

# A TURNING POINT

by Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

We all know about the division that has existed for centuries between the Holy Orthodox Catholic Church of the East and the Roman Papacy. We know also that, often, there is a turning point in history where two faiths begin to diverge. For example, the Fourth Ecumenical Council was rejected by the group of people who came to be known as the Monophysites. Their rejection of this holy Council became a turning point for these, in many ways, remarkable people.

A great deal has been written about the differences between Roman Catholicism and the Orthodox Church, and, as we have noted elsewhere, most of these differences can be attributed to the influence of one very prominent and very erudite writer in the West, Augustine, the Bishop of Hippo in Africa. His teachings on the Holy Trinity (i.e. the *filioque*), created grace, predestination, inherited guilt, the role of secular philosophy, revelation and other subjects — all played a role in driving a wedge between the patristic teaching of the Catholic Church of the East and West, and the doctrines of the emerging Papacy.

We think we may have found one of those turning points where these two faiths may have begun to diverge.

This particular turning point appears in a letter which the elderly monk and scholar, Jerome, the translator of the Vulgate, wrote from Palestine to Augustine, his younger friend.

In Letter 404, this is what Jerome writes:

You say also that if there be anything in your writings which has displeased me, and which I would wish to correct, you are ready to receive my criticism as a brother; and you not only assure me that you would rejoice in such proof of my goodwill toward you, but you earnestly ask me to do this. I tell you again, without reserve, what I feel: you are challenging an old man, disturbing the peace of one who asks only to be allowed to be silent, and you seem to desire to display your learning. It is not for one of my years to give the impression of enviously disparaging one whom I ought rather to encourage by approbation. And if the ingenuity of perverse men finds something which they may plausibly censure in the writings even of evangelists and prophets, are you amazed if, in your books, especially in your exposition of passages in Scripture which are exceedingly difficult of interpretation, some things be

found which are not perfectly correct? This I say, however, not because I can at this time pronounce anything in your works to merit censure. For, in the first place, I have never read them with attention; and in the second place, we have not beside us a supply of copies of what you have written, excepting the books of Soliloquies and Commentaries on some of the Psalms; which, *if I were disposed to criticize them, I could prove to be at variance, I shall not say with my own opinion, for I am nobody, but with the interpretations of the older Greek commentators.*\*

In a phrase of less than twenty-five words, Jerome sums it all up: "...if I were disposed to criticize [your works], I could prove them to be at variance...with the interpretations of the older Greek commentators."

Not much more needs to be said than that, except this: in the person of Saint Ambrose of Milan, whose sermons he heard and liked — but disagreed with — the young Augustine was at variance with the older Latin commentators also. As Jerome says, the young bishop of Hippo, it seems, wanted to display his learning.

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\* Copyright *A Treasury of Early Christianity*, ed. by Ann Freemantle, Mentor Books, NYC, 1953, p. 102.