

ARCHBISHOP AUXENTIUS AND THE ICON OF THE HOLY TRINITY

This statement was issued by HOCNA in 1990.

We reprint it here for the sake of those who have not seen it.

Many false and irresponsible statements have been made recently about Archbishop Auxentius and the icon of the Holy Trinity; statements which ignore both the written record and the history of events in order to accuse Archbishop Auxentius and the Synod of which he is president of un-Orthodox and heretical beliefs.

Looking to the precedents of Church history and conciliar decrees, we find that the Council of Moscow in 1666, at which the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Moscow were present, as well as representatives of all the patriarchates, clearly and definitively expounded the Orthodox symbolic depiction of the Holy Trinity in the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham while condemning the depiction of the Holy Trinity as a white-haired elder, our Saviour, and a dove. This latter depiction was based on Roman Catholic prototypes and had become especially wide-spread in Russia.

This Council, pan-Orthodox in scope, is authoritative for the Faithful upon this subject. However, it never called the Western depiction of the Trinity a heresy; nor were any penalties or anathemas imposed, which would necessarily have been imposed if the matter were a question of heresy. This fact has not hindered some present-day proponents of the Council from being more rigorous than the Council, because they are apparently ignorant of what constitutes a heresy. They are often heard saying that anyone who venerates the Western depiction espouses Arian beliefs, or Anthropomorphism, or the belief that God Father became incarnate, and, consequently, is a heretic.

Heresy is primarily a doctrine contrary to the teaching of the Church and a separation from the mind of the Church. Heresy must have an articulated doctrine, sufficient to challenge the Church's belief and to draw its adherents together for the formation of separate groups or congregations, or a sect separate from the Church.

The Western depiction of the Holy Trinity is certainly a misleading icon, and might inspire some thoughts or feelings of subordination, Arianism, Anthropomorphism, circumscription of the Divinity, etc., but nowhere in the Orthodox Church has anyone used this icon to teach such heresies. Indeed, they are explicitly condemned by all, with their contrary, the true Orthodox doctrine, being confessed by all, up to and including Archbishop Auxentius.

As he said in 1974, it is a question of art rather than dogma. Since no heretical doctrine is being preached and Orthodox dogmas are upheld, this depiction of the Trinity can be called — according to the Council of 1666 and the Council in Constantinople of 1780 — "improper", "ignorant", "unbefitting", "unacceptable", "base", but it cannot be called a heresy.

Through ignorance and carelessness, iconographers began copying the Western models for the icon of the Trinity; and in the sixteenth century it became wide-spread, as also, but more slowly, did the Italian style of painting icons. A reaction against the depiction of the Unbegotten Father began in Moscow in the early 1550's, when many churches in Moscow, as well as the Annunciation Church in the Kremlin, were being rebuilt after the great fire of 1547. An educated man, Ivan Mihailovitch Viskovaty, vociferously objected to the innovations made by iconographers from Novgorod, Pskov, and elsewhere in the icons of the newly refurbished churches. He especially condemned the depiction of the Unoriginate Father as being contrary to the Seventh Ecumenical Council, and therefore heretical. In order to calm the disturbance, the Tsar intervened and a local council was held in 1554 which declared that the depiction of the Western model of the Trinity is completely in accord with the Holy Apostles and Tradition and must be worshipped under threat of penalties. Furthermore, the Russian Council punished Viskovaty with three years separation from Communion because of disobedience and causing dissension, warning him that if he remained unyielding, he would fall into heresy. No saint — and there were many in Russia at this time — accused Moscow of heresy and separated themselves; nor did any other local Church condemn them and break off communion. In fact, Metropolitan Macarius, who presided over the council, was recognized in 1986 as a saint and inscribed in the rolls. For one hundred twelve years, this decision was in force until revoked by the Council of 1666.

