

Church History: The Church Post-Constantine and in the Middle Ages



Diocese of Rockford

Christianity Legalized

- In 313, the Emperor Constantine issued the Edict of Milan, which made Christianity legal in the Roman Empire as a whole for the first time in its history.
 - This had a dramatic impact on the condition of the Church. Her numbers grew as it became fashionable to be a Christian.
 - Between Constantine and Theodosius, the rulers of the Empire were Christian, except during the reign of Julian, often called "Julian the Apostate" because he sought to reverse Christianity's growing influence in the Empire and restore classic Roman paganism.
- What an astonishing reversal! Any observant party would have said through much of that time that it was surely the Roman state that would win in the end.
 - She now had more time and opportunity to reflect more fully on the meaning of what she believed.
 - Julian reigned as sole Emperor from 361-363. He was the last non-Christian ruler of the Roman Empire.

Christianity Legalized, contd.

- Many things attracted the people of the Roman Empire to Christianity as they observed the Christians during the centuries between Christ's resurrection and the reign of Constantine.
 - Julian the Apostate is said to have wanted to create charitable institutions in a pagan Roman Empire to prevent the Christians from attracting people to them by means of their charity.
- Among these things was the Christians' commitment to caring for the vulnerable, the poor, etc. The Christians would even rescue newborn babies left to die by families who did not want them (a not uncommon practice in the ancient pagan world).

East and West

- Another significant political event that occurred in the 4th century was the appointing of two emperors to govern the two halves of the Roman Empire--the Western half and the Eastern half.
 - After this time, until 800, there was only one Roman emperor, who reigned in the city of Constantinople in the East.
 - In 800, the Pope crowned Charlemagne, King of the Franks, as the Holy Roman Emperor, thus reviving the Empire in the West.
 - The relationship between East and West varied quite a bit for several centuries--sometimes being amiable, sometimes less so.
- This state of affairs began in 395 and ended around 476 when the Western part of the Empire fell to Germanic "barbarians".
 - This Eastern Roman Empire became known as the Byzantine Empire, because its capital was in Constantinople, which was also called Byzantium.
 - The political division between East and West was accompanied by cultural and religious differences as well.

Ecumenical Councils

This is the period of the first eight ecumenical councils of the Catholic Church.



The First Ecumenical Council: Nicaea I

- The main instigation for the calling of the First Council of Nicaea was the Arian controversy.
 - The Emperor Constantine, who had himself become a Christian and wanted Christianity to be a unifying factor in his Empire.
 - The council affirmed that Christ is homoousian (Greek "of one essence") with the Father.
 - The council also dealt with some other issues, including making a resolution on the date of Easter for the universal Church.
- Arius was unhappy with the Church's formulations on the nature of Christ. On his view, Jesus is technically and strictly speaking, not God.
 - In the year 325, Constantine called the bishops of the world to convene in the city of Nicaea. 318 bishops participated.
 - Decided the term was the most appropriate to use the word, even though not found in Scripture, because it expressed the true sense of the meaning of Scripture and closed the loophole from the Arians who wished to use Scriptural language, wrongly-interpreted, to support their own heretical ideas.

After Nicaea

- The Council of Nicaea seemed to settle the issue of the divinity of Christ. Unfortunately, however, this was not the case.
 - Whereas Nicaea said that the Son is homoousian ("of one essence") with the Father, and Arius said that the Son was heteroousian ("of a different essence") from the Father, the Semi-Arians said that the Son was homoiousian ("of a similar essence") to the Father.
 - One of the most important figures during this time period was St. Athanasius, who became Bishop of Alexandria shortly after the end of the Council of Nicaea.
- A group arose that embraced and promoted a mitigated form of Arianism which has come to be called *Semi-Arianism*.
 - The problem with the Semi-Arian position is that it really amounts to the same position as Arianism in the end, for one is either God or one is not.
 - He was a staunch upholder of the Council of Nicaea and vigorous in its defense.

The Second Ecumenical Council: Constantinople I

- The Emperor Theodosius called an ecumenical council to deal with various heresies and to help promote orthodoxy and unity in the Church.
 - After this council, the Church finally had the creed Catholics have come to know as the Nicene Creed.
 - This creed is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.
- At this council, Semi-Arianism was finally defeated.
- ◆ Macedonians (after their founder Macedonius) or the Pneumatomachians ("fighters against the Holy Spirit")
 - ◆ The council also rejected a heresy called Apollinarism (after Apollinaris) which affirmed that Jesus was not fully human.

The Donatists

- The Donatist schism was basically a revival of the similar Novatianist position.
 - The Donatists were orthodox except for their position on the traditors, so they are often thought of as schismatics (those who divide the unity of the Church) rather than heretics (those who promote false doctrine).
 - The Donatists were opposed by the orthodox bishops. St. Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo, was especially effective at refuting them.
 - It was during this controversy especially that the Church formulated her idea that the validity of the sacraments does not depend on the worthiness of the minister.
- During persecutions some handed over their copies of the Scriptures to be burned and many handed over other things as well, including their fellow Christians.
 - Those who handed over the Scriptures became known as traditors ("those who hand over").
 - Some of the Donatists and those associated with them began to resort to violence to promote their cause, and this brought upon them repression by the State.
 - The Donatist idea was that a sinful minister cannot administer sacraments

St. Augustine of Hippo and His Confessions

- St. Augustine (354-430) was from North Africa.
- One of the most popular works in Christian history is Augustine's Confessions, in which he tells the story of his life and how he eventually was led to the Catholic faith.



- As Augustine grew up, he rejected the Christian faith of his mother and embraced a life of immorality and false philosophies.
- He met the Bishop of Milan, St. Ambrose, who was also skilled at rhetoric, and who made a deep impression on Augustine.
- Augustine converted to Christianity and was baptized.
- He went on to become bishop of the city of Hippo in North Africa and became one of the most important saints and doctors in the history of the Catholic Church, having a deep influence on Catholic theology and the development of the Church's doctrine.
- The Confessions are written as addressed to God.

The Third Ecumenical Council: Ephesus

- The third ecumenical council of 431 came about because of the views of Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople from 428-431.
 - Nestorius's greatest critic was St. Cyril of Alexandria, the Patriarch of Alexandria.
 - Cyril wrote to Pope Celestine of Rome, who delegated authority to Cyril to declare Nestorius excommunicated unless he should repent within ten days.
 - Nestorius, meanwhile, convinced Emperor Theodosius II to convene an ecumenical council. The council was convened, and Cyril became its president.
 - A good deal of politics took place during the council, as is typically the case with councils, but the end result was that Nestorianism was condemned.
- He really didn't like the phrase Theotokos ("God-bearer" or "Mother of God") applied to the Virgin Mary. He thought it made it sound like the divine nature itself had a mother, which would of course be absurd. He advocated instead the term Christotokos ("Christ-bearer").
- This was the first ecumenical council to create a lasting schism.

Pelagianism

- Pelagius was a British monk who was greatly concerned about the moral laxity he saw all around him in the Christianized Roman Empire.
 - Pelagianism's main opponent was St. Augustine, who helped lead the North African church to condemn it.
 - The condemnation of Pelagianism was also affirmed by Pope Innocent I and Pope Zosimus.
 - Pelagianism was condemned at the ecumenical Council of Ephesus.
 - After the condemnation of Pelagianism, a modified version of it arose in the Church which has come to be called Semipelagianism.
- He articulated views on free will, sin, and grace that he thought were necessary to safeguard moral purity.
 - He argued that since God has given all people free will, all people must be able to obey God's moral law without being given any further ability through the grace of God.
 - Pelagius reasoned that if people lack the ability to obey God without grace, that would excuse their sin, since no one can justly be required to do something that they are unable to do.
 - By definition, a being with free will must be able to choose and do what is morally required of them without being given any extra aids not already inherent in their free will.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council: Chalcedon

