

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

### **CHAPTER 7. The Second General Council of Nicaea, 787**

The seventh General Council, the Second Council of Nicaea, was summoned in order to settle a controversy which “to a great extent was a domestic controversy of the church of Constantinople and its immediate dependencies.”[1] And the subject of this controversy was a matter “in which the peculiar character of all the nations concerned played a large part.”[2] It was a controversy about the lawfulness of venerating holy images and relics, and about prayer to the saints. Why these controversies arose, towards the year 725, historians still can only make guesses, as they can also only guess what it was that led the emperor, Leo III (717- 40), to lead the anti-image party, so to call it.[3]

Leo III was one of the great emperors, a ruler under whose government “the empire not only ceased to decline, but even began to regain much of its early vigour.”[4] Yet at the time he was proclaimed emperor, the empire was threatened with immediate ruin. “Six emperors had been dethroned within the space of twenty-one years. Four perished by the hand of the public executioner, one died in obscurity, after being deprived of sight, and the other was only allowed to end his days peacefully in a monastery, because Leo felt the imperial sceptre firmly fixed in his own grasp. Every army assembled to encounter the Saracens had broken out into rebellion. The Bulgarians and Slavonians wasted Europe up to the walls of Constantinople; the Saracens ravaged the whole of Asia Minor to the shores of the Bosphorus.”[5]

The new emperor’s first task was to save his capital. He was crowned on March 25, 717, and just four months later the siege of Constantinople began; huge armies of Mohammedans on the land side, and a vast fleet in the sea of Marmora and the Black Sea. The siege lasted just a year. In the end, it was the besiegers who starved, and little by little their fleet was destroyed. For the next twenty years, the empire had nothing to fear from

the Saracens, and the prestige of the great defence was perhaps Leo's main resource in his unexpected career as a religious reformer.

"Unexpected" would seem to be accurate. For while we can fix the date when the emperor first published his views on these religious practices, the years 726 and 727, none can say whence these ideas came to him. But one of the historians best versed in the story gives him credit for a sincere desire to purify religion from an ever increasing superstition.[6] Images--paintings, that is, mosaics, reliefs, statues--are in part the decorative furniture of a church; they are reminders of holy personages now no longer in this world, or of past incidents of religious history, and they are a means by which the devout can pay honour to Christ and the saints, honouring these by honouring their images; by using precious woods, ivories, gold, and silver, out of which to make the image; by clothing it in costly silks, ornamenting the figure with jewels and so forth; most of all by a certain ceremonious use of the image, burning lights in front of it, offering incense to it, and especially by kneeling before the image when one is praying to the personage it represents. According to the personal taste or temperament of the believer, these practices can vary indefinitely from what seems mere gesture to what, no less certainly, can seem the very extravagance of passion. But, even at the very extreme, devotion to the image for the sake of the saint represented is, of course, a different kind of thing altogether from the act of the ancient heathen who thought the image itself a god, itself actually able to reward the devotee or work him harm, and who addressed his prayer to the image itself for the image's own sake--the image thus being, in his case, what we call an idol.

What exactly the mentality was that underlay Leo III's anti-image policy we shall probably never know. That he was a great reorganiser of the whole machinery of the state is certain. Inevitably, in this particular state, the Byzantine Empire, this meant a deep interest in the welfare of religion. Was it as part of the very necessary regeneration of the state that the question of the religious exercises of the ordinary man came under the

emperor's notice? somewhat as (just one thousand years later) they seem to have fascinated another emperor, Joseph II?

The historians of the religious arts will tell us that round about the time when Leo III grew up, religious art was passing from a state where the pictures were repetitions of "typical" figures (saints in hieratic postures, symbolised according to a rigid convention), to a very different condition of things, where the pictures were more like those of ordinary human beings. They speak of a new, naive, crude realism, especially in the pictures of the martyrs, where the artist's imagination revelled in the delineation of horrific tortures. And once the taste for pictures of the saints in action grew, there began to appear, as well as their authentic deeds, pictures of what they had never done except in pious fairy tales-- miracles and other wonders that had, in fact, never taken place at all; and this even in the pictures of the Blessed Virgin and of her Divine Son. In other words, legend was being given the same credence as truth--which is one of the most direct routes, of course, to superstition. There seems to be no doubt of these developments, particularly in the matter of icons properly so called--that is, the pictures, in metal, wood, ivory, or painted, made for private devotion. We read of icons alleged to have worked miracles, and held especially sacred or valuable because of this reputation, and of others not made by human hands, miraculously conveyed to this earth. And all this with little or no supervision from the authorities in the church. In a word, grave abuses, long tolerated.