In spite of the Council of 1666 in Moscow and that of 1780 in Constantinople, this Western depiction of the Trinity was popular and became most common not only in Russia but throughout Orthodoxy. If this depiction were a heresy, then *de facto*, the entire Orthodox Church has been in heresy for over four centuries, because heresy in itself is a real separation from God; yet the doctrine of the Church remained unshaken: there was no teaching of Anthropomorphism, of subordination, of Arianism, or of any other heresy supposedly confessed in this depiction. These heresies are, in fact, expressly condemned. Wherefore, we can only conclude that this depiction of the Uncircumscribed, Beginningless, and Unbegotten Father is a mistake in iconography — according to the Councils of 1666 and 1780 — and

not a heresy.

Following this conciliar tradition, it would be entirely out of order and contrary to Church tradition to accuse Archbishop Auxentius of heresy, even if he did exclusively impose the Western depiction of the Trinity, which he does not do and never did. It was he who in 1976 ordered that the *Voice of Orthodoxy*, (May, 1976, no. 726), the official organ then of the Synod, to publish the decrees of the Council of 1666 for the instruction of the Faithful. Although controversy arose, he struggled to restrain the extremists of both sides, while counseling charity and patience. Since people become attached to an unquestioned tradition of many generations, the Council of 1666 – in its pastoral concern and understanding – did not impose penalties upon them who retained the Western depiction, because the Fathers understood that people slowly abandon a tradition, even if it be an erroneous one, and that the matter was not an issue of dogmatic confession, i.e., a heresy.

Archbishop Auxentius used the same tactics; his primary concern was to preserve unity and charity in the Church. He stated that both icons may be worshipped and restrained extremists of both sides from imposing their views forcibly on others. Herein lies the other distortion of fact with which some accuse him: that he deposed a priest for worshipping the traditional icon of the Holy Trinity. The truth is quite different.

As we have said, controversy arose after the publication in 1976 of the decrees of the Council of 1666. A Father C., priest of the parish of the Holy Trinity in Leibadeia, Greece, was imposing the icon of the Hospitality of Abraham and calling the Western model heretical. There was some resistance and factions formed.

After some admonitions, Archbishop Auxentius, being authorized by the then Synod, addressed an encyclical letter to the parish, which was later made a general encyclical and published in the *Voice of Orthodoxy*, September, 1979, number 765.

To all the most pious clergy and people of our Church
Beloved and most dear children.

Grace and Peace from Almighty God, and from us, prayers and blessings.

The Holy Synod having convened, it decided that henceforth the sacred icon of the Holy Trinity, in which the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are depicted, may be venerated without hesitation, according to the sacred canons and sacred traditions. He who does not venerate it and causes scandals, will be subject

to the appropriate canonical penalties.

For the Holy Synod
Archbishop Auxentius

We have included the entire text of this encyclical because a widely-circulated translation of it is seriously distorted. The first mistranslation, which is less serious and which may be an inadvertency from an ignorance of grammar, is that which says: "the icon . . . is to be venerated". We have translated it: "the sacred icon . . . may be venerated" because the verb is clearly in the subjunctive mood, middle voice, and should be so translated in English. The mistranslation lends an imperative nuance which is lacking in the original. The second mistranslation is in the last sentence: "He who does not venerate it will be subject to the appropriate penalties as one who creates disorder and scandals". In the Greek, "venerate" and "causes" are both participles next to each other in the same clause, joined by "and". They must be translated together with the same value since they are coordinate. To delay the one until the end of the next clause, as is done in the mistranslation with the consequent distortion in meaning, is unprincipled.

The meaning of the encyclical is clear and is in agreement, as we shall show, with the written record and course of events. The conscience of each man is left free, but if "He . . . does not venerate it and causes scandals", then he will be subject to penalties. So it happened with Fr. C., who disrupted his parish with factions. When he was advised by Archbishop Auxentius to desist and show restraint, he did not obey. He was suspended in 1979, after being tried by a spiritual court under the presidency of Metropolitan Gerontius, because he "remained stubbornly insistent". The facts are clearer in the decision for Fr. C.'s deposition, published in *Voice of Orthodoxy*, December, 1980, number 779 where mention is made of the encyclical translated above, which has had wide-spread circulation. This spiritual court, under the presidency of Metropolitan Callinicus of Phthiotis and Thaumacus, and composed of Euthymius of Thessalonica, Athanasius of Larisa, and Stephen of Chios, makes mention in its decision of another encyclical "published in the same periodical (issue no. 771) wherein the pious Christians are directed that they may honor both icons". The decision lists the causes for Fr. C.'s deposition: "whereas this clergyman has caused problems for a long time over the icon of the Holy Trinity", "he has disdained the decision of the Holy Synod" and "a former admonishment from His Beatitude, our Archbishop upon this subject". The court deposed Fr. C. because he caused disorders, not because he worshipped the traditional icon.

Nowhere in the above incident can there be any doubt why Fr. C. was deposed. Nowhere did Archbishop Auxentius preach heresy or act contrary to the councils and canons as some would like to accuse him. To claim that Fr. C. was deposed because he advocated the traditional icon of the Hospitality is to ignore and distort the entire written record. He was condemned for causing dissension and for violating his parishioners' freedom of conscience, contrary to the very Council of 1666 which he claimed as authority since, as we have seen, the Council imposed no penalties nor provided any enforcement of its decrees. As further proof that the matter stands as we have described it, Fr. C. was received back by Archbishop Auxentius in 1989 with no repudiation of his convictions, but only with the promise to moderate his zeal and that he would not describe the Western model as heretical.

At the Orthodox Conference in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1988, Archbishop Auxentius conferred with about thirty-five clergymen and these incidents and his convictions concerning the icon of the Holy Trinity were discussed. All were impressed with the Archbishop's pastoral concern and found no fault in his position but were convinced that it was Orthodox and in accord with the spirit of the Councils. Any statements contrary to that witness affirmed by the clergymen and the witness of the written record appended and referred to above are distortions or falsehoods of people with ulterior motives.

An unfavorable comparison has been made between Archbishop Auxentius and the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia on this subject which could only be made by ignoring the facts. The Archbishop was falsely accused of declaring that anyone who did not venerate the icon of God the Father was not Orthodox. Yet the official organ of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia, *Tserkovnaya Zhizn'* (*Church Life*, July - August, 1985, no. 7-8), published an article in 1985 by Archimandrite Cyprian of Holy Trinity Monastery in Jordanville, New York, which called them who censured the depiction of God the Father "a repetition, to some degree, of iconoclasm" and that their interpretation is "close to heresy". The article states that the tradition of depicting God the Father is ancient and had the approval of the saints, since they made no objection. The only exceptions were "a few people who unsuccessfully attempted to sow discord under the influence of the same dark power which hid itself under the appearance of seeking for purity of faith." This last, broad condemnation would seem to include not only the Fathers of the Councils of 1666 and 1780, but also the Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council, who stated: "Why do we not depict the Father of the Lord Jesus Christ? Because we have not seen Him."

This article was never qualified or rebutted. We know of a prominent Russian iconographer in Europe who wrote protesting Archimandrite Cyprian's article, but his letter was never published.

Given this general spirit, what would have happened in Jordanville if a hieromonk of the brotherhood suddenly rose up and accused everyone who worshipped the icon of God the Father — the patronal icon of the monastery and painted everywhere — of being heretics? Would not that hieromonk be disciplined? If he did not obey and desist, would he not be expelled or defrocked? The answer is obvious and would hold true for any place in the R.O.C.O.R. since this Western depiction of the Trinity is very popular.

However, we do not wish to make irresponsible accusations of heresy but simply to present excerpts from the written record — open to all — in order to expose the false statements which are circulating: that Archbishop Auxentius preaches heresy, rejects the decisions of the Council of 1666, does violence to the consciences of the faithful, and that he defrocked a priest who would not violate his convictions. Archbishop Auxentius has struggled to maintain church unity, in the pastoral spirit of the Council of 1666 and of all the Fathers, by restraining both extremes in this controversy. The fact that Fr. C. is now in good standing under the present synod of Archbishop Auxentius, without having to renounce his convictions but only having to restrain himself from accusing the other opinion of being a heresy, is a living refutation of the accusations against Archbishop Auxentius. Reverence to either of the icons cannot be called heretical, according to the Church speaking in council. What is to be condemned is the immoderate and extreme zeal, which, contrary to the Councils, would make reverence to either icon and the entire issue a matter of Faith and which would impose its opinion by violence.