

“AN EMPEROR WE HAVE, BUT NO BISHOP”

Rev. Donald J. Sanborn

The following is an excerpt from *The Supplication to the Emperor of the Monks of Constantinople*¹, being a complaint to him about the heretic Nestorius, then occupying the episcopal see of the same city.

Nestorius professed two errors. The first was that the Man formed in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary was other than the Word of God. The incarnation was simply the dwelling of the Word in a man, as in a temple. Hence Christ was not God, but merely the temple of God. His second error was to deny the title of Mother of God (*Theotokos*) to the Blessed Virgin Mary, according her only the title of Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*).

The monks are asking the Emperor to intervene on their behalf, and resolve an intolerable situation in which a heretic is occupying the see of Constantinople. The original text is in Greek. We here reproduce the Latin translation of it as found in *Mansi*, and next to it an English translation² which our staff has prepared:

Basilii diaconi et reliquorum monachorum supplicatio

Ob hoc verum dogma in sanctissima Dei ecclesia sincere prædicatum, Paulumque hæreticum jure optimo ejectum, facta sunt schismata populorum, perturbatio sacerdotum, et pastorum tumultuatio. Quin et hoc ipso quoque tempore quidam ex reverendissimorum sacerdotum numero Nestorium, qui obtinet episcopatus huius sedem (si tamen episcopum vocare fas est, eo quod Christum natura verum Deum) sanctam vero virginem deiparam esse obstinata animi contentione negare pergat, in publico consessu coram non infrequenter corripuerunt, et ab eiusdem communionem desciverunt, et in hodiernum usque diem desciscunt; nonnulli clanculum ab illius consortio se subdlexerunt; alii ex religiosissimis presbyteris, quoniam in hac sancta ecclesia Irene maritima contra repullulans pravum dogma invehebantur, dicendi facultate privati sunt. Unde accidit, ut populus

¹Found in *Mansi*, *Sacrorum Conciliorum Nova et Amplissima Collectio*, (Florence: 1760) Tom. IV, col. 1103. (In *Mansi* it is entitled, *Basilii diaconi et reliquorum monachorum supplicatio*).

²If the reader should notice some discrepancy between the Latin and the English, it is because the English translation was done directly from the Greek.

usitatam fidei prædicationem requirens, publice inclamaret: Imperatorem habemus, episcopum non habemus. Verum hic populi conatus non mansit impunis. Pars namque a ministris comprehensa, atque ad tribunal abstracta, tali immanitate diverberata exceptaque est in regia civitate, qualis ne apud barbaras quidem nationes quandoque usitata fuit. Non defuerunt qui populo præsentem et audientem in sanctissima ecclesia coram illi reclamarent; sed non citra gravissima incommoda, quæ ea de causa pertulerunt. Denique simplex quidem monachus, zelo vehementi instigatus, in medium ecclesiæ progressus cum synaxis celebraretur, impietatis præconem, quod hæreticus esset, ab ingressu prohibere conatus est. Sed hunc ille cæsum magnificis præsidibus tradidit; flagrisque denuo dissectum, et publice cæsum, præcone non absque clamore præeunte, in exilium expulit. Neque tragœdia hæc hisce finibus constitit. Etenim qui partes sequuntur omnia per vim agentis post impiam illam concionem; nisi Deus prohibuisset, in ipsamet sacrosancta Dei ecclesia cædem edituri erant.

*The Supplication to the Emperor of the
Monks of Constantinople*

Because this dogma, however, was preached without alloy in the most holy Church of God, and Paul [of Samosata] the heretic was most justly thrown out, divisions arose among the people, as well as disturbances among priests, and agitation among the pastors. But now in this time also some of the most respected priests have often and openly in public assembly accused Nestorius, who occupies this episcopal see (if, however, it is licit to call him bishop, for the fact that he continues to deny, with obstinate resolve, that Christ by nature is true God and that the holy Virgin is the Mother of God). These same priests have cut off communion with him, and to this day are still not in communion; some have secretly removed themselves from his fellowship; others from among the most sanctified of priests, have been denied their faculty to preach, for the reason that, in this holy diocese of Irene by the Sea, they attacked the perverse doctrine which was again sprouting forth. It therefore happened that, as the people were seeking the traditional preaching of the Faith, they publicly cried out: "An Emperor we have, but no bishop." But this effort of the people did not go unpunished. For some of them were seized by the ministers, and dragged before the court, and were taken out and beaten in the imperial city with a cruelty not used even in the barbarian nations. There were not lacking those who openly protested before him in the presence of the people who were present and listening in the most holy church, but not without very serious beatings which they bore for that cause. Finally a certain simple monk, enflamed with vehement zeal, making his way to the middle of

