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The Reception of Councils

A paper presented by His Holiness, while he was the Archbishop Mor Severios Zakka,
at the Pro Oriente consultation.

Introduction

For a complete understanding of this subject, we have to know the authority of the councils and the executive power of their decisions. Saint Athanasius (c. 296-373) said: "The council of Nicaea (325) had pronounced the word of God, and it is existing for ever."¹ The decisions of the councils according to the custom of the ecclesiastical Fathers, were not merely a code of creed or a collection of educational orders, but they are the decrees of God and God Himself is their supreme law maker.

The Doctors of canon law have agreed that "If the right of making a law was confirmed to a law maker, then it is confirmed for the subordinates of his subjects the right of the obligation to obey these laws, because both rights are inseparable; and to trespass any true law, being compulsory obligatory in the mind, is a sin. The power of such a legal law is known as the power of an administrative law."²

It is clear that God had granted the apostles and their successors an authority in the church³ to teach the faithful, therefore they are the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth.⁴ The Lord had ordered them saying: "Teach them to observe all that I have commanded you, and be assured, I am with you always, to the end of the time."⁵ Then he sent them the Holy Spirit, to stay with them for ever,⁶ and to teach them everything, and to remind them all what Christ had told them.⁷ So the authority of the apostles is from God to tend and to teach the people. Thus, if it was confirmed to the apostles the right of making laws, teaching, binding and loosening, it was meanwhile confirmed to the faithful to obey them; and as the authority of the apostles was granted to their successors as well⁸ the faithful have no right to refuse the decisions of these also. Their decisions are of the Holy Spirit; and that he who refuses to listen to them, must then be treated as a pagan or a tax gatherer.⁹

This was what the apostles themselves understood. Saint Paul, the apostle himself, wrote to the Galatians warning them of slipping into strange teachings, saying, "but if anyone, if we ourselves or an angel from heaven, should preach a gospel at variance with the gospel we preached to you, he shall be held outcast."¹⁰

"So that who does not accept the teachings of the church should be strange to the church of God." Our Lord said: "Whoever listens to you listens to me; whoever rejects you rejects me. And whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."¹¹

Accordingly, therefore, it becomes clear that the legal ecumenical councils must be accepted. The authority of these councils and the decisions they take must be obeyed by the entire body of the church. If these decisions concern matters of creed, then they must be clinged to by Christians very strongly, and those who do not must be excommunicated.

After the council of Jerusalem had declared its decisions in the year 51, it was announced through Barnabas, Paul, Judas (surnamed Barsaba) and Silas. "So they were sent off on their journey and travelled down to Antioch, where they called the congregation together, and delivered the letter. When it was read, they all rejoiced at the encouragement it brought."¹² So the decision was obligatory because it was issued by a supreme authority which was the council of the apostles; that is why the faithful accepted it joyfully, and for them it was a cause of encouragement.

It is mentioned in the church history that a group of the Jews, who became Christians, rejected the decisions of the council of Jerusalem; the church casted them out.¹³

The Reception of the New Testament and the Dogma is based upon the Testimony of the Apostles

The evangelical circumstances at the beginning of Christianity demanded that some of the servants of the Word, be evangelists, pastors, prophets, apostles and teachers, equip God's people for work in His service, to build up the body of Christ.¹⁴

In practice, they did not limit their preaching to a certain region or a given nationality, though Peter was called the apostle of the Jews¹⁵ and Paul the apostle of Gentiles.¹⁶ Their work was general, and the authority of each one of them extended to all the churches of the world without being confined to the regions in which each one had preached or the churches he had established.¹⁷

The foundation of the faith relied on the teaching of apostles, which is the teaching of the Holy Spirit; and whenever some contradictory teaching appeared, the church would return to the testimony of the apostles which was unanimously agreed upon by all the apostolic churches,¹⁸ because the principle work of the apostles was to bear witness to the life of Christ, His death, His resurrection and His teaching.¹⁹ The testimony was orally given, because Christ did not give His disciples any manuscript; but when the early Christians found it necessary to write down the Gospel, the four Gospels were written down. The church examined them and all the Scriptures of the New Testament, by returning to those who had seen Christ and heard him guided by the Holy Spirit.²⁰ The church became sure that each one of these scriptures was written down by one of the disciples, or under his supervision. So she decided their lawfulness, for they gained the testimony of the church, which was unanimously accepted, and it was a testimony of the truth, because this unanimity was a decisive evidence for an apostolic testimony.

