

The Great Schism between Rome and Constantinople

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I. Preliminary Tensions

There is an unverifiable tradition in the Church which states that the Apostle St. Andrew preached around and even established an episcopal see at Byzantium. But there was no significant ecclesiastical presence there until that area was claimed by St. Constantine the Great who moved the imperial capital there from Rome and renamed it “Constantinople,” the “City of Constantine.” From that point on, the See of Constantinople began to take on great importance and ecclesiastical prerogatives. To emphasize its status as the new imperial capital, Constantinople was dedicated by St. Constantine as “New Rome” on May 11, 330. Because of its importance, the Patriarchs of Constantinople quickly began to see themselves above the See of Alexandria (which historically held the second place of primacy after Rome), and actually on a par with Rome herself (27). But a primacy was still recognized as belonging to the Pope in Rome (81). What that primacy exactly entailed was the subject of future debates and ultimately *the* theological factor which led to the schism between the two great Sees - a schism which remains to this day.

In addition to this were many non-theological factors which also contributed to this schism. For instance a point of tension between Rome and Constantinople were the southern Italian territories of Sicily and Calabria and that also of Illyricum (which comprised most of the Balkans). Due to military aid from the Roman East these territories had passed from Papal to Byzantine control sometime around the mid 8th century (46). This remained a source of contention and Rome consistently demanded of Eastern Emperors and Patriarchs that the territories be restored to Papal jurisdiction (73).

II. The Ignatian-Photian Controversy

The controversy between the two consecutive Patriarchs of Constantinople, Ignatius and Photius, is another important chapter which contributed to the schism. Ignatius was a monk and abbot at the time he was elected by the Empress Theodora. His election by-passed normal procedure and thus was considered irregular (70). Upon Theodora’s political downfall, Ignatius was also targeted for his political miscalculations and eventually exiled (71). He was later pressured into resignation but only, as Ignatius’ supporters believed, in such a way that none of his policies would be repudiated nor would there be any implication that his elevation to the Patriarchal throne was invalid (72). Ignatius’ replacement, Photius, was a layman but a reputed scholar. He was quickly tonsured a reader and then ordained successively a sub-deacon, deacon and priest in time for his enthronement slightly before Christmas day, 858.

When Ignatius’ supporters realized that Photius was not interested in following the policies of his predecessor (as they believed he had promised), the conflict began (72).

Each side mutually declared the opposing Patriarch deposed (73). The Emperor Michael III, wrote to Pope Nicholas requesting that he send legates to confirm Ignatius' resignation. The Pope replied that since he was never informed of these developments, he would rather send legates to enquire whether the handling of Ignatius was canonical. He also asked that Illyricum be restored to papal jurisdiction. The Pope also wrote to Photius and reproached him for his rapid elevation to such a great office and See. The Pope added that if the enquiry checked out he hoped to be able to confirm Photius' election. "Thus in this letter too Nicholas implied that he had the right to the final decision, though he carefully left his options open" (74). Photius replied in a letter to the Pope defending his rapid elevation on the basis of the differences of discipline and rite between their respective Churches (75). Photius also dodged the question on Illyricum.

Apparently disappointed by this, the Pope then reversed the decision of his legates in favor of Photius. Finally a council was held in Rome in 863 and "Ignatius was declared to be still the legitimate Patriarch and Photius was deprived of his title and degraded to lay status" (76). In retaliation Photius formulated points of difference which had previously existed between Rome and the East but now were becoming more pronounced. For instance, chief among these was the Frankish-Latin unilateral insertion of the *filioque* (and from the Son") clause into the Nicene Creed which the Greeks noticed being recited in the Latin-controlled Bulgarian Churches (78). Photius attacked this clause as a heresy of the Latin Church because to make "the Holy Spirit proceed from both the Father and the Son was to admit of two principles" in the Godhead (78). He detailed all of the areas considered problematic in Latin theology and sent this to the other Eastern Patriarchs. "The detailed criticisms of Latin theology contained in this letter were to feature constantly in future polemic between Rome and Constantinople" (78). Photius held a synod and deposed and anathematized the Pope.

The battles and intrigues continued between the rivaling Ignatian and Photian parties. "During the years of Ignatius' second patriarchate relations between Rome and Constantinople were scarcely more harmonious than under Photius (82). In fact Photius and Ignatius were reconciled sometime between 872 and 876 (82). Upon Ignatius' death, as was apparently agreed by all leaders in Constantinople, Photius reascended the Patriarchal throne. His status was recognized by Rome due to political expediency over the situation in Bulgaria (83). "By reason of his position as head of the universal Church the Pope claimed authority to release Photius and his clergy from penalties previously imposed (83). Photius, despite later Latin fabricated fables, was cleared of all charges by a synod of 383 bishops with Rome's consent. He later retired, reportedly due to ill health and died in exile in full communion with Rome (86). It is also noteworthy that up to this point the *filioque* was not being sung in the Creed in Rome (85).

Another point of contention, referenced above, was the battle over the Slav missions (especially Bulgaria) and which Church would have control over them. Both Rome and Constantinople competed for their ecclesiastical allegiance. Pope Nicholas, by ruling in favor of Ignatius, apparently believed in return Constantinople would concede Bulgaria to Rome, as was later admitted by the papacy (77). "In any case the Bulgarian ruler (Boris), anxious to establish an autonomous Church, made its own decision, which in the end favored Constantinople and not Rome (85).

III. The Widening of the Gap

Another source of friction between Rome and Constantinople was the advancing kingdom of Charlemagne and the Franks. In 753 the over-committed Eastern Roman military was unable to come to the aid of Rome against the Lombards. At this point Rome had to turn to the Franks for assistance and from then on an alliance was formed that would prove to be fateful for the Byzantine East (39). The Franks came to consider themselves as protectors of the Roman See and the true Holy Roman Empire. The Franks thus incessantly sought opportunities to illegitimate the Byzantine Eastern Roman Empire and its Church.

Another significant rupture between the two Sees came in 1054. The uncompromising Roman legate, Cardinal Humbert was sent to Constantinople with letters for the Patriarch, Michael Cerularius, from the Pope intended to authoritatively address recent disputes between the respective churches. After repeated failed attempts to deliver the letters to the Patriarch, the Cardinal became enraged. Humbert marched into the great Church of Hagia Sophia, during the Divine Liturgy, and placed a Bull of Excommunication of the Patriarch upon the Holy Altar. A Greek sub-deacon chased behind the Cardinal attempting to return the Bull but the Cardinal threw it to the ground and shook off the dust from his shoes (133). Cerularius after reading the Papal letters claimed that Humbert had forged them and that the seals on the letters were tampered with (134). He then returned the excommunication upon Humbert.

Although Humbert had only excommunicated the Patriarch and had nothing but the highest praises for the city and Church of Constantinople, this rift is commonly (and somewhat mistakenly) considered the official date of schism between the Byzantine East and the Latin West. As a result, in 1965 the Pope of Rome (Paul VI) and the Patriarch of Constantinople (Athenagoras) revoked these mutual anathemas because of their symbolic role in the “Great Schism.” As Hussey explains about the event of 1054, “posterity has however read into this dramatic episode ‘a formal schism’ which did not then exist... that was to come together with the intensified embitterment engendered by the Latin crusading movement and its culmination in 1204 -that was when the real schism occurred (136).”

The Fourth (and most devastating) Crusade culminated in the sacking of Constantinople by the Franks, the overthrow of the Eastern Imperial government as well as the Latin ecclesiastical take-over of the Byzantine-Constantinopolitan Church (167). It was in everyway a foreign invasion which left deep scars of bitter resentment among the Greek populace -even after the Latins departed. The end result of this weakening of the Eastern Roman Empire by the Franks, led directly to fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453.

Ironically, the Byzantines had done likewise to their Christian Armenian neighbors who formerly served as a buffer state between Byzantium and the advancing Turks. This weakening of Armenia by Byzantium, as one writer put it, forged the links in the chain that would enslave Constantinople in its fall to the Turks (M. Chahin, Kingdom of Armenia). There were several politically motivated attempts at reunion between Rome and Constantinople including the Councils of Lyons (1274) and Florence-Ferrara (1438-9) -both considered Ecumenical Councils by the Latin Church. But the Papacy refused

Constantinople any significant military aid without the acceptance of Papal supremacy over the universal Church (170). The Patriarch of Constantinople, Michael of Anchialus, in reply to the union-minded Emperor Manuel I, voiced the heart-felt, anti-Latin conviction of the Greeks when he stated they preferred to see the Muslim turban in Constantinople to the Latin tiara (173). With the fall of Constantinople and the ensuing Turkish domination, the reunion of the ancient Churches remained a distant idea until modern times.