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THE HENOTIKON SCHISM AND THE ROMAN CHURCH

W. T. TOWNSEND

AT THE close of the fifth century Rome and Constantinople were still divided over the question of the Henotikon of Zeno. Ever since Gibbon wrote his famous history the Henotikon has been well known at least by name. All students of church history are fairly well acquainted with the Monophysite controversy and the various attempts to heal the unhappy divisions in the Eastern church, divisions which were undermining the unity of the Empire, and threatening the authority of the emperor. Still the far-reaching effect of the whole Monophysite question was much greater than is commonly realized, demonstrating, as it did, the fundamental differences in theological thinking of East and West. The legalistic mind of the Roman was incapable of understanding the theological subtleties of the Greek. Ever since Nicaea the two divisions of the Empire had been growing apart, but not until Chalcedon were their differences clearly apparent. The famous *Tome of Leo*¹ dominated the discussions of that council, and gained for its author a position higher than any his predecessors had enjoyed; but in the end it was the rock on which the unity of the church was shattered.

The emperors could not but view with alarm the contentions that threatened the integrity of the Eastern Empire. Backed by hordes of fanatical monks, the Monophysites became a powerful sect, which it was impossible to crush. Antioch and Alexandria were the chief centers of disturbance, but it was the latter which caused the emperors the greater anxiety. When every allowance is made for exaggeration, we get a picture of civil and ecclesiastical discord dismal in the extreme.²

¹ See Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoire des conciles*, II, 569 n. 1.

² See the Henotikon, quoted by Evagrius, III, 14. Also a letter of Pope Felix to Zeno: "Dolet certe pietas tua, quod per diuturnos partis alternæ gravesque conflictus

THE HENOTIKON

In 474 Zeno mounted the imperial throne. He was of that race which a couple of centuries later was to furnish the dynasty of the Iconoclasts. Whether there was a tinge of puritanism in the rude Isaurian mountaineers which had already begun to show itself, or whether Zeno's policy was dictated merely by the exigencies of statecraft, is an open question; but it might well be the latter, for it was plainly evident that something must be done to bring peace to the Eastern church. In 482 Zeno issued the Henotikon, which was to make his name notorious if not famous. The decree was addressed to the church of Egypt, thus showing where the important influences were centered. It begins by reaching back to the councils of Nicaea and Constantinople. Next the evils resulting from the conflict are set forth in vivid language. Then it proceeds to anathematize Nestorius on the one side, and Eutyches on the other. There is a confession of faith, which is, as Gibbon points out, perfectly orthodox. But just at the close comes a phrase, which, under the most favorable interpretation, must be regarded as unfortunate. It reads: "And every one who has held or holds any other opinion, either now, or at another time, whether at Chalcedon or in any synod whatever, we anathematize."³ It is easy to see that an imperial decree, that claimed the power to override a church council was not likely to attain the unity that its name implied.⁴ To be justified at all it must have succeeded, and there is no doubt that it failed utterly. It did not unite the East, while, on the

multi de hoc saeculo videantur ablati aut baptismatis aut communionis expertes" (*Epistolae Romanorum Pontificum Genuinae*, ed. A. Thiel, I, 230).

³ Evagrius, III, 14. This author, although writing somewhat later, is an important source for the history of this period. He was born in Syria in the year 536 or 537, and was trained as a lawyer, hence the title "Scholasticus" by which he is known. He was made questor by the Emperor Tiberius II, and was given the honorary rank of ex-prefect by Maurice. His ecclesiastical history covers the period from 431-594, and was intended by the author to be a continuation of Sozomen, Theodoret, and Socrates. Evagrius was a careful historian, and is of first importance, especially in the development of the Nestorian and Monophysite controversies.