Thus, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the church tested and approved the twenty-seven scriptures of the New Testament.²¹ It became an obligation for all the believers to receive them without increasing or decreasing even a single letter.

In the same way was the reception of the Dogma which included all the traditional teachings coming down from the disciples, even though the disciples did not legislate them in an Ecumenical council. The reception of any doctrine by the church does not need to be imposed in an Ecumenical council, because the church had received her doctrines from the apostles; the councils were held to defend the true faith

and to refute any heresy, by referring to the testimony of the apostles. That is why we can see the Fathers of the church such as Clement of Alexandria (c. 150-c. 215), Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-86) and Gregory of Nyssa (c. 330-c. 395) content simply with any statement received by the church, even though it was not issued by an official decision.²²

Such a decision is based upon the testimony of a universal church.

The Nicean creed, for example, was included within the scriptures of the Fathers in details, and was acceptable by the church since the early days of christianity; but the council formed it in a clear shape, and compelled the believers to receive it under the sentence of excommunication.

Holding of the Councils

The apostles held three councils²³ and thus they established the principle of the councils. But the church, due to the evil persecutions, did not hold councils until the second half of the second century. Thereafter when it began to introduce orders and laws, it became responsible to solve doctrinal problems and to organize the church. Thus the local, general and ecumenical councils were found.²⁴

The Reception of the Councils

The decisions of the councils were consciously received²⁵ by the believers, and their judgements were carried out by their authorities immediately after they were issued without any disturbance, whatever the ecclesiastical rank or the social class.

The decision of the local, general and ecumenical councils were regarded to be of a divine source... The Ecumenical council had the most supreme authority over the universal church;²⁶ that is why its decisions had a decisive obligatory power over the entire church.

The ancient official documents show that the early christians regarded the decisions concerning doctrine issued by the Nicaean Ecumenical council in the year 325 as spontaneously infallible, and had an obligatory acceptable authority, that is to say: "They are incontestable in faith, and all Christians regarded them as an expression of a heavenly grace and divine order." The reason being that the decisions taken by the Ecumenical council pertained to the Divine order, as it was quoted in the Edict of the Emperor Constantine, when he declared the decisions of the Nicean council.²⁷ Anyway we must mention here with great sorrow that the interference of the Roman Empire in the church's own religious affair, officially, spoiled the spiritual quality of the councils. However virtuous the aim of the state might sometimes be in solving the religious problems by means of Ecumenical councils, its influence created from the local problem an international one, thus helping the division of the church.

The Reception of the Local and the General Councils within their area is easier than the Reception of the Ecumenical Council throughout the entire Church

As soon as a decision of a local or a General council was issued, it was submitted to the local church or Apostolic see; for example, the decisions issued by the two General councils held against Origen (c. 185-c. 254), who in an excess of zeal, mutilated himself, misinterpreting (Mt. 19:12) in a literal sense. And for accepting to be ordained a priest by bishops of Caesarea and Jerusalem without his bishop's consultation, Anba Demetrius deposed Origen from the priesthood and set him into exile.

Although Origen was a pious Doctor of international influence, the church immediately accepted the decision issued against him; if the case of Origen was discussed in an Ecumenical council he would have been supported by most of the churches in the world.²⁸

Here is another example of decisions of the general and local councils that were carried out immediately after they were issued and the church receiving them without any uproar. This was the excommunication of Paul of Samosata, patriarch of Antioch (3rd century). His teaching was that our Lord Jesus Christ was only a human being. Consequently, he was deposed from his see in the council of Antioch in 268.

Paul of Samosata obeyed the order of the council, without any resistance, and the church satisfactorily received the decision.²⁹ Thus the problem was solved without interference from the government. It is not fair to compare Origen, the great scholar, the international philosopher, and the pious man, with Arius the arrogant priest; neither is it fair to compare the supreme rank of Paul of Samosata, the patriarch, with the mentioned Arius. Nevertheless, the trial of Origen was held at a local council, and its decision was immediately received. Arius was condemned to be excommunicated in the time of pope Peter in a local council held in Alexandria without any disturbance at that time. Afterwards, however, Arius returned to the church during the time of Anba Arsheela, and returned again to his heresy in the time of Alexandrius. His case became international, and it was examined in the Nicaean Ecumenical Council in the year 325, which was held according to the call of Emperor Constantinus. Three hundred and eighteen bishops were present, among whom were two Ariusian bishops. After a long dispute, the council condemned Arius and sentenced him for excommunication and exile.

