

The Seven Councils: An Introduction

I

There are various ways in which to study the Seven Ecumenical Councils. The history, personalities and theological controversies surrounding them are a collective *sine qua non*. Creeds and ensuing controversies, Orthodoxy versus heresy, schism and the quest for unity along with ecclesial and political intrigue and ambition are among the necessary conduits that lead us to a comprehensive appreciation and understanding of these councils. Yet, all of this does not do justice to the importance of these councils if their history and theology are seen apart from the expansion of doctrine, which is necessary if the proclamation of the never changing Gospel of Jesus Christ is to continue. Within their historical context the theology of the seven councils bears witness to the vibrancy and creativity that results from the cooperation of the divine and the human even when among the human *dramatis personae* we encounter the severely flawed.

Because our study of the seven councils will concentrate on the expansion of Christian doctrine, the role of Tradition, which holds a prominent place in how expansion is to be understood, will also have to be explored and explained. Unfortunately, as many are aware, Tradition is one of those slippery words that, when misunderstood and misused, either limits or distorts the proclamation of the Gospel *vis-à-vis* the new and challenging questions posed by modern and post modern society.

The doctrine of the seven councils provides a bedrock of Orthodox theology that cannot be divorced from the proclamation of the Gospel. Christian theology and therefore Christian doctrine are existential in as much as they originate from the encounter with the God-Man Jesus Christ. Doctrine and its historical expansion are not the creation of a new revelation but rather express a living faith – a living experience that grows when guided and nurtured by the Holy Spirit within the

context of history. In other terms the theology accompanying these councils says something not only about God but also about created existence, its fall and redemption. Theology i.e. words about God also speak about the origin and destiny of humanity and all creation.

The doctrines of the seven councils are existential in as much as they provide a lens through which to see, understand and inter-act with reality. The theology of the councils articulates and defends the most fundamental teaching of the Gospel, i.e. God taking on human nature so that humanity might become God by grace. By affirming this reality the seven councils uncompromisingly maintain that the triune and tri-personal God created ex nihilo so as to establish an inextricable relationship with his creation. To threaten this living and eternally growing relationship, to undermine the economy of divine love, i.e. God's care for humanity and all creation, to foster the polarization of matter and spirit, to compromise and limit the activity of the Holy Spirit in history are among the issues taken up by the seven councils.

II

While maintaining their continuity with the past the seven councils simultaneously articulate what cannot be exhausted by human words as the Church sojourns in history. Here the insight of G.L. Prestige is worth reviewing. Focusing on the "central truths" contained in the New Testament, Prestige concisely outlines how they are the culmination of the universal interaction of God and humanity throughout history:

... there remains an essential preliminary revelation in the Old Testament, not to mention what the Fathers called a 'preparatio evangelica' in the best thought of the pagan world, which served to prepare the way of the Gospel. The deepest experiences and noblest convictions of the pre-Christian world pointed towards Christ and God. If that be so, it would be utterly unnatural

for the highest post-Christian experience not to confirm the Gospel in a corresponding degree. In other words, an accretion, enlargement, confirmation of the faith is to be expected and welcomed in the process of transmitting Christian truth; as Hebrew history paved a high-road to Bethlehem and Calvary and Olivet, so subsequent events can and must be theologically interpreted by Christians, as flagstones in the paths that lead down from Gospel truth to the hearts and actions of mankind.¹

What is especially interesting about Prestige's approach to history – or more precisely salvation history – is how the Christ event, and by extension the event of Pentecost, is not confined to the past but continues to reveal itself in new ways throughout the course of history. The seven councils stand out as signposts of the ongoing or expanding revelation of the Gospel. They affirm that the words of Scripture and all of the living Tradition are to be interpreted as the Church exists in time and space. The seven councils confirm that the language of Scripture needs interpretation if the Good News is to remain alive and relevant. Saint Maximus the Confessor, when stressing that the words of Scripture are able to transcend their own historical context when one is engaged in the ascetical life, helps to illustrate this point.

If the words of God are uttered merely as verbal expressions, and their message is not rooted in the virtuous way of life of those who utter them, they will not be heard...Just as God in His essence cannot be the object of man's spiritual knowledge, so not even His teaching can be fully embraced by our understanding. For though Holy Scripture, being restricted chronologically to the times of the events which it records, is limited where the letter is concerned, yet in spirit it always remains unlimited as regards the contemplation of intelligible realities.²

¹ Fathers and Heretics, London, SPCK, 1968, p.2.

² Second Century On Theology, the Divine Economy, Virtue and Vice, 91 and 92.

By no means is Maximus an advocate for interpreting Scripture by ignoring its historical moorings. However, he does imply that if the Scripture is only understood from within its historical context its “words” become incapable of revealing and commenting on other realities beyond the parameters of a particular point in history. This brings us to what I refer to as the conciliar hermeneutic of Scripture.

Without exaggeration, the seven councils hold an important place in the canon of biblical exegesis. The study of the councils is a study of Scripture. Delving into the theology of the councils presupposes delving into the Bible. Unless the two function as a whole within the living Tradition the Scripture risks becoming a text used to support and promote theologies that in the end compromise and ultimately distort the reality of God, humanity and the rest of creation. Through a conciliar hermeneutic the word of Scripture maintains its inexhaustible content that in turn ensures that the Tradition of the Church remains ever dynamic and ever expanding.

