

0341-0341 – Concilium Antioecenum – Synodal Letter

The Synodal Letter

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The Fathers of Gangra recognize not only the Holy Scriptures, but also the Apostolical traditions for the rule of morals.

From this [canon] it is by no means doubtful that the fathers of this Synod considered that the Eustathians had violated some already existing ecclesiastical canons. Beveridge is of opinion that these are those commonly called the Canons of the Apostles (*Synod. I. 5*). Nor is this unlikely to be true, for there can be no doubt that the doctrines of the Eustathians condemned by this synod are directly opposed to those very “Canons of the Apostles”; and no small argument is drawn for the authority and antiquity of the Canons of the Apostles from the large number of Eustathian teachings found to be therein condemned, as Beveridge has pointed out and as can easily be seen by comparing the two.



THE SYNOD OF ANTIOCH IN ENCÆNIIS.

A.D. 341.

Elenchus.

Historical Introduction.

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The Canons, with the Ancient Epitome and Notes.



Historical Introduction.

Of the Synod of Antioch which adopted the canons subsequently received into the code of the universal church we know the exact date. This is fixed by the fact that the synod was held at the time of the dedication of the great church in Antioch, known as the “Golden,” which had been begun by his father, Constantine the Great, and was finished in the days of Constantius. The synod has for this reason always been known as the Synod of Antioch *in Encæniis*, i.e., at the dedication (*in Dedicazione*), and was holden in the summer of the year 341. Ninety-seven bishops assembled together and a large number of them were hostile to St. Athanasius, being professed Eusebians, all of them were Orientals and most of them belonged to the patriarchate of Antioch. Not a single

Western or Latin bishop was present and the pope, Julius, was in no way represented. This fact gave Socrates the historian the opportunity of making the statement (around which such polemics have raged), that “an ecclesiastical canon commands that the churches should not make decrees against the opinion of the bishop of Rome.”¹⁶⁰

But while this much is all clear, there is no council that presents a greater amount of difficulty to the historian as well as to the theologian. No one can deny that St. Hilary of Poitiers, who was a contemporary, styled it a Synod of Saints (Synodus Sanctorum)¹⁶¹; that two of its canons were read at Chalcedon as the “canons of the Holy Fathers”; and that Popes John II., Zacharias, and Leo IV. all approved these canons, and attributed them to “Holy Fathers.” And yet this synod set forth creeds to rival that of Nice, and, it is said, that some of the canons were adopted to condemn Athanasius.

Various attempts have been made to escape from these difficulties.

It has been suggested that there really were two Synods at Antioch, the one orthodox, which adopted the canons, the other heretical.

Father Emanuel Schelstraten, S. J.¹⁶² improved on this theory. He supposed that the Eusebians stopped behind in Antioch after the orthodox bishops left and then passed the decrees against Athanasius, giving out that the synod was still in session. This has been adopted by Pagi, Remi Ceillier, Walch, and to a certain extent by Schröckh and others. But Tillemont demurs to this view, urging that according to Socrates¹⁶³ the deposition of Athanasius came first and the adoption of the canons afterwards. But Tillemont would seem to have misunderstood Socrates on this point and this objection falls to the ground. But another objection remains, viz., that both Socrates and Sozomen say that the creeds were drawn up *after* the deposition of Athanasius, “and yet” (as Hefele remarks, Vol. II., p. 63), “St. Hilary says that these creeds proceeded from a ‘Synod of Saints.’”

Schelstraten’s hypothesis not being satisfactory, the learned Ballerini, in their appendix to the *Opera S. Leonis M.*, have set forth another theory with which Mansi agrees in his “Notes on Alexander Natalis’s *Church History*.” These maintain that the canons did not come from the Council in *Encæniis* at all, but from another synod held before, in 332; but Hefele rejects this hypothesis altogether, on the following grounds. First and chiefest because it has no external evidence to support it; and secondly because the internal evidence is most unsatisfactory. But even if the 25 canons were adopted by a synod at Antioch in 332, the real difficulty would not be obviated,

¹⁶⁰ Socrates. *H. E.*, Lib. II., cap. viij. Hefele thinks the statement may rest upon nothing more than the letter of Julius I. that the matter should first have been referred to Rome (Hefele. *Hist. Councils*, Vol. II., p. 59, n. 2). But the word used by Socrates is *κωνών*!

¹⁶¹ Hilar. Pict. *De Synodis, seu de Fide Orient.*, C. xxxii. Ed. Ben., 1170.

¹⁶² Schelstraten, S. J. *Sacrum Antiochenum Concil. auctoritati suæ restitutum*. (Ant. 1680.)

¹⁶³ Socrates. *H. E.*, Lib. II., Cap. viij.



for Socrates says¹⁶⁴ of that synod that there too the “opposers of the Nicene faith” were able to elect their candidate to fill the place of the banished bishop Eustathius!

Hefele seems to give the true solution of the whole difficulty when he says: “Certainly Athanasius identified the Eusebians with the Arians and we regard them as at least Semi-arians; but at that time, after they had made the orthodox confession of faith, and repeatedly declared their disapproval of the heresies condemned at Nice, they were considered, by the greater number, as lawful bishops, and thoroughly orthodox and saintly men might without hesitation unite with them at a synod.”¹⁶⁵

Pope Julius styles the very Eusebian synod that deposed Athanasius “dear brethren” while blaming their action, and invited them to a common synod to enquire into the charges made against the Saint. In view of all this we may well believe that both orthodox and Eusebians met together at the consecration of the Emperor’s new church, and that the whole church afterwards awarded the canons then adopted a rank in accordance with their intrinsic worth, and without any regard to the motives or shades of theological opinion that swayed those who drafted and voted for them.



The Synodal Letter.

(Found in Labbe and Cossart, Concilia, Tom. II., col. 559. It really is no part of the canons, but I have placed it here, because, as Labbe notes, “it is usually prefixed to the canons in the Greek.”)

The holy and most peaceful Synod which has been gathered together in Antioch from the provinces of Cœle-Syria, Phœnicia, Palestine, Arabia, Mesopotamia, Cilicia, and Isauria;¹⁶⁶ to our like-minded and holy fellow Ministers in every Province, health in the Lord.

The grace and truth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ hath regarded the holy Church of the Antiochians, and, by joining it together with unity of mind and concord and the Spirit of Peace, hath likewise bettered many other things; and in them all this betterment is wrought by the assistance of the holy and peace-giving Spirit. Wherefore, that which after much examination and investigation, was unanimously agreed upon by us bishops, who coming out of various Provinces have met together in Antioch, we have now brought to your knowledge; trusting in the grace of Christ and in the Holy Spirit of Peace, that ye also will agree with us and stand by us as far as in you lies, striving with us in prayers, and being even more united with us, following the Holy Spirit, uniting

¹⁶⁴ Socrates. *H. E.*, Lib. I., Cap. xxiv.

¹⁶⁵ Hefele. *History of the Councils*. Vol. II., p. 66. I have in this introduction done little more than condense Hefele.

¹⁶⁶ Hefele thinks this list of provinces is probably an interpolation. In the Latin version this letter is followed by the names of the bishops.

in our definitions, and decreeing the same things as we; ye, in the concord which proceedeth of the Holy Spirit, sealing and confirming what has been determined.

Now the Canons of the Church which have been settled are hereto appended.



The Canons of the Blessed and Holy Fathers Assembled at Antioch in Syria.¹⁶⁷

Canon I.

WHOSOEVER shall presume to set aside the decree of the holy and great Synod which was assembled at Nice in the presence of the pious Emperor Constantine, beloved of God, concerning the holy and salutary feast of Easter; if they shall obstinately persist in opposing what was [then] rightly ordained, let them be excommunicated and cast out of the Church; this is said concerning the laity. But if any one of those who preside in the Church, whether he be bishop, presbyter, or deacon, shall presume, after this decree, to exercise his own private judgment to the subversion of the people and to the disturbance of the churches, by observing Easter [at the same time] with the Jews, the holy Synod decrees that he shall thenceforth be an alien from the Church, as one who not only heaps sins upon himself, but who is also the cause of destruction and subversion to many; and it deposes not only such persons themselves from their ministry, but those also who after their deposition shall presume to communicate with them. And the deposed shall be deprived even of that external honour, of which the holy Canon and God's priesthood partake.

Notes.

ANCIENT EPITOME OF CANON I.

Whoso endeavours to change the lawful tradition of Easter, if he be a layman let him be excommunicated, but if a cleric let him be cast out of the Church.

The connexion between these canons of Antioch and the Apostolical Canons is so evident and so intimate that I shall note it, in each case, for the convenience of the student.

Zonaras and Balsamon both point out that from this first canon it is evident that the Council of Nice did take action upon the Paschal question, and in a form well known to the Church.

VAN ESPEN.

From this canon it appears that the fathers did not deem laymen deserving of excommunication who merely broke the decrees, but only those who "obstinately persist in opposing the decrees

¹⁶⁷ This is the title in the codices of Zonaras; the Parisian edition of Balsamon simply reads "The Synod at Antioch." The Bodleian ms. reads "Canons of the Synod at Antioch in Syria."