

# **Ecumenical Councils**

## **The First Ecumenical Council**

The Arian controversy arose during fourth century. Arius, an Alexandrian priest, taught that the Divine Logos, the Word of God Who became man - Jesus Christ - is not the divine Son of God. He was merely a creature like everything else created out of nothing by God. According to Arius, God is not the uncreated Holy Trinity. God is the Father, the Creator, alone. God the Father created His Logos or Word or Son as the first and greatest of His creatures. This Logos, Who may be called divine only in a manner of speaking is God's instrument for the salvation of the world, being born as the man Jesus. Thus Jesus Christ is not the uncreated, divine Son of God having exactly the same uncreated divinity as God the Father. He is a creature, as is the Holy Spirit. God is not the Holy Trinity.

The controversy raised by the teaching of the Arians was brought to the decision of the whole Church at the Council which Constantine called in Nicea in 325. This council, known as the First Ecumenical Council, decreed that the Logos, Word and Son of God is uncreated and divine. He is begotten - that is, born or generated - from the Father, and not made or created by Him. He is of one essence with the Father (homoousios). He is True God of True God, the Word of God by Whom all things were made. It is this uncreated, only-begotten divine Son of God Who became man from the Virgin Mary as Jesus Christ the Messiah of Israel and the Savior of the world.

## **The Second Ecumenical Council**

The decision of the Nicene Council was not universally accepted in the Church for a long time. The controversy raged for many decades. Numerous councils were held in different places which formulated various statements of faith. The Arian party gained imperial support and the defenders of the Nicene faith were greatly persecuted. The troubles persisted until 381 when, at a council in Constantinople, known now as the Second Ecumenical Council, the original decision of Nicea was reaffirmed and the divinity of the Holy Spirit was proclaimed. The combined statement of these two councils comprises the Symbol of Faith, the Creed of the orthodox Catholic Church.

The Council of Nicea also made a number of canons concerning the order and discipline of the Church. These canons confirmed the primacy of the Church of Rome in the West, Alexandria in Africa, and Antioch in the East (Canon 6), and the recognition of the dignity of the Church in Jerusalem (Canon 7). The council also made the rules for determining the date of the annual celebration of Easter. The Council of Constantinople also produced canons, one of which stated that "the bishop of Constantinople shall have the prerogative of honor after the bishop of Rome because Constantinople is the New Rome." (Canon 3)

## **The Third Ecumenical Council**

At the beginning of the fifth century when Alexandria and Constantinople were feuding over their respective positions in the Church and in the empire, Nestorius, the bishop of Constantinople, made known his refusal to honor Mary, Christ's mother, with the traditional title of Theotokos. He claimed that the one born from Mary is merely the "man" in whom the eternal Logos of God came to dwell, but not the Logos Himself. Thus, Mary could not properly be called Theotokos, which means the one who gave birth to God.

Saint Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria (d.444), forcefully rejected the teaching of Nestorius, claiming that it is proper to call Mary Theotokos since the one born from her, "according to the flesh," is none other than the divine Logos of God. The only-begotten Son of God was "begotten of the Father before all ages" coming down from Heaven for man's salvation, being born in the flesh, and becoming man from the Virgin. Thus, the Son of God and the Son of Mary is one and the same Son.

Nestorius and his followers refused to yield to Saint Cyril's appeals for repentance. Thus, in 431, in the city of Ephesus, a small group of bishops under Saint Cyril's direct control held a council to affirm the Alexandrian doctrine and to reject that of Nestorius. The decisions of this meeting were formally recognized in 433 by the Eastern bishops who had not been present. The Council of 431 subsequently became known as the Third Ecumenical Council.

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### **Twelve Anathemas Proposed by Cyril and accepted by the Council of Ephesus (Third Ecumenical Council)**