- In the 440s, a monk named Eutyches started making public statements in favor of what he considered to be orthodox Christology, following the teaching of St. Cyril of Alexandria.
 - Eusebius and Flavius accused Eutyches of emphasizing the unity of Christ so much that he ended up dissolving the human nature into the divine nature and therefore denying Jesus's fully intact humanity (monophysitism).
 - Eutyches, on the other hand, accused Eusebius and Flavius of being Nestorian.
 - A synod was held, and Eutyches was condemned. A report was sent to Pope Leo I of Rome.
 - Canon 28 - Constantinople's place
- Eventually, he got into a fight with Eusebius, the Bishop of Dorylaeum, and the whole thing ended up before Flavius, the Patriarch of Constantinople.
 - The whole thing got so heated that the Emperor Theodosius II decided to call an ecumenical council to deal with it. The council met in 449 in the city of Ephesus and was headed up by Patriarch Dioscorus.
 - Leo condemned the whole council, calling it a "robber council".
 - Leo and so called the new council, which convened in 451 in the city of Chalcedon.
 - The Council of Chalcedon proved to be the beginning of a long-lasting schism that has continued even to the present day.

The Fifth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople II

- Emperor Justinian made another attempt to placate the Monophysites by condemning selections from sections of the works of Theodore, Ibas, and Theodoret which were particularly offensive to the Monophysites.
 - The condemnation of the Three Chapters-- as these three selections of writings came to be known --didn't end up reconciling the Monophysites.
- These works had long been suspected or accused by various people of tending towards or advocating Nestorianism.
 - There had been a great effort on the part of Catholics, Monophysites, and the Emperors to end the schism and reconcile the divided parties.
 - It did cause some other temporary schisms, however, because the move was very controversial--not because it condemned Nestorianism, which everyone involved in the discussion agreed was a good thing to do, but because it condemned writings from men who had died in good standing within the Church (and some of whom had been exonerated from suspicion of heresy by the Council of Chalcedon).

The Sixth Ecumenical Council: Constantinople III

- During the 620s through the 630s, a movement arose to promote the idea that Christ, being a unified Person who was both divine and human, had only "one energy".
 - But not everyone was convinced.
 - Sophronius, who became Patriarch of Jerusalem in 634, objected strongly to the doctrine. He asserted that Christ had two energies and not one.
 - Constantine IV, who succeeded Constans II when he died in 668, affirmed the Dyothelite ("two wills") position. He called for an ecumenical council to settle the dispute once and for all. The council condemned Monothelitism and affirmed Dyothelitism.
- This idea of Christ having "one energy" was promoted especially by Sergius, the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Emperor Heraclius accepted it and promoted it as well.
 - Eventually, Sergius and Heraclius convinced the Patriarch of Antioch and the Patriarch of Alexandria to agree as well.
 - Thus ended the controversy. The council's decisions were sent to Pope Leo II, and he approved and confirmed them.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council: Nicaea II

- During the first half of the 8th century, Emperor Leo III became convinced that it was wrong to have and make use of images-- pictures, representations, of Christ, of Mary, of the saints, etc.--in the Church.
 - Emperor Leo III may have been moved by the growing complexity and extravagance of image-use in the churches, combined with arguments from the Muslims (who were strongly anti-image) who reminded him of biblical prohibitions on images from the Old Testament.
 - The council of Nicaea II was convened at Nicaea in the year 787. It condemned the iconoclast position and affirmed the validity of images in the Church, also clarifying how they are to be used properly and how to avoid using them improperly.
- He began a campaign to remove images from all over his empire.
 - In 741, Leo III died, and his son Constantine V succeeded him. In 754, Constantine decided to call an ecumenical council to establish definitively the anti-image point of view. The Patriarchate of Constantinople was represented, but no representatives were sent from the other major patriarchates-- Rome, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.