

CONSTANTINOPLE IV–EAST VS. WEST: MISUNDERSTANDING AND MISTRUST

You have likely heard the oft-quoted idiom, “The shoe is on the other foot.” It originated in the 1800’s with slightly different wording– “the boot is on the other leg.” Essentially, the idiom reveals that **changing positions** can be **uncomfortable** when circumstances place you in the opposite position. When the Council of Constantinople III was held, the West (i.e. Rome!) was **unhappy** with some of its provisions. Now, nearly two centuries later, the shoe was on the other foot– the **East** was furious. Though accepted and numbered as an ecumenical council in the West, **Constantinople IV (869-870)** was summarily rejected in the east. Its principal purpose was to confirm the deposition (i.e., removal from office) of **Photius**, Patriarch of Constantinople. That removal had been initiated by the Eastern Emperor and affirmed by the Pope.

So far so good, right? Well, it is not that simple, as we shall soon see. But first, who was he and why was he being deposed? **Photius** was an absolutely brilliant “**Renaissance**” man, centuries **before** it even occurred! He was interested in the origin of words, grammar, history, medicine, philosophy and theology. My goodness, he even loved to read **dictionaries**! No offense, but does anyone know the Greek word for nerdy? Much of his life was spent as a lay intellectual (possibly a teacher?) and statesman. His ecclesiastical career came later and with astonishing speed. He was installed/ordained in four successive days as lector, sub-deacon, deacon and priest! Talk about the “fast-track” to exercising Church leadership! This made Rome more than a little suspicious, and the pope sought clarification about his predecessor’s resignation.

But here’s the deal. The ecumenical Council of Constantinople IV may well be the most controversial of all, due to misunderstanding and potentially **false claims** of schism, only learned later. Here’s the short story. Photius was accused of “illegally” occupying the position of Patriarch of Constantinople, of having conspired to oust the legitimate occupant, so as to insert himself. He is even accused of **bribing** papal legates in his insatiable desire for ecclesiastical power. It gets even more complicated. Was the previous patriarch deposed or did he in fact resign, realizing that he was no longer respected and had lost his authority? Did Photius play any real role in this turn of events, or was he merely tasked with assuming the role? Add to this the **separate** issue about Photius’ attitude towards the Western traditions (e.g., celibacy, fasting, length of the Lenten season to name three) and you have a **volatile mixture**, sure to produce strife.

Photius was deeply rooted in eastern traditions– why wouldn’t he be? In the past, differences between east and west were generally seen as legitimate differences of custom, but as time marched on, they became more pronounced. One had real doctrinal significance– the **addition** of a single Latin word to the creed, *filioque*. This could be the subject of a separate column but suffice it to say that in the Nicene Creed we profess that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father *and the Son*. The “and the Son” is the translation of the single Latin word *filioque*, which **does not appear** in the text of the Creed. “Nicaea, we have a problem!” To Photius, it was unforgivable to alter a fixed creed. His writings reveal disdain for western customs and even the person of the Pope, whom he hyperbolically termed “a heretic who ravages the vineyard of the Lord.” Ouch! Still, that’s **distinct** from whether he legitimately was elected Patriarch.

This council perfectly illustrates the development of **divergent traditions** in various parts of Christendom and the difficulties encountered with poor means of communication in the early middle ages. Missionary efforts **spread** both from the east and west, but when they converged in present-day Bulgaria, German clergy encountered Greek clergy and there was bound to be conflict.

Whose “territory” was Bulgaria? The East felt that this Balkan territory should fall under their jurisdiction; the west countered that it should answer to Rome. A toxic mixture of political, cultural, economic, and social as well as theological differences produced an **ecclesiastical stew** that was bound to boil over at some point. The Council of Constantinople IV was the precursor to that **boiling point** resulting in the definitive split between east and west in 1054 A.D. We have so much in common with our Orthodox brothers and sisters in the faith. Many of these issues were exacerbated by politics, mistrust and poor communication, including a language barrier.

When I read the phrase “Photian schism,” I cringe. Even though his rhetoric was over the top, the incendiary language used by the Council against him was also divisive. Constantinople IV will **not** go down as a crowning moment in Church history, even if the noble goal of preserving **Roman primacy** and good church order was actuated. It came with a **heavy** price tag, namely the further **alienation** of the East from Rome and the setting of the stage for more conflict in later years. **Hindsight** is 20/20– it is easy to judge with the benefit of history. While the facts reveal that there was blame on both sides, the resulting condemnation of Photius was most unfortunate and unnecessary. Let us continue to pray for better relations with our Orthodox brothers and sisters, showing one another mutual respect for our traditions.

- A **verdict** in the Derek Chauvin **trial** was reached shortly before bulletin press time. Archbishop Hebda invited us to ask God “to bring healing into our communities, comfort to the family of George Floyd and all who mourn, and satisfaction to those who thirst for justice.” He wisely reminded us “of the Lord’s loving closeness even in challenging times” as we **respectfully** seek the **common good** and strive to be instruments of reconciliation.
- Pope Francis applauded the beatification of five **Cistercian monks** who in 1799, were martyred in **Casamari Abbey** in Frosinone, Italy. French soldiers had sacked churches and monasteries, but these monks resisted, vowing to **protect the Eucharist** from profanation.
- **ACT test prep**, altar server style. While duly impressed with their sanctuary skills, I still try to “up their game” in other areas. I asked a server to carry the holy water bucket and accompany me with “requisite alacrity” while performing the sprinkling rite. He was both **eager** and **swift** in carrying out his duty! Oh, how they put up with my foibles. They deserve at least a **partial indulgence** for enduring yet another impromptu and uninvited vocabulary lesson!
- As we continue–albeit slowly but surely– to return to normalcy and see increased Sunday attendance, such is not the case in **Ireland**. A new Covid regulation **forbids** indoor gatherings, includes most Masses (funerals, weddings, and livestream Masses are permitted) is seen by the Irish bishops as “draconian.” Furthermore, the bishops were **neither consulted** nor alerted ahead of time. When it comes to getting back to normal in Ireland–it’s a **long way** to Tipperary.
- The **May Family Rosary Procession** returns next Sunday, May 2. The Procession begins from the State Capitol at 2:00 p.m. Those not processing are invited to pray the rosary with us in the Cathedral. Please join us.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector