

## A SAD (THREE) CHAPTER(S) IN HISTORY: CONSTANTINOPLE II- A MIXED BAG

For those who prefer their Church history bundled in neat and tidy parcels, you may wish to skip this week's installment of my series on the early ecumenical councils. Following the triumph of Catholic doctrine promulgated at Chalcedon, the next council was much less significant and frankly, rather disappointing. **Constantinople II** (553 A.D.) issued just a single decree entitled "**The Three Chapters.**" Therein, various writings of three authors were condemned **posthumously**, a full century **after** they died, when they were in no position to explain themselves. The decree was aimed largely at populations within the region who were still clinging to the notion that Jesus had just one nature, called **Monophysites**. It even sounds eerie! The edict confused many in the Church because parts of the condemned writings were in fact considered orthodox. But in truth, it is a **fine** theological **distinction** that persists even to this day.

**Coptic** Orthodox in Egypt and **Ethiopian** Orthodox are amongst the most ancient Christian communities that retain an historical link to this belief. Today, they prefer to use a different (less "loaded") term, attaching the label "non-Chalcedonian," meaning they diverge from that doctrine. Instead, they hold that both divinity and humanity are **equally present** within a single nature in the person of Christ. Yes, indeed— in theology, lots of time I spent thrashing about in the weeds! But it was a serious issue in its day, and I will enthusiastically defend the **need for precision** any day of the week. Doctrine matters! A question remaining after Chalcedon concerned **how** the two perfect **natures** of Christ **were united** in the one person of Christ. I fully acknowledge that **many good Catholics** have never even asked the question, nor must they!

Emperor Justinian hoped a Council would clarify the Council of Chalcedon against misinterpretations— to get everyone on the same theological page, so to speak. Good luck! Whether it was fair to condemn *in absentia* someone who died a century before is certainly open to vigorous debate. The pope at the time vacillated and was too easily bowed to pressure. To his credit, **Pope Vigilius**, while certainly condemning certain propositions of a theological nature, refused to tarnish the memory of those unable to speak in their own defense. The pope merely wanted the controversy to pass by, citing poor health as his reason for not attending. The obvious lesson is that **avoiding** conflict often makes it **worse!** While unthinkable today that a **secular ruler** would convene a Church Council, these were different times. The separation between Church and state was not on anyone's radar then, and Justinian never attended in person anyway.

The Council took place in the Great Hall attached to **Hagia Sophia**, the magnificent Byzantine Church built by **Justinian** and about which I have written, now reverted to a **mosque**. The church in Egypt was drifting into this belief that Jesus Christ effectively had a single (divine) nature. By condemning the writings of three supporters of Nestorius (who had imposed a radical separation, such that Mary was only the mother of Jesus' "human" nature), the emperor felt that he could **nudge certain folks** towards the doctrine codified at Chalcedon. Emperor Justinian was convinced that those sympathetic to the view that Jesus had but one nature (i.e., divine) could be **won over** by attaching their names to the condemnation by pope and emperor alike of three writers long dead, who had been accused of some questionable teachings about Mary. One might say this is a prime example of the **proverb**, "The enemy of an enemy is a friend."

As an example of the **clarification** the council offered, I cite a portion of Canon 3: "If anyone declares that the [Word] of God who works miracles is not identical with the Christ who suffered... and that the miracles and the sufferings which he voluntarily underwent in the flesh were not of

the same person: let him be **anathema**.” But the desired effect never happened, and **two schools of thought** remained about how best to understand the person and natures of Jesus Christ. [Parenthetically, I see a slight parallel with the recent Vatican clarification about the blessing of same-sex unions. People intuit that this clarification, which contains nothing new, was released because of the **drifting** of the Church in Germany on this topic.] Councils and condemnations often were intended to draw straying sheep back to the fold. This one had very mixed results.

Lest you think I am the proverbial skunk at the garden party, some good emerged from this council. One significant contribution of Constantinople II was a **beautiful statement** on the need for **open and honest dialogue** in the Church about **contentious** issues. They wrote: “The holy fathers, who have gathered at intervals in the four holy councils, have followed the examples of antiquity. They dealt with heresies and current problems by debate in common, since it was established as certain that when the disputed question is set out by each side in communal discussions, the light of truth drives out the shadows of lying.” We desperately need the “light of truth” to drive out any shadows of doubt and error. Every age has its controversies, and each generation needs the guidance of the Holy Spirit to provide needed clarity. Such clarity did not come about easily!

- I never thought almsgiving could be so fun. Ever since collecting my nickels and dimes for the CRS Rice Bowl project in the early 1970’s, **almsgiving during Lent** has been an annual staple. But nothing has compared to the **joy** I experienced this Lent while trying to support scholarships for our Catholic Grade school students. As I packaged and mailed the baseball cards to the winning bidders, my heart was overjoyed. **No regrets** at all— in fact, I learned a valuable **lesson in spiritual detachment!**
- “Zero bottles of beer on the wall, zero bottles...” When the last two monks left **Achel Abbey** in Belgium, the brewery ceased using the label “Trappist” beer to describe its products. Strict rules guarantee the authenticity of Trappist products: brewing **within the confines** of a monastery; under the direction of the **monks**; production limited to the costs of monastic preservation (i.e., to financially sustain the monastery). Worldwide, there now remain thirteen monasteries that produce their own brew.
- No fooling—for the second year in a row, the Archdiocesan **Chrism Mass** takes place on Holy Thursday morning, its traditional place in the calendar. It takes place **Thursday, April 1 at 10:00 a.m.** We priests simply **love** this Mass, as we witness the blessing of the oils and recommit ourselves to our priestly promise. All are invited.
- My 2021 **Minnesota Twins** baseball prediction will arrive at the same time (hint to the Easter bunny!) as my Easter basket— next Sunday. Still pondering the landscape! I’ll predict this much now—I can’t wait to get back into a **real stadium**, regardless of how many fans are allowed!
- I hope you can participate in as much of Holy Week as possible. A full schedule is included. I also invite your support of the **Easter Flower Fund** and the **Communal Mass Intentions**. Envelopes are on the tables by the four piers.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,  
Rector