Consequently, the Nicean Creed was formed,³⁰ and the bishops returned to their countries; but disputes arose in the church and the Arius party began to increase in strength after the council. The disputes were more political and racial than religious, and while the Nicean Council decision was accepted by one group, the other group rejected it, and alas, the followers of Arius became one hundred million in number, and in every short time they caused a severe harm to the church.

Their evil would have remained until today, if it was not for their self-divisions. Eventually the Arian party disappeared, as many of them rejoined the true church.

While we are studying the subject of the council's reception, it is inevitable to mention two complicated questions. The first was the question of Easter, and the second was the baptism of the heretics. These were the causes of disagreement in the church in its early days, but the church had found the solution for them.

The Examination and Reception of the Local and General Councils by the Ecumenical Council

Before the Council of Nicea in the year 325, many councils were held in the centres of the Holy Sees and Dioceses; these councils issued many decisions about faith and order, and these decisions were received at their regions. The Council of Nicea examined the decisions of these Local and General councils concerning the question of faith and order, such as the question of Easter and the Heretical Baptism, as we have mentioned before.

The Council of Nicea issued a decision which was taken to be heavenly and thus became strictly obligatory. The decisions of the Local and General councils, which was agreeable with the testimony of the apostolic church, were considered to be ecumenical. St. Julius, the Pope of Rome, said "as to me it is necessary to return to the apostolic Canon for discussing the ecclesiastical questions, not the eloquency, and don't I know why you got angry with my letter? Is it because I have invited you to attend the council? You have to know that those who have confidence in their behaviours are not afraid of having their conducts be examined."³¹

That is why we see that the great Council of Nicea had discussed the decisions of the Local and General council held before and then gave decisions an ecumenical quality. The traditions that were acknowledged by the church were represented in councils and these traditions could not be abolished by individual influence, whatever and however influential these individuals might be.

The old documents indicate that the Fathers of the first Ecumenical Council of Nicea and the whole Christendom at that time considered the decisions concerning the Doctrine that were issued by the Council of Nicea spontaneously infallible and authoritative, that is to say they were "indisputable in the faith and all the Christians should consider them as expressions of heavenly grace and divine order."³²

Emperor Constantine, in his letter to the church of Alexandria, said that "all what the 318 Fathers of the church had decided must be considered as divine judgement, and I am sure that there is no one amongst you bishops who suspects them or hesitates to fulfill them."³³ That is why the Emperor took charge of issuing the Nicene decisions and announced them amongst the church to carry them out.

Obstacles on the Way of the Council's Reception

The Council of Nicea wanting to carry out its decisions granted the apostolic Holy Sees certain privileges of authority derived from civil and not from religious considerations. But this same authority became the cause of the strong conflict between the state and the church.

In the West, where the center of the government was transformed from Rome to Ravenna, the influence of the Pope of Rome increased and he gained his independence to administer the church. The same thing happened in Egypt where the influence of the Pope of Alexandria was beyond the reach of the government. But in Constantinople, the Patriarch was no more than a government official compared with the monarch's power. In consequence, the church became one of the government offices and the Emperor became the actual head of the church, the judge of disagreements on the Doctrine, and the executor of the council's decisions.³⁴

The interference of the authorities in solving the problems and its attempts to submit the church to its order brought to the church uncountable misfortunes and pains.

Emperor Constantine who once said in a letter, "The decisions pronounced by the ecumenical Council are but divine ones,"³⁵ turned back from his ideas and ordered a council to be held in Jerusalem in the year 335, wherein it was decided to cancel the sentence of the Ecumenical Council of Nicea against Arius, and ordered Arius to return from his exile to Alexandria. Constantine wrote to Athanasius to receive Arius back to communion but the influence of Athanasius had been so increased in Egypt at that time that his bishops obeyed him following the decision of the Council of Nicea. He refused the orders of the Emperor saying, "He who was excommunicated by an ecumenical council can be loosened only by another ecumenical council because he who has the power to bind he alone has the power to loosen."³⁶

The enraged Emperor ordered a council to be held in Tyre to get rid of Athanasius. He accused him of a political charge and he was sentenced to exile. In the year 336, the Emperor called Arius to Constantinople to pray in the church and ordered Patriarch Alexandria to accept him in his company, but Alexandria answered the Emperor saying, "He who was divested of his priestly office by an ecumenical council, no one has the right to return him to his office except the ecumenical council."³⁷

