

THE HOLY MOTHER OF GOD: THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS AND MARY

At just 48 years of age, Emperor Theodosius died of severe edema in early 395 A.D. He was the last sole emperor of the Roman Empire. Henceforth, the empire would be split into East and West, headquartered in Constantinople and Milan respectively. The differences between the two were significant. Despite his personal failings, **Theodosius** enthusiastically supported **orthodox** Catholic belief about Jesus. The issues around Mary's title may be summarized as a major dispute between two schools of thought, Alexandria (Egypt) and Antioch (near the Turkish-Syrian border today). Patriarch **Nestorius** of Constantinople asked the Emperor (**not** the pope) to call a Council, believing that **his own views** would be vindicated. He was in for a **rude awakening**. Nestorius, a monk who in 428 A.D. became the Archbishop of Constantinople, truly desired to **protect the divinity** of Jesus. While his intentions were noble enough, his theology was seriously flawed.

Nestorius taught that Mary was the mother of the **human nature** of Jesus only; thus, to call her *Theotokos* (lit. "God bearer") was incorrect. He could not distinguish between *person* and *nature*. We believe that Jesus Christ is a divine person with two natures. Just **semantics**, you say? Not really. The concept of *person* answers to the question "Who?" The concept of *nature* answers to "What?" Distinctions matter. Mary gave birth to the Son of God, the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, who took upon Himself a human nature. There is only one divine Person, who is both God and man. Did Nestorius deny the "of the same substance" (*homoousios*) of the Creed? No, not especially. But he **misused** it. He saw "divinity" as incapable of suffering. So, only a human nature died on the Cross. And yet, the Church Fathers did not hesitate to speak of the holy Virgin as the Mother of God.

The Council fathers at **Ephesus** answered: "We do not say that his flesh was turned into the nature of the godhead or that the unspeakable Word of God was changed into the nature of the flesh...we do not **divide him into parts** and separate man and God in him, as though the two natures were mutually united only through a unity of dignity and authority...but we know **only one** Christ, the Word from God the Father with his own flesh." (emphasis added) Saints in the early church defended this traditional understanding. St. Ignatius of Antioch declared: "Our God, Jesus Christ, was carried in Mary's womb." (*Letter to the Ephesians* #53, 110 AD) St. Gregory Nazianzus boldly declared (late 4th c.), "If anyone does not recognize the Holy Mary as the Mother of God, he is separated from God" (Letter 101, 4). Seems pretty clear to me.

In the end, the formal definition of Ephesus was succinctly stated in just one sentence, and in negative form: "If anyone does not confess that the Emmanuel [Christ] in truth is God, and that on this account the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God (Theotokos)—since according to the flesh she brought forth the Word of God made flesh—let him be anathema." Mary is the Mother of God because she is the Mother of Jesus Christ, in whose **one divine Person** the nature of man and the nature of God are inseparably united. Mary did not bestow upon her Son His **divine** nature, any more than any other mother gives her child the soul as well as the body. The soul is always created **directly by God**. Such controversies demonstrate how the **Church struggled** to articulate her doctrine—decent people honestly formulating theories that did not always agree.

Sometimes sheer ecclesial politics gets in the way of common sense. Many are surprised to learn that with respect to the Blessed Mother, **Martin Luther** himself accepted the phrase "mother of God"; he did not object on this point. In commenting on the Nestorian controversy, writing: "We too know very well that God did not derive his divinity from Mary; but it does not follow that it is

therefore wrong to say that God was born of Mary, that God is Mary's Son, and that Mary is God's mother." (*Luther's Works*, 41:97). The recognition of **doctrinal differences** in some areas ought not preclude agreement in others. But in truth, the term "mother of God" has been so associated with Catholics, that our protestant brothers and sisters, even if they do not disagree, prefer to avoid it. It has effectively become a Catholic and Eastern Orthodox term, and needlessly so.

Ephesus itself was not without its own controversy, with differing groups of bishops wanting to start the council before others arrived. That's certainly one way to handle controversy—begin before your adversaries arrive! Pope Celestine sent **legates**, though they arrived late to the party! The legates agreed with **Cyril of Alexandria** (Nestorius' theological nemesis!), thus cementing the Roman view of the question. Cyril's corrective letters to Nestorius were deemed so compelling that they were essentially adopted as the Council's own common text. In the end, a much clearer teaching concerning Mary emerged, one that has stood the test of time. But it was tough sledding to get there. After Ephesus, Marian devotion flourished. Churches sprang up in her honor, including the major basilica of **St. Mary Major** in Rome, commissioned by Pope Celestine himself.

- Talk about a modern-day Grinch! Apparently, "**cancel culture**" has even reached **Dr. Suess** books. Looks like the cat's got my tongue—I'm speechless. Dr. Suess himself perhaps said it best, "They say I'm old-fashioned, and live in the past, but sometimes I think progress progresses too fast!" Amen, good doctor, Amen!
- A moment of respite in the midst of Lent. Join us **today (Sunday)** at **3:00 p.m.** for a special organ recital by **Dr. Christopher Ganza**. He will be performing Charles-Marie Widor's 6th symphony for organ. Dr. Ganza describes it as an epic journey from darkness into light. The recital is free and open to the public.
- Batter up! My baseball card auction benefitting the **Aim Higher Foundation** continues until 8:00 p.m. tonight. AHF provides \$1000 scholarships to children attending Catholic grade schools. Even if you are not a card collector, I encourage you to view the auction **online here**, where there is an opportunity to support AHF.
- We continue to hear **confessions daily** from **3:45-5:00 p.m.** and encourage your reception of the sacrament before Easter. See page 6 for the Holy Week Liturgy and confession schedule.
- A special Mass is being held on the Solemnity of St. Joseph, **Friday March 19 at 6:00 p.m.** It follows immediately after the 5:30 p.m. Stations of the Cross. As it is a solemnity, the usual Lenten Friday **abstinence is not in force** this year. We ask those (myself included) who are preparing to make their consecration to Saint Joseph to attend this Mass. The 7:30 a.m. Mass takes place as usual.
- There remain just **nine** (out of 2625) **living** bishops who attended one or more sessions of Vatican Council II. It ended more than 20,000 days ago. That's 55+ years! The end of an era is approaching.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector