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HETERODOXY AND THE TWELVE GREAT FEASTS OF THE EASTERN CHURCH

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Historians have never properly dealt with the Twelve Great Feasts (*Dodekaortion*) of the Eastern Orthodox Church. While some feasts have received much attention, others have been almost totally ignored, thus making an understanding of these feasts as a group difficult. More importantly, scholarship has largely disregarded the historical causes behind the feasts' existence.

Gregory Dix is the only scholar who has tried to approach the subject of the feasts as a whole. He believes that the feasts strictly commemorated the historical events in Christ's life rather than theological doctrines.¹ He begins his discussion of the origin and spread of the early Church's feasts with: "It is one thing to have a knowledge of the course of liturgical history. . . . It is quite another and a more difficult thing to understand the real motive forces which often underlie such changes."² This paper hopes to explain the "real motive forces" behind the widespread acceptance of the feasts adopted after the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381.

By dealing with them as a group I hope to show that the original purpose of the feasts was not to commemorate events in Christ's life as Dix believes, but rather to put forth theological and ultimately political propositions in an accessible and convincing form. The Twelve Great Feasts are the Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost, Raising of Lazarus, Palm Sunday, Ascension, Epiphany, Nativity, Presentation, Dormition, Annunciation, and Transfiguration.³ I will deal with them in the chronological order of their widespread acceptance, rather than of their local observance, as the former has greater significance in relation to contemporary theological controversies. It is this chronological progression of widespread acceptance that suggests a logical

¹ Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (Westminster, 1954), pp. 358-359.

² Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 303.

³ Various other feasts were also put forward before the canon of the *Dodekaortion* was settled. Ordering the feasts into groups of seven, ten, twelve, and even eighteen is artificial, however, and detracts from the original significance of the Twelve Great Feasts' establishment.

grouping of the feasts according to purpose and origin. The early Church observed only the first three feasts, the Core Group (Crucifixion, Resurrection, Pentecost), as independent celebrations. It was not until centuries later, after the Council of Constantinople, that the other feasts were observed throughout the East. This paper is primarily concerned with these other feasts. To show the logic of their adoption I have subdivided them into the Cyrillian Group (Raising of Lazarus, Palm Sunday, and Ascension), the Epiphany and Nativity, the Marian Group (Presentation, Dormition, and Annunciation), and the Transfiguration.

THE CORE GROUP

In terms of major feasts, the ante-Nicene Church was characterized by simplicity and a contentment with limiting general festal observance to three feasts, the Crucifixion, the Resurrection, and Pentecost, which apparently had arisen while Christianity was still a sect of Judaism.

The Jewish Pascha or Passover, which begins on the fourteenth day of Nisan, commemorates the salvation of the Chosen People from bondage in Egypt. It is followed by a fifty day penitential period which culminates in the Feast of Weeks, a harvest festival and celebration of the giving of the law to Moses on Sinai. As Jewish sectarians, the very earliest Christians observed these same feasts both according to Jewish tradition and in commemoration of Christ's death, the resurrection, and the coming of the Holy Spirit. Eventually the Christians broke with Judaism and devised their own method for determining the date of the Pascha so that the Feast of the Resurrection might fall on a Sunday.⁴ The Feasts of the Crucifixion and the Resurrection were essentially observed as one feast⁵ and correspond to the Jewish Pascha, while Pentecost corresponded to the Feast of Weeks.⁶

These feasts make up the Core Group not only chronologically (except for the Epiphany none of the others was celebrated as an independent feast for three or more centuries), and calendrically (except for the Dormition and the Transfiguration all of the others are calendrically determined by the Core Group), but also—more importantly—doctrinally. Accordingly to Orthodox Christian belief, salvation is possible only through the death, resurrection, and ascension of Christ who was both God and man, and through the descent of

⁴ Neither the Paschal controversy nor Quartodecimanism had any effect on the early history of the Twelve Great Feasts.

⁵ Dix, *Liturgy*, pp. 157, 164.

⁶ "Pentecost" is the Greek name for the "Feast of Weeks."

the Holy Spirit to restore the grace lost to mankind through the Fall. During the first three centuries of Christianity, the Ascension was celebrated either on the Feast of the Resurrection or on Pentecost. Since the Ascension only took on an independent character under Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386), it will be considered as part of the Cyrillian Group.