1. If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is God in truth, and therefore that the holy virgin is the mother of God (for she bore in a fleshly way the Word of God become flesh, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not confess that the Word from God the Father has been united by hypostasis with the flesh and is one Christ with his own flesh, and is therefore God and man together, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone divides in the one Christ the hypostases after the union, joining them only by a conjunction of dignity or authority or power, and not rather by a coming together in a union by nature, let him be anathema.
4. If anyone distributes between the two persons or hypostases the expressions used either in the gospels or in the apostolic writings, whether they are used by the holy writers of Christ or by him about himself, and ascribes some to him as to a man, thought of separately from the Word from God, and others, as befitting God, to him as to the Word from God the Father, let him be anathema.
5. If anyone dares to say that Christ was a God-bearing man and not rather God in truth, being by nature one Son, even as "the Word became flesh", and is made partaker of blood and flesh precisely like us, let him be anathema.
6. If anyone says that the Word from God the Father was the God or master of Christ, and does not rather confess the same both God and man, the Word having become flesh, according to the scriptures, let him be anathema.
7. If anyone says that as man Jesus was activated by the Word of God and was clothed with the glory of the Only-begotten, as a being separate from him, let him be anathema.
8. If anyone dares to say that the man who was assumed ought to be worshipped and glorified together with the divine Word and be called God along with him, while being separate from him, (for the addition of "with" must always compel us to think in this way), and will not rather worship Emmanuel with one veneration and send up to him one doxology, even as "the Word became flesh", let him be anathema.
9. If anyone says that the one Lord Jesus Christ was glorified by the Spirit, as making use of an alien power that worked through him and as having received from him the power to master unclean spirits and to work divine wonders among people, and does not rather say that it was his own proper Spirit through whom he worked the divine wonders, let him be anathema.
10. The divine scripture says Christ became "the high priest and apostle of our confession"; he offered himself to God the Father in an odor of sweetness for our sake. If anyone, therefore, says that it was not the very Word from God who became our high priest and apostle, when he became flesh and a man like us, but as if there were another who was separate from him, in particular a man from a woman, or if anyone says that he offered the sacrifice also for himself and not rather for us alone (for he who knew no sin needed no offering), let him be anathema.
11. If anyone does not confess that the flesh of the Lord is life-giving and belongs to the Word from God the Father, but maintains that it belongs to another besides him, united with him in dignity or as enjoying a mere divine indwelling, and is not rather life-giving, as we said, since it became the flesh belonging to the Word who has power to bring all things to life, let him be anathema.
12. If anyone does not confess that the Word of God suffered in the flesh and was crucified in the flesh and tasted death in the flesh and became the first born of the dead, although as God he is life and life-giving, let him be anathema.

### **The Fourth Ecumenical Council**

In 451, another council was called, this time in the city of Chalcedon, to solve the problem of the doctrine of Christ. This council, now recognized in the Church as the Fourth Ecumenical Council, succeeded in defending the teaching of Saint Cyril and the Ephesian Council of 431. It also satisfied the demands of the Eastern bishops that the genuine humanity of Jesus would be clearly confessed. In its definition, the Council of Chalcedon closely followed the teaching, formulated in a letter, of Pope Saint Leo of Rome.

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The Chalcedonian definition states that Jesus Christ is indeed the Logos incarnate, the very Son of God "born of the Father before all ages." It affirms that the Virgin Mary is truly Theotokos since the one born from her "according to the flesh" in Bethlehem, is the uncreated, divine Son of God, one of the Holy Trinity. In His human birth, the Council declared, the Word of God took to Himself the whole of humanity, becoming a real man in every way, but without sin. Thus, according to the Chalcedonian definition, Jesus of Nazareth is one person or hypostasis in two natures - human and divine. He is fully human. He is fully divine. He is perfect God and perfect man. As God, He is "of one essence" (homoousios) with God the Father and the Holy Spirit. As man, He is "of one essence" (homoousios) with all human beings.

The union of divinity and humanity in Christ is called the hypostatic union. This expression means that in the one, unique person of Christ, divinity and humanity are united in such a way that they are neither mixed together and confused, nor separated and divided. Christ is one person Who is both human and divine. The Son of God and the Son of Mary is one and the same person.

### **The Monophysites**

The decision of the Council of Chalcedon was not accepted by the extreme disciples of Saint Cyril of Alexandria, nor by those who came to be associated with them. These Christians, called monophysites, rejected the Chalcedonian Council on the basis that the council spoke of two natures, thus rejecting the old formula of Saint Cyril which claimed that in His incarnation, Christ has but one nature. The supporters of the Chalcedonian decision claimed and still claim that though their words are different from those of the holy father, their doctrine is exactly the same and is simply expressed with greater precision. The disagreement was never settled, however, and although many attempts at reunion were made in the fifth and sixth centuries - and again in recent years - the dissenters from the Chalcedonian decision remain separated from the orthodox Catholic Church.

Today, the so-called Monophysite Christians are in the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Ethiopian Church, the Syrian Jacobite Church, the Syrian Church of India, and the Armenian Church. These churches are often called the Lesser Eastern Churches or the Oriental Orthodox Churches.

### **The Councils**

The Third and Fourth Ecumenical Councils made a number of canons of a disciplinary and practical nature. The Council of Ephesus forbade the composition of a "different faith" from that of the first two councils (Canon 7). This canon has been used in opposition to the addition of the word filioque to the Creed as it came to be used in the Western Churches. The Council of Chalcedon gave to Constantinople, the New Rome, "equal privileges with the old imperial Rome" because the new capital city was "honored with the emperor and the senate" (Canon 28).

### **The Fifth Ecumenical Council**

In addition to rejecting the unorthodox Catholic and ambiguous teachings of the Three Chapters (objectionable writings of Theodoret of Cyr and Ibas of Edessa, and the writings and the person of Theodore of Mopsuestia.), the Fifth Ecumenical Council carefully clarified the orthodox Catholic doctrine of the hypostatic union of divinity and humanity in Christ. In a long series of statements, the Council affirmed, without ambiguity, the traditional orthodox Catholic faith that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is "one of the Holy Trinity," one and the same divine person (hypostasis) Who has united personally (hypostatically) in Himself the two natures of God and man, without fusing them together and without allowing their separation in any way.

The Fifth Council also officially condemned the teachings of Origen (d.254) and his sixth-century disciples who taught and practiced a "spiritualistic" version of Christianity which held many unorthodox Catholic doctrines. They taught that Christ was the only created spirit who did not become material through sin; that men's souls were pre-existent spirits; and that all creation will ultimately be saved through its spiritualization by God in Christ the Savior.

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### Anathemas of the Fifth Ecumenical Council against the "Three Chapters"

1. If anyone will not confess that the Father, Son and holy Spirit have one nature or substance, that they have one power and authority, that there is a consubstantial Trinity, one Deity to be adored in three subsistence's or persons: let him be anathema. There is only one God and Father, from whom all things come, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things are, and one holy Spirit, in whom all things are.
2. If anyone will not confess that the Word of God has two nativities, that which is before all ages from the Father, outside time and without a body, and secondly that nativity of these latter days when the Word of God came down from the heavens and was made flesh of holy and glorious Mary, mother of God and ever-virgin, and was born from her: let him be anathema.
3. If anyone declares that the [Word] of God who works miracles is not identical with the Christ who suffered, or alleges that God the Word was with the Christ who was born of woman, or was in him in the way that one might be in another, but that our lord Jesus Christ was not one and the same, the Word of God incarnate and made man, and that the miracles and the sufferings which he voluntarily underwent in the flesh were not of the same person: let him be anathema.
4. If anyone declares that it was only in respect of grace, or of principle of action, or of dignity or in respect of equality of honor, or in respect of authority, or of some relation, or of some affection or power that there was a unity made between the Word of God and the man, or if anyone alleges that it is in respect of good will, as if God the Word was pleased with the man, because he was well and properly disposed to God, as Theodore claims in his madness; or if anyone says that this union is only a sort of synonymity, as the Nestorians allege, who call the Word of God Jesus and Christ, and even designate the human separately by the names "Christ" and "Son", discussing quite obviously two different persons, and only pretending to speak of one person and one Christ when the reference is to his title, honor, dignity or adoration; finally if anyone does not accept the teaching of the holy fathers that the union occurred of the Word of God with human flesh which is possessed by a rational and intellectual soul, and that this union is by synthesis or by person, and that therefore there is only one person, namely the lord Jesus Christ, one member of the holy Trinity: let him be anathema. The notion of "union" can be understood in many different ways. The supporters of the wickedness of Apollinarius and Eutyches have asserted that the union is produced by a confusing of the uniting elements, as they advocate the disappearance of the elements that unite. Those who follow Theodore and Nestorius, rejoicing in the division, have brought in a union which is only by affection. The holy church of God, rejecting the wickedness of both sorts of heresy, states her belief in a union between the Word of God and human flesh which is by synthesis, that is by a union of subsistence. In the mystery of Christ the union of synthesis not only conserves without confusing the elements that come together but also allows no division.
5. If anyone understands by the single subsistence of our lord Jesus Christ that it covers the meaning of many subsistence's, and by this argument tries to introduce into the mystery of Christ two subsistence's or two persons, and having brought in two persons then talks of one person only in respect of dignity, honor or adoration, as both Theodore and Nestorius have written in their madness; if anyone falsely represents the holy synod of Chalcedon, making out that it accepted this heretical view by its terminology of "one subsistence", and if he does not acknowledge that the Word of God is united with human flesh by subsistence, and that on account of this there is only one subsistence or one person, and that the holy synod of Chalcedon thus made a formal statement of belief in the single subsistence of our lord Jesus Christ: let him be anathema. There has been no addition of person or subsistence to the holy Trinity even after one of its members, God the Word, becoming human flesh.
6. If anyone declares that it can be only inexactly and not truly said that the holy and glorious ever-virgin Mary is the mother of God, or says that she is so only in some relative way, considering that she bore a mere man and that God the Word was not made into human flesh in her, holding rather that the nativity of a man from her was referred, as they say, to God the Word as he was with the man who came into being; if anyone misrepresents the holy synod of Chalcedon, alleging that it claimed that the virgin was the mother of God only according to that heretical understanding which the blasphemous Theodore put forward; or if anyone says that she is the mother of a man or the Christ-bearer, that is the mother of Christ, suggesting that Christ is not God; and does not formally confess that she is properly and truly the mother of God, because he who before all ages was born of the Father, God the Word, has been made into human flesh in these latter days and has been born to her, and it was in this religious understanding that the holy synod of Chalcedon formally stated its belief that she was the mother of God: let him be anathema.
7. If anyone, when speaking about the two natures, does not confess a belief in our one lord Jesus Christ, understood in both his divinity and his humanity, so as by this to signify a difference of natures of which an