the church while Mass was being celebrated, tried to stop the preacher of the impiety from coming in. But he knocked him down, and handed him over to imperial prefects. Then, after having cut him up by the lash, and publicly beaten him, while the preacher was going ahead of him and shouting, he sent him into exile. Nor was it confined to this. After that wicked sermon, the partisans of his sect, since he was in possession of the place, would have brought their bloodshed into God's most holy church, if God had not forbidden it.

In this excerpt, the reader should discover and meditate a few items of note. The first is that Nestorius' heresies were not specifically condemned by any act of extraordinary magisterium. He was considered a heretic because his denials and teachings ran contrary to the *ordinary universal magisterium* of the Catholic Church. One would look in vain in the Councils of Nicea or of Constantinople for a definition of *Theotokos*. Yet Nestorius' doctrine is regarded as impious, for it contradicts the general teaching and belief of the Catholic Church as a whole.

The second item is that the priests of the diocese, at least those who remain orthodox, have publicly denounced him in council, *and have withdrawn communion from him*. They obviously already consider him outside the Church for the fact of his public heresy, and this even before his official condemnation.

Thirdly, notice that the people will not recognize him as bishop, for his failure to preach the traditional teaching. They instinctively know that the preaching and teaching of heresy is radically incompatible with the tenure of ecclesiastical authority. Hence they say, "An Emperor we have, but no bishop," *and this before any official condemnation by the papal authorities*.

Fourthly, despite his public heresy, it was still necessary that Nestorius undergo warnings by the Pope, and having repudiated the warnings, be officially excommunicated and deposed by the same.

The case is strikingly close to our own. The bishop in this instance is the Bishop of Rome and any other bishop, for that matter, who adheres to the heresies of Vatican II. The heretical matter contradicts, in most cases, the universal ordinary magisterium of the Church, although in some cases it could be argued that Vatican II contradicts *extraordinary* magisterium.³

From this similarity, we should take the example from our orthodox forefathers: break communion with the heretics, and deny them the jurisdiction

³For example, Pope Pius IX condemned, with his apostolic authority, the notion of liberty of conscience as being *contrary to the Scriptures*. Does this not fulfill all the requirements of solemn magisterium? Furthermore, the doctrine of *Extra Ecclesiam Nulla Salus*, which Vatican II and JP 2 explicitly contradict by saying that non-catholic religions are means of salvation, could arguably belong to the extraordinary magisterium.

and title of pope or bishop which they claim. “An Emperor we have but no bishop.”

At the same time, we should realize that while we have the right and obligation *personally* and even *collectively* to cut communion with heretical prelates, and to regard them as false prelates, we do not have the authority to declare the sees legally vacant which these heretical “popes” or “bishops” possess *de facto*. Only the authority of the Church can do that. We wait anxiously for the glorious day when the authority of Christ vested in a true pope will declare that the authors of Vatican II and all those who through their own fault adhered to its false teachings are excommunicated from the Catholic Church. We look forward to the authoritative deposition from their putative thrones of Paul VI, John Paul I and John Paul II, with the hopeful addition of John XXIII. How these richly deserve the title which was inscribed on Nestorius’ document of excommunication and deposition: the *New Judas*.

This balance of Catholic outrage against the teaching of heresy, on the one hand, and of Catholic respect for the processes of law, on the other, is the basis of Bishop Guérard des Lauriers’ *Thesis*. Just like the clergy who refused Nestorius’ communion, and just like the people who said they have no bishop, so Catholics must refuse to be in communion with or recognize the claim to jurisdiction of those who teach the heresies and errors of Vatican II. On the other hand, until their designation to possess the authority is legally declared null and void by competent authority, the heretical “pope” or “bishop” is in a state of legal possession of the see, but without authority. He can only lose that state of legal possession by legal deposition.

This distinction, when properly understood, should satisfy those who object, with certain reason, that the sedevacantist oversteps his bounds in deposing popes and bishops, that he sets himself up as an ecclesiastical authority. It is necessary to wait, the objectors argue, until such time as a pope declares these Vatican II popes and bishops to be null and void. In the meantime, it is necessary to regard them as valid in their office.

Valid *quoad jurisdictionem*, nego; *quoad designationem*, concedo. For by nature, by divine law, it is impossible that jurisdiction coincide with the preaching of heresy, since it is impossible that he who wishes to draw the flock into heresy have the habitual intention of promoting the proper ends of the Catholic Church.

Error always happens either by the combining of those things which should be separated, or by the separating of those things which should be combined. In this case the application of the aristotelico-thomistic principle of matter and form (act and potency, ultimately) to the office of the papacy delineates the proper distinctions to be made. The sedepenist fails to make the distinction, and thus confuses the legal designation to be pope with the papacy

itself. The total sedevacantist fails to make the distinction, and considers the heretical inmates of the Vatican to be already legally deposed.

The first error leads the sedeplenist into the blasphemous and objectively heretical position that the authority of the Church is capable of promulgating error and impious disciplines. The second error, although far less grave, leads the total sedevacantist into an implicit denial of the apostolicity of the Church. For if the line of Apostles, matter and form, has been snipped off by the heretical “popes,” then there is no institutional linkage or continuity from the time of the Apostles to the present. One would have to conclude that it was broken with the last valid pope, probably Pius XII.

If the public pronouncement and teaching of heresy means automatic legal deposition, then there would have been no necessity to warn Nestorius or to legally depose him. The case is really quite close to our own problem today, and we should learn from it.

WHAT THE LETTER WOULD HAVE SOUNDED LIKE
IF THE SOCIETY OF SAINT PIUS X
HAD WRITTEN IT.

Your Imperial Majesty:

We must bring to your attention the fact that Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople, has been preaching false doctrine, contrary to Tradition. He is saying that Our Lord is not God by nature, and that Our Lady is not the Mother of God, but only the Mother of Christ. We have publicly denounced this doctrine, and have publicly branded Nestorius as the Antichrist. We have called him a heretic. We have said that Nestorius is a schismatic, and anyone who adheres to this doctrine is schismatic. We have undertaken to protect the people from this evil heretic by setting up Mass centers in which they can come and hear the true doctrine. We act as though Nestorius does not exist.

At the same time, however, we recognize him as the true bishop of the diocese, having the authority of Christ to teach, to rule, and to sanctify the flock confided to him. There have some among us who have said that he is not a true bishop because he is a heretic and a schismatic, but we have driven them from our midst, have denounced them as schismatics, and sent them away to live in poverty and misery. We tell the people not to go to their Masses.

What we are asking for is that Nestorius try the “experiment of Tradition.” We would like him to set up in the diocese a single church, dedicated to the *Theotokos*, where the faithful can come and hear the traditional doctrine. We would like Nestorius to give our society of priests official canonical recognition, so that we can have legal status in his diocese.

In return, we will state that we accept the teachings of Nestorius “in the light of Tradition.” We will refrain from criticizing his doctrines, and from all polemic against him. We shall accept his laws and disciplines without exception, and shall not criticize them.

In order to safeguard our position, we have asked Nestorius for a “Tradition Commission,” so that there will always be a place for those who believe in the *Theotokos*.

Nestorius did set up an “Ecclesia Dei” Commission for those faithful and priests who desire to exercise their option to venerate the *Theotokos*. But we are unhappy with this state of affairs, even though we were the ones who brought it into being, since, even though he is the true bishop with real jurisdiction, we do not trust him or his Commission.

Could you please intervene on our behalf, so that we can obtain permission to have a side-chapel dedicated to the *Theotokos* in Nestorius’ cathedral?