⁴ Gibbon's statement that "It is in the ecclesiastical story that Zeno appears least contemptible (chap. xlvi), is well known, but would not find many supporters today.

other hand, it lost the West.⁵ It must soon have died a natural death from its very ineffectiveness, if Rome had not insisted on the condemnation of Acacius, patriarch of Constantinople.⁶

Simplicius (†483), who was bishop of Rome at the time, does not appear to have heard of the Henotikon, but he was very disturbed over the general condition of the Egyptian church.⁷ His successor, Felix III,⁸ wrote at once to both the emperor and Acacius, demanding that the statutes of Chalcedon be maintained, that Peter Mongus be expelled from the see of Alexandria, and that Acacius appear to defend himself at Rome. With the letters were sent two papal delegates, Vitalis and Misenus.⁹ From then on things began to move rapidly. Cyril, the superior of the Akoimèts in Constantinople, dispatched Simeon, one of his monks, to inform Felix that his ambassadors had betrayed him by holding communion with the heretics, and by uttering the name of Peter when reading the diptychs. Felix took prompt action. A synod was called at Rome which excommunicated both Acacius and Peter. The unfortunate legates were punished by being degraded from the priesthood.¹⁰

In 491 Zeno died, and his widow, Ariadne, by offering her hand to Anastasius, a silentiary, raised him to the vacant throne. Pope Felix III died the following year, and was succeeded by Gelasius I. If we are to believe Theodorus Lector, Anastasius' orthodoxy was questioned from the beginning, and the Patriarch Euphemius objected to his election "Saying that he was a heretic, and as such unworthy to rule christians."¹¹ The same historian states that there was rejoicing among Manichaeans and Arians at his promotion; the former, because of his

⁵ Evagrius, III, 30.

⁶ So Harnack, *Dogmengeschichte*, II, 378.

⁷ Evagrius, III, 15; and Simplicii, *Epistolae*, Thiel I, pp. 199 ff.

⁸ Felix is reckoned II or III according as Felix the antipope (355-65) is counted or omitted.

⁹ Evagrius, III, 18; and Felicitis, *Epistolae*, Thiel I, pp. 222 ff.

¹⁰ Evagrius, III, 19-21; and Felicitis, *op. cit.*

¹¹ Theodorus Lector, II, 6.

mother's known partiality for their sect, and the latter, because his maternal uncle held views similar to their own. Such charges, even if untrue, show what people of his time thought, and would be sufficient to make his election unpopular at Rome.

In the first year of his pontificate Gelasius wrote a circular letter to the Eastern bishops,¹² and a personal one to the Patriarch Euphemius.¹³ A little later he wrote to Faustus, who was at that time in Constantinople head of a delegation from Theodoric to the Eastern court.¹⁴ This letter is interesting in more ways than one. Anastasius had informed the Romans that the pope had excommunicated him. The haste with which Gelasius wrote to deny the charge shows very plainly that such a step was unthinkable, if not impossible.¹⁵ The Roman senate and people were orthodox, but there was a strong Eastern party, and there were lengths to which a pope could not go, even when dealing with a heretical emperor.

By the returning delegation Anastasius asked for *litterae apostolicae*, giving as an excuse for leaving Acacius' name on the diptychs, fear of the city mob of Constantinople. Gelasius replied with his famous letter in which he propounded the doctrine of dual authority, known as the Gelasian theory of the papacy. He claimed that the governing of the world was dual in its nature, namely, the sacred authority of the pontiffs and the regal power. In this the burden of the priests was heavier, because in the divine examination they must answer even for kings.¹⁶ In the matter of Acacius he refused to give way. His name must be

¹² Thiel I, pp. 287 ff.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 312 ff.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 341 ff.

¹⁵ Cf. Carlyle, *History of Political Theory in the West*, I, 188. "The attitude of Felix and Gelasius towards the emperor is courteous, and even deferential, but it is at the same time quite firm. It is clear that while they were reluctant to break with the emperor, to have an open quarrel with him, they had no hesitation in resisting him."

¹⁶ For the text of the letter see Thiel I, pp. 349 ff. On the question of the dual authority Gelasius writes: "Duo quippe sunt, imperator auguste, quibus principaliter mundus hic regitur: auctoritas sacra pontificum, et regalis potestas. In quibus tanto gravius est pondus sacerdotum, quanto etiam pro ipsis regibus hominum in divino reddituri sunt examine rationem."

erased from the diptychs, and no fear of men ought to hinder the emperor from performing his duty. To these terms the emperor had no intention of subscribing. Controversy nearly always breeds its opposite, so it is not surprising that Anastasius inclined more and more to the Monophysite position. On one point he was determined: the West must accept the Henotikon. The opposition of the papacy was preventing the unifying of the East.

When in 496, on the death of Gelasius, Anastasius II became bishop of Rome, his milder disposition and sincere desire to heal the schism inspired the court at Constantinople with the hope that a settlement, not unfavorable to its views, might be reached. In fact one of the first acts of the new pope was to write in the most conciliatory terms to the emperor, even offering to pass over in silence the obnoxious name of Acacius.¹⁷ A man who went so far might be induced to go farther. There was a report current in Constantinople at the time, and repeated by Theodorus Lector, that the senator Festus had secretly suggested to the emperor that the pope might even be persuaded to subscribe to the Henotikon.¹⁸ Whether this could really have been accomplished we have no means of knowing, for, when Festus reached Rome, Pope Anastasius was dead. On the other hand it must be remembered that if Festus, a Roman senator skilled in the paths of diplomacy, was seriously of the opinion that such an event was at least possible, he must have had some foundation for his belief.¹⁹ To this supposition must be added the clear statement of the *Liber pontificalis* that the pope "desired secretly to reinstate Acacius and could not. And he was struck dead by divine will." These facts, added to the testimony of his

¹⁷ Thiel I, pp. 615 ff.

¹⁸ Theodorus Lector, II, 17. This took place during the second embassy of Festus, when he finally made peace between Theodoric and Anastasius, and brought the *ornamenta palatii* back to Italy (*Anonymus Valesii*, 64). Perhaps the successful conclusion of his civic mission was due to a readiness to sacrifice Rome in things ecclesiastical.

¹⁹ Such is the opinion of Pfeilschifter, *Der Ostgotenkönig Theoderick d. Grosse*, pp. 39 f.

own letter to the emperor, make a strong case. The name of Anastasius II was particularly execrated in the Middle Ages, and he is one of the supreme pontiffs whom Dante placed in hell. Leaving out of consideration what he might have done, we know by his own statement that he was ready, at least, to be silent on the question of Acacius, while recognizing his baptisms and ordinations. Grisar²⁰ has labored, I think ineffectually, to minimize the evidence.

PARTIES IN ROME

The death of Pope Anastasius left two parties in Rome: those who favored carrying forward the attempts of the late pope to effect reconciliation, and those who followed the uncompromising attitude of Felix and Gelasius. But this was not the only line of demarcation, and it is the other elements entering in that make the situation difficult to define.

For some time previous to the beginning of the sixth century there had been a party among the Italians whose members evidently believed that the hope for the future lay with the strong barbarian leaders. This group was not very large in the beginning, and may even have been inspired by a good deal of fear, but as time went on it grew.

This party, which for the want of a better name we may call the "Western," became stronger under the Goths. This was due to a number of causes. In the first place Theodoric came with imperial sanction, so that no break with the East was involved. Again the Gothic king was exceedingly diplomatic in upholding Roman institutions. Moreover, Theodoric was able to give security; he not only ruled but he protected Italy, and materially extended its borders. But perhaps the strongest single factor in giving definite shape to the Western party was the schism. This is best seen by the alignment of the parties. The new election of a bishop of Rome was to show that the members of the clergy

²⁰ *Geschichte Roms und der Päpste im Mittelalter*, I, 457 ff. For a full discussion see Döllinger, *Die Papst-Fabeln des Mittelalters*, pp. 146 ff.

were at this time largely Western or Gothic in their sympathies. Of course this must only be taken in a general sense, as there were clerics and laymen on both sides.

There was still another group whose members, while accepting Theodoric, still looked to Constantinople, and would have liked to see the West brought into closer relation with the East. These were mostly laymen of noble families. Some members of the aristocracy, such as Cassiodorus, had frankly accepted the barbarian régime, but they were the minority; for the most, the Gothic rule was a hard necessity.²¹ Some had even left Italy and taken up their abode in the East. Priscianus, writing about this time, assures the Emperor Anastasius of the allegiance of both Romes.²² For the present the rule of Theodoric was tolerated, and Festus, who seems to have been the leader of the Roman aristocracy, used his influence to get it recognized in the East. Still his sympathies appear to have been with the emperor, and in the new papal elections he was the leader of the Eastern party.

Previous to 498 we have no clear evidence that these groups were sharply defined. All the elements of division were there; what was needed was a clear-cut issue, and this the impending papal election was to supply.

THE PAPAL ELECTION OF 498

Two candidates were in the field, each supported by one of the two parties: Symmachus, who represented the policy of Gelasius and was uncompromisingly hostile to the Henotikon, and Laurentius, who was supported by the Eastern party headed by Festus.²³

Little is known of either candidate previous to the time of the election. According to the *Liber pontificalis* Symmachus was

²¹ Romano, *Le Dominazioni barbariche in Italia*, pp. 175 f.

²² "De laude Anastasii imperatoris," l. 265, *Poetae Latini Minores* V (ed. Baehrens).

²³ Vogel suggests this fact as the reason for Theodoric's support of Symmachus (*MGH. Auctor. Antiq.* VII, xvi).

a native of Sardinia, and from his own statement it is evident that he was still a pagan when he arrived in Rome. In his apology against the Emperor Anastasius he writes: "Roma mihi testes est et scrinia testimonium perhibent, utrum a fide Catholica, quam in sede beati apostoli Petri veniens ex paganitate suscepi, aliqua ex parte deviaverim."²⁴ At the time of his election he was a deacon.²⁵

Laurentius was a Roman,²⁶ and, according to the *Laurentian Fragment*, a presbyter in the Roman church. His subscription to the acts of a synod held in 499 is a little more specific: *Coelius Laurentius archipresbyter tituli Praxidae*. Since he was the choice of Festus we may safely infer that he favored the imperial party, though how far he was prepared to go in meeting the wishes of the emperor we have no means of knowing. It is probably a safe guess that he had already agreed to some compromise, the recognition of Acacius at the very least.

The long and bitter struggle between Symmachus and Laurentius does not concern us here except in the result. The final recognition of Symmachus was the death knell of the Henotikon. History does not deal in the might-have-beens, but one cannot help but wonder how different might have been the history of the Eastern Empire if some compromise could only have been found in the Monophysite quarrel which would have been satisfactory to all parties. Without the West no plan could be completely successful. With the defeat of the party of Festus all hope that Rome would agree to any *via media* vanished for good and all. Still, even if Anastasius had lived, or if Laurentius had been elected, it is highly improbable that the one or the other, no matter how pliant they might have been personally, would have been any more successful in forcing a compromise of Italy than was Honorius I a hundred years later, when the Emperor Heraclius tried his hand at healing the old sore.

The years that followed the election of Symmachus were in the nature of an anticlimax. Anastasius refused to admit defeat,

²⁴ Thiel I, p. 702.

²⁵ Theodorus Lector, II, 17.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

and a bitter correspondence ensued, but his case was lost with the election. Symmachus died in 514, the emperor four years later. New actors must come upon the scene before the corpse of the Henotikon was to be finally committed to the tomb.

The Emperor Anastasius left no direct heirs, only nephews. An obscure palace intrigue brought Justin, commander-in-chief of the guard, to the throne. The new emperor was of peasant birth, and was almost seventy at the time of his elevation to the purple. He was either nearly or wholly illiterate; but what he lacked in this regard was more than compensated for by his brilliant nephew and heir, Justinian. Justin and Justinian were natives of Illyricum, so belonged more to the West than to the East. Perhaps Justinian already dreamed of his conquest of the West, and the restoration of the old undivided empire, which he so splendidly failed to accomplish. All this was impossible without ecclesiastical unity. Hormisdas, the new pope, abated not one iota of the demands made by his predecessor. But Justin and Justinian were prepared to make all concessions, and in a letter dated April 22, 519, the emperor officially notified Hormisdas that the Eastern bishops had signed the *Libellus* of the pope.²⁷

Thus after a short life of thirty-seven years the Henotikon received its official obituary, but its ghost refused to be laid, and haunted the history of the Byzantine Empire, both secular and ecclesiastical, for many a long year, But "That," as Rudyard Kipling would say, "is another story."

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²⁷ See Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoire des conciles*, II, 1046 ff.