

Third Council of Constantinople

(SIXTH GENERAL COUNCIL)

The Sixth General Council was summoned in 678 by Emperor Constantine Pogonatus, with a view of restoring between East and West the religious harmony that had been troubled by the Monothelistic controversies, and particularly by the violence of his predecessor Constans II, whose imperial edict, known as the “Typus” (648-49) was a practical suppression of the orthodox truth. Owing to the desire of Pope Agatho to obtain the adhesion of his Western brethren, the papal legates did not arrive at Constantinople until late in 680. The council, attended in the beginning by 100 bishops, later by 174, was opened 7 Nov., 680, in a domed hall (trullus) of the imperial palace and was presided over by the (three) papal legates who brought to the council a long dogmatic letter of Pope Agatho and another of similar import from a Roman synod held in the spring of 680. They were read in the second session. Both letters, the pope’s in particular, insist on the faith of the Apostolic See as the living and stainless tradition of the Apostles of Christ, assured by the promises of Christ, witnessed by all the popes in their capacity of successors to the Petrine privilege of confirming the brethren, and therefore finally authoritative for the Universal Church.

The greater part of the eighteen sessions was devoted to an examination of the Scriptural and patristic passages bearing on the question of one or two wills, one or two operations, in Christ. George, Patriarch of Constantinople, soon yielded to the evidence of the orthodox teaching concerning the two wills and two operations in Christ, but Macarius of Antioch, “almost the only certain representative of Monothelism since the nine propositions of Cyrus of Alexandria” (Chapman), resisted to the end, and was finally anathematized and deposed for “not consenting to the tenor of the orthodox letters sent by Agatho the most holy pope of Rome”, i.e., that in each of the two natures (human and Divine) of Christ there is a perfect operation and a perfect will, against which the Monothelites had

taught that there was but one operation and one will (*mia energieia theandrike*) quite in consonance with the Monophysite confusion of the two natures in Christ. In the thirteenth session (28 March, 681) after anathematizing the chief Monothelitic heretics mentioned in the aforesaid letter of Pope Agatho, i.e. Sergius of Constantinople, Cyrus of Alexandria, Pyrrhus, Paul, and Peter of Constantinople, and Theodore of Pharan, the council added: "And in addition to these we decide that Honorius also, who was Pope of Elder 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 dogmas." A similar condemnation of Pope Honorius occurs in the dogmatic decree of the final session (16 Sept., 681), which was signed by the legates and the emperor. Reference is here made to the famous letter of Honorius to Sergius of Constantinople about 634, around which has arisen (especially before and during the Vatican Council) so large a controversial literature. It had been invoked three times in previous sessions of the council in question by the stubborn Monothelite Macarius of Antioch, and had been publicly read in the twelfth session together with the letter of Sergius to which it replied. On that occasion a second letter of Honorius to Sergius was also read, of which only a fragment has survived. (For the question of this pope's orthodoxy, see HONORIUS I; INFALLIBILITY; MONOTHELITES.)

There has been in the past, owing to Gallicanism and the opponents of papal infallibility, much controversy concerning the proper sense of this council's condemnation of Pope Honorius, the theory (Baronius, Damberger) of a falsification of the Acts being now quite abandoned (Hefele, III, 299-313). Some have maintained, with Pennacchi, that he was indeed condemned as a heretic, but that the Oriental bishops of the council misunderstood the thoroughly orthodox (and dogmatic) letter of Honorius; others, with Hefele, that the council condemned the heretically sounding expressions of the pope (though his doctrine was really

orthodox); others finally, with Chapman (see below), that he was condemned

because he did not, as he should have done, declare authoritatively the Petrine tradition of the Roman Church. To that tradition he had made no appeal but had merely approved and enlarged upon the half-hearted compromise of Sergius...Neither the pope nor the council consider that Honorius had compromised the purity of the Roman tradition, for he had never claimed to represent it. Therefore, just as today we judge the letters of Pope Honorius by the Vatican definition and deny them to be ex cathedra, because they do not define any doctrine and impose it upon the whole Church, so the Christians of the seventh century judged the same letters by the custom of their day, and saw that they did not claim what papal letters were wont to claim, viz., to speak with the mouth of Peter in the name of Roman tradition. (Chapman)

The letter of the council to Pope Leo, asking, after the traditional manner, for confirmation of its Acts, while including again the name of Honorius among the condemned Monothelites, lay a remarkable stress on the magisterial office of the Roman Church, as, in general, the documents of the Sixth General Council favour strongly the inerrancy of the See of Peter. "The Council", says Dom Chapman, "accepts the letter in which the Pope defined the faith. It deposes those who refused to accept it. It asks [the pope] to confirm its decisions. The Bishops and Emperor declare that they have seen the letter to contain the doctrine of the Fathers. Agatho speaks with the voice of Peter himself; from Rome the law had gone forth as out of Sion; Peter had kept the faith unaltered." Pope Agatho died during the Council and was succeeded by Leo II, who confirmed (683) the decrees against Monothelism, and expressed himself even more harshly than the council towards the memory of Honorius (Hefele, Chapman), though he laid stress chiefly on the neglect of that pope to set forth the traditional teaching of the Apostolic See, whose spotless faith he

treasonably tried to overthrow (or, as the Greek may be translated, permitted to be overthrown).

From the Catholic Encyclopedia