The Reception of an Ecumenical Council by a following Ecumenical Council

Socrates, the historian, in his speech about the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in the year 381, said the following: "Theodosius, Roman Emperor, called for the Orthodox bishops to hold a council to support the faith of the Council of Nicea and to manage to ordain the bishop of Constantinople."³⁸ Suzimua the historian said: "The Emperor gathered quickly a council of the bishops who were of his own faith, to agree with what was decided in Nicea, and judged that the faith of Nicea would remain firm and to neglect all the heresy; and to run all the churches everywhere according to the old canons."³⁹

There is no doubt that the Fathers of the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople received the decrees of the Council of Nicea, and fixed its Creed, and explained what concerned the question of the Incarnation, and added this statement: "And we believe in the Holy Spirit, etc." and they excommunicated Macedonius and his two followers and commanded to carry out what the council arranged and it was received by the whole Christian church though the bishops of the West did not take part in it.⁴⁰ Then it came about that the Third Ecumenical Council to be held in Ephesus in the year 431 to study the heresy of Nestorius and it decided in their seventh canon that it is not permissible for anyone to put forward, to write, or to compile, another faith except the faith that was put by the Fathers assembled by the Holy Spirit in the city of Nicea.⁴¹

The Ecumenical Councils Received by the Syrian Church

The Syrian Orthodox Church and its sisters the Oriental Orthodox Churches accept only three ecumenical councils which are the Council of Nicea (325), Constantinople (381), and Ephesus (431). The Syrian Church included the acknowledgement of these councils, in the Diptychs of the Fathers in the mass, and it recites the Nicæan Creed that was put forward by these councils, and oblige everyone who wants to accept the sacrament of Baptism to announce his acknowledgement of this Creed. The same applies in the case of confession and in the case of ordaining deacons, priests and bishops. According to the Syrian Church, the quality of the ecumenical council does not depend on the number of its members but on its representation of all the sectors of the apostolic churches bearing the testimony of the teaching of the apostles. Therefore after the Council of Ephesus, which was the third ecumenical council (431), it became impossible to have ecumenical councils.

The Reception of the Councils Today

There is no doubt that local and general councils are accepted within their own territories and these are not the subjects of our discussion. As for the ecumenical councils, the Oriental Orthodox churches recognize three of them as mentioned earlier, whereas other Orthodox churches recognize seven, and the Roman Catholic churches recognize twenty-one. In our attempt to reach a Christian unity, we see ourselves facing an immense obstacle which should be overcome before we can arrive at this supreme goal.

The conditions of the ecumenical councils are not fulfilled in the councils that some of our churches recognize to be ecumenical; hence other churches do not find it easy to accept them.

The three ecumenical councils recognized by the Universal church were held when Christendom felt the dangers threatening the true Christian doctrine. The aim of holding a council is to preserve the doctrine that was once delivered by the saints; and the judgement of the truthfulness of the doctrine is the apostolic tradition which is the unanimous apostolic testimony.

Isn't our acceptance of the New Testament based upon these testimonies, as mentioned above? The Fathers of the church unanimously decided that the scriptures of the New Testament which were passed from hand to hand in the church in those days, and which are in our own hands today, were written under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, by or under command of the apostles who heard the teachings of our Lord and saw these miracles---His passion, His resurrection, and His Ascension. That is why we are consciously obliged to accept these true testimonies.

We are again obliged to accept every teaching that the early Fathers of the church unanimously accepted, although these teachings did not reach us through ecumenical councils. For a council to be ecumenical, it must be in harmony with the teachings of the apostles and the early Christian Fathers, and should be received by the apostolic churches who participate in it.⁴²

If the testimony is not unanimously accepted by the apostolic churches, then the council will not be ecumenical. Thus we can understand the objection raised by John of Antioch against the Council of Ephesus (431) not considering it to be Ecumenical as the church of Antioch was not represented. Cyril of Alexandria was blamed for his opening of the council meeting without waiting for John of Antioch and for the bishops of the Orient. John then held a council in which he excommunicated Cyril, and Memnon, bishop of Ephesus, with the charge of being unjust.⁴³

The Council of Ephesus did not become ecumenical until Cyril and John were reconciled in 433, when John received the council and signed the excommunication of Nestorius; meanwhile Cyril signed the excommunication of Abolinarius.

And thus by the reconciliation of the two Patriarchs, the third council was considered to be ecumenical and its decisions were received by the entire church, and they were announced by the Emperor.⁴⁴

The approval of John of Antioch for the decisions of the council of Ephesus do not mean that John was the head of the universal church; but it shows the necessity for the ecumenical councils to be accepted by the legal heads of the Holy Sees of whom John was one in those days.⁴⁵

The Second Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 381, was attended by Oriental bishops, who relied on the apostolic testimony and the guidance of the Holy Spirit to preserve the true teaching.⁴⁶ Immediately after closing the meeting of the council, its decisions were announced through all the heads of the churches including Damasus, the Pope of Rome, who did not attend the council or send a representative.⁴⁷ The council stated that "the statement of the faith was so arranged that churches who enjoyed the same faith, were always passionately attached to this faith."⁴⁸ Thus the Western church recognized the legality of the council and received it as an ecumenical one.

So the Christian churches today should together study all the councils, which should be examined according to the traditions of the apostles and the decisions of the three ecumenical councils which all the churches recognize, and the teachings of the forefathers which is the true testimony.

History confirms that, some times, certain questions which had no connection with religion occurred, and that human weakness clearly appeared in those councils. But we believe that the teachings of the legal councils were preserved by the Holy Spirit.

We don't forget that the interference of the Roman Empire, as we have previously mentioned, increased the disagreements and encouraged dissensions; liberality and openness were limited, and the human horror of jail, exile, excommunication, and destitution kept the tongues of many Fathers silent, or away from the truth.

History was sometimes written by extremely cruel and unjust persons. Reading ecclesiastical history makes us feel ashamed of the long history of hatred of some people who were supposed to be trusted to guard the law of love, concord, pardon and forgiveness. So it is in the spirit of love and understanding that our councils must be studied. Since the councils are held to fix the Doctrine, as we have mentioned above, let us study their decisions, without taking too much care of the minutes of their meetings.

The revision and the study of the councils do not imply the lessening of their authority. For example, following the Addis Ababa conference in 1965, "Al-Karaza Review" (issued in Arabic in Egypt)⁴⁹ wrote the following: "The sacred synod of the Coptic Church examined the decisions of the conference. In that synod some of the decisions were immediately received and the rest was postponed for a further study, though the Patriarchs of Oriental Orthodox Churches and bishops of these churches attended that conference."

I feel happy to state here that the Syrian Orthodox Church which rejects the Ariusian Council of Antioch (AD 341) and its creed, accepts the moral canons of that council for they match the apostolic canons.⁵⁰ The Syrian church rejects also the Council of Chalcedon (AD 451) considering the tome of Leo as a renewal of Nestorianism, nevertheless the Syrian church had adopted some canons of the Council of Chalcedon.

Mar Gregorius Bar 'Ebroyo Catholicos of the East (13th century) had cited five of these canons and added them to his book of canon law, called "The Book of Guidance." These canons are the following: 1. The Monasteries (1:2). 2. The Charity (1:3). 3. The church's Deputy and Manager (1:4). 4. The order of the Diocese (7:1) and 5. The Monkhhood (7:10).

What an open-minded scholar Bar 'Ebroyo was? And like him were most of the Fathers of the Syrian Church. In spite of their rejecting the creed of the council which they did not recognize, they did not mind accepting the moral canons which were good for the institution of the church, though they were introduced in a council rejected by the church.

So let us look at all the councils and study their decisions in the light of Apostolic tradition which is the true testimony of the Apostles and forefathers. Let us do that in the spirit of understanding and with the Guidance of the Holy Ghost, so that we may get good results. Let us sincerely hope that we arrive at fruitful results, which will bring us closer together.

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4. Ti. 3:15.
5. Mt. 28:20.
6. Jn. 14:16.
7. Jn. 14:26.
8. 1 Ti. 5:22, 6:2. And. Ac. 1:24, 20:28. And Bishop Alexandros Geeha, *Christian Church History* (in Arabic) (Homs, 1964) 127-132-140.
9. Mt. 18:17.
10. Gal. 1:8-9.
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13. Rev. Isaa Asaad. Al-Tarpha, *Church History* (in Arabic) (Homs - Syria, 1924) 42-43.
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18. H. B. Cyril Makkar, Roman Catholic Patriarch of Alexandria. *Foundation of the church* (in Arabic) (1925), Vol. 2, 225-226-334.
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