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WAS NESTORIUS A NESTORIAN?

For more than fifty years theologians and historians of dogma have discussed the relationship of Nestorius (born after 381—died about 451), Patriarch of Constantinople (428-431) to the doctrine condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. As late as 1949 the learned Emile Amann could write: "Whether we like it or not, Nestorius is still a problem today."¹

For the non-Catholic historians of dogma generally, the problem was solved early in the century.² Nestorius, a candid, sincere, stubborn patriarch was the object of unjust criticism and biased, mis-informed judgment on the part of the Roman Pontiff, St. Celestine (422-432), and of the sinister political intrigue of Cyril of Alexandria and his confreres. He was unwittingly involved in a very complicated skein of circumstances which unfortunately led to his deposition and exile. The Council of Ephesus, rigged by Cyril, ignorant of the mind of Nestorius, condemned a Nestorius existing only in the distorted minds of the Alexandrians. Hence the "tragedy" of Nestorius. Later writers outside the Church have modified somewhat the tenor of their criticism but still maintain that Nestorius was orthodox. The publication in 1910 of the last work of Nestorius, the *Liber Heraclidis*, provided, according to these writers, confirmation of their view that Nestorius had been grossly misunderstood and arbitrarily condemned. In short, Nestorius was not a Nestorian.³

¹ E. Amann in *Revue des Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 23, 1949, p. 5.

² F. Loofs, *Nestoriana, Die Fragmente des Nestorius, gesammelt, untersucht und herausgegeben*, Halle, 1905. This is the best collection of the extant works of Nestorius. Additional fragments have been published by Mercati, Ludtke, Nau, Schwartz and Lebon. Cf. also A. Harnack, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, Tübingen, 1909; R. Seeberg, *Lehrbuch der Dogmengeschichte*, vol. 2, Leipzig, 1910, p. 204; Bethune-Baker, *Nestorius and His Teaching*, a fresh examination of the evidence, Cambridge University Press, 1908.

³ Bethune-Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

A number of Catholic scholars incline to favor a partial rehabilitation of Nestorius. While not questioning the condemnation of error at the Council of Ephesus, they question whether Nestorius ever held such error. That he was imprudent, contentious, unskilled in theology, unfortunate in his language, lacking in tact in dealing with Rome may be admitted. But that he subjectively held unorthodox christological or mariological views does not appeal certain. On the contrary, in this instance Rome was poorly informed, acting on the inadequate and false summary compiled by Cassian, and angered by the apparent questioning of the Roman decision regarding Pelagianism by Nestorius, Pope Celestine at the instigation of Cyril and the Alexandrian bishops precipitated the tragedy of Nestorius.⁴

On the other hand, the traditional view that Nestorius did in fact hold the false doctrine rightly condemned at Ephesus, whatever be the involved historical circumstances surrounding that event, is maintained by the majority of Catholic theologians.⁵ Hence the current question regarding the mind of Nestorius.

⁴ Emile Amann, *Nestorius*, in *D.T.C.*, vol. 11, Paris, 1931, col. 76-157. This article contains Amann's general and somewhat restrained view of this affair. For a criticism see M. Quera, S.J., *Un esbós d'història del Concili d'Efès*, in *Analecta Sacra Tarraconensia*, vol. 7, 1931, pp. 3-55. Amann returned to this question in much more severe language shortly before his death. Cf. Amann, *L'affaire Nestorius vue de Rome*, in *Revue de Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 23, 1949, pp. 5-37, 207-244, and vol. 24, 1950, pp. 28-52, 235-265. L. Ciccone, C.M., *L'affaire Nestorius vue de Rome de Mons. Amann*, in *Divus Thomas* (Placentiae), vol. 28, 1951, pp. 33-50, shows convincingly the unsatisfactory character of these last articles of Amann. Cf. also L. Fendt, *Die Christologie des Nestorius*, Kempten, 1910.

⁵ Jugie, *D.T.C.*, vol. 5, col. 161-162; Galtier, *De Incarnatione et Redemptione*, Paris, rev. ed. 1947, n. 109-125. This is an excellent treatment of the dogmatic aspects of the controversy. G. Bardy, in Fliche-Martin, *Histoire de l'Eglise*, Bloud and Gay, 1948, vol. 4, pp. 163-196, is one of the best short general treatments of the historical aspects of the question. F. S. Müller, S.J. in *Gregorianum* vol. 2, pp. 266-284, 352-386: *Fuitne Nestorius revera Nestori-*

In a paper so limited as this must necessarily be, it would be impossible to discuss in detail this immensely intricate question. One can only indicate the general positions held today and some of the growing bibliography on this subject. It need hardly be pointed out that neither the heretical teaching condemned at Ephesus, nor the legitimacy of that Council are in question; nor whether Nestorius originated such doctrine;⁶ nor whether he was in good or bad faith in proposing his views on Christology; but solely whether according to sound and objective norms of hermeneutics the heretical doctrine is found in the sermons, letters, and later writings of the unhappy patriarch.⁷ The treatment here can be conveniently summed up under three headings: (1) The external events of the controversy; (2) the teaching of Nestorius prior to the Council of Ephesus; (3) the teaching of Nestorius in the *Liber Heraclidis*.⁸

I

The External Events

Nestorius, head of a monastery in Antioch and a renowned preacher, was consecrated bishop of Constantinople in April, 428. Immediately he took strong measures against heretics in his city. The Emperor at his urging issued a long decree May 30, 428 against a list of heretics, omitting mention of the Pelagians, despite the fact that the notorious Julian of Eclanum and three Italian bishops deposed from their sees were present

anus? Also Roschini, *La Madonna secondo le fede e la teologia* vol. 2, Roma 1953, pp. 155-159.

⁶ On Nestorius' sources cf. Nilus a S. Broc., O.C.D., *De Maternitate divina B. Mariae semper Virginis*, Romae, 1944, p. 1-2. This is a very objective study of the whole affair.

⁷ Cf. Bardy, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-165, for a good bibliography on Nestorius.

⁸ Amann, *D.T.C.*, vol. 11, col. 75-157; Bardy, *op. cit.*, pp. 163-196.

in the city. The remnants of Arianism and Apollinarism were the particular object of the zeal of Nestorius and these he determined to stamp out. The use of the term *Theotókos* provided the occasion for the ensuing bitter controversy. The term had long been in use in Alexandria circles and indeed in general outside of Antiochian influence. For Nestorius it was heretical in its origin, used by heretics currently, and endangering the faith of his flock. The word should not be used. He thus supported, if he did not inspire, the sermons of Anastasius, a companion monk from Antioch, and the strong condemnations of Dorotheus, bishop of Marcianopolis, of all who dare to call Mary the Mother of God. Nestorius himself in subsequent sermons and letters explained that Mary was not properly the Mother of God, since God had no beginning, but rather the Mother of Man, though more properly she should be called the Mother of Christ, since this title embraced the two natures in one person. *Theotókos* was neither scriptural nor used by the Fathers at Nicea.

The reaction at court, in the monasteries and among the populace was immediate and deep. Nestorius was adamant. St. Cyril in Alexandria was shortly apprised of the situation and wrote to the monks defending the use of *Theotókos* and explaining the reasonableness and orthodoxy of the term; he rejected the position of Nestorius without naming him. A series of letters carried the matter further: Nestorius to Pope Celestine in 429; Cyril to Nestorius, Easter 430; Nestorius to Cyril, June 430; Cyril to Pope, Emperor and imperial family. In the summer of 430 the Pope held his Roman Council and clearly and definitively disapproved of the teaching of Nestorius and ordered him to retract within ten days of his notification of the decision or be deposed.⁹ This decision is com-

⁹ Amann, *Revue de Sciences Religieuses*, vol. 23, 1949, pp. 5-37. Msgr. Amann writes with wide erudition, but his assumptions and inferences, especially with regard to culpable ignorance on the part of Pope Celestine go beyond the evidence.

municated by letter to the Emperor, to Nestorius, to a number of Eastern bishops and to Cyril of Alexandria with the added charge to see to its execution.¹⁰

St. Cyril drew up his famous twelve anathematisms which Nestorius was to be asked to subscribe as evidence of his retraction and went to Constantinople to carry out his commission. Nestorius in a very difficult position at this point urged both Pope and Emperor to convene a General Council. November 19, 430, the Emperor called for a council to meet at Ephesus, Pentecost (June 7) 431. The scope was not specified. The Pope assented stating that its purpose would be to carry out the decision already handed down regarding Nestorius. After delays, protests, and increasingly bitter rivalry at Ephesus, St. Cyril, over the opposition of sixty-eight bishops, opened the Council June 22. In its seven sessions it accomplished its purpose as seen by Pope Celestine and Cyril, and closed July 31, 431. Nestorius refused to appear before the Council. He was judged on the basis of the letter of Pope Celestine and the Roman Synod to Cyril, the letters between Cyril and Nestorius, a collection of twenty fragments taken from the writings of Nestorius as against a Patristic memoir on the Incarnation, and the actual experience of the bishops present with Nestorius at Ephesus. The anathematisms of St. Cyril were read but not made part of the Acta of this Council. Nestorius was condemned, deposed, and excommunicated.

The opposition refused to accept this action and attacked the teaching and procedure of Cyril. After two years of con-

¹⁰ There is still considerable debate as to the exact nature of St. Cyril's authority regarding the composition of a profession of faith to be submitted to Nestorius, and particularly over his right to convene the General Council. Cf. Duchesne, *Histoire ancienne de l'Eglise*, vol. 3, p. 349, n. 1; P. Galtier, *Le centenaire d'Ephèse, Rome et le Concile*, in *Recherches de Science Religieuse*, vol. 21, 1931, p. 275. Amann's grave accusations are countered by Ciccone, *art. cit.*

troversy in which Nestorius is a very secondary figure, an "Act of Union" was accepted by both sides and the central question of the controversy was ended with the affirmation of one person in two natures in the orthodox sense, and the acceptance of the validity of the title *Theotókos*. Certainly the language of this "Act" closely approximates that of Antioch and represents a concession on the part of St. Cyril. The doctrine, however, is that of the Universal Church, which St. Cyril had always ardently defended. No mention was made of the unfortunate anathematisms.

Nestorius, deprived of his see, resided in Antioch until the end of 431 and then at the request of Pope Celestine and with the support of John of Antioch, the Emperor exiled him to the Oasis in the Libyan desert where he composed his lengthy apologia, the *Liber Heraclidis*, and where he died in 451. Much of the present controversy stems from diverse views on the activity of St. Cyril, and the justice or injustice of the treatment of Nestorius. For some, the whole story is a "tragedy" of errors of which Nestorius is the victim.

II

The Teaching of Nestorius Prior to the Council

The entire controversy regarding the mind of Nestorius is vastly complicated by the existing confusion in concepts and terminology of the Alexandrian and Antiochian Schools. It was further deepened and entangled by the resentment and bitterness inherited from the long struggle between Alexandria and Constantinople for supremacy in the East. Galtier remarks that both sides used formulae which were equivocal and which necessarily aroused suspicion of either Apollinarism or Adoptionism.¹¹

¹¹ For the pertinent passages in Nestorius see Loofs, *op. cit.*, pp. 175-178, 251-252, 263, 276, 281, 352. Also see Galtier, *op. cit.*, n. 113-114.

In briefest outline, Nestorius appears to have taught prior to the Council:

(a) The title *Theotókos* is to be rejected because it is heretical in origin, not found in Scripture and not used by the Fathers at Nicea, and leads to the erroneous belief that Mary is the Mother of the Divinity. It must be avoided lest the physical properties of the human nature be predicated of the divine nature, which is to confuse and mix the natures. Mary is not the Mother of God; otherwise we would have to admit that "God suffered, God was two months old, God died." She is the Mother of Man, but better Mother of Christ, which name applies to the two natures.¹² Nestorius under pressure admits *Theotókos* can be used if explained properly.¹³ His explanation is of interest.

(b) In Christ there are two natures in one Person. This he insists on. Christ is one, One Lord, One Son. These phrases have their own meaning, given the use of the *communicatio idiomatum* by Nestorius.¹⁴ The *Persona Christi* is not the *Persona Verbi*¹⁵ and hence things true of the *Persona Christi* may not be predicated of the *Persona Verbi*.

(c) Since the *Persona Christi* is intimately united with the *Persona Verbi* we may speak of one Person in two natures. He prefers the description "Habitaculum Dei" or "Templum Dei."¹⁶

(d) Proceeding from his mariological position of denying that Mary is properly called the Mother of God, and is properly called the Mother of Christ, he went further in defending

¹² Cf. *Nestoriana* (Loofs), p. 251.

¹³ Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

¹⁴ Amann explains that the Antiochian School did not scientifically formulate the rules for *communicatio idiomatum* until a hundred years after Nestorius. Cf. *Revue de Sciences Religieuses*. vol. 23, 199, pp. 5-37.

¹⁵ Cf. Tixeront, *History of Dogmas* vol. 3, St. Louis, 1916, pp. 26-32.

¹⁶ Cf. I. Solano, S.J. *De Verbo Incarnato*, in *Sacrae Theologiae Summa*, vol. 3, Madrid, B.A.C., 1953, p. 33, n. 11-13. Also Tixeront, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

this doctrine to his obscure concept of the union in two natures. His motive was to avoid saying God or the *Verbum* was born, suffered or died because he thought that indicated changeability in the divine nature. Excellent though his motive was, the means he chose to prevent error was destructive of the fundamental doctrine of the Catholic faith. He maintained that a union wherein the assumed human nature became properly the nature of God or the *Verbum* was impossible. Underlying his mariological teaching and his use of the "communicatio idiomatum" is his obscure faulty concept of the mode of union. The essential point in the controversy is his refusal to admit, even after careful clarification of terms by St. Cyril, that those things which are in Christ by reason of His human nature belong to the Eternal Son of God.¹⁷

St. Cyril, whose formula "Una Verbi Dei natura incarnata" was certainly very misleading and to Antiochian ears pure Apollinarism, had explained his teaching before, during and after the controversy in most orthodox language and meaning. The central point at issue was clear to both of them. For Nestorius the dilemma is always: *aut divinitas genita est ex Maria, aut genitus est homo, cui iunctus est Deus, sicut sanctus in templo*. The third possibility—*Verbum genitum est ex Maria*—he refused to admit. Beneath his ambiguous and dangerous language, which also merited censure, rests his failure to assert a true hypostatic union in Christ. The available evidence points to his holding the doctrine ascribed to him at Ephesus.