We do hear of bishops who protested against these developments--it was with three bishops of sees in Asia Minor[7] that the movement began which Leo III was to take up. But we have not anything like sufficient detail about episcopal action in general to judge the bishops as a whole. Later, the emperors--Leo's son and successor, Constantine V, at least -- were to take up the position that image-veneration is simple idolatry. But was this the original position? Or was it something like this: "Too many people pay reverence to images in such a way as to make it seem that they

are actually idolaters”? Or did anyone assert: “Too many people have become idolaters through the custom of venerating images”? Even today, strange to say, one occasionally finds educated men, whom the Catholic use of images repels, hard to convince that Catholics do not believe the actual wood or plaster statue is a being capable of doing what is asked. I have never had reason to think these non-Catholic friends of mine thought myself an idolater, but every time they see a seemingly less educated Catholic (whom they presume, of course, to be a less intelligent being than themselves) kneeling in prayer before a statue, or lighting a candle to burn before it, their suspicion is aroused that here is idolatry. Given the fact of the never ceasing war of the Church on superstition in all its forms, the unanimous violence of theologians and preachers, at all times, against even the quasi-superstitions of social life,[8] the presumption is dead against the accusation. The American Catholic can be just as startled as his non-Catholic friend, at the spectacles he sometimes sees in the churches of latitudes far to the south, at the way statues are dressed, bedizened with jewellery, paraded around and apparently treated, at times, as though they were the central feature of religion. A little experience shows that this is but an instance of that general truth upon which Montaigne so loved to dwell: “It is the common weakness, not of the lower classes only but of all mankind almost, to form their judgments and their plans according to the way of life where they were born.”[9] Who will ever persuade the image-loving Italian or Spaniard that the teen-age maidens of the United States do not suffer from the freedom with which their parents allow them to run around with the boys of their choice?

The point where the Iconoclasts roused against themselves the general feeling of the Church was not that they said, “There is too much of this image devotion in the religious life of the day,” or “This if not checked will lead to superstition,”[10] but the openly expressed principle of the whole campaign: “Image devotion is idolatry.” And, at a later stage in the controversy, they protested that all prayer to the saints is superstitious and sinful.

Leo III's first "iconoclastic" act of which we have certain knowledge was the removal of the image of Christ from over the principal gate of the palace at Constantinople. This caused a riot and there were some deaths, and arrests, and punishments. Next there were mutinies in the armed forces as the orders went round that images were to be destroyed. The emperor endeavoured to win over the patriarch, Germanos, to approve the new policy, and he also wrote to the pope, Gregory II. These letters are lost, but we do possess the pope's replies, and we can learn that the correspondence was an interchange of doctrinal treatises, the pope explaining to the emperor that the Old Testament prohibition was about idol worship, and explaining how idols and the Catholic images are different kinds of things. The emperor's threat that unless the pope submitted he would be deposed had no effect except to cause a revolt in the Italian provinces, and then, February 11, 731, the pope died.

Gregory II died without knowing that on January 17 the emperor had called together his senators and chief officers of state and the patriarch to put before them an imperial declaration that whoever refused to destroy any images he possessed, or whoever paid honour to images, was a rebel against the state. The patriarch refused to put his name to the declaration. He took off his badge of office and went away, not to the official palace he had occupied for so long, but to the family home. The emperor appointed one of his officials to succeed him, who signed willingly; the declaration (thus fortified with the approval of the Church) was published, and the first persecution began.

It was the newly elected Gregory III[11] who received the new patriarch's demand for recognition as lawful bishop of Constantinople in a profession of faith, made up, in part, of the edict or manifesto he had just signed. This pope, like the emperor, was a Syrian by birth. He replied by refusing the recognition asked for, and threatened the petitioner that unless he returned to orthodox ways he would be cast out of the priesthood. Gregory III was a man of great determination, and his "reaction" to the emperor's violence

was to call a council that sat at Rome from November 1 to the end of the year--very much as Martin I had acted in 649. As many as ninety- three bishops attended. The pope published a sentence of excommunication against all who, “despising the ancient practice of the church,” set themselves against the veneration of images, destroyed or profaned them. The emperor, on receipt of this news, prepared an expedition to punish the Italian bishops and to arrest the pope. But the fleet was wrecked by storms. Only the remnant of it reached Sicily. All that Leo could do was to confiscate the vast papal domains in Sicily, upon whose revenues the popes had depended for their administration of Rome and for their traditional care of the poor.

Leo III died in June 740. His son, who succeeded as Constantine V, was to reign for thirty-five years, and to show himself as capable as his father had been. Such a succession--nearly sixty years of continuous, good, strong government--was without precedent. The great event of the new reign, from the point of view of religion, was the council called by Constantine in 753, for the purpose of solemnly condemning the cult of images. For this emperor was much more of an Iconoclast than Leo III. In a treatise which he wrote, and circulated to the bishops on the eve of the council, he explained that all images of Christ were heretical, since they must portray Him as merely human, i.e., as though He had but one nature. At the same time that he thus, indirectly, seemed to reprobate the ancient Monophysite heresy, he used its terminology to explain himself; and as well as this, by refusing to the Blessed Virgin the name of Theotokos, by asserting her to be no more than Christotokos, he aligned himself with the Nestorians. It was at the first real breathing space of his reign--which had begun with a civil war, in which the rebels held Constantinople--that Constantine V held this council.

It met in the emperor’s palace called Hieria, near Chalcedon, February 10, 753, and it sat for as long as seven months, with 338 bishops attending.

So far as numbers went, this was one of the greatest of all the councils so far.

The pope was not invited to it; the see of Constantinople was vacant; Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem were now well and truly sees in partibus infidelium. The president was that archbishop of Ephesus who, nearly thirty years before, had been one of the first promoters of iconoclasm. What took up the time of so many bishops for so many months was not the proposal to forbid the veneration of images. Here all were agreed. But the bishops resisted the emperor steadfastly when he proposed to go back on the earlier, acknowledged General Councils. They refused to endorse his heresies about the nature of Christ, the Theotokos, and her role of intercessor for mankind, the practice of prayer to the saints, the veneration due to their relics. So that the final summing up of the council does no more than speak of the images as being idolatrous and heretical, a temptation to the faith that originated with the devil. No one is to possess or venerate an image, even in the secrecy of his home. All who disobey are to be excommunicated, and also to be punished by the law of the emperor, for their disobedience is also a crime against the state.

It is now that the real persecution began. The names of several illustrious martyrs have survived, some of them beheaded, others flogged till they died. Especially did the emperor rage against the monks, against whom as a class he organised a campaign of slander, whose dress and celibacy he ridiculed in pageantry and shows. At one moment a law enacted that all the emperor's subjects should swear never again to venerate an image, and the first to take this oath was the patriarch of Constantinople, publicly, holding up the relic of the true Cross, in the pulpit of St. Sophia. The minority who refused suffered cruelly. And now the emperor went beyond his council of 753. All prayer to the saints was forbidden, and all veneration of their relics. These were to be destroyed. From the great basilica at Chalcedon the body of the martyr to honour whom it was built,

St. Euphemia, was thrown into the sea. And so, the reign of terror continued until Constantine V died, the feast of Holy Cross, 775.

His son, Leo IV, lasted only five years, and then, as regent for the child Constantine VI, Leo's widow, Irene, ruled. She was a devout Catholic; that is to say, she had always been opposed to the whole iconoclastic business; and once the winter was over (Leo IV died in September, 780) a Byzantine embassy once more appeared in Italy. It was bound for the court of Charlemagne, to negotiate a marriage for the young emperor. And it was an augury of coming recovery, the first sign of the future seventh General Council of 787.

In May 784, the patriarch Paul of Constantinople, without a word even to the sovereign, suddenly went into retirement. Death was coming, he explained, and he must repent, and make reparation for his bad oath to work for the destruction of the cult of images. To the empress, he said, further, that the church of Constantinople was in schism, and that the only remedy for the evil was a General Council. Nothing but the unsettled state of the empire after her husband's death had delayed Irene's plans to reverse the policy of the last sixty years, and now she acted with decision. On August 29 the empress wrote to the pope (Adrian I, 772-95) that she had decided to summon a General Council and, inviting him to take part in it, she said, "It is God Himself, wishing to lead us to the truth, Who asks you to come in person, in order to confirm the ancient tradition about the veneration of images." [12] If Adrian could not come himself would he send worthy men to represent him?

Shortly after the despatch of this letter the patriarch Paul died (September 784). To fill the vacancy the empress chose a layman, one of the highest officers of the state, Tarasios. To a great meeting of bishops and state officials, he made a speech explaining exactly the present position in law and fact of the see of Constantinople and the hundreds of sees dependent on it. Ever since the time of Pope Gregory III, fifty-three years before, all these had been cut off from the universal church. This state of things could



not be borne any longer. A General Council was the only way out of the complex difficulty. If the assembly agreed and would support him, Tarasios would accept the empress' nomination and consent to be patriarch. There were some objections and a discussion, but in the end the meeting pledged its support. On Christmas Day, Tarasios was consecrated.

His first act was to send to the pope the official notice of his election, which, as was the usual form, took the shape of a detailed profession of faith. Tarasios also frankly explained how he came to acquiesce in the unusual (not to say irregular) business that he, a layman, had been chosen to be the new bishop. With this so-called synodical letter, there went the official announcement of the election and consecration from the empress.

It was many months before these letters reached the distant pope. His replies are dated October 29, 785. Adrian was ready, he said, to be represented at the council, if such a council was the only way to bring about the restoration of the images. But, even so, on conditions: the coming council was to anathematize the gathering at the Hieria of 753, and this in the presence of the papal legates,[13] the empress was to guarantee full freedom of action to the council, and that the legates would be allowed to return to Rome. Adrian's conditions were accepted and so, from the outset, by virtue of this initiatory letter, the pope's position vis-a-vis the council is that of Agatho in 680 and of St. Leo in 451.

The summonses for the council--ordered to meet at Constantinople--went out in the summer of 786, and on August 1 the bishops assembled in the basilica of the Holy Apostles. But the proceedings had scarcely begun when the church was invaded by a regiment of soldiers, and despite the presence of the empress and her son, Constantine VI, the bishops were put out of the church. The army was, notoriously, one of the chief strongholds of the Iconoclasts--loyalty to the religious peculiarities of the great soldier-emperors, Leo III and Constantine V, was a thing seriously to be reckoned with. Irene resigned herself, sent the bishops home to their sees,

and turned to the task of securing for the garrison of the capital troops on whom she could rely.

This took time, and it was May 787 before the call to the council was again issued. This time the bishops were not convoked to the capital, but to Nicaea, fifty miles away, and separated from the turbulent city by the waters of the Bosphorus. There, on September 24, with memories no doubt of the other council held there centuries before,[14] the seventh General Council held its first session, with something like three hundred bishops in attendance.

The council opened with an address by Tarasios. Then the letter of the empress was read, guaranteeing freedom of speech to all, and ordering that the pope's letter to her should be read. The remainder of the session was taken up with the question of reconciling the handful of iconoclastic bishops who appeared--and a discussion whether they should then be allowed a place in the council. It was made a condition sine qua non that each should renounce and anathematize the council of 753.

At the second session (September 26) the pope's letter was read. It began with the statement of the powers divinely given to St. Peter to bind and to loose, and that this power was the inheritance of his successors. Now Peter's successors had never wavered, in this matter of the devotion to images, and with regard to the controversy of the last sixty years, the pope recalled all that had been done since the reign of Gregory II in protest against the innovations, and what the popes had done to defend this pious practice from the charge of idolatry. Adrian cited such well-known Biblical facts as the figures of the cherubim in the Holy of Holies, and the brazen serpent. He quoted the long line of authority for the practices as it is found in the Greek Fathers of the Church. And then he passed on to matters of a different kind, where the late emperors had grievously wronged the Roman See, matters where he demanded that injustices should be righted. This part of the pope's letter was not read out to the council. Were the legates aware of the omission? It is hardly likely. The

matter of complaint was Leo III's confiscation of the papal properties in Sicily, and, what mattered still more, his adding to the jurisdiction of the see of Constantinople the sees of Calabria[15] and Sicily. Adrian also reproved the elevation of a layman – Tarasios -- to the patriarchal see.

When the letter was read, the legates rose and demanded that the patriarch declare his acceptance of the doctrine as there stated. Tarasios did this, and the legates next asked that each bishop should rise and personally make the same declaration. This also was done, and the monks present also professed this as their faith.

It was after this act of submissive faith that the council, in its fourth and fifth sessions (October 1 and 4), went into the theological case for the practice of venerating images and praying to the saints. For two days, long extracts were read from Scripture and the Fathers and explained and commented by various speakers, and stories were told of marvellous happenings in one diocese after another that proved the duty of honouring the saints through their images. The writers who had taught otherwise were condemned, among them such leading Monophysites of bygone years as Severus of Antioch and Philoxene of Mabboug. The fifth session closed with the solemn enthronement of an image, in the church where the council was held; this at the proposition of the legates.

Two days later, at the sixth session, the prescribed condemnation of the council of 753 took place. The decree of that assembly was read out, and after each clause there was read a lengthy refutation of what it stated, a reprobation worded, as to the bishops of 753, in language too coarse to reproduce. It is more interesting that one reason given for denying that council's claim to be oecumenical was that the pope was not represented at it; and it was boldly stated that it was just not possible that the Church of Christ should ever fall away into idolatry.

