

## THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS

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IS Holiness Pope Pius XI, December 25, 1930, wrote to the Cardinal Vicar of Rome and to the Secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Oriental Churches concerning the fifteenth centenary of the Oecumenical Council of Ephesus to be celebrated in 1931. The Catholic world should not fail to see more than a mere coincidence in the fact that His Holiness chose Christmas Day to write on such a subject. This action, coming as it did on the feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, should suggest the intimate connection which the Council has with the sublime mystery of our redemption. For it will be recalled that not the least sublime of those mysteries surrounding the Saviour's incarnation and birth is that of His Mother's Divine Maternity and, further, that this glorious prerogative of Our Lady was first defined and assured to the Christian world at the Council of Ephesus. In his letter the Holy Father urges that the faithful take an active interest in this fifteenth centenary celebration by becoming more familiar with the teaching of the Council of Ephesus and especially with the doctrine which it propounded. By way of compliance with the Holy Father's wishes, therefore, let us briefly examine this Council, first from an historical viewpoint and, secondly, from a theological viewpoint.

### I

The mention of the Council of Ephesus quite naturally conjures up the imposing figure of Saint Cyril, the great Bishop of Alexandria and that of his notorious opponent, Nestorius, heretical Bishop of Constantinople. These two Prelates, Saint Cyril on the side of orthodoxy, Nestorius on the side of heterodoxy, were by far the most conspicuous personages in the discussions of Ephesus and for this reason they have come down to us in ecclesiastical history as the chief protagonists of the celebrated Nestorian controversy. The question at issue between them was that of Our Lady's age-old, time-honored title as Mother of God. St. Cyril taught that she is the Mother of God in the true sense of the word. Nestorius protested that such a dignity could not be attributed to a human creature. The dispute

was finally settled at Ephesus; but to see its origin requires some insight into the movements that went before.

In the early centuries of the Church there was at Antioch a famous school of exegesis and another, no less celebrated, was established at Alexandria. Between these two schools there always existed a vigorous sort of rivalry on grounds of biblical criticism. The Antiochian method of interpretation was one of rigorous and exaggerated literalism. Nestorius received his training at Antioch under Theodore of Mopsuestia, patron and abetter of Pelagianism, and commentator of rather doubtful orthodoxy who has received the odious title "father of heresies." Whereas St. Cyril was at the head of the Alexandrian school which inherited the tradition of St. Athanasius, Peter and other great doctors who had employed both the literal and mystical interpretation according as the sense of the text seemed to demand. Another point of difference between them lay in their disagreement over the exact meaning of the Incarnation. The Alexandrians, in accord with the early Councils of the Church, insisted on the intimate union of the divine and human natures in Christ. The Antiochians on the other hand wished to emphasize the distinction between the two natures. Such were the elements out of which the Nestorian controversy arose.

Nestorius became Patriarch of Constantinople in 428. Immediately he enlisted the sympathy and admiration of the Emperor, Theodosius, by the zeal with which he attacked the Apollinarian heretics. This heresy had been condemned for asserting that Christ did not have a complete human nature. It seems that Nestorius in defending the twofold nature of Christ against the Apollinarians fell into an opposite heresy by dividing Christ into two persons. He maintained that the Divine Word was united to the humanity of Christ, not by a physical, personal union, but by some sort of moral union after the manner of an indweller in the temple, or as God is united to the soul of the just man. Just as the indweller does not become identified with the temple by the fact of his living there nor does God become one with the just man by the presence of His grace in the soul, so neither did the Incarnate Word, according to Nestorius, become man in the sense that two natures were united physically under one person. From this he concluded that Mary was the Mother of Christ, the human Person, but in no sense could she be called the Mother of God. These errors spread rapidly and were received favorably by many of high position; but the simple faithful were bitterly opposed to the innovations of Nestorius, as is borne out by an incident that took place in Constantinople about this time.

On a festival day at the Cathedral of Constantinople, a certain priest, Anastasius, in the course of a sermon on Our Lady, remarked that Mary, a human creature, could not be called the Mother of God. The people hearing this thing were horrified and immediately appealed to their Bishop. But Nestorius, the real instigator of this subtle means of exploiting their simple faith and piety, quite naturally sent them away all the more chagrined and perplexed by his scandalous explanations. They refused to be deceived, however, and came to an open break with their Bishop. And it so happened on another feast day of Our Lady that, when a visiting Bishop spoke of the Virgin Mother as the true Mother of God, a veritable tumult of joy and hilarious excitement arose in the audience, reverberating down the long aisles and fretted vaults of the venerable cathedral to welcome his blessed words.

Just as St. Athanasius and St. Augustine had been raised up by God to defend the Church against Arianism and Pelagianism in the previous centuries, so in the fifth St. Cyril arose to combat Nestorianism. He informed Pope Celestine I of the disgraceful schisms and defections from truth which the teachings of Nestorius were causing in the East and, when commanded by papal letter to take measures against the innovators, he admonished Nestorius and entreated him to recant his errors and submit to orthodoxy. In his pastorals he defended the term—*Theotokos*—Mother of God, and finally after further admonition, drew up the celebrated twelve propositions which he asked Nestorius to anathematize. But Nestorius, who had shown rather shabby sportsmanship throughout their duel of correspondence, held himself aloof from all overtures of a conciliatory nature and far from subscribing to the true doctrine concerning Mary's Motherhood, he even essayed, in his vituperative rebuttal to the twelve anathemas, to impeach St. Cyril of heresy. In the mind of the Church and the faithful, however, as is evident from the turn things took at Ephesus, there was never any doubt as to who was on the side of orthodoxy.

On June 22, 431, the Council of Ephesus was formally opened in the Church of St. Mary under the presidency of St. Cyril to whom Pope Celestine had delegated full legatine powers. Before its sessions were closed it numbered about two hundred and fifty Bishops, in spite of the fact that many Oriental Bishops in sympathy with Nestorius gave no heed to the summons which they received to attend the Council. Nestorius, in Ephesus when the Council convened, stubbornly refused to take part in its proceedings. The first sessions were devoted to an investigation of the Nestorian tenets and

after long and thorough deliberations the assembled Bishops formally condemned Nestorius and solemnly proclaimed their faith in the term—*Theotokos*. When their decision was announced, the people, who had crowded about the church all day awaiting news, now thronged the Council hall and carried the Fathers of the Council to their respective lodgings in a triumphal procession of torch light and holiday regalia. Six days after the excommunication of Nestorius, John, Patriarch of Antioch, who had offered flimsy excuses for his delay, finally arrived at Ephesus and called a pseudo-council in which Nestorius' deposition and condemnation were declared null and void and the Catholic bishops were accused of heresy. In the meantime the sessions of the authorized Council were hampered by violent opposition from the Nestorian quarters to whose standards the armed mighty had been attracted and the Catholic bishops were forced to a rather ingenious expedient to make known their decision and their violent retention in Ephesus. A beggar, hired for that purpose, was sent to Constantinople with explanatory letters concealed in the hollow of a cane. Relief was soon brought to the bishops who had so boldly defended the truth and the sessions and canons of the Council were officially approved by Pope Sixtus III who had succeeded Celestine I. This Council, thus approved, took rank as the third Oecumenical Council of the Church.

## II

With these details in mind, let us now consider briefly the doctrinal aspect of the Council with a view to determining: first, what were the fundamental reasons underlying the conclusion reached at Ephesus; secondly, what was the explanation of that conclusion; finally, what it meant for Rome to set the seal of her approbation on that conclusion.

Although the question uppermost in the minds of the bishops assembled at Ephesus was that of our Lady's Divine Maternity, yet its solution involved other facts even more fundamental. The pressure brought to bear on the delegates of the Council by the partisans of Nestorius easily discountenances the assumption that groundless sentimentality or pious credulity in any way influenced their decision. Certainly nothing short of a conviction founded on divine authority, on the evident testimony of Holy Scripture and sacred tradition, can account for the undivided stand which the Catholic bishops took with regard to the *Theotokos*. However, since Nestorius accepted neither Scripture nor the doctrine of the Incarnation in exactly the

same sense as the fathers of Ephesus, it is no great matter of wonder that here precisely would be the chief points of dispute.

Nestorius objected that nowhere in Sacred Scripture is it explicitly stated that Mary is the Mother of God. The fathers of the Council responded that although Holy Writ does not state in so many words that Mary is the Mother of God, it does expressly declare that Mary is the Mother of Jesus Christ and that this same Jesus is true God. This fact is quite clear from St. John's Gospel: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was God," and "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." Now the Evangelist certainly identified this Word with Jesus, the Son of Mary, as is evident from the episode of Cana. Hence the inference is inescapable: if Mary is truly the Mother of Christ, the Lord, and Christ is truly God, then Mary must also be the Mother of God. Her divine Maternity can just as validly be inferred from scores of texts found in other places of Scripture. But Nestorius refused to draw the inference so obvious to the Catholic bishops. On the contrary, he openly denied Mary's Divine Maternity and in the attempt to bolster up his contention, fell into a far more serious error concerning the mystery of the Incarnation.

The idea of two persons in Christ, which was first introduced by Nestorius, had much in common with the previous heresies concerning the Incarnation of the Word. The Arians, for example, denied the Divinity of Christ. The Docetae denied His humanity, saying that he had only an apparent body. The Valentinians taught that instead of taking His body from the flesh of Mary, Christ brought it down from heaven. The Apollinarians denied to Christ a rational, human soul. Finally Nestorius held for two distinct persons in Christ, a divine and a human. This latter aberration from the true doctrine concerning the Incarnation seems to be traceable to the Antiochian method of exegesis. Nestorius, following Theodore of Mopsuestia, rigidly restricted to the humanity of Christ those passages of Scripture which seem to emphasize the human nature and to the Divinity, those seeming to insist on the Divine Nature, and this to the extent of excluding all intercommunication of activity and attributes between the two natures. Now this seems to be a round-about way of saying that there are two persons in Christ. It is probable that all the errors just enumerated have a common origin in false interpretations of the teaching of Scripture concerning the Incarnation. At any rate, it is certain that in their main conclusions they were much the same, namely: a denial of the fact of a real true Incarnate God, which denial if pushed to its logical conclusion directly implies

a denial of Mary's Divine Maternity. For whether we deny the Divinity of Christ or His Humanity, as earlier heretics did, or whether as Nestorius said, the two natures, the Divine and the human, are not intimately and physically united in the one person, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the conclusion is the same: God did not really become man by taking a complete human nature from the Blessed Mother. Therefore Nestorius rightly concluded from this that Mary could not be the Mother of God but only the Mother of Christ, the human person. In this he was at least logical which cannot be said for those Protestants of more recent date who assumed the very illogical position of admitting the Divinity of Mary's Son whilst denying her Divine Maternity.

On the other hand, the Fathers of Ephesus were no less logical. For it is equally evident, that if God, the Word, as St. John said, "was made flesh," that is, really became man at the moment of the Incarnation and was born of Mary, then she is verily the Mother of God. In other words, the fact of Mary's Divine Maternity stands or falls with the fact of the Incarnation. Now both of these facts are most clearly established by the inspired word of Scripture as we have already seen. Moreover, the Council of Nice and the first Council of Constantinople had already condemned those heresiarchs who erred concerning the Incarnation, and so by anticipation had also condemned Nestorianism. The reason, therefore, for the contradictory conclusions which Nestorius and the bishops at Ephesus reached lay in the fact that they disagreed in principles. For it is certain that the Catholic bishops came to Ephesus prepared to settle the Nestorian controversy according to revealed truth as contained in Holy Scripture, sacred tradition and the teaching of the Councils. Hence they were perfectly logical and orthodox in grounding their affirmation of Our Lady's Divine Maternity on the testimony of Sacred Scripture and the fact of the Incarnation as understood and accepted by the universal Church. Pope Celestine was so sure of the Catholic position that he forbade the delegates whom he sent to Ephesus to argue with Nestorius but reminded them that they were to examine the doctrine of Nestorius and ascertain wherein it departed from the teaching of the Church.

There was in connection with the mystery of the Incarnation, a very serious and very obvious objection which the Nestorians brought up against Mary's Divine Maternity. It may be stated as follows: Christ is called God on account of His Divine Nature. But the Divine Nature did not take its origin from the Blessed Virgin. Conse-

quently she cannot be called the Mother of God.<sup>1</sup> In other words: how can Mary, a human creature, be called the Mother of God, the Uncreated? We have already seen how the fathers at Ephesus established the fact of Mary's Divine Motherhood on the authority of revealed truth. Now let us see, in the second point of our inquiry, how they explain that fact.

St. Cyril answered the difficulty in the following terms: "As the mother of man is the mother, not simply of his body, but of his entire person, notwithstanding that his soul comes from another source—as she gave birth not only to the body of man but to the whole, complex individual, composed essentially of a true union of body and soul; so also the Blessed Virgin Mary, who, although she did not, in any sense, give birth to the Divinity, by which the Word is equal to the Father, is nevertheless truly and really the Mother of the Word, because the flesh of the Word was formed in her womb, and she brought into the world the Person of the Eternal Word, who was clothed with our nature."<sup>2</sup>

This explanation is the sum and substance of what the Council taught on this difficult question and is certainly in harmony with the consecrated formula,—*two complete natures and one person in Christ*, which the Church employs to express the mystery of the Incarnation. It should be noted, however, that the notion and application of the terms *nature* and *person*, which are used in St. Cyril's explanation, were brought out more clearly by later theologians. The *nature* of a being usually signifies its essence, (what it is by definition), regarded precisely as the principle whereby the being acts or is acted upon. Thus, for example, human nature, a composite of body and rational soul, explains what a man is essentially and what sort of operations he is capable of performing. Human nature, moreover, is essentially the same in every man, otherwise a being would not necessarily be a man precisely because of his human nature. But there is still a more noble perfection superadded to the individual, existing man which makes this particular individual human nature his own rather than another's. That perfection is known formally as personality. Personality terminates substantially the individual nature, rendering it immediately capable of existence and proper operations, independent of and incommunicable to other beings; in fine, rendering it a *person*, a subject immediately responsible for its own acts. Hence the existence and operations of a human being, not directly to the *nature*,

<sup>1</sup> St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, art. 4, 2nd. obj.

<sup>2</sup> Alzog, *Universal Church History*, Vol. I, p. 416.

but to the *person*. It is not properly this individual human *nature* that is born, lives, feels, thinks, wills, but this *person* who is born, lives etc., by this human *nature*. In applying these notions to the mystery of the Incarnation, theologians say that Christ is called God by reason of His Divine Nature and man by reason of His human nature, for a being is denominated by its nature. Hence Christ is rightly called the God-Man. Moreover, it is true that the Divinity did not take its origin from Mary, but it cannot be concluded from this that Mary is not the Mother of God. Because it is of faith that the two natures in Christ are united in one Divine Person. This Divine Person, existing eternally, equal to and identical with His Divine Nature, in time became man, not by assuming a human person, for this would be a case of a man becoming God, which is impossible, but He became man by assuming an individual human nature, composed of a rational soul immediately created by God and of a human body taken from the flesh of Mary. This human nature, in some mysterious and supernatural way, was physically united to and subsists in the Divine Person without need of a human personality. It follows therefore that whatever Christ did as man, He did also as God, since His actions all must be attributed to His Divine Person. When Christ was born, preached His Gospel, suffered and died, we can truly say that God was born, preached His Gospel, suffered and died. When Mary through the agency of the Holy Ghost, conceived in her womb and brought forth at Bethlehem Christ, the Lord, we can truly say that she conceived and brought forth God. For conception and birth are of a person and not of a nature alone.<sup>3</sup> Now a woman is a person's mother if she conceives and bears him.<sup>4</sup> But most certainly Mary conceived and bore Christ, the Lord. Therefore she is the Mother of God.

