The Letter of the Synod to the Emperor and Empress

Council of Nicaea (AD 787) (AD 787)

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(Labbe and Cossart, Concilia, Tom. VII., col. 577.) To our most religious and most serene princes, Constantine and Irene his mother. Tarasius, the unworthy bishop of your God-protected royal city, new Rome, and all the holy Council which met at the good pleasure of God and upon the command of your Christ-loving majesty in the renowned metropolis of Nice, the second council to assemble in this city. Christ our God (who is the head of the Church) was glorified, most noble princes, when your heart, which he holds in his hands, gave forth that good word bidding us to assemble in his name, in order that we might strengthen our hold on the sure, immovable, and God-given truth contained in the Church's dogmas. As your heads were crowned with gold and most brilliant stones, so likewise were your minds adorned with the precepts of the Gospel and the teachings of the Fathers. And being the disciples and companions, as it were, of those whose sounds went forth into all the earth, ye became the leaders in the way of piety of all who bore the name of Christ, setting forth clearly the word of truth, and giving a brilliant example of orthodoxy and piety; so that ye were to the faithful as so many burning lamps. The Church which was ready to fall, ye upheld with your hands, strengthening it with sound doctrine, and bringing into the unity of a right judgment those who were at variance. We may therefore well say with boldness that it was through you that the good pleasure of God brought about the triumph of godliness, and filled our mouth with joy and our tongue with gladness. And these things our lips utter with a formal decree. For what is more glorious than to maintain the Church's interests; and what else is more calculated to provoke our gladness?

Certain men rose up, having the form of godliness, inasmuch as they were clothed with the dignity of the priesthood, but denying the power thereof; and thus deserving for themselves the charge of being but priests of Babylon. Of such the word of prophecy had before declared that "lawlessness went forth from the priests of Babylon. Nay more, they banded themselves together in a sanhedrim, like to that which Caiaphas held, and became the propagators of ungodly doctrines. And having a mouth full of cursing and bitterness, they thought to win the mastery by means of abusive words. With a slanderous tongue and a pen of a like character, and objecting to the very terms used by God himself, they devised marvellous tales, and then proceeded to stigmatise as idolaters the royal priesthood and the holy nation,

even those who had put on Christ, and by his grace had been kept safe from the folly of idols. And having a mind set upon evil, they took in hand unlawful deeds, thinking to suppress altogether the depicting of the venerable images. Accordingly, as many icons as were set in mosaic work they dug out, and those which were in painted waxwork, they scraped away; thus turning the comely beauty of the sacred temples into complete disorder. Among doings of this sort, it is to be specially noted that the pictures set up on tablets in memory of Christ our God and of his Saints, they gave over to the flames.

Finally, in a word, having desecrated our churches, they reduced them to utter confusion. Then some bishops became the leaders of this heresy and where before was peace, they fomented strife among the people; and instead of wheat sowed tares in the Church's fields. They mingled wine with water, and gave the foul draught to those about them. Although but Arabian wolves, they hid themselves under sheeps' clothing, and by specious reasoning against the truth sought to commend their lie. But all the while "they hatched asps' eggs and wove a spider's web," as says the prophet; and "he that would eat of their eggs, having crushed one, found it to be addled, with a basilisk within it," and giving forth a deadly stench.

In such a state of affairs, with a lie busy destroying the truth, ye, most gracious and most noble princes, did not idly allow so grave a plague, and such soul-destroying error long to continue in your day. But moved by the divine Spirit which abideth in you, ye set yourselves with all your strength utterly to exterminate it, and thus preserve the stability of the Church's government, and likewise concord among your subjects; so that your whole empire might be established in peace agreeably with the name [Irene] you bear. Ye rightly reasoned, that it was not to be patiently endured, that while in other matters we could be of one mind and live in concord, yet in what ought to be the chief concern of our life, the peace of the Churches, there was amongst us strife and division. And that too, when Christ being our head, we ought to be members one of another, and one body, by our mutual agreement and faith. Accordingly, ye commanded our holy and numerously-attended council to assemble in the metropolis of Nice, in order that after having rid the Church of division, we might restore to unity the separated members, and might be careful to rend and utterly destroy the coarse cloak of false doctrine, which they had woven of thorn fibre, and unfold again the fair robe of orthodoxy.

And now having carefully traced the traditions of the Apostles and Fathers, we are bold to speak. Having but one mind by the inbreathing of the most Holy Spirit, and being all knit together in one, and understanding the harmonious tradition of the Catholic Church, we are in perfect harmony with the symphonies set forth by the six, holy and ecumenical councils; and accordingly we have anathematised the madness of Arius, the frenzy of Macedonius, the senseless understanding of Appolinarius, the man-worship of Nestorius, the irreverent mingling of the natures devised by Eutyches and Dioscorus, and the many-headed hydra which is their companion. We have also anathematised the idle tales of Origen, Didymus, and Evagrius; and the doctrine of one will held by Sergius, Honorius, Cyrus, and Pyrrhus, or

rather, we have anathematised their own evil will. Finally, taught by the Spirit, from whom we have drawn pure water, we have with one accord and one soul, altogether wiped out with the sponge of the divine dogmas the newly devised heresy, well-worthy to be classed with those just mentioned, which springing up after them, uttered such empty nonsense about the sacred icons. And the contrivers of this vain, but revolutionary babbling we have cast forth far from the Church's precincts.

And as the hands and feet are moved in accordance with the directions of the mind, so likewise, we, having received the grace and strength of the Spirit, and having also the assistance and co-operation of your royal authority, have with one voice declared as piety and proclaimed as truth: that the sacred icons of our Lord Jesus Christ are to be had and retained, inasmuch as he was very man; also those which set forth what is historically narrated in the Gospels; and those which represent our undefiled Lady, the holy Mother of God; and likewise those of the Holy Angels (for they have manifested themselves in human form to those who were counted worthy of the vision of them), or of any of the Saints.[We have also decreed] that the brave deeds of the Saints be pourtrayed on tablets and on the walls, and upon the sacred vessels and vestments, as hath been the custom of the holy Catholic Church of God from ancient times; which custom was regarded as having the force of law in the teaching both of those holy leaders who lived in the first ages of the Church, and also of their successors our reverend Fathers. [We have likewise decreed] that these images are to be reverenced (proskunein), that is, salutations are to be offered to them. The reason for using the word is, that it has a two-fold signification. For kunein in the old Greek tongue signifies both "to salute" and "to kiss.

And the preposition proj gives to it the additional idea of strong desire towards the subject; as for example, we have ferw and prosferw, kurw and proskurw, and so also we havekunew and proskunew. Which last word implies salutation and strong love; for that which one loves he also reverences (proskunei) and what he reverences that he greatly loves, as the everyday custom, which we observe towards those we love, bears witness, and in which both ideas are practically illustrated when two friends meet together. The word is not only made use of by us, but we also find it set down in the Divine Scriptures by the ancients. For it is written in the histories of the Kings, "And David rose up and fell upon his face and did reverence to (prosekunhse) Jonathan three times and kissed him" (1 Kings xx., 41). And what is it that the Lord in the Gospel says concerning the Pharisees? "They love the uppermost rooms at feasts and greetings (aspasmouj) in the markets. It is evident that by "greetings" here, he means reverence (prosekunhsin) for the Pharisees being very high-minded and thinking themselves to be righteous were eager to be reverenced by all, but not [merely] to be kissed. For to receive salutations of this latter sort savoured too much of lowly humility, and this was not to the Pharisees' liking. We have also the example of Paul the divine Apostle, as Luke in the Acts of the Apostles relates:

"When we were come to Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly, and the day following Paul went in with us unto James, and all the presbyters were present. And when he had

saluted (aspasamenoj) them, he declared particularly what things God had wrought among the Gentiles by his ministry" (Acts xxi., 17, 18, 19). By the salutation here mentioned, the Apostle evidently intended to render that reverence of honour (timhtikhn proskunhsin) which we shew to one another, and of which he speaks when he says concerning Jacob, that "he reverenced (prosekunhsen) the top of his staff" (Heb. xi., 21). With these examples agrees what Gregory surnamed Theologus says: "Honour Bethlehem, and reverence (proskunhson) the manger."

Now who of those rightly and sincerely understanding the Divine Scriptures, has ever supposed that these examples which we have cited speak of the worship in spirit (thj en pneumati latreiaj)? [Certainly no one has ever thought so] except perhaps some persons utterly bereft of sense and ignorant of all knowledge of the Scriptures and of the teaching of the Fathers. Surely Jacob did not adore (elatreusen) the top of his staff;and surely Gregory Theologus does not bid us to adore (latreuein) the manger? By no means.

Again, when offering salutations to the life-giving Cross, we together sing: "We reverence (proskunwmen), thy cross, O Lord, and we also reverence (proskunwmen) the spear which opened the life-giving side of thy goodness." This is clearly but a salutation, and is so called, and its character is evinced by our touching the things mentioned with our lips. We grant that the word proskunhsij is frequently found in the Divine Scriptures and in the writings of our learned and holy Fathers for the worship in spirit (epi thj en pneumati latreiaj), since, being a word of many significations, it may be used to express that kind of reverence which is service. As there is also the veneration of honour, love and fear. In this sense it is, that we venerate your glorious and most noble majesty. So also there is another veneration which comes of fear alone, thus Jacob venerated Esau. Then there is the veneration of gratitude, as Abraham reverenced the sons of Heth, for the field which he received from them for a burying place for Sarah his wife. And finally, those looking to obtain some gift, venerate those who are above them, as Jacob venerated Pharaoh. Therefore because this term has these many significations, the Divine Scriptures teaching us, "Thou shalt venerate the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve," says simply that veneration is to be given to God, but does not add the word "only;" for veneration being a word of wide meaning is an ambiguous term; but it goes on to say "thou shalt serve (latreuseij) him only," for to God alone do we render latria.

The things which we have decreed, being thus well supported, it is confessedly and beyond all question acceptable and well-pleasing before God, that the images of our Lord Jesus Christ as man, and those of the undefiled Mother of God, the ever-virgin Mary, and of the honourable Angels and of all Saints, should be venerated and saluted. And if anyone does not so believe, but undertakes to debate the matter further and is evil affected with regard to the veneration due the sacred images, such an one our holy ecumenical council (fortified by the inward working of the Spirit of God, and by the traditions of the Fathers and of the Church) anathematises. Now anathema is nothing less than complete separation from God. For if any are quarrelsome and will not obediently accept what has now been decreed,

they but kick against the pricks, and injure their own souls in their fighting against Christ. And in taking pleasure at the insults which are offered to the Church, they clearly shew themselves to be of those who madly make war upon piety, and are therefore to be regarded as in the same category with the heretics of old times, and their companions and brethren in ungodliness.

We have sent our brethren and fellow priests, God-beloved Bishops, together with certain of the Hegumenoi and clergy, that they may give a full report of our proceedings to your godly-hearing ears. In proof and confirmation of what we have decreed,and also for the assurance of your most religious majesty, we have submitted proofs from the Fathers, a few of the many wehave gathered together in illustration of the brightly shining truth. And now may the Saviour of us all, who reigns with you (sumbasileuwn umin) and who was pleased to vouchsafe his peace to the Churches through you, preserve your kingdom for many years, and also your council, princes, and faithful army, and the whole estate of the empire; and may he also give you victory over all your enemies. For he it is, who says: "As I live, saith the Lord, they that glorify me, I will glorify." He it is also who hath girded you with strength, and will smite all your enemies, and make your people to rejoice.

And do thou, O city, the new Sion, rejoice and be glad; thou that art the wonder of the whole world. For although David hath not reigned in thee, nevertheless thy pious princes here preside over thy affairs as David would have done. The Lord is in the midst of thee; may his name be blessed forever and even Amen.

Source. English translation: an older public-domain translation as collected in the Writings-Database (HistoricalChristianFaith), mostly from the Ante-Nicene, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers and similar nineteenth-century editions. SermonIndex has only divided it into chapters and short sections; the wording is the translator's own. Square brackets, Greek or Latin words and footnote-free text are as the source file prints them, and a transcription error may remain. No Greek or Latin text is shown beside it yet, and no modern English version has been made.