Yet within the dynamic and ever expanding Tradition we encounter a paradox relative to the unchangeable nature of dogma. On the one hand no dogmatic formula can exhaust the reality of God and his creation. On the other hand, in confronting heresy, δόγμα defined as decision, decree, fixed belief, ordinance or precept (also opinion) stands immutable.

Unlike many who misinterpret dogma to mean something inflexible, and exhaustive, its primary thrust is towards catholicity – towards a fullness of knowledge and experience that are inexhaustible. Therefore, dogma as an expression of Catholicity stands opposed to heresy. Christos Yannaras concisely describes this opposition.

The heretics absolutized just one aspect of the experiential certainty of the Church and so inevitably relativized all the others... Classical examples in history are *Nestorianism* and *monophysitism*. The first absolutized the humanity of Christ, the second his divinity. And in both cases, they relativized and finally destroyed the one entire truth of the incarnation of God, of the

God-manhood of Christ. Nestorianism preached an ethical model of a perfect man, monophysitism an abstract idea of a fleshless God

He goes on to say that,

the first designation that was given to what today we call dogma was a *definition*, that is a limit, a boundary of truth. Today's 'dogmas' were the definitions of the Ecumenical Councils – those theoretical decisions which formulated the truth of the Church, fixing a *border* between this truth and its corruption by heresy.³

Consequently, the inflexibility of dogma stands as an unchanging witness in the face of heresy. Nevertheless, dogma remains open to expansion through further articulation and clarification. Prestige maintains that there

is a true sense in which the Christian faith, without losing its integrity or its intensity, may be enlarged in breadth and relevancy as it is transmitted down the ages.⁴

Florovsky complements Prestige by stressing that

The truth is given in effect, once and for all. But the apprehension of the truth is progressive. What develops throughout the ages of Christian existence is not the truth itself, but the witness of the Church to that truth. Fidelity to the truth, revealed once and for all, is not compromised by what St. Gregory of Nazianzus called 'the creation of new terms' (καινοτομεῖν τὰ ὀνόματα), which was necessary precisely for protecting and guarding the identity of the faith.⁵

³ Elements Of Faith, T&T Clark, Edinburgh, 1991, pp.15, 16.

⁴ Op. Cit. p. 5

⁵ Le Corps Du Christ Vivant, p.45.

III

From new insights and ideas comes new language that continues to expand the one, catholic and apostolic faith. Here it must be stressed that expansion cannot be understood as a mere mechanical or systematic repetition of ideas and concepts of the past. Through the Spirit, Christ the immutable truth is present now as in the past. And yet, the circumstances or rather the challenges of “now” allow for an unveiling of another facet or facets of the catholic faith unique to our time. This unveiling does not alter the truth but rather reveals its catholic nature as always new and alive. For the dialectic of the one catholic truth to be lived and expressed throughout history each generation must grapple with the issues of its day.

In Christ and in the communion of the Holy Spirit, the catholicity of the Church is already given. The catholicity of the Body is determined by the Master and the Comforter. Nevertheless, catholicity always remains a problem to be resolved for each new generation, for each local community and for each of the faithful.⁶

Each of the seven councils deals with the issues emerging from the theology/theologies of their day. Witnessing to the one truth who is Christ, these councils provide a basis – a composite basis – from which to approach the theology/theologies of our day. They provide us with the foundation upon which to “resolve” the inexhaustible catholic teaching and experience of the Church for our generation. The decisions of these councils are both a guide and impetus for the Church to navigate the uncharted and choppy waters of modern and postmodern culture.

Yet, we must also recognize that as guides they are limited as to how far they can take us given the religious, intellectual, artistic, scientific and political issues of our day. In our time we are confronted with challenges and questions that the Fathers of the seven councils had no knowledge of. Furthermore, it has been pointed out that after the

⁶ Georges Florovsky, *op. Cit.* p. 31

conversion of Constantine and the emergence of the Christian empire the fathers were unable to apprehend the idea that within its historical context the Church was in the process of becoming. Consequently, development or, for our purposes, the expansion of doctrine would not figure into the patristic mindset. G.L. Prestige comments about what could be referred to as an intellectual and spiritual limitation.

The Fathers did not distinguish very clearly between practices which were really primitive and others of somewhat later introduction. They had little or none of the modern sense of evolutionary development and saw no reason for a clear-cut separation in thought between the character of an institution in its rudimentary germ and that of the same institution in a fully developed form. Their expositions of cultural history are therefore not reliable; they always need to be checked.”⁷

Studying the seven councils and reflecting on their contribution to the proclamation of the Gospel help the Church, through its faithful, to live and speak in new and compelling ways to draw the world into the life in Christ. Studying the seven councils, as with the study of theology in general, is not a matter of archaeology but an ascetical ordeal in which we seek to open the mind and heart to the Holy Spirit who draws us into the catholic experience of the living body of Christ. From the time of our baptism we have been called to be bearers of the Spirit (πνευματοφόροι) and not fighters of the Spirit (πνευματομάχοι). May our humble endeavor be motivated by a desire to have the Holy Spirit come and abide in us.

Father Robert M. Arida

⁷ Op. Cit. p. 15.