

Professor HAMILCAR S. ALIVISATOS D.D.

THE BYZANTINE EMPERORS AND THE OECUMENICAL COUNCILS *

As well known, the highest authority of the Orthodox Church is according to her canon law and her democratic character, attributed to the Oecumenical council. The same consists chiefly of all the canonically installed and ruling bishops of the Church, who regardless the significance of their diocese, do participate to the council by equal right, given to them through their consecration.

This parliamentary ecclesiastical body having its origin in the Apostles' Synod (Acts 15th) was usually convened by the byzantine emperors, when the solution of an acute church-problem, such as the danger of the prevailing of a heretical doctrine, became urgent and the convocation of the council seemed to be imperative.

In this case certain places for the meeting of the council were assigned by the Emperors, probably after due consultation and advice with the church authorities, (presumably the Oecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople). The emperors have mostly attended the meetings of the Council, especially their opening sessions, at which, as Chiefs of the State they used to address the Assembly. Occasionally they even took part at the discussions, but have never presided the meetings.

This, so to say, technical interference of the emperor is often misinterpreted, as a proof not only of a direct interference of the State-authority in internal Church affairs, but even as a strong evidence of an absolute control of the Church exercised by the Emperor, i.e. by the State.

Certainly there are cases of rather abrupt interferences of the emperors in internal church affairs. Constantine the Great, although baptised only just before his death, has keenly interfered even in doctrinal church-problems, regarding himself as the *ἐπίσκοπος τῶν*

* Ἀνακοίνωσις γενομένη ἐν τῷ ΙΓ' Βυζαντινῷ Συνεδρίῳ τῷ συνεληθέντι ἐν Oxford κατὰ Σεπτέμβριον τοῦ 1966.

ἔξω and acting apparently as a Pontifex Maximus, exactly in the same way as in the pagan religious affairs. He had convened the first Oecumenical Council in Nicea (325 A.D.), followed by his successors in the convening of the next six Oecumenical Councils, according to the tradition created by him.

Such an action involving important consequences in the relationship between Church and State was met without any objection from the part of the Church, just for practical reasons, enough profitable for the same.

Dogmatical agitations and controversies in the Councils and outside of them led very often to riots, and the upholding of the public order by the emperor's interference was not less important even for the Church.

The carrying of the considerable expenses of the meetings from the State fund, according to the tradition created by Constantine as well as any other material assistance, was also thankfully accepted by the Church:

Personal theological attitudes on doctrinal questions of the emperors (Justinian, Zeno, Palaeologues etc.) were mostly stimulating the efforts of the Church for the prevailing of the pure orthodox doctrine.

Of course these interferences have in no way challenged the Oecumenical council's authority or liberty; and there is not a case of imposition of the emperor's views on the doctrinal decisions of the Oec. Councils. Attempts of that kind were duly repudiated from the Church, and synodical decisions taken under imperial pressure (Latrocinium, Florentinum and others) were rejected and frustrated. In similar conflicts the Consensus Ecclesiae or the so called «conscience» of the Church, i.e. the general consent of clergy and laity on doctrinal questions, pressed always the seal of authenticity on the decisions of the Oecumenical Council, regardless the Emperor's views or opinions.

This Consensus Ecclesiae, which gives the assurance of the highest authenticity to the Oecumenical Councils is evidently based on the doctrinal significance of the two sacraments, baptism and holy orders, the first for the laity and the second for the clergy.

That is why the doctrinal decisions of the seven Oecumenical Councils (the only ones recognised by the Orthodox Church) are accepted and recognised by the Church even as infallible, just because the grace transmitted from Christ through those two sacraments enables both clergy and laity to act with authority in the Church.

On the other hand the real position of the emperor in the Church-organism explains clearly the significance of his interference in regard to the decisions of the Oecumenical Council.

The emperor was surely regarded as one of the laymen, perhaps the first of them, who in spite of some secondary privileges and prerogatives of a purely honorary character, granted to him by the Church, (such as the distinguished place he took among the congregation, his anointment at the ascension to the throne, the blessing of the congregation by him through the Divambulon and the receiving of the holy communion by his own hands), did not create for him any essential right of preponderance in the Church-organism.

His anointment at his enthronement had not a sacramental character, although for the same he was praised as the «*χρηστὸς Κυρίου*». The Church, did not find any difficulty to recognise an usurper gaining power, as the true emperor, with just the same prerogatives, his predecessor had.

After later political developments, when the byzantine emperors ceased to exist and several orthodox States were created with their orthodox rulers, the Church did not recognise to any one of them, similar prerogatives, as those to the byzantine Emperors.

Some attempts made by some of the many orthodox kings to revive in their persons the old imperial dignity, have failed.

On the whole the byzantine emperors had a preponderance recognised to them by the church. But this preponderance, from the very beginning (Constantine the Great) to the very end (Constantine Palaeologus) remained purely honorary and in no case had it influenced the Oecumenical Council's doctrinal authority.