Thus the Core Group commemorated Christ's death and resurrection, but at the same time reinforced the basic elements of the fundamental Christian doctrine of salvation: 1) the Crucifixion and death of Christ who, as the Paschal Lamb, was sacrificed to free God's people from the bondage of sin, 2) the Resurrection and victory over death, a victory in which all Christians hoped to partake, 3) Christ's Ascension, his final act on earth and the transmission of his human body into heaven, and 4) Pentecost, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the restoration of grace to mankind, completing the redemptive cycle made possible by the Crucifixion. With the exception of the Ascension, which had a strong connection to the earlier feasts, the doctrinal principles celebrated by the remaining post-Nicene feasts either repeat those principles already implied in the Core Group or are of only secondary importance.

THE CYRILLIAN GROUP

Around 318-320, the Alexandrian priest Arius (c. 250-336) began to expound views on the nature of Christ which were soon condemned as heretical. According to the Arian heresy, since the Godhead was necessarily unbegotten and Christ was begotten of the Father, Christ was not co-eternal with the Father and therefore not truly divine. Orthodox theologians thought that this eroded their concept of redemption, which relied on the complete humanity as well as the complete divinity of Christ to reconcile men to God.

The Arian heresy created theological division within the Empire which in turn led to political division. To counter this division, Constantine called the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. The Council condemned Arius and declared Christ to be true God and true man and of one substance with the Father (*homoousios*). This was by no means the end of Arianism, however. United under Eusebius of Nicomedia, the Arian faction succeeded in reasserting themselves before Constantine died in 337. Under Constantius II (337-361) and Valens (364-378) the Arians received support which enabled them to banish many of their opponents and seemed likely to bring them ultimate victory.

The situation dramatically changed with the accession of Theodosius I in 379. He enjoined his subjects to profess the faith of the bishops of Rome and Alexandria (i.e., the Nicene faith), promulgated a series of decrees against the

various heresies, removed the Arian bishop of Constantinople, and called the Second Ecumenical Council at Constantinople in 381. Presided over by Meletius, the patriarch of Antioch who had been exiled for his orthodoxy by Constantius II, this Council upheld Nicene theology and denounced Arianism. Theodosius continued to issue decrees against heretics and pagans alike and made Orthodox Christianity the official religion of the empire.

It was amid this activity that the liturgical feast was developed as an expression and reinforcement of Orthodoxy by Cyril of Jerusalem. Cyril became bishop of Jerusalem between 349 and 351 and may have been active in the church there as early as 330.⁷ The Church of Jerusalem had been relatively unimportant for some time previous to this, but after Constantine's mother, Helena, visited the Holy Land and rediscovered the Holy Sepulchre in 326, Jerusalem's situation began to improve. With its increasing importance came an increasing tension between Jerusalem and the metropolitan see of Caesarea. The Arian position of the Metropolitan Acacius of Caesarea (bishop 340-366) and the anti-Arian stance of Cyril's predecessor Maximus did much to heighten this tension. Upon Maximus's death in 349 Acacius deposed Maximus's chosen successor and put Cyril in the see. Though Cyril renounced as invalid the ordination he had received from Maximus, it soon became clear that he intended to continue his predecessor's independent policy. Because of this policy he was deposed and apparently replaced by Arians on three different occasions.⁸ Cyril's theology was on the margins of Orthodoxy, but his disagreement with the Nicene party was more semantic than doctrinal. By the time of the Council of Constantinople in 381, the Arians had pushed Cyril into the Orthodox camp where he became an outspoken leader in the struggle against Arianism.

The reasons behind Cyril's liturgical innovations have not been explained beyond brief references to Jerusalem's unique topographical possibilities as the site where many of the events celebrated by the feasts originally took place. According to Dix, Cyril's innovations were due to "purely local circumstances and opportunities." He feels that it is out of the question that Cyril saw beyond the needs of his own community when he devised his liturgical program.⁹ Such an argument of "local pride" does little to explain the origins of the Cyrillian Feasts, and it does nothing to explain why these feasts were adopted so uniformly throughout the East during one clearly

⁷William Telfer, *Cyril of Jerusalem and Nemesius of Emesa* (London, 1955), p. 21.

⁸Telfer, *Cyril*, p. 21.

⁹Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 351.

defined historical period. Dix reveals his ahistorical approach when he states that although Cyril first made his innovations in the 350s and 360s, they were not universally accepted until the end of the 80s and 90s. This delay, Dix believes, ensued because Cyril was ahead of his time, or because of the compromising events surrounding his consecration.¹⁰ Instead, the reasons for this time lag will become clear when viewed in relation to contemporary heretical movements and to the ecclesiastical councils which were called to deal with them.