Regarding these explanations, it should be born in mind that they deal with a mystery of faith and therefore do not pretend to penetrate the intimate nature and manner of Mary's Divine Maternity. However they do show the reasonableness of the Catholic position on this point of doctrine, as well as the absurdity of Nestorianism. It is also important to remember, that these arguments defend the title, *Mother of God*, in the full force and strict sense of that expression, and not in any figurative sense, such as that in which Mary became the Mother of all men by virtue of Christ's words, spoken to her and

<sup>3</sup> *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, Q. 35, Art. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *op. cit.* Q. 35, art. 4.

the Beloved Disciple at the foot of the cross. Otherwise, there would have been no controversy. No sentence of excommunication and deposition would have been fulminated against Nestorius. Nestorius would have been right. The whole point of the dispute was: whether Mary can be called the Mother of God in the true sense of the term. It was in this sense alone that St. Cyril and the fathers at Ephesus answered in the affirmative and it was in this sense that their conclusion received the official approbation of Rome.

The Council of Ephesus, once approved by Rome, meant first of all a glorious triumph for Mary. For here the Church spoke infallibly on a dogma that is the basis of all that she teaches concerning Our Lady. Those beautiful titles of the Virgin are all concentrated in and founded upon her sublime dignity as Mother of God. To deny that title is to throw over the strongest argument for her Immaculate Conception, the Virgin Birth of her Son, her unique position as Mediatrix of all grace and the other privileges which she enjoys. There would be no propriety in according to her such divine honors if she were not God's Mother and He not her Son.

In her triumph, mankind also triumphed. It is difficult to understand how men could ever question Our Lady's glorious prerogative. Most of the good in modern civilization,—the position of honor given to woman, the sanctity of the home, our humane regard for the poor and outcast, the dignity of labor—all must be traced to the benign and tender influence which Mary as Mother of God exerts over the minds and hearts of men. So much of our faith, so much of our liturgical ceremony and prayer hinges upon her Divine Motherhood that it would be impossible to imagine Christianity without the Virgin Mother. The very words,—*Holy Mother of God*,—have a convincing sweetness, a turn of phrasing that captivates the fancy and puts the mind at rest.

The Council of Ephesus also marked a most signal victory for the Church. It was a very striking witness to the Primacy of Rome and that at a time when the great Patriarchs and Potentates of the East were growing more and more reluctant to admit the Supremacy of the Bishop of Rome. In that long series of clashes between Rome and the East over this very question, Rome could always point to the Council of Ephesus in testimony of her claim. In this way the fifteen hundred years between Ephesus and modern times, in which the Primacy of Rome was solemnly defined, are bridged over and the voice of Pius XI, urging the faithful to join in the fifteenth centenary

celebration of the Council of Ephesus becomes one with the voice of Celestine I, solemnly proclaiming in General Council that most blessed and beautiful doctrine,—the Divine Maternity of Mary.

*Books Consulted:*

St. Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 35, a. 4.

Alzog's *Universal Church History*, Vol. I.

Cardinal Newman, *Development of Christian Doctrine*, Ch. 6, Sect. 3.

Wilmer's, *Handbook of the Christian Religion*, II p. III Ch., II Sect.

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## BROKEN FETTERS

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In Satan's galley groans a naked soul,  
Betrayed by self into this hulk of pain.  
Despairing, ever strokes he cross sin's main,  
While buoys of darkness sound the traitor's goal.

With rhythmic motion sweats he at his fate,  
His spirit worn dares not to falter long,  
But yields to droning beat of fiendish song—  
Alone to crush the serpent's fang, too late.

Behold! His sweeping oar is struck at rest,  
He springs in triumph from the pit of death,  
Again the charm of virtue's way to test.

Consuming grace-fires did dissolve the chain,  
Which locked him to the throne of endless night—  
His mother kissed the Christ-path not in vain.