, but my Father in heaven." Matt. 16:15-17.

36. Luke 22:31.