Scholarship has largely ignored the appearance of the feasts other than those of Holy Week during Cyril's episcopate. Of the five major feasts which were first independently celebrated on the local level in Jerusalem in Cyril's time, only one—Palm Sunday—actually falls in Holy Week proper. The Feast of the Raising of Lazarus, for example, has probably been more neglected than any of the other major feasts. It falls on the Saturday before Palm Sunday and commemorates Christ's raising of Lazarus from the dead. This feast was first mentioned by the Spanish nun and pilgrim Etheria as being the day the presbyter announced Easter to the congregation.¹¹ Since it is now generally accepted that Etheria was in Jerusalem from 381 to 384,¹² her observations on liturgical practices there must pertain to Cyril's episcopate. The festal observance of the Raising of Lazarus spread throughout the East in the last two decades of the fourth century.

Why was it that after three and a half centuries of Christianity this miracle should suddenly take on the public and ritualized form of a feast? Why should its observance just as suddenly be taken up throughout the East? At this point recognizing a distinct Orthodox conception of all the feasts becomes crucial to understanding their function. For example, an Arian probably would not have denied that Lazarus was raised from the dead when Christ said, "Lazarus, come forth" (John 11:43). What he would have denied was that Christ performed this miracle on the basis of his own true and eternal divinity. As a specifically Orthodox feast, then, the Raising of Lazarus represents more than Christ's power over death: it is a manifestation of the divine and human natures which make salvation from death possible. John Chrysostom's homilies on the Raising of Lazarus (c. 390)¹³ show this was

¹⁰ Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 353.

¹¹ *Itinerarium Egeriae (Peregrinatio Aetheriae)*, ed. Otto Prinz (Heidelberg, 1960), 29.5. For an English translation see John Wilkinson, *Egeria's Travels* (London, 1971).

¹² Wilkinson, *Travels*, pp. 237-239.

¹³ John Chrysostom, *Commentarius in Sanctum Joannem Apostolum et*

how the feast was understood during the period of its widespread adoption. In these homilies John spoke of the miracle in terms of Christ's revealing first his human nature,¹⁴ then his divine nature.¹⁵ He also referred repeatedly to the relation and equality of the Son to the Father,¹⁶ eventually even addressing a rhetorical question to "the heretic."¹⁷ Chrysostom's exegesis of the Raising of Lazarus was almost exclusively concerned with the Orthodox conception of the nature of Christ vis-à-vis the Arian conception. Thus we see already that the Feast of the Raising of Lazarus involved much more than Jerusalem's topography. Further conclusions will be drawn about the Cyrilian Feasts as a group.

Palm Sunday was also first recorded by Etheria between 381 and 384.¹⁸ It was localized at Jerusalem during the mid-fourth century and, like the Feast of the Raising of Lazarus, it spread throughout the Eastern Empire during the last two decades of that century.¹⁹ The feast commemorates Christ's entrance into Jerusalem, an event which would culminate in the salvation of mankind. It marks the first day of Holy Week which, as it was observed at Jerusalem, was a long and elaborate program that topographically and chronologically reproduced the last events of Christ's life, death, and resurrection, according to Scripture and tradition. It took on the form of a series of feasts, each day being marked by special religious ceremonies, Scriptural readings, and processions to appropriate parts of the city and surrounding countryside. Each day had the character of being a feast itself.

Palm Sunday largely owes its place as one of the Twelve Great Feasts to its disposition as the first day of Holy Week. Certainly other events of Holy Week—such as Holy Thursday, commemorating the institution of the eucharist—could have made a better claim to theological importance. In the form in which it was generally adopted, Palm Sunday seems to have served as an

Evangelistam, Migne, PG 59, 349-360. For an English translation see *Saint John Chrysostom: Commentary on Saint John the Apostle and Evangelist*, trans. Thomas Aquinas Goggin (New York, 1960).

¹⁴ One example: "in order to confirm the fact of his human nature . . ." Goggin, *Chrysostom*, p. 181.

¹⁵ One example: "they had received such a great proof of his Godhead . . ." Goggin, *Chrysostom*, p. 201.

¹⁶ Goggin, *Chrysostom*, pp. 193, 194, and 197.

¹⁷ Goggin, *Chrysostom*, p. 196.

¹⁸ Etheria, 30-31.

¹⁹ Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 353.

abbreviation of the succession of events of the Passion which culminated in the next Great Feast: the Crucifixion. In this way the feast of Palm Sunday reinforced the Orthodox conception of redemption and therefore opposed Arianism. Accordingly, when Cyril of Alexandria addressed "that Arian madness" again and again in his homily on Palm Sunday,²⁰ the feast which was being celebrated seems to have served more as a vehicle for his theological observations than as a theological argument in its own right.