III

The Teaching of Nestorius in the "Liber Heraclidis"

The Book of Heraclidis is believed to be the last work of Nestorius.¹⁸ Written in Greek about 451, after the convoca-

¹⁷ Galtier, *op. cit.*, n. 120.

¹⁸ Nilus, *op. cit.*, p. 11, note 47.

tion of the Council of Chalcedon but prior to its actual convening, it has survived in an XIth or XIIth century Syriac manuscript belonging to the Patriarch of the Nestorians in Kurdistan.¹⁹ Though some doubts have been expressed regarding its complete authenticity in its actual present state, yet it is generally agreed that it is the work of Nestorius.²⁰ The scope of this lengthy work is to show that the author was unjustly condemned at Ephesus; that Cyril of Alexandria was moved by animosity and not zeal for orthodoxy; that the Fathers at Ephesus were ignorant of the teaching of earlier Fathers, especially of those at Nicea, and that the author finds support for his views in St. Leo and Flavian of Constantinople.

The publication of this work added increased impetus to the already warm discussion. By and large most scholars found that it confirmed their earlier views. Bethune-Baker maintains that however obscure may have been the pre-conciliar position of Nestorius, here at last it is clearly and unequivocally established as orthodox.²¹ Tixeront is of the opinion that Nestorius has modified his teaching on the mode of union but is still erroneous.²² The majority of Catholic scholars find in it clearer statements of his heresy, though couched in much more subtle and apparently orthodox language.²³

The work must be judged with the reservations suggested by its apologetic character. His attempt to associate himself with St. Leo and Flavian and the Nicean Fathers attests

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, note 48. Also Bardy, *op. cit.*, p. 163, n. 1. It was edited in French by F. Nau in 1910.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ Bethune-Baker, *op. cit.*, p. 198.

²² Tixeront, *op. cit.*, p. 29, note 67.

²³ Cf. F. S. Müller, *Gregorianum* vol. 2, 1921, pp. 35-386; R. Schultes, in *Der Katholik*, vol. 93, 1913, pp. 237-238. Seeberg admits that Nestorius in the *Liber Heraclidis* is speaking of only a moral union in Christ. Cf. *op. cit.*, vol. 2, p. 203.

his isolation and his need for stronger support than can be had from his Antiochian teachers.²⁴

His teaching regarding *Theotókos* is identical, though he now permits the use of the term more readily than in the past.²⁵ He still prefers "Christotokos" and for the same reason. He insists that consequent to the union of the two natures there is but one person, but again denies that it is "ipsum Dei Verbum" as Cyril has taught.

As to myself, I said and I claimed that the union is in only one *prosopon* of Christ. . . . You do the opposite, since you insist that God the Word be the *prosopon* of the union in the two natures. . . . It is Christ, therefore, who is the *prosopon* of the union; God the Word is not (the *prosopon*) of the union, but of his nature, which is not the same thing.²⁶

It seems a fair conclusion that the teaching of the *Liber Heraclidis* is not substantially different from the teaching of Nestorius prior to the Council. Here, it is true, he uses orthodox formulae much more insistently, argues very acutely against St. Cyril, and is anxious to bring St. Leo and Flavian to his defense, but underneath this profuse and warm defense remains the old position on the maternity of Our Lady, the mode of union in Christ, and his faulty explanation of St. John's "*Et Verbum caro factum est.*"

In conclusion, it is the view of the writer that there is no valid ground for rejecting the traditional view that the doctrine attributed to Nestorius by Pope Celestine, St. Cyril, and the Council of Ephesus, and ultimately by most of even his defenders among the Oriental bishops is indeed the teaching of Nestorius. As Jugie has remarked: it would be more than

²⁴ Duchesne, *op. cit.*, vol. 3, p. 452; Galtier, *op. cit.*, n. 125.

²⁵ *Liber Heraclidis* (ed. Nau), p. 260.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 131-133.

astonishing if both friends and enemies were deceived in this affair, and that, having been misunderstood by all his contemporaries, the unfortunate Nestorius has been appreciated only by a few choice souls several centuries after his death.²⁷

The entire controversy is eloquent witness to the intimate dependence of Mariology on Christology, and of the mutual light and harmony to be derived in the theological synthesis from the close association of Mother and Son.

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²⁷ Jugie, in *D.T.C.*, vol. 5, col. 161-162.