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ineffable union has been made without confusion, in which neither the nature of the Word was changed into the nature of human flesh, nor was the nature of human flesh changed into that of the Word (each remained what it was by nature, even after the union, as this had been made in respect of subsistence); and if anyone understands the two natures in the mystery of Christ in the sense of a division into parts, or if he expresses his belief in the plural natures in the same lord Jesus Christ, God the Word made flesh, but does not consider the difference of those natures, of which he is composed, to be only in the onlooker's mind, a difference which is not compromised by the union (for he is one from both and the two exist through the one) but uses the plurality to suggest that each nature is possessed separately and has a subsistence of its own: let him be anathema.

8. If anyone confesses a belief that a union has been made out of the two natures divinity and humanity, or speaks about the one nature of God the Word made flesh, but does not understand these things according to what the fathers have taught, namely that from the divine and human natures a union was made according to subsistence, and that one Christ was formed, and from these expressions tries to introduce one nature or substance made of the deity and human flesh of Christ: let him be anathema. In saying that it was in respect of subsistence that the only-begotten God the Word was united, we are not alleging that there was a confusion made of each of the natures into one another, but rather that each of the two remained what it was, and in this way we understand that the Word was united to human flesh. So there is only one Christ, God and man, the same being consubstantial with the Father in respect of his divinity, and also consubstantial with us in respect of our humanity. Both those who divide or split up the mystery of the divine dispensation of Christ and those who introduce into that mystery some confusion are equally rejected and anathematized by the church of God.
9. If anyone says that Christ is to be worshipped in his two natures, and by that wishes to introduce two adorations, a separate one for God the Word and another for the man; or if anyone, so as to remove the human flesh or to mix up the divinity and the humanity, monstrously invents one nature or substance brought together from the two, and so worships Christ, but not by a single adoration God the Word in human flesh along with his human flesh, as has been the tradition of the church from the beginning: let him be anathema.
10. If anyone does not confess his belief that our lord Jesus Christ, who was crucified in his human flesh, is truly God and the Lord of glory and one of the members of the holy Trinity: let him be anathema.
11. If anyone does not anathematize Arius, Eunomius, Macedonius, Apollinarius Nestorius, Eutyches and Origen, as well as their heretical books, and also all other heretics who have already been condemned and anathematized by the holy, catholic and apostolic church and by the four holy synods which have already been mentioned, and also all those who have thought or now think in the same way as the aforesaid heretics and who persist in their error even to death: let him be anathema.
12. If anyone defends the heretical Theodore of Mopsuestia, who said that God the Word is one, while quite another is Christ, who was troubled by the passions of the soul and the desires of human flesh, was gradually separated from that which is inferior, and became better by his progress in good works, and could not be faulted in his way of life, and as a mere man was baptized in the name of the Father and the Son and the holy Spirit, and through this baptism received the grace of the holy Spirit and came to deserve sonship and to be adored, in the way that one adores a statue of the emperor, as if he were God the Word, and that he became after his resurrection immutable in his thoughts and entirely without sin. Furthermore this heretical Theodore claimed that the union of God the Word to Christ is rather like that which, according to the teaching of the Apostle, is between a man and his wife: The two shall become one. Among innumerable other blasphemies he dared to allege that, when after his resurrection the Lord breathed on his disciples and said, Receive the holy Spirit, he was not truly giving them the holy Spirit, but he breathed on them only as a sign. Similarly he claimed that Thomas's profession of faith made when, after his resurrection, he touched the hands and side of the Lord, namely My Lord and my God, was not said about Christ, but that Thomas was in this way extolling God for raising up Christ and expressing his astonishment at the miracle of the resurrection. This Theodore makes a comparison which is even worse than this when, writing about the acts of the Apostles, he says that Christ was like Plato, Manichaeus, Epicurus and Marcion, alleging that just as each of these men arrived at his own teaching and then had his disciples called after him Platonists, Manichaeans, Epicureans and Marcionites, so Christ found his teaching and then had disciples who were called Christians. If anyone offers a defense for this more heretical Theodore, and his heretical books in which he throws up the aforesaid blasphemies and many other additional blasphemies against our great God and savior Jesus Christ, and if anyone fails to anathematize him and his heretical books as well as all those who offer acceptance or defense to him, or who allege that his interpretation is correct, or who write

