

The Council of Ephesus

Objectives

To learn about the heresies of Nestorius and Belagius and how the church refuted them and defended the faith

References

1. “The Era of Ecumenical Councils (Asr El Magamee)” by Fr. Kyrollos El Antouny
2. Dioceses of the Southern U.S. www.suscopts.org (servants and preservants)
3. “The Nature of Christ” by H.H. Pope Shenouda the 3rd

Scriptural Verse

“For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”

Luke 2:11

St. Basil picked this verse to explain the One Nature of the Only Son

Lesson Guidelines

1. Qualifications of the Ecumenical Council

- Held because of a heresy
- Held by an emperor’s invitation
- Attended by most of the bishops to represent the whole world
- Must issue a Statement of Faith
- Only 3 Ecumenical Councils filled these Criteria
 - The first at Nicea, 325 AD
 - The second at Constantinople, 381 AD
 - The third at Ephesus, 431 AD

2. The Council of Ephesus

A. The Heresy: Against the nature of Christ, the designation of St. Mary as “Theotokos = mother of God” and the need for the grace of God

- Nestorius claimed that Christ has two separate persons; one is divine and above human frailty while the other is human and susceptible to all the weaknesses of the flesh. The divine Christ could not suffer or die and therefore He was not present at the cross. The human Christ alone suffered and died.
- Accordingly he stated that St. Mary carried the human Christ and therefore could not be called “Mother of God” or “Theotokos” but should be called “Mother of Jesus”. He stated that it was impossible for the Virgin to give birth to the Creator because whatever is born of the flesh is flesh and that the relation between the human and divine nature of Christ started after birth.
- Belagius claimed that the sin of Adam is not inherited and that man is born like Adam before the fall and therefore can reach the highest level of sanctity without the grace of God.

B. The Emperor: King Theodosius Junior

- Emperor Theodosius (408 AD), the son of Arkadius, was a faithful Christian.

- He prohibited evil songs and closed down sinful places especially on Sundays and the Lord's Feasts.
- He also brought the relics of St. Augustine and St. John Chrysostom to Antioch.
- Emperor Theodosius had no children so he asked the monks to pray for him and an old monk had a vision that God was preventing him from having a heretic son.

C. The Council of Bishops: (200 attendees)

- Two hundred bishops assembled in the city of Ephesus for the council.
- The council was chaired by H.H. Pope Cyril of Alexandria based on the vote of the attendees who knew him to be a faithful and knowledgeable person. Pope Cyril is called the "Pillar of Faith" because of the forcefulness of his character, his zeal for Orthodoxy and his fruitful writings. Fifty of his bishops as well as Abba Shenouda the Archmandrite and Abba Boctor El Souhagi, abbot of Fao's monastery, accompanied him to the council.
- Nestorius sent a letter stating that he could not attend without Bishop John of Antioch who delayed attending for 16 days.
- Emperor Theodosius did not attend the council but sent a representative who unfortunately was Nestorian and caused many troubles.

D. Resolution of the Council

First Session

- The bishops established the Introduction to the Creed: "We exalt you the mother of the true light..."
- They condemned the heresy of Nestorius, excommunicated and defrocked him as he was the bishop of Constantinople.
- They excommunicated Belagius and condemned his heresy

Note: Nestorius, along with John of Antioch and the Emperor's representative plotted an evil scheme and excommunicated Pope Cyril and Memnon Bishop of Ephesus.

Second Session

- The representatives of Rome attended this session, read the letter of Bishop of Rome and supported Pope Cyril.

Third Session

- The representatives of Rome agreed with the resolutions of the first session and they signed it.

Fourth Session

- The council discussed the deeds of John of Antioch and his bishops. They sent for him twice but he refused to come.

Fifth Session

- The council revoked the excommunication of Pope Cyril and the bishop of Ephesus and they excommunicated John, Bishop of Antioch.

Last session

- All the resolutions were written down, unanimously signed and sent to Emperor Theodosius to be confirmed.

Note: The Emperor made every effort to make peace between the Bishop of Antioch and Pope Cyril. After many discussions John of Antioch agreed with the resolutions of the council of Ephesus.

Conclusion

In Christ, the Divine Nature was united with the Human Nature in the womb of the Virgin. That is why the blessed Elizabeth said: “But why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:43)

This belief was confirmed in the Council of Ephesus and was accepted by all the Apostolic Churches. Through the union of the human nature with the divine nature Christ was able to offer an unlimited sacrifice sufficient for the forgiveness of sins of the whole world throughout the ages.

Activities/Discussion Points

1. Discuss the sentence: “Union without mingling, confusion or alteration”

This is a real union, which does not involve mingling as of wheat and rice nor confusion as of milk and tea nor change as in a chemical reaction. In contrast, no change occurred in the Divine or Human Nature of Christ as a result of their unity but it was a unity that led to oneness of nature.

Example: “the union between iron and fire” (Pope Cyril the Pillar of Faith)

In this union, iron is not changed into fire nor fire into iron but the end result is an ignited iron. Likewise the nature of the Incarnate Logos is One Nature having all the divine characteristics and the human characteristic as well **except** that the union of iron and fire is not permanent.

2. Why is it so important to maintain the title of “Theotokos” for St. Mary, the virgin?

When our Church calls St. Mary “Theotokos”, it confirms that she gave birth to the incarnate Logos although she was not the source of the Divine nature. God the Logos in the fullness of time, descended and filled her and she carried Him who was united with the human nature.

3. Discuss the following Biblical proofs of the One Nature of God

- “Before Abraham was, I AM” John 8: 58
- “No one has ascended to heaven but He who came down from heaven, that is the Son of Man who is in heaven” John 3: 13
- “You denied the Holy One... and killed the Prince of life” Acts 3: 14 - 15
- “Had they known, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory” 1 Corinthians. 2: 8
- “To shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” Acts 20:28
- “I am He who lives, and was dead and behold, I am alive forevermore.” Rev. 1:17-18