

TWO CONTINENTS, TWO NATURES– ONE FAITH : CHRIST AND CHALCEDON

Finally, the controversies about the divinity of Jesus had died down by the time the 4th ecumenical Council was held in 451 A.D. at Chalcedon. But as if often the case, as soon as one dispute is put to bed, another erupts. Granted, **Chalcedon** is hardly a household name. The ancient city was located just across the **Bosporus River** from Constantinople (see map). Ancient Chalcedon is known today as Kadıköy, and is considered a district of Istanbul, a sprawling metropolis of 15 million residents. And yet, technically it is located in a **different continent!** Geographers tell us that the **river** is the demarcation line between Europe and Asia. So **ancient** Chalcedon is located in Asia! Its land was judged to be inferior– the modern-day equivalent of living on the “other side of the tracks.” It was nicknamed the “town of the blind,” which says all you need to know. Why would anyone settle there?

Still, what occurred on this less than desirable ancient maritime peninsula was arguably one of the Church’s most **triumphant moments** for clarifying and codifying Catholic doctrine. If you caught a train today at the ornate Ottoman-era **Haydarpassa Rail Station**, scholars believe you likely would be standing atop the ruins of the ancient church of **St. Euphemia**, site of this council. If this were Italy, its ruins would have been unearthed and turned into a museum– train station or not! More than **500 bishops** convened at St. Euphemia in Chalcedon on **October 8, 451**. They came from all directions. The provinces in the west were occupied by the invasion of the likes of Attila the Hun, but papal legates were dispatched. Though **absent** in person, Pope Leo’s presence was **very much felt** through the reading of his famous “Tome,” amongst the most **brilliant papal documents** ever. That’s why he’s St. Leo the Great!

Floating around in the mid-5th century was the belief that Jesus had only **one** nature– **divine**. Thus, his true humanity was downplayed, as if he only acted in a human manner for our sake. Emperor Marcian saw the danger in such division amongst the people. The Council produced a simply **magnificent** “Definition of Faith” that is required reading by every theology student. We **poured over it** in the seminary– I remember! It’s just that clear and concise– a “mic drop” moment before there ever was one. In it, Chalcedon **referred to itself** as “the sacred and great and ecumenical council.” Before you think the folks were a wee bit haughty (“Make Chalcedon Great Again!”), be careful. They knew **exactly** what they were doing. “Ecumenical” became a technical term– the idea of a broad gathering of bishops from all corners. It was seen as an extraordinary gathering, called to address issues much weightier than any local gathering.

Not every council called by an Emperor was deemed ecumenical. But this one was! The controversy was traced to a monk named **Eutyches**. Gee, those poor monks caused their fair share of troubles in the early days. In truth, Eutyches was a **staunch defender** of traditional teaching about **Mary** as “Mother of God” at Ephesus (last week’s column). Fast forward twenty years, and now he was in the **hot seat!** He posited that Christ had only one nature (*physis*), which was both human and divine. Pope Leo actually was against calling a council. He felt that for individual bishops to sign on to the traditional faith was sufficient– i.e., don’t open a can of worms! But a **can of worms** they got! So, Leo reminded them that “...the evil one never stops trying to smother the seeds of religion with his own tares and is forever inventing some novelty or other against the truth.”

For Eutyches, Christ’s body was that of God’s. Initially two natures existed– after being united in the person of Christ, **only one remained**. Hint: it wasn’t the human one! Think about the implications. If Jesus really only had a divine nature, then the Garden of Gethsemane (“Father, let

this cup pass”) appears little more than play acting, a divine drama in which Jesus plays the part of a man. To be blunt, Leo called Eutyches’ thinking “very rash and extremely ignorant”. The Council fathers took the contributions of Pope Leo very seriously; his letter held sway. In the end, the Council issued this formal definition: “So, following the saintly fathers, we all with one voice teach the confession of one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same **truly God and truly man**, of a rational soul and a body; consubstantial with the Father as regards his divinity, and the same consubstantial with us as regards his humanity.” (emphasis added)

Wisely, the Council also characterized the addition to the Nicene Creed discussed in last week’s column as a “seal,” thereby avoiding the **awkward** discussion as to whether they violated the **prohibition** of Ephesus to **add** anything to the Creed. Finally, the Council added 30 disciplinary decrees (canons). This too caused a stir. Canon #28 decreed that a **special prerogative** ought to be attached to the See of Constantinople. It should “take second place after her” (i.e., Rome). The Roman legates rejected this— there was **no justification** for it, and Pope Leo refused to recognize it. Once again, papal authority indicates that the See of Rome was not merely first among equals, but had a **unique primacy**, based upon the role of St. Peter. In all respects, Chalcedon was a most consequential council.

- It was fascinating to watch the Holy Father arrive at the **Plains of Ur** near the Euphrates River. It is believed to be the birthplace of Abraham. Viewing the **6000-year-old ruins** on Google earth is sobering— to describe it as a desert somehow does not do it justice. Yet, here is where Abraham received his call, a call to peace and promise of prosperity. That call is now our responsibility, as the Pope rightly noted.
- Perhaps you have noticed the **increased** seating capacity in Church. **Every other pew** is now open for worship. As we slowly move back to normalcy, **it remains key** that you continue to spread out, especially on the Dayton Ave. side. Thank you for walking the extra distance from the parking lot! This is the best way to **maximize capacity** as Easter approaches and **avoid** the need for a sign-up system.
- One of the most beautiful churches I have ever visited is receiving a needed facelift. **Mission San Carlos Borromeo in Carmel, CA** just received a \$1.8 million grant in preparation for its **250th anniversary**. California mission founder St. Junipero Serra is buried here. It is deserving of this needed updating, given 300,000 annual visitors.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector