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on his behalf or on that of his heretical teachings, or who are or have been of the same way of thinking and persist until death in this error: let him be anathema.

13. If anyone defends the heretical writings of Theodoret which were composed against the true faith, against the first holy synod of Ephesus and against holy Cyril and his Twelve Chapters, and also defends what Theodoret wrote to support the heretical Theodore and Nestorius and others who think in the same way as the aforesaid Theodore and Nestorius and accept them or their heresy and if anyone, because of them, shall accuse of being heretical the doctors of the church who have stated their belief in the union according to subsistence of God the Word; and if anyone does not anathematize these heretical books and those who have thought or now think in this way, and all those who have written against the true faith or against holy Cyril and his twelve chapters, and who persist in such heresy until they die: let him be anathema.
14. If anyone defends the letter which Ibas is said to have written to Mari the Persian, which denies that God the Word, who became incarnate of Mary the holy mother of God and ever virgin, became man, but alleges that he was only a man born to her, whom it describes as a temple, as if God the Word was one and the man someone quite different; which condemns holy Cyril as if he were a heretic, when he gives the true teaching of Christians, and accuses holy Cyril of writing opinions like those of the heretical Apollinarius ;which rebukes the first holy synod of Ephesus, alleging that it condemned Nestorius without going into the matter by a formal examination; which claims that the twelve chapters of holy Cyril are heretical and opposed to the true faith; and which defends Theodore and Nestorius and their heretical teachings and books. If anyone defends the said letter and does not anathematize it and all those who offer a defense for it and allege that it or a part of it is correct, or if anyone defends those who have written or shall write in support of it or the heresies contained in it, or supports those who are bold enough to defend it or its heresies in the name of the holy fathers of the holy synod of Chalcedon, and persists in these errors until his death: let him be anathema.

Such then are the assertions we confess. We have received them from

1. Holy Scripture, from
2. The teaching of the holy fathers, and from
3. The definitions about the one and the same faith made by the aforesaid four holy synods.

Moreover, condemnation has been passed by us against the heretics and their impiety, and also against those who have justified or shall justify the so-called "Three Chapters", and against those who have persisted or will persist in their own error. If anyone should attempt to hand on, or to teach by word or writing, anything contrary to what we have regulated, then if he is a bishop or somebody appointed to the clergy, in so far as he is acting contrary to what befits priests and the ecclesiastical status, let him be stripped of the rank of priest or cleric, and if he is a monk or lay person, let him be anathema.

### **The Sixth Ecumenical Council**

The Third Council of Constantinople, known as the Sixth Ecumenical Council, held in 680-681, officially verified that Jesus Christ must have two distinct and separate wills and actions, just as He has two distinct and separate natures in one person. The Holy Fathers insisted there is one Son of God Who is one Son of Mary, but this one Son wills and acts distinctly as God and as man. Thus teaching and formally condemned both Patriarch Sergius of Constantinople and Pope Honorius of Rome, together with all who defended the false doctrine about Jesus that deprived Him of His genuine humanity.

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## **The Seventh Ecumenical Council**

In 787, during the reign of the Empress Irene (780- 802), who favored icon veneration; a council was held in Nicea which defined the legitimate and proper use of icons in the Church. This council, now known as the Seventh Ecumenical Council, followed the theology of Saint John of Damascus (d.749). The decision of the council affirmed that icons may be made and honored but not worshipped.

