

# Nestorius and Cyril: 5th Century Christological Division and Recent Progress in Reconciliation

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## I. Introduction

The 5<sup>th</sup> century controversy of Bishop Nestorius of Constantinople and Bishop Cyril of Alexandria centered on the Person of Jesus Christ: To what extent is he human? To what extent divine? And to what extent and how are his humanity and divinity united? The controversy takes shape on two fronts: (1) the Christological debate, primarily because of the potential implications for soteriology (whether a certain conception of Christ can be considered an efficacious Savior); and (2) the persons involved, because each is venerated by his later adherents and thus an integral part of the ongoing debate. This fact, that the controversy continues to be worked out though it is more than 1500 years old, owes its significance to the ecumenical movement which emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This particular Christological problem has been at the center of much dialogue between the Roman Catholic Church and the Ancient Churches of the East. And, as we will see, an examination of the ecumenical dialogue will provide us with fresh insights by which to reevaluate the initial controversy itself.

## II. Setting the Scene

First, let us review the basic outline of events as they unfolded. Cyril (c. 378-444) succeeded his uncle Theophilus as Bishop of Alexandria in 412, after having begun his ecclesiastical career nine years earlier as Lector of the church of Alexandria. In contrast, Nestorius (d. ca. 451) was a monk in the Antioch area who was called upon to preach publicly in Antioch.<sup>1</sup> Known as a powerful speaker, and receiving the recommendation of John of Antioch, in 428 Nestorius was appointed Bishop of Constantinople by Emperor Theodosius II. At the Council of

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<sup>1</sup> There seems to be some lack of clarity as to the nature of Nestorius' duties before his appointment to the bishopric. According to Adrian Fortesque, *The Lesser Easter Churches* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913) 61, "Nestorius had been a monk at the monastery of Euprepios; then deacon, priest and preacher at the chief church of Antioch." However, Friedrich Loofs, *Nestorius and His Place in the History of Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1914) 27, seems to represent another view: "It is well known that Nestorius in April 428 was called out of the monastery of Euprepios, in the neighborhood of Antioch, to the vacant bishopric of Constantinople." It is perhaps telling that after he was deposed at Ephesus in 431, Nestorius requested, and received, permission to *return* to his monastery. In any case, the two themes which emerge from Nestorius' career prior to 428 are that he was a monk as well as a powerful preacher.

Constantinople (381), the See of Constantinople had been elevated equal to that of Rome. Nestorius had suddenly become one of the most powerful men in the empire. He used his power to vehemently attack heresy, particularly in rooting out remnants of Arianism and Apollinarianism (see §III below for a brief description of these two -isms).

Nestorius quickly ran afoul of the establishment, however, when he questioned the use of θεοτόκος<sup>2</sup> in the veneration of Mary, the mother of Jesus. This led to a greater dispute about his Christology—specifically, his conception of the unity of the divine and human natures of Christ. In this controversy Cyril of Alexandria became his most outspoken opponent. In Rome, Pope Celestine received letters from Nestorius and Cyril along with written excerpts of some of Nestorius' Christological positions. The Pope had them reviewed and called a synod in 430, at which Nestorius was ruled against. Cyril was entrusted with delivering the message: Nestorius had ten days to renounce his heresies or be condemned. Cyril added what are known as the Twelve Anathemas, each of which Nestorius was to answer correctly. Nestorius, however, did not accede within the ten days; before he received the letter Theodosius II had called for a General Council, which would settle the matter at a higher level. The council was held in Ephesus in 431.

The Council of Ephesus did not arrive at a new definition of faith to modify that established at the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381). For that we must wait until the Council of Chalcedon in 451. What Ephesus did was decide the dispute between Nestorius and Cyril in favor of Cyril. Cyril returned triumphantly to Alexandria and Nestorius returned to his monastery, succeeded as Bishop of Constantinople by Maximian. Nestorius was later exiled in 436, landing in Upper Egypt where he wrote *The Bazaar of Heracleides*,<sup>3</sup> his last known work, probably in 451.<sup>4</sup> In deciding in Cyril's favor, Ephesus did not, however, fully adopt Cyril's Christology. Cyril's second letter to Nestorius was approved as the faith of the Council, but the Anathemas attached to the third letter were not. In the end, the Council of Ephesus was not able to come to a resolution by itself. Cyril convened the council before the arrival of John of Antioch and the Eastern bishops, who, after they arrived, convened their own council and deposed Cyril. Emperor Theodosius II had to step in to settle the affair. Closure of the council was not properly achieved until 433, when John of Antioch agreed to The Formulary of Reunion with Cyril.<sup>5</sup>

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2 Grk. theotókos; lit. God-bearer; i.e., Mother of God

3 There was apparently an error in the translation of the work from the original (lost) Greek to Syriac: *Bazaar* should probably be *Book* or *Treatise* instead.

4 See G. R. Driver and Leonard Hodgson, eds. and trans., Introduction, *The Bazaar of Heracleides*, By Nestorius (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2002 [1925]) x. In *Bazaar*, Nestorius is aware of Theodosius II's death in 450 as well as the flight of Dioscorus, but not of the formal decisions of Chalcedon.

5 See Loofs 53-56. It wasn't an ecumenical council: "Two party-councils had sat and cursed each other." He also notes that, in the Formulary of Reunion, the anathema against Nestorius was the price of peace.

The controversy did not end here, however. In 444, Cyril died and was succeeded as Bishop of Alexandria by Dioscorus, who held the extreme side of Cyril's Christology (Monophysitism, i.e., one nature). In 449, after Eutyches had been condemned at the Synod of Constantinople the previous year, Dioscorus admitted him to communion and asked Theodosius II for a General Council. It was held in Ephesus in 449. Dioscorus presided and achieved his ends by threat of military force: Eutyches was restored and Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople (he had succeeded Proclus and Maximian), was condemned. He died shortly thereafter from the rough treatment he received. In Session II, Cyril's Twelve Anathemas were approved.

In Rome, Pope Leo (he had succeeded Sixtus III and Celestine) protested against these proceedings, but Emperor Theodosius II confirmed them. The next year, however, Theodosius died and was succeeded by his sister, Pulcheria. She and her new husband, the senator Marcian, assembled a General Council at Chalcedon in 451 to overturn the decisions made at Ephesus in 449. Flavian was vindicated and Dioscorus was deposed. A new definition of faith was crafted so as to exclude the "heresies" of Nestorius and Eutyches from the orthodox Christological formula.

The definition of Chalcedon is still considered by some to be the perfect Christological formulation. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adrian Fortesque wrote:

This exposition of the principle should be a useful reminder that after the bitter controversies of the 5th century, after all the mutual accusations, the unholy violence and unchristian methods of that time, the Catholic Church finally settled down in possession of the obviously right solution, the one to which a reasonable man must come in any case.<sup>6</sup>

At the very end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Jon Sobrino also weighed in on the definition of Chalcedon:

I think it is important for us to feel (if that is an appropriate term) that, given the direction taken by christological thinking in the Greco-Roman world, Chalcedon "hit the mark," that it not only formulated the vision of those who won the debate but also expressed a truth that opened the way to "more."<sup>7</sup>

Clearly Sobrino represents a more developed viewpoint which retains Chalcedon with emphasis on the "truth" which it expressed. We will look at this further

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6 Fortesque 58.

7 Jon Sobrino, *Christ the Liberator: A View from the Victims*, trans. Paul Burns (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2001: from Spanish edition of 1999, reprinted 2003) 295.

below: the definition of Chalcedon itself in the next section and its place in the present in §IV, particularly in regard to the difference between hitting the mark in expression and hitting it in essence. Now we will begin in earnest with the Christological debate.

### III. The Christological Debate

The Antiochene school (represented by Nestorius) and the Alexandrian school (represented by Cyril) both held the “twoness” (humanity and divinity) and the “oneness” (unity of the humanity and divinity) of Christ. On the moderate side of each school, the differences were in the emphasis on either twoness or oneness, and also in the terminology used for expressing twoness and oneness. When the positions were expressed in their extreme senses, however, the understanding of the meanings of twoness and oneness was also at odds. In other words, viewed in the extreme, the issue became fundamental: the Antiochenes saw the Alexandrian Christ as a divine being without a real humanity (as in Apollinarius' Christology); and when the Alexandrians looked at the Antiochene Christ, they thought they were seeing double. Thus the challenge for understanding the debate between Nestorius and Cyril is to distinguish the moderate from the extreme. Each of these theologians can be seen to represent *either* the moderate or the extreme position of his school of thought.

This challenge continues to cause the debate to appear a bit of an enigma. According to Jacques Dupuis, “We may note that at the time of the contest between Nestorius and Cyril, ambiguity and confusion still remained concerning the terminology. When Cyril spoke of 'one nature (*phusis*) only in Jesus Christ,' he meant the unity of person (*hupostasis*). When Nestorius spoke of two 'natures' (*phuseis*), he seemed to intend two persons (*prosôpon*).”<sup>8</sup> It is easy to see here how retaining the perspective of the winners leads to certain preconceptions. Cyril here is being understood in his moderate sense, for the whole of his Christology, which indeed affirmed both the humanity and divinity of Christ. In his book, *On the Unity of Christ*, Cyril says:

The Only Begotten Word, even though he was God and born from God by nature, the “radiance of the glory, and the exact image of the being” of the one who begot him (Heb 1:3), he it was who became man. He did not change himself into flesh; he did not endure any mixture or blending, or anything else of the kind. But he submitted himself to being emptied and “for the sake of the honor that was set before him he counted the shame as nothing” (Heb 12:2) and did not disdain the poverty of human nature. As God he wished to make that flesh which was held in the grip of sin and death evidently superior to

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8 Jacques Dupuis, S.J., *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994) 88.

sin and death. He made it his very own, and not soulless as some have said, but rather animated with a rational soul, and thus he restored flesh to what it was in the beginning.... The same was at once God and man, and he was “in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7) since even though he was God he was “in the fashion of a man” (Phil 2:8). He was God in an appearance like ours, and the Lord in the form of a slave.<sup>9</sup>

It is obvious, then, that while Cyril emphasized the unity of Christ and his divinity, he held that Christ “was at once God and man,” and without “any mixture or blending.” In this way he preserved the distinction between the two natures which became so important in the definition of Chalcedon. Also, Cyril is clearly defended against the accusations that he was falling into the Apollinarian heresy, even though Cyril had adopted Apollinarius' formula: μία φύσις.<sup>10</sup> Apollinarius used the formula in the sense that Christ had no human soul; instead, the human soul was replaced by the Word.<sup>11</sup> But Cyril says, “not soulless as some have said, but rather animated with a rational soul.” With these statements in mind, Cyril's use of “μία φύσις” takes on a rather different appearance. It can be seen as just an extreme expression, not a representation of his entire Christology. Aloys Grillmeier suggests that “the right thing now would have been for Cyril to give up the 'Apollinarian' language of the μία φύσις formula once and for all. Had he done this, without doubt the further development of christological dogma would have been preserved from much confusion.”<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, the bottom line is that Cyril can be, should be, and for the most part is being viewed according to his overall Christology, which played a significant role in the definition of Chalcedon, and not according to a narrow understanding of his Apollinarian formula, which was not adopted at Chalcedon.

Nestorius, however, was not treated so kindly. To reiterate Jacques Dupuis' assessment: “When Nestorius spoke of two 'natures' (*phuseis*), he seemed to intend two persons (*prosòpon*).” This has in view only the extreme side of Nestorius, which is seen most clearly in his adamant rejection of three positions: (1) Christ not being really human (Apollinarianism),<sup>13</sup> (2) Christ not being really divine (Arianism), and (3) the divine Word being passable. All three positions, interestingly, were represented in the issue over the use of θεοτόκος. Grillmeier points out that both the Arians and the Apollinarians used the title for Mary,

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9 St. Cyril of Alexandria, *On the Unity of Christ*, trans. and introduced by John Anthony McGuckin (Crestwood: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995) 54-55.

10 Grk. μία φύσις (or φύσις): one nature

11 Brian O. McDermott, S.J., *Word Become Flesh: Dimensions of Christology* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press: A Michael Glazer Book, 1993) 199.

12 Aloys Grillmeier, S.J., *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1: *From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (451)*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised edition, trans. John Bowden (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975) 476.

13 It is important to note that in this category Nestorius included Cyril, based on a narrow view of Cyril's “one nature” Christology.

because they held that the Word was joined through a natural union with the flesh and was thus involved in birth, suffering and death. “The Arians seek to spread the title *Theotokos* so as to have the opportunity of attacking the very divinity of Christ. Nestorius sees the abolition of this title as the only way out.”<sup>14</sup> For Christ to really be a human there must be a full human nature, including a soul; and for him to be divine, there must be an inseparable union with the Word. Yet if the Word is to avoid those things which *must not* be attributed to divinity—birth, suffering, and death—the distinctness of the two natures even after the union must be emphasized. From the Alexandrian perspective, the Nestorian union in Christ appeared to be weak, as if there were two persons. For Cyril, θεοτόκος was an integral part of this union; deny the title, and you deny the union.<sup>15</sup> Immediately following the passage quoted above, he says, “This is what we mean when we say that he became flesh, and for the same reasons we affirm that the holy virgin is the Mother of God.”<sup>16</sup> A fundamental disagreement thus existed on the surface, while different philosophical and theological starting points and emphases appear to be the cause.

What of the moderate side of Nestorius? While the positions so far mentioned caused a great stir and his ultimate demise, Nestorius' overall delivery of the Antiochene Christology was much more orthodox.<sup>17</sup> He was firmly convinced of the union of the divine and human natures in the single Son, Christ: “I did not say that the Son was one (person) and God the Word another; I said that God the Word was *by nature* one and the temple *by nature* another, one Son by conjunction.”<sup>18</sup> There are clearly not two persons, but note that the word used for expressing union is not actually “union” but “conjunction.” Grillmeier notes that Nestorius rarely used ἐνώσις,<sup>19</sup> “for behind that he again suspects the 'one nature' of the Apollinarians.”<sup>20</sup> The implications of this “conjunction” are not terribly clear, however. It seems to rest on the meaning of πρόσωπον,<sup>21</sup> for that is the location of the conjunction. After an extensive analysis,<sup>22</sup> Grillmeier concludes:

The *prosopon* is 'appearance', the collection of qualities in which a thing, or better, a spiritual nature, exists, is seen and judged and honoured; it is also the manner in which it acts. In other words,

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14 Grillmeier 452.

15 Cyril was upholding the doctrine of *communicatio idiomatum*: “communication of idioms” between the Persons of the Trinity. Jesus is God and Mary is Jesus' mother, thus Mary must be attributed the title Mother of God.

16 St. Cyril 55.

17 Even his position on θεοτόκος had a moderate side. According to Loofs 31-32, Nestorius wrote to Pope Celestine that “the term may be tolerated,” and preached, “I have already repeatedly declared that if any one of you or any one else be simple and has a preference for the term θεοτόκος, then I have nothing to say against it: only do not make a Goddess of the virgin.”

18 From a sermon Nestorius preached in 430. Quoted by Grillmeier 454.

19 Grk. hénosis: union

20 Grillmeier 459.

21 Grk. próσωpon: appearance

22 See Grillmeier 459-463.

Nestorius gathers all the possibilities of grounding the unity of natures in Christ on an ontic basis apart from taking as this basis the *physis qua physis*. But the only sphere of ontic reality given in a concrete being apart from the *physis* or *ousia* is for him the sphere of individual properties. He can rightly claim to have found an ontic basis for the discussion of the unity of Christ.... But the fundamental weakness of his solution emerges when the unity itself is to be explained.... He cannot succeed, as his metaphysical starting point is wrong. But we must acknowledge that his intention was sound.<sup>23</sup>

Thus the union of Christ as conceived by Nestorius was real, not merely moral,<sup>24</sup> but on the level of being (ontic). However, the complexity of the distinction between the natures and his inability to adequately explain their union led to confusion,<sup>25</sup> not to mention the fact that the modern concept of 'person' did not yet exist. According to Grillmeier, Nestorius by necessity retained a *πρόσωπον* for each of the natures as well as one for the union of the two, “with the result that he sometimes speaks of two *prosopa*, sometimes of one *prosopon* in Christ.”<sup>26</sup> It is this inadequacy to make a convincing case for his orthodoxy, greatly fueled by how his positions impacted on the *θεοτόκος* issue, that gave his opponents—who were not straining themselves to see his moderate side—cause<sup>27</sup> and opportunity to depose him, even though, as Grillmeier maintains, “his intention was sound.”

As mentioned above, Ephesus decided the winner in 431 but it took Chalcedon in 451 to establish a new definition:

Following therefore the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach to confess 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 composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being (*homoousios*) with the Father as to the divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin [*cf. Heb 4:15*]. The same was begotten from the Father before the ages as to the divinity and in the latter days for us and our salvation was born as to his humanity from Mary the Virgin Mother of God.

We confess that one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion or change, without division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union but rather the

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23 Grillmeier 463.

24 A “moral union” is a characterization made by Fortesque 71.

25 It is important to note that, according to Grillmeier 463, “in the time of Nestorius, it is everywhere apparent that no adequate union of spiritual beings had yet been evolved.”

26 Grillmeier 463.

27 There are other theories of political intrigues, which may have been intertwined with the theological issues.

character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (*prosôpon*) and one hypostasis. He is not split or divided into two persons, but he is one and the same Only-begotten, God the Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as formerly the prophets and later Jesus Christ himself have taught us about him and as has been handed down to us by the Symbol of the Fathers.<sup>28</sup>

Not only did the definition of Chalcedon seek to prevent misunderstandings along the lines of the extreme view of Nestorius' position (separating the natures so as to divide Christ into two Sons), it also clearly established the distinctness of the two natures of Christ in order to exclude the positions of Dioscorus and Eutyches, who had adopted Cyril's μία φύσις position, though without his ability to compromise with those who did not have the same emphasis on the unity of Christ.<sup>29</sup> In Chalcedon's "two natures" language, the "Monophysite" Alexandrians under Dioscorus saw another example of Nestorius' heresy.

Tragically, the results of the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon included the separation of two major groups of Christians, the Nestorians and Monophysites. The Churches descended from these traditions are still with us today, the Ancient Churches of the East. In the following section we will look at the challenge of ecumenism to the Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon, including its impact on the understanding of history and the definition of Chalcedon itself.

#### **IV. The Christological Controversy and Ecumenism**

Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Adrian Fortesque wrote *The Lesser Eastern Churches* (cited above in several places), the second volume of his trilogy on the Eastern Churches. A significant work of scholarship, it also reflects the centuries-old views which contributed to the rift between the Roman Catholic Church and the separated Churches of the East: "All the people of this volume are heretics and schismatics.... And they too, equally logically from their point of view, say that we are heretics and schismatics."<sup>30</sup> He summed up the Christologies of the Ancient Churches of the East this way: "Nestorianism divides Christ into two persons, Monophysism confuses him into one nature."<sup>31</sup> For Fortesque, if the current followers of Nestorius are to "become Catholics they must... be converted to the faith of Ephesus and Chalcedon, they must accept the term *θεοτόκος*, and renounce Nestorius at least, if not Diodore and Theodore. In a word, this unhappy little sect

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28 Jacques Dupuis, S.J., ed., *The Christian Faith in the Doctrinal Documents of the Catholic Church*, 7<sup>th</sup> revised and enlarged edition (New York: St. Pauls/Alba House, 2001) 227-228.

29 A valuable characterization of the shift caused by Cyril's death is made by J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines*, paperback 5<sup>th</sup> revised edition (London: Continuum, 1985, reprinted 2003) 330. "Cyril himself... stood for moderation, and while he was alive he restrained his hotheaded partisans. With his death in 444 the reaction against the Two Natures doctrine gathered force...."

30 Fortesque 4.

31 Fortesque 5. He makes it clear that he uses these terms to characterize the positions of the Churches.

is not only schismatical but heretical too.”<sup>32</sup> Not only were these conclusions wrong on several points, they also were not a sign of things to come from the Roman Catholic Church as its position developed later in the century.

The last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw considerable progress toward reunification, owing to a shift in emphasis from the letter of the law to the spirit of the law, so to speak. In 1951, in his encyclical on the Council of Chalcedon, Pope Pius XII sounded a message that seems to speak to both sides, anticipating the shift. First he stresses the “great importance and weight of the dogmatic definition of Chalcedon,” and says, “let those who are involved in the errors of Nestorius or Eutyches penetrate with clearer insight into the mystery of Christ and at last accept this definition in its completeness.”<sup>33</sup> At the end of the document, however, he makes a point of articulating the heart of the dogma of Chalcedon, indicating a focus on the spirit of the definition: “Let no one corrupt by perverse innovation or weaken by doubt the dogma confirmed at Chalcedon, namely, that there are in Christ two true and perfect natures, the divine and the human, not confused with another, but joined together and subsisting in the one person of the Word.”<sup>34</sup> It would be this budding focus on the essence of the matter which would soon grow and enable progress in ecumenism.

Only 13 years later, in 1964, the Roman Catholic Church broke ground in the building of a permanent structure of ecumenical commitment.<sup>35</sup> The “Decree on Ecumenism” of Vatican II detailed a specific commitment to reunification with the Eastern Churches.<sup>36</sup> This included a fundamental step toward recognizing a “unity in difference” in theology:

What has just been said about the lawful variety that can exist in the Church must also be taken to apply to the differences in theological expression of doctrine. In the study of revelation East and West have followed different methods, and have developed differently their understanding and confession of God's truth. It is hardly surprising, then, if from time to time one tradition has come nearer to a full appreciation of some aspects of a mystery of revelation than the other, or has expressed it to better advantage. In such cases, these various theological expressions are to be considered often as mutually complementary rather than conflicting. Where the authentic theological traditions of the Eastern Church are concerned, we must recognize the admirable way in which they have their roots in Holy Scripture, and how they are nurtured and given expression in the life

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32 Fortesque 84. See also note 4, same page, and note 1, page 87, for Fortesque's discussion of schism and heresy.

33 Pope Pius XII, *Sempiternus Rex Christus*, 3.

34 Pope Pius XII, *Sempiternus Rex Christus*, 44.

35 Walter Kasper, “Current Problems in Ecumenical Theology,” undated, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, I, notes that Pope John Paul II “constantly stresses” that the decision is irrevocable.

36 See Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 13-18. In view are *all* of the separated Churches in the East.

of the liturgy. They derive their strength too from the living tradition of the apostles and from the works of the Fathers and spiritual writers of the Eastern Churches. Thus they promote the right ordering of Christian life and, indeed, pave the way to a full vision of Christian truth.<sup>37</sup>

Further, quoting Acts 15:28,

this Sacred Council solemnly repeats the declaration of previous Councils and Roman Pontiffs, that for the restoration or the maintenance of unity and communion it is necessary 'to impose no burden beyond what is essential'. It is the Council's urgent desire that, in the various organizations and living activities of the Church, every effort should be made toward the gradual realization of this unity, especially by prayer, and by fraternal dialogue on points of doctrine and the more pressing pastoral problems of our time.<sup>38</sup>

Additionally, the decree's characterization of the origin of the separations in the East is crucial:

The heritage handed down by the apostles was received with differences of form and manner, so that from the earliest times of the Church it was explained variously in different places, owing to diversities of genius and conditions of life. All this, quite apart from external causes, prepared the way for decisions arising also from a lack of charity and mutual understanding.<sup>39</sup>

Thus Vatican II redefined the playing field: differences in theological expression are acceptable, only the essential must be insisted upon, and the traditions in the East are understandably different, which is due to several causes, including environment, misunderstanding, and "lack of charity." Their stated goal is crystal clear: "every effort should be made toward the gradual realization of this unity."

Seven years later, in 1971, a significant move on this new playing field was made in "The Common Declaration by Pope Paul VI and His Holiness Mar Ignatius Iacob III," patriarch of the Syrian Orthodox Church of Antioch.<sup>40</sup> At the

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37 Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 17.

38 Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 18.

39 Second Vatican Council, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, 14.

40 The Syrian (or Syriac) Orthodox Church of Antioch is a member of the Oriental Orthodox Churches, which are also called the Non-Chalcedonian Orthodox Churches for their rejection of the Council of Chalcedon. Two other members discussed below are the Coptic Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox Churches. The Oriental Orthodox Churches are in communion with each other but not with the (Eastern) Orthodox Church or the Roman Catholic Church. Historically they have been considered "Monophysite." However, according to a Coptic

end of their meeting, the Pope expressed the logic of signing new statements while maintaining the traditional faith as follows:

If [theologians] recognize that there are still differences in the theological interpretation of this mystery of Christ because of different ecclesiastical and theological traditions, they are convinced, however, that these various formulations can be understood along the lines of the faith of the early councils, which is the faith we also profess.<sup>41</sup>

Pope Paul VI thus extended the position of Pope Pius XII in *Sempiternus Rex Christus* by further emphasizing the spirit of the definition of Chalcedon. In saying that “these various formulations can be understood along the lines of the faith of the early councils,” the Pontiff highlighted the specific method of applying the call to reconciliation made by Vatican II. New formulations could be made in order to bridge the gaps created by the original formulations, but the faith of the formulations (particularly Chalcedon) would remain.

“The Common Declaration” also furthered Vatican II's characterization of the split: “The period of mutual recrimination and condemnation has given place to a willingness to meet together in sincere efforts to lighten and eventually remove the burden of history which still weighs heavily upon Christians.”<sup>42</sup> There are now experiences in history characterized as burdens which must be removed. As far as the specific progress in applying the new method and removing the burden, “The Common Declaration” records the following statement:

Progress has already been made and Pope Paul VI and the Patriarch Mar Ignatius Jacob III are in agreement that there is no difference in the faith they profess concerning the mystery of the Word of God made flesh and become really man, even if over the centuries difficulties have arisen out of the different theological expressions by which this faith was expressed.<sup>43</sup>

The way has thus been paved for seeing unity where previously only difference was in view; and the unity is seen in the faith behind (or expressed in) the formulation, not in explicit agreement with the letter of the formulation.

In 1973, Pope Paul VI took the next step in this direction by formulating a

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Orthodox priest, Fr. Matthias F. Wahba, “Monophysitism: Reconsidered,” undated, COP|NET, 21 Apr. 2005, <<http://www.coptic.net/articles/MonophysitismReconsidered.txt>>, “considering the past, the non-Chalcedonians are better to be called 'mia-physites' than 'monophysites.’” This expresses the distinction he draws between “mono” and “mia,” holding onto Cyril's μία φύσις formula but rejecting monophysitism.

41 “Address of Pope Paul VI,” Rome, October 25, 1971.

42 “Common Declaration by Pope Paul VI and His Holiness Mar Ignatius Iacob III,” Rome, October 25, 1971.

43 “Common Declaration by Pope Paul VI and His Holiness Mar Ignatius Iacob III,” Rome, October 25, 1971.

new, extensive Christological statement along with the Patriarch of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The “Common Declaration of Pope Paul VI and of the Pope of Alexandria Shenouda III” states:

In accordance with our apostolic traditions transmitted to our Churches and preserved therein, and in conformity with the early three ecumenical councils, we confess one faith in the One Triune God, the divinity of the Only Begotten Son of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the Word of God, the effulgence of His glory and the express image of His substance, who for us was incarnate, assuming for Himself a real body with a rational soul, and who shared with us our humanity but without sin. We confess that our Lord and God and Saviour and King of us all, Jesus Christ, is perfect God with respect to His Divinity, perfect man with respect to His humanity. In Him His divinity is united with His humanity in a real, perfect union without mingling, without commixtion, without confusion, without alteration, without division, without separation. His divinity did not separate from His humanity for an instant, not for the twinkling of an eye. He who is God eternal and invisible became visible in the flesh, and took upon Himself the form of a servant. In Him are preserved all the properties of the divinity and all the properties of the humanity, together in a real, perfect, indivisible and inseparable union.<sup>44</sup>

Here we have agreement upon an expression that is “along the lines of” Chalcedon. The essence of Chalcedon, including some of the language, has been retained without requiring *all* of the language. Divinity and humanity are both preserved without using “in two natures” or “from two natures” or any other statement that one or the other party would consider objectionable. In fact, the problematic word “nature” is nowhere used. In place of this is simpler language that avoids the historical confusion—“humanity” instead of “human nature” and “divinity” instead of “divine nature.” Moreover, Pope Paul VI respected the heritage of the Coptic tradition by agreeing to language that takes great pains to emphasize the unity of Christ, including the metaphor that, in Christ, divinity and humanity did not separate even “for the twinkling of an eye.” It is worth noting that elsewhere the declaration also affirms the use of θεοτόκος for Mary.

This significant progress in ecumenism under Pope Paul VI was energetically continued by Pope John Paul II. November 11, 1994, is the date which should signify to the world that the controversy of Nestorius has been resolved (the Christology, not the division of the Churches). On that memorable

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44 “The Common Declaration of Pope Paul VI and of the Pope of Alexandria Shenouda III,” May 10, 1973.

day, Pope John Paul II and the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East<sup>45</sup> signed the “Common Christological Declaration.” Referring to this agreement, in 1995 Pope John Paul II stated, “Taking into account the different theological formulations, we were able to profess together the true faith in Christ.”<sup>46</sup> Here is an excerpt from the “Declaration”:

As heirs and guardians of the faith received from the Apostles as formulated by our common Fathers in the Nicene Creed, we confess one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten of the Father from all eternity who, in the fullness of time, came down from heaven and became man for our salvation. The Word of God, second Person of the Holy Trinity, became incarnate by the power of the Holy Spirit in assuming from the holy Virgin Mary a body animated by a rational soul, with which he was indissolubly united from the moment of his conception.

Therefore our Lord Jesus Christ is true God and true man, perfect in his divinity and perfect in his humanity, consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with us in all things but sin. His divinity and his humanity are united in one person, without confusion or change, without division or separation. In him has been preserved the difference of the natures of divinity and humanity, with all their properties, faculties and operations. But far from constituting "one and another", the divinity and humanity are united in the person of the same and unique Son of God and Lord Jesus Christ, who is the object of a single adoration.

Christ therefore is not an "ordinary man" whom God adopted in order to reside in him and inspire him, as in the righteous ones and the prophets. But the same God the Word, begotten of his Father before all worlds without beginning according to his divinity, was born of a mother without a father in the last times according to his humanity. The humanity to which the Blessed Virgin Mary gave birth always was that of the Son of God himself. That is the reason why the Assyrian Church of the East is praying the Virgin Mary as "the Mother of Christ our God and Saviour". In the light of this same faith the Catholic tradition addresses the Virgin Mary as "the Mother of God" and also as "the Mother of Christ". We both recognize the legitimacy and rightness of these expressions of the same faith and we

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45 Note that while venerating Nestorius and making use of his theological language, the Assyrian Church rejects the label “Nestorian” for two reasons: (1) “it does not accept all the implications of that name” and (2) the label “suggests the Church began with Nestorius or with his followers.” See Pro Oriente Consultation, “Is the Theology of the Church of the East Nestorian?” Vienna, June 1994, Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development <<http://www.cired.org>>, 17.

46 Pope John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 62.

both respect the preference of each Church in her liturgical life and piety.

This is the unique faith that we profess in the mystery of Christ. The controversies of the past led to anathemas, bearing on persons and on formulas. The Lord's Spirit permits us to understand better today that the divisions brought about in this way were due in large part to misunderstandings.

Whatever our Christological divergences have been, we experience ourselves united today in the confession of the same faith in the Son of God who became man so that we might become children of God by his grace. We wish from now on to witness together to this faith in the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life, proclaiming it in appropriate ways to our contemporaries, so that the world may believe in the Gospel of salvation.<sup>47</sup>

In each paragraph is a point of acute interest here: (1) The Divine Word was “indissolubly united” with humanity “from the moment of his conception.” This refutes an extreme position of Nestorius, which struggled with the concept of a divine infant due to the concept of impassibility. (2) One Son, that is, a unity of two natures in one person, is affirmed. This refutes a charge of professing two Sons, which Nestorius himself also denied but which was sometimes unclear to others because of his language, as noted above in §III. (3) The two Churches agree that Mary is the mother of the Son of God (Christ was always also the Word become human “from the moment of his conception”) and therefore they agree that their faith is the same. Respecting the fact the two traditions have developed along independent paths, they also respect the preference of each Church for a different expression of this faith. The Assyrian Church's affirmation here reflects the moderate Nestorius (see note 17 above). (4) Going a little beyond the language of the agreement between Pope Paul VI and the Syrian Orthodox Patriarch, this paragraph takes aim at controversies over specific individuals and terminology. It also reiterates the statement that the divisions of the past were largely the fault of misunderstanding. The implicit conviction is that the controversy between Nestorius and Cyril could have been resolved were it not for misunderstanding of their respective theologies, insistence on a single formulaic expression of faith, and the use of anathemas in personal antagonism.<sup>48</sup> (5) Two things are stressed here:

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47 Pope John Paul II and Catholicos-Patriarch Mar Dinkha IV, “Common Christological Declaration Between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East,” November 11, 1994.

48 See Very Reverend Michael J. Birnie, “Studies on Anathemas and Their Lifting in Relationship to the Question of Ecclesial Communion and Heresy,” 2002, Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development <<http://www.cired.org>>, 5-6. Birnie discusses the anathema leveled against Theodore of Mopsuestia by the Second Council of Constantinople (553): “This provoked an emotional and indignant reaction in the East.... In the fortieth canon of the Synod of Mar 'Aba in 544 they affirmed their adherence to Theodore and his teaching.... Though they attached no anathema to this simple affirmation, a gauntlet was thrown down,

unity of the Body of Christ and the importance of this unity for the sake of effective communication of the Gospel to the world.

This mission of evangelization in fact speaks to the very origin of the ecumenical movement. According to Cardinal Walter Kasper, “Characteristically, the new ecumenical awareness developed in connection with the missionary movement. The birth of the ecumenical movement is generally traced to the 1910 World Missionary Conference of Edinburgh. The division of the Churches was recognized as a serious obstacle to world mission.”<sup>49</sup> Samuel Hugh Moffett tells of an ecumenical mission which began in 497 when the Persian Shah Kavad fled to the Huns for refuge. Several Nestorian Christians were with him, including a bishop, four priests and two laymen. These were joined in the mission to the Huns by an Armenian (Monophysite) bishop. Moffett says that this “suggests that unlike the unseemly quarrels in the church at the home base, those early Christian missionaries to central Asia learned how to set aside their differences and begin to work together, united in Christian mission.”<sup>50</sup> Interestingly, Adrian Fortesque even treats the issue of common Christian mission to the world:

We think of the Nestorians as a wretched heretical sect, cut off from the Catholic Church and so gradually withering. They are that. But there is another side too. For a time, as long as they could, they did their share in the common Christian cause heroically. While they were cut off from the West, denounced by Catholics, Orthodox and Jacobites, while we thought of them as a dying sect in Persia, they were sending missions all over Asia. Those forgotten Nestorian missionaries, they were not Catholics but they were Christians.<sup>51</sup>

This is obviously a fascinating statement for the dying paradox which it represents: a heretical sect which heroically does its part in the “common Christian cause”! It is no wonder that those engaged in missionary activities and organization were the first to spearhead the ecumenical movement. Once the focus is off of the Church and onto the outward mission, we are in a better position to determine what is truly essential to the message and, consequently, to the Church.

This new understanding of what is essential to the message and to the Church, so crucial to ecumenism, requires repentance and forgiveness. Pope John Paul II made this clear in 1995:

Besides the doctrinal differences needing to be resolved, Christians

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and a line was drawn which no one would thereafter cross without severely damaging his reputation and status in the Church of the East.”

49 Kasper I.

50 Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, Vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500*, 2<sup>nd</sup> revised and corrected edition (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1998) 208-209.

51 Fortesque 109.

cannot underestimate the burden of long-standing misgivings inherited from the past, and of mutual misunderstandings and prejudices. Complacency, indifference and insufficient knowledge of one another often make this situation worse. Consequently, the commitment to ecumenism must be based upon the conversion of hearts and upon prayer, which will also lead to the necessary purification of past memories. With the grace of the Holy Spirit, the Lord's disciples, inspired by love, by the power of the truth and by a sincere desire for mutual forgiveness and reconciliation, are called to re-examine together their painful past and the hurt which that past regrettably continues to provoke even today. All together, they are invited by the ever fresh power of the Gospel to acknowledge with sincere and total objectivity the mistakes made and the contingent factors at work at the origins of their deplorable divisions. What is needed is a calm, clear-sighted and truthful vision of things, a vision enlivened by divine mercy and capable of freeing people's minds and of inspiring in everyone a renewed willingness, precisely with a view to proclaiming the Gospel to the men and women of every people and nation.<sup>52</sup>

Note that the “long-standing misgivings inherited from the past” must be healed through “conversion of hearts” so that there can be “the necessary purification of past memories.” Here, Pope John Paul II has given us a powerful rubric for evaluating divisive events of the past in light of the healing necessary in the present. Later in the same document, the Pope directly addresses ecumenism with the “Ancient Churches of the East.” Regarding the Christological issues, he states, “Ecumenical contacts have thus made possible essential clarifications with regard to the traditional controversies concerning Christology, so much so that we have been able to profess together the faith which we have in common.”<sup>53</sup> Thus the common profession of faith is enabled because *the controversies have been clarified*. Cardinal Walter Kasper summed up the recent progress with the Eastern Churches in this way:

The reasons underlying their separation, besides political motives, lay in the dispute about the Christological formula of the Council of Chalcedon (451): Jesus Christ true God and true man in one person, that is one person in two natures. In the meantime, after intensive preparatory work involving historical research on dogmas and discussion mediated by the “Pro Oriente” Foundation in Vienna, these

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52 Pope John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 2.

