

Second Council of Constantinople

(FIFTH GENERAL COUNCIL)

This council was held at Constantinople (5 May-2 June 553), having been called by Emperor Justinian. It was attended mostly by Oriental bishops; only six Western (African) bishops were present. The president was Eutychius, Patriarch of Constantinople. This assembly was in reality only the last phase of the long and violent conflict inaugurated by the edict of Justinian in 543 against Origenism (P.G., LXXXVI, 945-90). The emperor was persuaded that Nestorianism continued to draw its strength from the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Theodoret of Cyrus (d. 457), and Ibas of Edessa (d. 457), also from the personal esteem in which the first two of these ecclesiastical writers were yet held by many. The events which led to this council will be narrated more fully in the articles POPE VIGILIUS and in THREE CHAPTERS; only a brief account will be given here.

From 25 Jan

January, 547, Pope Vigilius was forcibly detained in the royal city; he had originally refused to participate in the condemnation of the Three Chapters (i.e. a brief statement of anathema upon Theodore of Mopsuestia and his writings, upon Theodoret of Cyrus and his writings, against St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Council of Ephesus, and upon the letter written by Ibas of Edessa to Maris, Bishop of Hadaschir in Persia). Later (by his "Judicatum", 11 April, 548) Vigilius had condemned the Three Chapters (the doctrine in question being really censurable), but he expressly maintained the authority of the Council of Chalcedon (451) wherein Theodoret and Ibas - but after the condemnation of Nestorius - had been restored to their places; in the West much discontent was called forth by this step which seemed a weakening before the civil power in purely ecclesiastical matters and an injustice to men long dead and judged by God; it was all the more objectionable as the Western mind had no accurate knowledge of the theological situation among the Greeks of that

day. In consequence of this Vigilius had persuaded Justinian to return the aforesaid papal document and to proclaim a truce on all sides until a general council could be called to decide these controversies. Both the emperor and the Greek bishops violated this promise of neutrality; the former, in particular, publishing (551) his famous edict, *Homologia tes pisteos*, condemning anew the Three Chapters, and refusing to withdraw the same.

For his dignified protest Vigilius thereupon suffered various personal indignities at the hands of the civil authority and nearly lost his life; he retired finally to Chalcedon, in the very church of St. Euphemia where the great council had been held, whence he informed the Christian world of the state of affairs. Soon the Oriental bishops sought reconciliation with him, induced him to return to the city, and withdrew all that had hitherto been done against the Three Chapters; the new patriarch, Eutychius, successor to Mennas, whose weakness and subserviency were the immediate cause of all this violence and confusion, presented (6 Jan., 553) his profession of faith to Vigilius and, in union with other Oriental bishops, urged the calling of a general council under the presidency of the pope. Vigilius was willing, but proposed that it should be held either in Italy or in Sicily, in order to secure the attendance of Western bishops. To this Justinian would not agree, but proposed, instead, a kind of commission made up of delegates from each of the great patriarchates; Vigilius suggested that an equal number be chosen from the East and the West; but this was not acceptable to the emperor, who thereupon opened the council by his own authority on the date and in the manner mentioned above. Vigilius refused to participate, not only on account of the overwhelming proportion of Oriental bishops, but also from fear of violence; moreover, none of his predecessors had ever taken part personally in an Oriental council. To this decision he was faithful, though he expressed his willingness to give an independent judgment on the matters at issue. Eight sessions were held, the result of which was the final condemnation of the Three Chapters by the 165 bishops present at the last

session (2 June, 553), in fourteen anathematizations similar to the thirteen previously issued by Justinian.

In the meantime Vigilius had sent to the emperor (14 May) a document known as the first “Constitutum” (Mansi, IX, 61-106), signed by himself and sixteen, mostly Western, bishops, in which sixteen heretical propositions of Theodore of Mopsuestia were condemned, and, in five anathematizations, his Christological teachings repudiated; it was forbidden, however, to condemn his person, or to proceed further in condemnation of the writings or the person of Theodoret, or of the letter of Ibas. It seemed indeed, under the circumstances, no easy task to denounce fittingly the certain errors of the great Antiochene theologian and his followers and yet uphold the reputation and authority of the Council of Chalcedon, which had been content with obtaining the essentials of submission from all sympathizers with Nestorius, but for that very reason had never been forgiven by the Monophysite opponents of Nestorius and his heresy, who were now in league with the numerous enemies of Origen, and until the death (548) of Theodora had enjoyed the support of that influential empress.

The decisions of the council were executed with a violence in keeping with its conduct, though the ardently hoped-for reconciliation of the Monophysites did not follow. Vigilius, together with other opponents of the imperial will, as registered by the subservient court-prelates, seems to have been banished (Hefele, II, 905), together with the faithful bishops and ecclesiastics of his suite, either to Upper Egypt or to an island in the Propontis. Already in the seventh session of the council Justinian caused the name of Vigilius to be stricken from the diptychs, without prejudice, however, it was said, to communion with the Apostolic See. Soon the Roman clergy and people, now freed by Narses from the Gothic yoke, requested the emperor to permit the return of the pope, which Justinian agreed to on condition that Vigilius would recognize the late council. This Vigilius finally agreed to do, and in two documents (a letter to Eutychius

of Constantinople, 8 Dec., 553, and a second “Constitutum” of 23 Feb., 554, probably addressed to the Western episcopate) condemned, at last, the Three Chapters (Mansi, IX, 424-20, 457-88; cf. Hefele, II, 905-11), independently, however, and without mention of the council. His opposition had never been based on doctrinal grounds but on the decency and opportuneness of the measures proposed, the wrongful imperial violence, and a delicate fear of injury to the authority of the Council of Chalcedon, especially in the West. Here, indeed, despite the additional recognition of it by Pelagius I (555-60), the Fifth General Council only gradually acquired in public opinion an ecumenical character. In Northern Italy the ecclesiastical provinces of Milan and Aquileia broke off communion with the Apostolic See; the former yielding only towards the end of the sixth century, whereas the latter (Aquileia-Grado) protracted its resistance to about 700 (Hefele, *op. cit.*, II, 911-27). (For an equitable appreciation of the conduct of Vigilius see, besides the article VIGILIUS, the judgment of Bois, in *Dict. de théol. cath.*, II, 1238-39.) The pope was always correct as to the doctrine involved, and yielded, for the sake of peace, only when he was satisfied that there was no fear for the authority of Chalcedon, which he at first, with the entire West, deemed in peril from the machinations of the Monophysites.

The original Greek Acts of the council are lost, but there is extant a very old Latin version, probably contemporary and made for the use of Vigilius, certainly quoted by his successor Pelagius I. The Baluze edition is reprinted in Mansi, “*Coll. Conc.*”, IX, 163 sqq. In the next General Council of Constantinople (680) it was found that the original Acts of the Fifth Council had been tampered with (Hefele, *op. cit.*, II, 855-58) in favour of Monothelitism; nor is it certain that in their present shape we have them in their original completeness (*ibid.*, pp. 859-60). This has a bearing on the much disputed question concerning the condemnation of Origenism at this council. Hefele, moved by the antiquity and persistency of the reports of Origen’s condemnation, maintains (p. 861) with Cardinal

Noris, that in it Origen was condemned, but only en passant, and that his name in the eleventh anathema is not an interpolation.

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