

The mind of the Orthodox Church

2. The two Ecumenical Councils

The Synodikon of Orthodoxy refers to all the Fathers who formed the Ecumenical Councils, but mainly it is limited to mentioning and referring to two Councils with great authority and great authenticity. They are the Seventh Ecumenical Council, which ruled about the veneration of the holy icons, and the Ninth Ecumenical Council, which ruled about the uncreated essence and the uncreated energy of God, as well as ruling in an inspired way about hesychasm, the way which we should use in order to reach deification.

The Seventh Ecumenical Council (787) was convoked by the grace of God, and the “decree of our devout and Christ-loving Emperors, Constantine and Irene, his mother”, as the definition of faith of this Council says. Indeed it says that “the Lord God in His good pleasure convoked us, the leaders of the priesthood everywhere, with divine zeal and the consent of Constantine and Irene, our most faithful sovereigns.” They contrast themselves with the heretics who, although they are priests, in reality are not, “being said to be priests, but not being priests”, for they have made accusations against the true faith of the Church, “following impious men of the same persuasions.”

Many things appear in this text. First, that the Ecumenical Council is convened by the decree of the Imperial Sovereigns. Secondly, that the heretics, while they are priests, are really not, since the apostolic succession is not only the uninterrupted priesthood, but also adherence to the apostolic tradition and teaching. Thirdly, that the heretics repudiate the catholic teaching of the Church and follow philosophers, who have their own

opinions and conceptions.

The Definition of Faith of the Seventh Ecumenical Council reveals the Orthodox teaching about veneration of the holy icons, because “honour paid to the image passes on to the original”, and “he who venerates the image is venerating in it the reality of the one who is depicted therein.”

In the Synodikon of Orthodoxy the whole faith of the Church concerning the veneration of the holy icons is conserved.

The possibility of painting an icon of Christ is proclaimed precisely because He became incarnate and assumed human nature in fact, not in imagination. In the hypostasis of the Word the divine nature was united with the human nature immutably, unchangeably, inseparably and indivisibly. The difference in essences is confessed, and in this way “the created and the uncreated, the visible and the invisible, the passible and the impassible, the limited and the unlimited” were united in the one hypostasis of the Word. To the divine essence belongs the uncreated, the invisible, the impassible and the unlimited, while to the human essence belongs, apart from the other things, also the circumscribed. For this reason we can make icons of Christ, because He became incarnate. Anyone who does not tolerate “the depiction in icons of the incarnate Word, and His sufferings on our behalf” is anathematised.

Also, in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy it is proclaimed that, by venerating the holy icons and by looking at them, the eyes too are sanctified and the nous is lifted up towards the knowledge of God. It refers to “those who sanctify their lips with words, and then sanctify their hearers by means of these words, who both know and preach that, as the eyes of those who see are sanctified by the sacred icons, so the nous is lifted up by them to the knowledge of God, just as it is by church buildings, by the

sacred vessels and other holy treasures.”

Thus it is possible for us to venerate the flesh of God and to be sanctified by this veneration, naturally according to the condition in which we are, since the flesh of Christ is characterised as “equal to God and of equal worth”.

The Ninth Ecumenical Council (1351, together with the Councils before and after this) in the time of St Gregory Palamas was concerned with another doctrinal topic, which is a sequel to the topics that concerned the early Church. In the fourth century the holy Fathers confronted the heresy of Arius, who taught that the Word of God is a creature. St Gregory Palamas in his time confronted the heresy of Barlaam, who said that God’s energy is created. Furthermore, as we said, the Council ‘justified’ hesychasm, which is the only method that leads man to deification.

With regard to the Ninth Ecumenical Council, we should say that it has all the elements and characteristics which we cited above to qualify it as an Ecumenical Council.

First, it is convoked by Emperors. The synodical tome of 1341 writes, among other things: “Then, when the council had gathered, also in the presence of the illustrious and blessed Emperor from God...of the senate and not a few of the most worthy archimandrites and abbots and the representatives of the state...” The three Councils which were convoked in this period, in 1341, 1347 and especially in 1351, on the doctrinal topic that was concerning the Church at that time are regarded as one Council, and they were convoked by order of the Emperors and in their presence.

Then, as we said before, the subject of the uncreated energy of God and what is called hesychasm are serious theological questions. They are not subjects that refer to canonical issues,

but serious dogmatic themes that refer to man's salvation. For if God's energy is created, then we end either in agnosticism or pantheism. We cannot attain communion with God. And if hesychasm, the method of the Orthodox tradition by which we are cured and attain deification, is replaced by philosophy, this too destroys the true preconditions for man's salvation. Therefore these subjects are most serious. This important Council condemned the heresy of the *actus purus*, the identification of the essence of God with His energy, and the introduction of created energies into God. In reality, scholasticism was condemned.

For this reason the Councils of St Gregory Palamas's time should be considered to constitute and compose the Ninth Ecumenical Council. This is because they were called together by the Emperor, they were concerned with a dogmatic issue of great importance, and St Gregory Palamas, who had attained deification and therefore had personal experience of deification, took the lead in them. As a typical example, I would like to refer to the opinion of Father Athanasius Jevtic, who writes:

“But we think that the Council of Constantinople at the time of St Gregory Palamas in 1351, judging at least from its great theological work, can be deservedly counted among the Ecumenical Councils of the Orthodox Church, as it is in no way inferior to them with regard to the soteriological significance of its theology. This Council constitutes the proof of the conciliarity of the Orthodox Church and of living experience and theology concerning salvation in Christ.”

This is also the consciousness of the Church. For this reason ‘The Chapters against Barlaam and Akindynos’ from the Ninth Ecumenical Council, about the victory and triumph of the Orthodox, were added to the Synodikon of Orthodoxy,

which existed already and was read in the Churches. Emperor John Cantacuzene, at the Council of 1351, which was the last Council concerned with this topic, summarised the conclusions of the discussions and decisions, while St Philotheos Kokkinos, then Metropolitan of Heraklia, assisted by George Galisiotis and the wise Maximus, put together the synodical tome from the records. Finally, the hesychastic teaching was inserted into the Synodikon of Orthodoxy for the first time, on the Sunday of Orthodoxy in 1352, with the heretics being anathematised and all who expressed the Orthodox teaching being acclaimed. After the death of St Gregory Palamas acclaim for him was added.

3. Anathemas and acclamations

Anyone who reads the Synodikon of Orthodoxy will discover at once that, on the one hand, the heretics are anathematised and, on the other hand, the holy Fathers and confessors are acclaimed. For the former those present proclaim “Anathema” three times; for the latter the people proclaim “Eternal memory” three times at each proposal.

Some people are scandalised when they see and hear such action, particularly when they hear “Anathema.” They consider it very harsh and say that the spirit of intolerance which the Orthodox Church has is being expressed in this way.

But this is not how things should be interpreted. The anathemas cannot be regarded as philosophical concepts and expressions of intolerance, but as medical actions. First of all, the heretics by the choice which they made ended up in heresy and departed from the teaching of the Church. By using philosophy they opposed themselves to theology and the revelation. In this way they demonstrate that they have fallen sick and in reality are

cut off from the Church. Then excommunication has the meaning of making official the departure of the heretic from the Church. The holy Fathers by this action of theirs confirm the already existing situation, and besides this, they help the Christians to protect themselves from the illness of heresy.

There is a characteristic extract from the records of the fourth session of the Seventh Ecumenical Council. It says there that the holy Fathers fulfil the word of Christ, in order to set the lamp of divine knowledge “on the lampstand” to shine on all those in the house, and not to hide it from them “under a bushel”. In this way those who devoutly confess the Lord are helped to travel unimpeded along the path of salvation. The holy Fathers “expelled every error of the heretics, and if the rotten limb was incurable, they cut it off. With a winnowing-fan they cleansed the threshing-floor. The grain, or the word which nourishes and makes strong the heart of man, they stored up in the granary of the Catholic Church, but the chaff of the heretical wrong teaching they threw out and burned in unquenchable fire.”

Thus the heretics are incurably rotten limbs of the Church and are therefore cut off from the Body of the Church. The heretics must be examined in this light. In this way one can see the Church’s love for mankind. For, as we have emphasised elsewhere as well, when someone employs erroneous medical teaching, there are no therapeutic results, and he cannot be cured. The same is true with dogmas or erroneous teaching. An erroneous teaching which is based on a wrong methodology can never lead man to deification.

It is in this light that we must examine the fact that the anathemas as well as the acclamations refer to particular people, because they are the ones who shape these teachings and as a re-

sult win adherents. And indeed it is characteristic that dreadful epithets are used for the heretics. We must add that the awful epithets which are used must not be examined in a moral sense, but in a theological sense, for many of the leaders of heresies were ‘moral’ men. I shall record a few such epithets and some indicative characterisations.

The iconoclasts who inveighed against the holy icons are called in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy “despisers” of the glory of God, “audacious against the icon and insolent, cowards and fugitives.” Those who started the heresy of iconoclasm, in the time of the Isaurians, are called “sacrilegious and leaders to perdition”. Gerontios is anathematised for “the poison of his abominable heresy...with his perverse dogmas.” Heresy is an illness and heretical dogmatic belief is perverse, because it twists the truth of the revelation of the Church. Anathema is pronounced upon “the gathering that raged against the venerable icons.”

As we said, all the heretics are mentioned in the Synodikon of Orthodoxy. This shows, on the one hand, that all heretics used the same method and in essence coincide with one another, and, on the other hand, that both the Seventh Ecumenical Council and the Ninth Ecumenical Council regard themselves as expressing the Church and as a continuation of the earlier Ecumenical Councils. Arius is called a “fighter against God” and a ringleader of the heresies; Peter the Fuller is called mad. The same characterisation, “mad”, is used of many heretics. Of course they are called mad not in a biological sense, but first and foremost in the theological sense. Barlaam, Akindynos, leaders of the anti-hesychastic teachings, and all their followers are called an “evil gang”. By contrast, for the defenders of the Orthodox teachings such adjectives as “devout”, “most holy”, and

“unforgettable” are used.

Again I must point out that heresy reverses the true method by which people are cured so that they can reach deification. If we think that therapy is purification of the heart and illumination of the nous in order for man to take the path to deification, then we understand that heresy overturns this method and leaves man permanently without a cure, without hope of healing and salvation.