53 Pope John Paul II, *Ut unum sint*, 63.

controversies have been settled through the bilateral declarations of the Pope and the respective Patriarchs. It was recognized that when speaking of one person and two natures, the starting point was a different philosophical conception, but with the same meaning as far as the matter itself is concerned. This understanding has enabled maintaining the common faith in Jesus Christ as true God and true man, without imposing on the other one's own respective formula; thus, the formulations of the Council of Chalcedon were not forced upon the Ancient Oriental Churches. The ultimate outcome has been unity in the diversity of ways of expression.<sup>54</sup>

At this point it is abundantly clear: all are in agreement that the meaning was the same even though the philosophical conceptions and formulas differed. We are now in a position to embrace unity in diversity. In light of this, what conclusions can we draw?

## **V. Conclusion**

First, while we may say that there is potentially dangerous language in certain formulations from particular perspectives, and while a few theologians stand out as having more than an average focus on extreme positions or dangerous language, no longer can we point to "Nestorianism" and say it "seems" to divide Christ, or to "Monophysitism" and say it confuses the natures or denies the humanity. The adherents of these positions did not fall into the potential traps of the extreme formulations as feared by their opponents. Today, the "Nestorian" (Assyrian) Church and three major "Monophysite" Churches (Syrian Orthodox, Coptic Orthodox and Armenian Orthodox<sup>55</sup>) have signed declarations with Rome agreeing that they have a common Christological faith, though expressed in some terms that differ from Chalcedon. It does injustice to the truth and to ecumenical healing to continue to use language and characterizations from the point of view of those who excommunicated Nestorius and Dioscorus.

In this regard, the Assyrian Church has decided to lift the anathemas against Cyril.<sup>56</sup> They also hope to be treated in the same manner: "As we do not ask anymore anyone to revile the memory of Cyril, we would respectfully ask not to be required to abandon our long held admiration of, and appreciation for, Nestorius."<sup>57</sup> This should be possible now. In 2002, the Joint Committee for Theological

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54 Kasper III.

55 For the Armenian agreement, see the "Common Declaration of John Paul II and Catholicos Karekin I," Rome, December 13, 1996. As in the other agreements with "Monophysite" Churches, Chalcedon-like language is used without mention of one or two "natures." The essence is retained while the cause of division is removed.

56 Bishop Mar Bawai Soro, "Does Ephesus Unite or Divide? A Reevaluation of the Council of Ephesus – An Assyrian Church of the East Perspective," 2002, Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development <<http://www.cired.org>>, 9.

57 Soro, "Ephesus" 11.

Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East (JCTD) stated the following in its press release:

With regard to Christology, the JCTD initiated the preparation of a comprehensive document on the Christological tradition of the Church of the East. Based on the existing achievements, reached by theologians and academic colloquia, this document should show the particular contribution of the Church of the East to the global development of Christology. In defending orthodoxy against local heresies, the Church of the East developed indeed a particular Christological terminology and reflection, which still holds its own place besides both the Greek and the Latin traditions. This Christological reflection was carried out by many theologians, belonging to the Mesopotamian area; it is also reflected in the liturgical and canonical tradition of the Church of the East. Greek authors as Diodore of Tarsus, Theodore of Mopsuestia and Nestorius of Constantinople, who gained the esteem of the Church of the East, are to be read and understood in the light of this particular Christological tradition.<sup>58</sup>

The JCTD thus made the application, in effect, of Pope John Paul II's rubric to the three primary persons on the "Nestorian" side of the controversy. These three, including Nestorius, "are to be read and understood in the light of" the Christological tradition of the Assyrian Church of the East, which has already reached Christological agreement with Rome. The more moderate side of Nestorius discussed above in §III can be seen even more clearly now in this light.

Second, the appointment of the Antiochene Nestorius as patriarch of Constantinople is a good example of the problem of not respecting the differences between traditions. Nestorius was not wanted in Constantinople. What was wanted was someone from outside the power struggle who could represent a middle ground. What they got, however, was a strong promoter of Antiochene theology. Nestorius did not respect the differences he found in Constantinople. In seeing dangers in so many differences, without acknowledging the dangers others might see in his, Nestorius failed in the task of pastoring a flock with traditions other than his own.

This controversy and its ongoing resolution should be a lesson to theologians and Church leaders in a world growing smaller not so much in its diversity as in the proximity of the other. The Churches must make such lessons a part of the fabric of the traditions so that ecumenical reconciliation would be the

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58 Joint Committee for Theological Dialogue Between the Catholic Church and the Assyrian Church of the East (JCTD), "Press Release of the Eighth Annual Meeting," 2002, Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Education Development <<http://www.cired.org>>.

lens through which those in other traditions are viewed, that the “lack of charity” in the past may be replaced by charity in the present.<sup>59</sup> Let us pray and do our part to continue to break down the barriers erected in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and in other centuries, that those who share the bond of the Spirit of Jesus may share also the table of remembrance.

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59 The Assyrian Church points out how important it is for clergy to be strong supporters and to report the proceedings of ecumenical dialogue to Church members so that they may rejoice and become supporters as well. See Bishop Mar Bawai Soro, “Reception of the 'Common Christological Declaration' in the Assyrian Church of the East: An Occasion for Christian Joy and Cultural Vitality,” 2002, Commission on Inter-Church Relations and Educational Development <<http://www.cired.org>>, 3-4.