

THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS

IT is a striking instance of the wondrous ways of Divine Providence that the city whose past renown circled round its false cult of 'great Diana of the Ephesians' should be the place whence should be proclaimed to the world, and for all time, the Divine Maternity of Mary, *παναγία θεοτόκος*, the All-holy Mother of God.

The Council of Ephesus, the fifteenth centenary of which occurs this year, is in importance second only to the Council of Nicaea. That earliest Oecumenical Council affirmed against Arius the Divinity of our Blessed Lord. This Synod of Ephesus by proclaiming the Divine Motherhood of Mary, affirmed against Nestorius, God-Incarnate, One Person in Two Natures, and that Person Divine.

In the controversies that led up to both these Councils the very existence of the Christian Faith was at stake. It was saved in the one by the test-word *ὁμοούσιος* (of one substance); it was saved in the other by the touchstone of orthodoxy *θεοτόκος* (Mother of God).

I. NESTORIUS AND NESTORIANISM.

Nestorius, monk and priest of Antioch, became Patriarch of Constantinople in 428, and soon after, in his presence, the priest Anastasius preached violent diatribes against the term *Theotokos*.

'It was impossible,' cried he, 'that God should be born of a woman. Let no one call Mary *Theotokos*, for Mary was but a woman.' The people were roused. But the Patriarch, instead of showing them that there was little to fear in a term which everyone used, and which had been employed for at least two centuries by great writers, such as Origen, Eusebius of Caesarea,

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Athanasius, Cyril of Jerusalem, Didymus, Gregory Nazianzen, Basil, Theophilus of Alexandria, and others, himself endorsed the sermons of his chaplain and began to commit to writing and to circulate widely his objectionable doctrines. Now began to be seen the true inwardness of the opposition to *Theotokos*, and the term, which even Theodoret afterwards came to own as 'the Apostolical tradition,' became the shibboleth of orthodox faith.

The explanation of the Incarnation according to Nestorius and the Antiochene school was that the Blessed Virgin gave birth to a human being to whom the Logos joined Himself at the first moment of conception. Mary, he said, was not Mother of God. 'I have learned,' said Nestorius, 'from Scripture that God came forth (*προελθεῖν*) from the Virgin, but never that he was born (*γεννηθῆναι*) of her.' *Χριστόκος* he would call Mary, or *ἀνθρωποτόκος*, but not *θεοτόκος*. Thus went the Atonement. For the Nestorian Christ is but a deified man, not Incarnate God. And so the term became the battle-cry.

In the light of what Dr. Bethune-Baker, the now apologist for Nestorius, has since written, these earlier words of his are interesting :

To refuse to the mother of the Lord the title *Theotokos* was doubtless to deny her a title that was rightfully hers; but it was much more than this. The English translation 'Mother of God' brings into undue prominence the glory of her motherhood; the Greek term fixes attention on the Godhead of Him who was born. To deny that she was *Theotokos* was really to deny that He who was born of her was God as well as man.¹

But now it is the fashion to say that Nestorius was not a Nestorian! And now Dr. Bethune-Baker writes :

That His Mother should be given a title that was quasi-divine mattered little. But the danger that under the cover of such a title an unhistorical conception of the facts of the Gospel should

¹ *History of Early Christian Doctrine*, p. 262.

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grow up and a false doctrine of the relations between the human and the Divine be encouraged—this was a subtle danger that needed to be exposed. So Nestorius was forced into the position of one who brings technical objections against a popular term.²

It is his zeal for the orthodox teaching on the Incarnation that makes Nestorius oppose the obnoxious term!

What he (Nestorius) feels must be guarded against at all costs is, on the one hand, the idea that the Godhead itself was born of a woman, wrapped in swaddling-clothes, suffered and died; and, on the other hand, the idea that the manhood of the Incarnate Word was not real like our own.³

Were there such people existing who were in danger of believing that the Godhead had Its origin from Mary? It is hard to imagine it. At any rate, they would surely be few, and, at this date, long after the days of Paul of Samosata, who had taught something like it,⁴ only among the very ignorant. And so St. Cyril of Alexandria evidently thinks, for he writes:

For if there were any whatever who should dare to say that this flesh made of earth had become Mother of the bare Godhead, and that she bare out of her own self the Nature which is over the whole creation, *the thing would be madness and nothing else.*⁵

The Regius Professor, Dr. W. Bright, speaks of 'the many passages in which Cyril . . . repudiated as *utterly monstrous* the notion that Mary gave birth to the Godhead (*e.g.* Ep. ii), or that there was any kind of change or fusion affecting the Divine Nature of the Eternal Son in the assumption of our humanity

² *Nestorius and his Teaching*, p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁴ Cf. Ep. ii ad Nest.; and Athanasius c. Apoll. I, 20.