The evolution of the Ascension as an independent feast is somewhat less clear, though its theological implications are more pointed. It marks Christ's ascension into heaven forty days after the Resurrection, as recorded in Acts 1:1-11. The Feast of the Ascension was originally attached to the Core Group, at first being observed as an adjunct to the Resurrection as suggested by the Gospel of Luke, the Epistle of Barnabas, and other sources.²¹ Later it came to be celebrated on Pentecost, still on a dependent basis as an aspect of the primary feast of the day it was kept.

The first mention of a festal observance forty days after the Resurrection was again made by Etheria in Jerusalem during Cyril's episcopate.²² Unfortunately she did not mention the purpose of this observance. She did, however, mention an observance of the Ascension on Pentecost,²³ fifty days after Easter. The Ascension was more or less widespread by 430, but still not celebrated everywhere.²⁴ The interesting questions are why was it only made an independent feast at that particular time, and why at Jerusalem? Further, if its observance was fairly general by 430, why were some churches still resisting this practice? The evidence suggests that at the time of Etheria's visit, the observance of the Ascension was evolving from an aspect of Pentecost into a major feast in its own right. That a period of transition would have been necessary is completely understandable: old traditions, especially religious traditions, die hard, and the Ascension had been attached to Pentecost for centuries. This natural reluctance to do away with established tradition probably accounts for the slower acceptance of the Ascension as an independent feast in comparison with the more rapid acceptance of the Raising of Lazarus and Palm Sunday.

²⁰ Cyril of Alexandria, *In Sanctum Festum Palmarum*, Migne, PG 77, cols. 1060, 1061, 1064.

²¹ J. Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* (Leiden, 1959), pp. 195ff.

²² Etheria, 42.

²³ Etheria, 43.4-43.5.

²⁴ Fernand Cabrol and Henri Leclercq, *Dictionnaire d'archéologie chrétienne et de liturgie* (Paris, 1924), vol. I, pt. 2, col. 2939.

Cyril of Jerusalem was no stranger to the polemical value of religious feasts. In an Orthodox interpretation, the Ascension celebrates the transfer of Christ's human body into heaven and the completion of his earthly mission, an important step in the process of salvation. It is the ultimate expression of his divine and human natures in one person. Because of this, and especially when linked with Cyril's relationship to the Arians and his treatment of other liturgical feasts, it seems certain that he promoted the feast of the Ascension as a blow against the Arian heresy. In order to derive maximum results from this feast Cyril gave it greater visibility than it had previously had. Its separation from the core feast to which it had long been attached indicates a new interest in the Ascension's theological significance in the mid- to late fourth century and a new desire to emphasize that significance.

As a feast concerned with the nature of Christ the Ascension was potentially applicable to any controversy over that subject. And so it seems that in the fifth century the Orthodox Feast of the Ascension was as much directed against the schismatic doctrine of Nestorianism as it had been in the fourth century against Arianism. In 428 Theodosius II appointed the Antiochene preacher Nestorius bishop of Constantinople. The new bishop soon attracted attention with his views on the nature of Christ and the role of the Virgin Mary. Nestorianism holds that there are two separate and distinct natures in Christ: the one—the divine word—chose to dwell in the other—the human, born of Mary. According to John of Damascus, the Nestorians credited Christ's more humble actions to his humanity and his more noble actions to his divinity.²⁵ They believed that only Christ's separate human nature died and that it was only extrinsically united with his divine nature.²⁶ Like Arianism, this was a threat to the Orthodox doctrine of salvation. Furthermore, the Nestorian denial of Mary's title "God-bearer" (*Theotokos*) in favor of the more limiting "Christ-bearer" provoked intense and increasing opposition to Nestorianism from both Orthodox theologians and adherents to the growing Marian devotion. Nestorianism was condemned in 430. Pope Celestine gave Nestorius ten days upon receipt of the papal letter to deny his earlier schismatic position, and Cyril of Alexandria added twelve anathemas to which Nestorius was to subscribe. Nestorius refused and was condemned by the majority party at the Council of Ephesus in 431, which also affirmed

²⁵ John of Damascus, *De Haeresibus Liber*, Migne, PG 94, 740. For an English translation see *Saint John of Damascus: Writings*, trans. Frederic H. Chase (New York, 1958), p. 138.

²⁶ Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church* (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 197.

Mary as *Theotokos*. Juvenal, bishop of Jerusalem (c. 420-458), had his see raised to the rank of patriarchate as a reward for his part in the proceedings.