The bishops of the council reasoned that the very essence of the Christian faith is the incarnation of the Son and Word of God in human flesh. God indeed is invisible. But in Jesus Christ the invisible God has become visible. The one who sees Jesus sees the invisible Father. (John 14:8) When icon painting and icon-veneration in the Church are denied, the true humanity of Jesus is denied. As well, it is denied that in and through Christ, the Holy Spirit has been given to men so that they may become holy, truly fulfilling themselves as created "in the image and likeness of God." (Genesis 1:26)

Thus, it was the council's decision that the rejection of the holy images is the rejection of the fact of salvation by God in Christ and the Holy Spirit.

God the Father and the Holy Spirit cannot and must not be depicted. Christ, the Theotokos, and the saints can be depicted in iconographic form because they show the reality of man's salvation by God. They show the true transfiguration and sanctification of man - and the whole of creation - by Christ and the Holy Spirit. The images may be venerated in the Church since "honor rendered to the image ascends to its prototype, and he who venerates an icon adores the person (hypostasis) of the one portrayed." (Seventh Ecumenical Council) After the council of 787 the attack against the icons continued. It finally ended in 843 when the icons were returned to the Churches where they remain today.

In the West, in the eighth century, the barbarian tribes continued to be converted to Christianity. The greatest missionary at this time was St. Boniface (d.754). Also in this century the bishops of Rome became for the first time secular rulers who governed properties in Italy, and entered into close relation with the newly-emerging Carolingian rulers. It was these barbarian rulers of the Carolingian House, particularly Charlemagne, who were to restore the empire in the West with the cooperation of the bishops of Rome. In order to do so, however, they had to attack the legitimacy of the empire in the East. They made their attack by accusing the East of idolatry because of icon veneration, and by accusing the East of dropping the words "and the Son" (filioque) from the Nicene Creed. These accusations were contained in the Caroline Books given by Charlemagne to the pope of Rome in 792

### **Anathemas of Seventh Ecumenical Council concerning holy images**

1. If anyone does not confess that Christ our God can be represented in his humanity, let him be anathema.
2. If anyone does not accept representation in art of evangelical scenes, let him be anathema.
3. If anyone does not salute such representations as standing for the Lord and his saints, let him be anathema.
4. If anyone rejects any written or unwritten tradition of the church, let him be anathema.

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## The Filioque Issue

In Spain, in the sixth century, the word filioque was added to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. This action, which was done to stress the divinity of Christ to the invading barbarians, who were Arians, was destined to have grave consequences in later Church history

In 808 Pope Leo III of Rome reacted against the charges of Charlemagne against the East. He had the creed without the filioque enshrined in golden tablets on the doors of St. Peter's.

In 1009 Pope Sergius of Rome wrote a confession of faith which included the filioque in the creed.

By 1052 a great controversy arose between Constantinople and Rome, not only about the filioque, but also about the place of the Roman papacy in the Church, and about divergent liturgical practices in East and West. The immediate cause of the conflict at this time was the Pope's suppression of Greek liturgical practices in South Italy, and the suppression of Latin practices in the East by the patriarch of Constantinople. In 1053 the Pope sent legates to Constantinople in an attempt to restore communion between the churches. Michael Cerularius, the patriarch of Constantinople, refused to give the papal legates a hearing because he thought they were politically motivated.

On July 16, 1054, Cardinal Humbert, the head of the papal delegation, was tired of waiting. He was irritated by the lack of respect shown to the Roman ambassadors, so he placed a document of anathema and excommunication (applying only to the "patriarch Michael Cerularius and those in sympathy with him") on the altar table of the Holy Wisdom (Hagia Sophia) cathedral. At the same time, the cardinal was very careful to praise Constantinople as a "most orthodox city." The official reasons for Humbert's anathema and excommunication of Cerularius were the removal of the filioque from the Creed; the practice of married clergy; and liturgical errors.

Patriarch Michael Cerularius responded to Humbert's action by excommunicating all responsible" for the July 16 incident. He drew up a long list of Latin abuses, mostly of divergent liturgical practices such as the use of unleavened bread for the Eucharist, and the practice of baptism by one immersion.

Although Cardinal Humbert acted only against the person of the patriarch and his sympathizers, and although the patriarch reacted only against Humbert himself, the attempt to restore unity between East and West in 1054 resulted in a permanent schism between the two churches which persists until today. Several gestures of reconciliation, such as the symbolic "lifting of the anathemas of 1054" by Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras I in 1966, were made, but to no avail.