At the seventh session the final dogmatic profession of the council was drawn up. It followed the now traditional fashion of a declaration of faith, beginning with the creed of Nicaea and anathematizing all past heretics--Pope Honorius among them, but not (curiously) the Three Chapters. Coming to the crucial point, "We define," the decree states, "that, as with the priceless, life-giving cross,[16] so with the venerable and holy images, they may be set up in their various forms in the churches, on the sacred vessels and vestments, on the walls; likewise in private houses, and along the wayside.... The more often we look upon them, the more vividly are our minds turned to the memory of those whom they represent ... to give to them, the images, an adoration of honour, but not, however, the true latria, which, as our faith teaches, is to be given only to the divine nature ... so that, like the holy cross, the gospels, and the relics of the saints, to these images offerings of incense and lights may be made, as was the pious custom of our ancestors. For the honour rendered to the image passes to that which the image represents, and whoever adores[17] an image adores the person it depicts. For in this way, is the teaching of the holy Fathers strengthened, that is to say, the tradition of the holy catholic church, receiving the gospel, from one end of the world to the other.... Those, therefore, who dare to think or to teach otherwise, or, as the wicked heretics do, to spurn these traditions of the church ... if they are priests or bishops, let them be deposed; if monks or laymen, let them be excommunicated." [18] And the decree ends with words of praise for the two bishops who had been leading opponents of the heresy, Germanos of Constantinople and George of Cyprus, and for the great theologian whose writings had been the heart of the resistance, John Mansour, John of Damascus, our St. John Damascene.

With regard to the words here italicised in the decree, it may be noted that *Honorariam adorationem* is the Latin translation given of the original Greek *timetiken proskynesisin*, where the second word, a noun, means literally "a paying obeisance to," "a prostrating oneself before"--a gesture of great respect, obviously; the degree, or kind, of respect intended being

something in the mind of the doer, primarily; and the significance, as it is done, a thing known only to himself. A Christian in front of an image, and an idolater in front of an idol, each gives the same salute--with a wholly different meaning in each case. The newly appointed Anglican bishop (in England), clad in his robes, kneels before Queen Elizabeth II, his hands joined--he is not adoring her, nor praying to her, but taking an oath of allegiance. It is folly to judge by appearance what we have never experienced personally, or have studied in the declarations of those who have had the experience. Which said, we may be allowed to regret that, from so early a time, the one Latin word *adoratio* was used officially to mean acts wholly.

As to *latria*: the Latin does not here translate, but takes over bodily the actual Greek word, whose original meaning "hired service, servitude," came to be restricted to the special meaning "the service of the gods," and so to "worship," the act by which we publicly recognise that God is the creator and sovereign lord of all that is--the uniqueness of His being, and of the dependence of all upon Him. As a technical term in theology, *latria* denotes the reverence especial to God, reserved to God--what the English word "worship" nowadays usually means and only means; although, a survival of other ages, the mayor of an English town is still "Your worship"; the bridegroom in the marriage service still says to the bride, "With my body I thee worship"; and in recent English translations of papal documents, the pope's address to the bishops, *Venerabiles fratres* has been rendered "Worshipful brethren." But neither mayors, nor brides, nor bishops are therefore regarded as divine!

In addition to this definition of faith, the council also enacted twenty-two disciplinary canons. They are of a routine character, reminders to the bishops and clergy of existing laws; a reminder to the modern reader that the council marks the beginning of the restoration of order, after sixty years of persecution and a regime of emergencies.[19]

The fathers of this General Council of 787 did not ask the pope to confirm its decrees, nor did the pope ever do so of his own initiative. Indeed, seven years later Adrian took great pains to explain to Charlemagne that he had not done so, and why. Here we are brought up against another of those strange sequels that would suggest that not every one of these twenty councils was, at the time it took place, regarded by all concerned as what we understand as a General Council.

But first of all, the appearance of the great name of Charlemagne suggests the usefulness of recalling to the reader the revolutionary changes in the “political” state of Italy and France which the hundred years had witnessed that separated the council against the Iconoclasts from the council against the Monothelites. These changes had a great influence upon the relations of the popes with the emperors at Constantinople in the eighth century (715- 95); and they were to influence powerfully these same relations for the hundred years that followed, the century in which the eighth General Council (869-70) took place, the council conventionally regarded as marking the beginning of the breakaway of Constantinople from Rome that still endures.

Briefly, within a matter of months after the death of Justinian (565), the emperor who at such a cost had restored the imperial authority in Italy, there came into that much ravaged land, from the north, the last and least civilised of all its invaders, the Arian Lombards (568). Throughout the century of the Monothelite troubles, of Pope Honorius and St. Martin I, there was constant petty warfare between the various Lombard chiefs and the imperial officials at Naples and Ravenna--this last being the central city of the new Byzantine-governed Italy. Very slowly, but very surely, in the course of 150 years the invaders established themselves, and in that time they gradually gave up their heresy and became Catholics. By the time of Pope Gregory II (715-31), whom we have seen threatened with deposition by the Iconoclast emperor Leo III, the real bulwark of the empire in Italy was no longer the exarch at Ravenna and his little army,

but the prestige of the pope as the heir of St. Peter. Time and time again, armed only with this, the popes of the eighth century persuaded the Lombards to retreat from new conquests--this in the time of the persecuting Iconoclasts, Leo III and Constantine V. The day was to come, however, when a Lombard king grew tired of thus "obeying St. Peter as his son" for the benefit of the distant Byzantine czar. And the popes then turned for help to the Catholic barbarians north of the Alps, to the Franks. How their appeals were finally heeded, the pilgrimage of Pope Stephen II to the court of Pepin in the winter of 753-54 (the winter following Constantine V's pseudo-council at the Hieria), how Pepin agreed to expel the Lombards from the territories around Rome and to convey the conquest to St. Peter in sovereignty, and how the pope ratified Pepin's hold on the Frankish crown by anointing him king with the holy oils, Pepin and his two sons, Carloman and the future Charlemagne--this is what every textbook tells at length.

Pepin was a great ruler (741-68) as his father Charles Martel (716-41) had been before him, and as Charlemagne was to be after him (768-814). Pepin not only defeated the Lombards, and mocked the demand of Constantine V that he reinstate Byzantium, but he watched with care over the apprenticeship of the popes as temporal sovereigns. And Charlemagne was no less interested, that they should be firmly established and rule in peace the far from peaceful lay lords who, all but independent each in his own fortress, resented the notion that priests were now their masters; and who, if the chance offered of seizing the supreme place, would make light of sacrilegiously going through the ritual formality of ordination and consecration in order to attain it.

All which is recalled to explain the harsh statement that the first twenty years of the new papal state were a bloody chapter indeed of Italian history. The election of Adrian I in 772, the pope of this seventh General Council that is our subject, brought a beginning of statesmanship. He ruled for all but twenty-four years--the longest-reigned pope hitherto--

wisely and firmly and humanely, with the young Charlemagne as his protector and counsellor, and yet without subservience to him: for all that Charlemagne, in a rather attractively naive way, made it ever evident that if it were his duty to protect the pope, it was the pope's duty to accept that protection, e.g., to hearken to the protector's advice, and carry it out. The two great men, however, managed together marvellously. The findings of the General Council of 787 were the greatest test to which their relations were put.

Charlemagne, by this time, had utterly destroyed the Lombard kingdom. It was he who was now, in title and in fact, King of the Lombards, the ruler of all Italy to the north of the little papal state as well as of the whole of what we call France, and over the Pyrenees to the Ebro, and east as far as the Rhine. The Holy See, not yet realising it, is now facing a pattern of potential dangers from the powerful protector which will be repeated century after century for the next thousand years--which, however, is none of our business just now. But the pope and his protector met in what promised to be a head-on collision a propos the decrees of this Second Council of Nicaea.

What we would first like to know, as we study this crisis, is how much information Charlemagne had about the council of 787 at the time it took place. This may seem an odd remark, seeing who Charlemagne was, and what his relations with the pope were, and given the undoubted fact that Charlemagne was in Italy from January to Easter of that year. But the suggestion is that the pope took care not to inform Charlemagne of the new rapprochement with Constantinople, and its sequel the council. And that politics were the reason for Adrian's deliberate silence: Byzantium (still in 787 master of Sicily and southern Italy) being the secret sustainer of resistance to the Franks of certain Lombard "pockets" in central Italy. And in the spring of that same year Charlemagne broke off the long-drawn-out negotiation for the marriage of his daughter to Irene's son, Constantine VI.[20]



Such was the situation, ominous for the papal state, in the weeks while the bishops of Asia Minor were journeying to Constantinople and there convening with Adrian's legates, under the aegis of Irene. Charlemagne, in this same autumn, was occupied with the business of destroying a treacherous vassal, the duke of Bavaria. On October 3 the rebel surrendered--the council was now busy examining the dossier of Scriptural authority for the cult of images. In the spring of 788 Charlemagne's diplomacy won the Lombards from their alliance with Constantinople. Irene's countermove was a command to her generals in Italy to destroy the Lombard duchy of Benevento. But the Lombard had now the Franks on his side, and it was Irene's forces that were destroyed, and the Byzantine frontier pushed back to the south.

These few details are set down to show the reality of the Charlemagne versus Constantinople animosity in these years, its importance to the great papal problem of political security as the protection of the independence of religion. The pope, needing the Frank most urgently, was walking on thin ice when, in these years of war, he had to be friendly with the Byzantines. Which is why not too much was said -- if anything was said -- to Charlemagne about the negotiations that produced the council. This may also raise the question whether the council was, in Adrian's mind, anything more than a council of the bishops of the Byzantine empire which, under his direction, was re-establishing Catholic belief and practice after sixty years of disorder.

Charlemagne's first news about what had been happening elsewhere while he dealt with Bavaria was the arrival of a Latin translation of the acta of the council of 787. The date of his receipt of this we do not know[21] -- most likely it was around 791. This translation--an incredibly bad one, by all accounts, and to judge from what has survived--perished long ago. When the scholars in Charlemagne's council came to examine it they were seriously disturbed, and by the king's command they prepared a lengthy systematic refutation of the council's decrees--the so-called

Caroline Books.[22] The essence of what so moved the Frankish world was a statement that images are to be given the very same veneration that we give to the Trinity itself -- the arch-mistranslation of the whole masterpiece of illiteracy.

Now what historians have, for centuries, called the Caroline Books, was, in form and fact, an official state paper, a law of the King of the Franks. In this Charlemagne reviews the history of the two councils, of 753 and 787, and he condemns both, criticising in detail, and with biting sarcasm, the evidence for the lawfulness of image-veneration officially set forth by the council of 787, a council convoked and animated by a woman, over which a woman had presided. And such a body as this is to impose its erroneous ideas on all the churches of the world, the bulk of whom have never even heard there has been such a council? Are these Greeks orthodox, even on the fundamental doctrine of the Trinity? Do they not believe that the Son proceeds from the Father alone? No wonder they blunder about the right and duty to venerate images. And so the long indictment rolls on.

But there is in it not a word of criticism for the pope. The document is written as though he had had no share in the council at all, and it contains the remonstrance that “Whenever a dispute arises about matters of belief, we must consult the holy, roman, catholic and apostolic church, which is set in authority over the other churches”[23]; understand, perhaps, “and not a synod of Greek bishops.” For the note that sounds through all this polemic “is not so much one of hostility to the doctrine set out at Nicaea, as to the fact of these Greeks sitting in council and giving forth as though they were the infallible rulers of Christendom.”[24]

The trouble is that there is now a second empire in Christendom, although its chief as yet only calls himself king -- and this chief is a genius, and as passionately interested in culture and religion as in politics and war, and this new western potentate will not tolerate that questions of doctrine shall be decided for the whole church by a council of those churches where his

Byzantine rival is lord. That the force behind the Caroline Books and the law called the Capitulary About Images, and behind the action, regarding the council of 787, of the council about to meet in 794 at Frankfurt, is a political force is what no man can easily deny.[25]

The great council which met at Frankfurt in the summer of 794 was not called merely in order to deal with the situation just summarily described, but with a serious heresy about the Trinity that had arisen in Spain. There had been appeals about this matter to the pope, an intervention from Rome, and a refusal to accept this; then a council at Ratisbon, and the trial of a leading Spanish bishop for heresy. It was to a council whose task was to settle this Spanish affair that Adrian agreed to send legates, and a dogmatic letter stating the true belief on the point at issue.[23] It was an imposing assembly, three hundred Latin bishops from every part of the West, the equal, in this material sense, of any of the General Councils, save the exceptionally large gathering at Chalcedon three hundred years before.[27] All that concerns our present subject is that the criticism of the council of 787, as made in the Caroline Books, was now put before the three hundred bishops at Frankfurt, and that they thereupon condemned the idea that images were the lawful object of adoration properly so called, and that they condemned the council of 787 for encouraging this heretical notion. The evidence, for this last serious charge, upon which the Latin bishops acted is explicitly stated--it is the mistranslated extract from a speech made at the council by one of the Greek bishops.[28] It is worth noting, first, that to these Latins the council they are rebuking is merely "the recent Greek synod at Constantinople," and next, that none of the wild language of the Caroline Books and nothing of the erroneous teaching just noted[29] appear in the proceedings of the council.

To strengthen the impression which the council of 794 might make upon Adrian, Charlemagne now sent to him the famous Capitulary About Images, eighty-five extracts from the Caroline Books. The pope examined

the indictment, and patiently refuted the eighty-five, point by point, patiently and with studied moderation, correcting the vast series of misunderstandings and ignoring the impudence and malice.[30] As to the alleged difference in belief between the two councils, of 787 and 794, the pope says very simply, “With regard to images, the belief of St. Gregory [the Great][31] and our belief are the same; and so the Greek bishops themselves, in this very synod, accepted the definition, [namely] to reverence images with salutations of honour, but by no means to give to them that true worship which, according to our faith, we give to the divine nature alone.... And therefore it is that we have accepted this said synod.”[32] This, so far as the pope was concerned, was the last word. A few months later he died, December 25, 795.

## NOTES

1. Jalland, 370.
2. Tixeront, III, 482 (467).
3. More formally, and, by a universal convention for centuries now, the Iconoclastic Movement.
4. Finlay, *The Byzantine Empire* (Everyman's edition), 3.
5. Finlay, 14.
6. Louis Brehier, whose *La Querelle des Images* (1904) is still a classic text. The quotation is from the similarly titled Chapter XIII of his *Gregoire le Grand, les Etats barbares et l'Invasion Arabe (590-757)*, p. 441, n. 1. This book is vol. 5 of the *Histoire de l'Eglise*, ed. A. Fliche and Msgr. V. Martin (1947).
7. Constantine of Nacolia, Thomas of Claudiopolis, Theodosius of Ephesus. From a letter of the patriarch of Constantinople, Germanos, whom Constantine had consulted, we learn that the bishop's difficulty was the explicit prohibition in Exodus, 20:4, 5.

8. For example, belief that it is dangerous to sit 13 at table, or to spill salt, general belief in “charms, omens, dreams and such like foolery.”

9. Essays, Book I, Chap. 49, “The Customs of the Ancient World.” The reader will recall the half-contemptuous amusement with which Newman compares his Protestant conviction of Catholic abuses with his Catholic knowledge of the facts in later years

10. Giving to created things what is due to God alone.

11. Elected March 18, 731.

12. There is a dispute among historians whether this letter was sent in 784 or 785.

13. “That pseudo-council which took place without the Apostolic See is to be anathematized, in the presence of our legates ... that the words of our Lord, Jesus Christ, may be fulfilled, ‘The gates of hell shall not prevail against it’ [the Apostolic See] and again, ‘Thou art Peter’ [Peter] whose see, holding the first place, gives light to the whole world, and is the head of all the churches of God.” This passage Denzinger quotes, no. 298.

14. The space of years between the two councils of Nicaea is roughly what separates us from the discovery of America by Columbus, or the death of Savonarola. The second council of Nicaea took place just a thousand years before the fall of the Bastille. These are staggering distances of time, in the record of an institution still as active as it was in 787 and 325, with Pope John XXIII, at this moment, preparing exactly as Pope Adrian I was preparing in 785.

15. Southern Italy.

16. From all the teaching and proscriptions of the Iconoclasts images of the cross and its relics had been carefully excepted.

17. Adorat in the Latin translation, proskynei in the Greek original. For this difference see the explanation about to follow.

18. From the text printed (with Latin translation) in Denzinger, nos. 302, 303, 304. different in kind. It is only in our own time that it has ceased to be used for the veneration of the Cross in the liturgy of Good Friday.

19. The canons are listed fully in Mansi. Schroeder, somewhat routed by their verbosity, offers only a summary in his translation, pp. 144-56.

20. Or Byzantium broke them off; crisis and unpleasantness in either case, whichever story is the truth.

21. Historians have had to tax their brains to set these events in a chronological order that is also logical. For a comparison of results cf. Amann, *L'Époque Carolingienne*, 1947 (F. and M., vol. 6), 127, n 2. It is Amann's "solution" that I am following.

22. The piece takes up some 120 pages of the *Patrology of Migne* (P.L., vol. 98, cols. 991-1248).

23. *Quod sancta romana catholica et apostolica ecclesia caeteris ecclesiis praelata, pro causis fidei cum quaestio surgit omnino sit consulenda.* Book I, Chap, 6; quoted Amann, 123, n. 2.

24. Amann, as quoted, p. 123.

25. So Amann, 123, "On n'en saurait disconvenir." It also needs to be said, with Tixeront, III, 474 (459), that "in Gaul, not only was it denied that images should be given adoration, in the proper sense of the word [the adoration with which we adore God as an act recognising He is God] but denied also that images could be given a relative honour [i.e., that the image could be honoured for the sake of the being it represented, an honour related to the living original]. This was an error in no way fostered by mistakes in the Latin translation sent by the pope."

26. Once again, the reader must be warned, there are problems about dates and the true sequence of events.

27. The official record of the proceedings--the acta--has not been preserved. We know nothing at all of the debates. Only the decrees of the council have survived.

28. See before, p. 161.

29. See before, *ibid.*

30. "Answers as subtle as the objections are futile," Tixeront, III, 477 (461). The text of the Capitulary has perished, Adrian's answer, in so columns of close print, is in Migne, P.L., vol. 98, cc. 1247-92, a text "crawling with mistakes," says Tixeront.

31. The reference is to a letter from this pope to Secundinus, saying what is and what is not lawful in the veneration given to images--a classic text in these controversies, and one now cited against the second council of Nicaea's misunderstood teaching.

32. Mansi, XIII, 808; P.L., vol. 98, c. 1291.