⁵ *Scholia*, § 26; P.G. LXXV, 1499.

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(e.g., Ep. iii). He was never weary of disclaiming (e.g., Ep. ad Joann.) such fantasies.’⁶

St. Cyril’s perpetual insistence on the term *Theotokos* was, even apart from its subsequent ratification by the Church, only too well justified; and it would be very difficult to coin a better one. As a writer of our day has lucidly and simply put it :

Every one who believes in Our Lord’s Divinity and is not a Nestorian calls the Blessed Virgin so. It follows obviously from the Hypostatic Union. She is the Mother of Christ, the mother of a person, and that person is God. The relation of mother and son concerns persons. The mother of a person who is God is just as much mother of God as the mother of a person who is man is the mother of man.⁷

Nestorius, though a man of upright, austere, virtuous life, was anything but humble. He had little of the vast learning that distinguished his great opponent Cyril. He was carried away by his confessedly great eloquence. Exact thought, and the consideration due to what acknowledged leaders of the Christian Church had laid down were no part of him. The description which Socrates the historian gives of him is probably pretty accurate. ‘Being by nature fluent of speech, he was thought to have been educated, but in truth he was ill-trained and disdained to learn the books of the ancient interpreters. For being puffed up in his fluency of speech, he did not attend accurately to the ancients, but thought himself superior to all.’

One is, therefore, not surprised to be told by the same historian that the term *Theotokos* was like a nightmare to Nestorius, but as Dr. Pusey remarks, for Nestorius to have accepted the one word *Theotokos*, ‘would have been to give up his heresy.’

⁶ *Life and Memoirs of W. Bright, D.D.*, p. 55.

⁷ A. Fortescue, *The Greek Fathers*, p. 178.

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II. THE PROTAGONISTS. NESTORIUS AND CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA.

Nestorius circulated his writings far and wide. They pervaded Egypt. They reached Rome. The Patriarch of Alexandria, the great 'Christian Pharaoh,' was accustomed each spring to write his hundred suffragans a Paschal letter announcing on what day Easter would fall, and he generally took the opportunity of discussing any question that interested his Patriarchate. This year (429), therefore, Cyril used the occasion to set forth the orthodox doctrine on the Person of Christ, though he did not mention Nestorius. He followed this up with an encyclical to the monks. Both these documents came into the hands of Nestorius, who wrote an angry letter to Cyril complaining of what he, hardly correctly, termed his interference. Cyril wrote in reply frankly reproving the Archbishop of Constantinople and exposing the Catholic doctrine. This was the famous dogmatic epistle to be approved by the Council of Ephesus, thus becoming an 'oecumenical document of the Faith.' Later, Cyril wrote another epistle, and to it he appended the twelve equally famous Anathematisms for Nestorius to accept.

Meanwhile, Pope Celestine was becoming anxious about the new teaching. Nestorius, writing to Celestine as to what was to be done regarding certain Pelagian western bishops who had taken refuge at Constantinople, seized the opportunity of trying to gain over the Pope to his doctrine. But, as the Pope later wrote, the letters which had been sent to him contained 'manifest blasphemies,' and there could be no doubt as to their authorship since they bore Nestorius's own signature.⁸

⁸ Mansi IV, 1026, 1027, 1035.

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Cyril, having learnt that Nestorius had already communicated with Rome, and also because the Pope had commissioned him to make investigations and report, sent his deacon Posidonius to the pontiff with a dossier.

‘It would be more agreeable,’ he wrote, ‘if we could keep silence, but God demands of us watchfulness, and ecclesiastical custom requires us to inform your Holiness However, we do not wish to abandon his communion openly before making known these things to your Piety. Deign therefore to declare what seems to you right. Is it necessary to remain in communion with him, or ought it to be proclaimed publicly that no one communicates with one who professes and teaches such errors? It is necessary that the opinion of your Piety be also sent to the Bishops of Macedonia and to all those of the East. This will give them the opportunity which they desire of strengthening themselves in unity and of coming to the help of the orthodox faith which is being attacked.’⁹

III. POPE CELESTINE’S ROMAN COUNCIL.

Pope Celestine, in consequence, held a synod at Rome. Fragments of the Pope’s speech have come down to us in which he approves the term *Theotokos*. He recalls, too, that when a boy he had heard St. Ambrose himself teaching the people to sing on the feast of the Nativity :

*Veni Redemptor gentium,
Ostende partum Virginis:
Miretur omne saeculum:
Talis decet partus Deum.*

‘There you see,’ he commented, ‘how perfectly this hymn of Ambrose agrees with the term “Mother of God” as defended by Cyril, and with our belief that the son of the Virgin was very God.’

Sentence was pronounced against Nestorius. Ten days would be given him to recant, otherwise he must

⁹ Mansi IV, 1011; P.G. LXXVII, 34.

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be deposed and expelled from the communion of the Church. And Cyril was commissioned to publish this sentence and, if necessary, to execute it :

Wherefore assuming to yourself the authority of Our See and using our stead and place with authority you will execute this sentence with the utmost severity, viz. that unless within ten days counted from the day of your notice he shall condemn in a written confession his evil teaching, and promise for the future to confess the faith concerning the birth of Christ our God which both the Church of Rome and that of Your Holiness and the whole Christian religion preaches, forthwith Your Holiness will provide for that Church. And let him know that he is altogether removed from our body. We have written the same to our brother and fellow bishops John, Rufus, and Flavian, whereby our judgement concerning him, yea rather the divine judgement of Christ Our Lord may be manifest.¹⁰

IV. THE PAPACY AT EPHEBUS.

But Nestorius appealed to the Emperor for a general Council. He was *persona grata* with Theodosius. He was the 'Court Bishop.'

It may be recalled that in his scornful reply to Cyril's anxious letter of remonstrance he had boasted that 'at Constantinople itself everything was in excellent condition, and the Emperor was quite in agreement with the doctrine.'¹¹

And this moment was particularly advantageous for Nestorius, for at the time Cyril was in anything but favour with the Emperor, as witness the imperious letter which he wrote to Cyril commanding his presence at the Council. 'A Caesar who so wrote,' remarks Pusey,¹² 'could not be approached. It seems that he expected St. Cyril to be condemned rather than

¹⁰ Mansi, IV, 1019.

¹¹ Mansi IV, 891.

¹² Pusey, Preface to St. Cyril of Alexandria's *Lesser Works*, lxxxii.

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Nestorius.' It cannot be said that an Oecumenical Council was necessary. 'The mind of the Church had been expressed in the previous year. The Council itself was only a device of Nestorius to ward off his condemnation. He had already been severed from the communion of the greater part of Christendom.'¹³ It is true, as Evagrius relates,¹⁴ that not long after the outbreak of this controversy, not only by Nestorius, but by the orthodox as well, an Oecumenical Council had been expressly demanded.¹⁵

But now it was Nestorius who urged it, and his modern advocate, Professor Loofs of Halle, says, 'It was Nestorius and no other who succeeded in inducing the Emperor to call a new Oecumenical Synod.'¹⁶ Pope Celestine sees no objection to a Council, for to him its function will be to establish and execute the sentence of his Roman Synod. 'The Bishop of Constantinople,' wrote Dean Milman, 'was already a condemned heretic; the business of the Council was only the confirmation of their (Celestine's and Cyril's) anathema.'¹⁷ The Pope writes to the Council:

In our solicitude we have sent to you our holy brothers in the priesthood, the Bishops Arcadius and Projectus and the priest Philip to be present at the discussions and to execute what has already been decided by Us.

The instructions which the Pope gave to these legates were explicit. They were not to enter into the discussions themselves, but to act as judges of the Bishops' opinions:

We ordain that the authority of the Apostolic See be safeguarded. If there be any dispute, it will be for you to judge

¹³ Pusey, *ibid.*, lxxxii.

¹⁴ H. E. I, c., VIII.

¹⁵ Hefele-Leclercq, Tome II, c. II, p. 287.

¹⁶ Loofs, *Nestorius*, p. 45.

¹⁷ *Hist. Lat. Christianity*, I, 206.

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the opinions of others without involving yourselves in the controversy.¹⁸

The Council of Ephesus opened on June 22nd, 431, and Cyril presided. One may regret the precipitancy with which St. Cyril, whom the Pope had delegated to hold his place, began the sessions. And that John of Antioch, Nestorius's friend, either would not or could not arrive in time.¹⁹ 'The original letters of Celestine,' Dom Chapman says, 'had been cruel, giving Nestorius no opportunity for defence, and demanding submission for obvious heresy through the mediations of the Alexandrian pope, the theological adversary of the Antiochenes, and the nephew of Theophilus, the enemy of Constantinople Had the Council opened a few days later, after the arrival of the papal legates, with their important letters from the Pope, and in the presence of the Bishop of Antioch and his suffragans, the deposition of Nestorius (or his recantation) might have taken place with less acrimony and with less disastrous results.'²⁰

It must be noted that it was in the absence of the Roman legates that this Eastern Council gave this judgement :

We being *necessarily compelled* by the canons and by the letter of Our Most Holy Father and fellow-minister Celestine, Bishop of the Roman Church, have with many tears come to this painful decision against him. Our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom He has blasphemed, decides by this holy Council that Nestorius is deprived of the Episcopal dignity and of all sacerdotal intercourse.²¹

At length the legates reached Ephesus, and so on July 10th a second session was held. They read the

¹⁸ Mansi IV, 556.

¹⁹ Mansi IV, 1232; Pusey, *op. cit.* XXX.

²⁰ *Downside Review*, May, 1925, p. 109.

²¹ Mansi IV, 1212. See also H. R. Percival, *The Seven Oecumenical Councils*, p. 218 seq.

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Papal letter in which the Pope said that he did not doubt that the Council would carry out what he had already decided. The fathers said, ' This judgement is right. To the new Paul, Celestine—to the new Paul Cyril—to Celestine guardian of the faith. To Celestine one with the Council—to Celestine all the Council gives thanks. One Celestine, one Cyril, one Faith of the Council, one Faith of the whole world ! '

Projectus, one of the Papal legates, stressed the point that the role of the Council was to execute the sentence delivered by Celestine. And Firmus, the Bishop of Caesarea, said :

The Holy Apostolic See of the most holy Bishop Celestine had already given a sentence and decree which we have followed when we came to Ephesus.²²

At the conclusion of the second session the priest Philip, returning thanks, said :

In applauding the letters of our blessed Pope, holy members of the Council, you are united to the holy head. For your holiness is not ignorant that the blessed Apostle Peter is the Head of all the society of believers and of the Apostles themselves.²³

Philip asked for the records of the Council's works accomplished previously to his and his fellow-legates' arrival. The sitting then terminated. They studied the documents during the night, and next day they had the *Acta* publicly read in their presence. Philip arose, and in celebrated words, inscribed in the *Acta* of the Council, pronounced excommunication against Nestorius :

It is doubtful to no one, but rather known to all ages that the holy and blessed Peter, the Prince and Head of the Apostles, the Pillar of the Faith, and the Foundation of the Catholic

²² Mansi IV, 1288.

²³ Mansi IV, 1289.

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Church, received from Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Saviour and Redeemer of the human race, the keys of the Kingdom, and that to him was given the power of loosing and binding sins; who up to this time and for ever lives and exercises judgement in his successors. His successor in due order and holding his place, our holy and most blessed Pope, Bishop Celestine, has sent us to the Council to supply his place.²⁴

And the Council writes to the Emperors :

We have canonically deposed Nestorius and have praised the most holy Bishop of Rome Celestine, who, before our sentence had condemned the impious doctrine of Nestorius for the greatest security of the Churches and of the Faith which the holy Apostles and Evangelists and holy fathers have transmitted to us.²⁵

V. CONCLUSION.

Twenty years later Leo the Great will be Pope. He is Celestine's archdeacon now. He is serving a good apprenticeship. He will manifest in his magnificent Tome the influence of the mighty Cyril; he will echo in his Petrine claims these fatherly words of Celestine :

It is true that We are far away from you. But Our solicitude makes Us everywhere present. The watchful care of the Blessed Apostle Peter regards all as present.²⁶

And :

What were Our cares and solicitude for you during this intestine war? The nights passed for us as the days . . . the crook of the shepherd consoled you, that Staff to which He delivered His flock to pasture when he was about to ascend to heaven.²⁷

²⁴ Mansi IV, 1296.

²⁵ Mansi IV, 1240; *cf.* 1301.

²⁶ Mansi V, 268.

²⁷ Mansi V, 274.

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Worthily to treat of the Council of Ephesus requires a volume. It borders on the rash to try to deal with a subject so great in a single article. But such as it is, this comment will at least serve this purpose, to bring to remembrance two things—first, that Nestorianism (a heresy peculiarly deadly because so disintegrating of the whole Christian revelation) is destroyed by realising the place of Mary in the Economy of Grace; and, secondly, how the attacks of ‘the gates of hell’ were frustrated, when the voice of Peter, ‘living in his successor,’ Celestine, was once again heard confirming his brethren. ‘Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.’

S. H. SCOTT.

Feast of St. Josaphat, 1931.