The Nestorians believed that Christ's human nature was incapable of the act of the Ascension without the Holy Spirit's assistance. In fact, according to John Cassian (c. 360-435) they even falsified the account of the Ascension in Acts 1:1-11 so that Holy Scripture would seem to confirm this.²⁷ Since the Council of Ephesus only condemned Nestorianism but did not eliminate it, resistance to the Orthodox celebration of this feast by Nestorian bishops and communities may have been considerable in certain areas. So while Nestorianism's troubled relationship with Orthodoxy stimulated the growth of later feasts it seems to have inhibited the spread of the Feast of the Ascension.

The feasts of the Presentation and the Transfiguration also originated in Jerusalem during Cyril's episcopate, but will be dealt with below as their observances spread later for reasons other than those which caused their institution at Jerusalem.

Thus the historical situation does not substantiate Dix's assertion that Cyril's liturgical innovations in the 350s and 60s were not adopted elsewhere until the 380s and 90s because they were ahead of their time or because of events surrounding Cyril's consecration. Cyril was an isolated anti-Arian bishop in a staunchly Arian territory.²⁸ Both to attack the Arian conception of the nature of Christ and to assert administrative independence from the Arian metropolitanate of Caesarea at a time when Jerusalem's claim to importance was just beginning to be recognized, Cyril instituted a series of liturgical celebrations which publicly put forth the Orthodox conception of the nature of Christ. They did so, moreover, in a manner which filled the vacuum of traditional cyclical festivals and communal demonstrations of unity left by the official demise of paganism under Theodosius I.

The real reason for the gap between the Cyrillian Group's inception and reception was political. Arianism was in the ascendancy in the time of Constantine II and Valens. At one time or another Arian bishops held the sees of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem, among others. There is no evidence of the general acceptance of a single feast outside of the Core Group before Theodosius I. It was only after the Arianizing emperors died and Theodosius I came to power—after he began removing Arian bishops from their sees, after he required profession of the Nicene Creed (which is believed to have been based on the baptismal creed of Jerusalem), after he

²⁷ John Cassian, *De Incarnatione Domini Contra Nestorium*, Migne, PL 50, 244-247.

²⁸ Telfer, *Cyril*, p. 28.

called the Council of Constantinople which condemned Arianism and asserted the divine and human natures of Christ in one person—that these feasts spread beyond Jerusalem to be kept throughout the East. This was neither an effort to catch up with Jerusalem's liturgical practices, nor the Council's vindication of Cyril's past actions. Rather, the acceptance of the Cyrillian Feasts throughout the major cities of the East implied an acceptance of the underlying theological concepts. It was no mere coincidence that the feasts were promoted at the same time the bishops of those cities gave legislative approval to those concepts at the Council of Constantinople.

THE EPIPHANY AND THE NATIVITY

The Cyrillian Feasts were not the only ones which owed their beginnings to Arianism. Just as the Council of Constantinople signalled the defeat of Arianism and helped rapidly disseminate the Cyrillian Group, it also seems to have encouraged the general adoption in the East of two other feasts concerned with the nature of Christ: the Epiphany and the Nativity.

The Epiphany is a feast of the "manifestation" of Christ and has at various times commemorated his birth, his baptism, the adoration of the Magi, and the miracle at the marriage feast of Cana. The feast originally celebrated Christ's birth²⁹ and was observed locally by at least the third century.³⁰ The Nativity of Christ, the only one among the twelve Great Feasts which was of Western origin, was being celebrated in Rome by 354 but was probably observed locally elsewhere in the West before this date.³¹ The Christian feast of the Nativity coincided with the pagan festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti*, the

²⁹ A minor Christian sect, the Montanists, apparently established this feast. They believed that the world was created at the vernal equinox, March 24 by their computation. The first full moon occurred fourteen days later, on April 6. It was on this day that the Montanists celebrated Easter. L. Duchesne, in *Christian Worship* (London, 1903), p. 263 suggests that the Montanists believed that Christ had lived only a complete number of years, since an incomplete number would involve the imperfection of a fraction. Since he died on April 6, he must have been conceived on the same date. By this reckoning, he was born nine months later on January 6.

³⁰ Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 357.

³¹ Tertullian, Hippolytus, the Philocalian Calendar, the apocryphal Acts of Pilate (Duchesne, *Worship*, p. 262), and other sources ranging from the late second to the fourth century fixed the date of Christ's death at March 25. Again, since Christ lived only a complete number of years, for those writers the date of his conception—the Feast of the Annunciation—was also March 25

Birth of the Invincible Sun. The cult of the Invincible Sun had sprung up before the time of Constantine who personally associated himself with the deity, but it was only during his reign that it began to become officially accepted in the West. The Orthodox Christian Feast of the Nativity celebrates the birth of Christ, who possesses full humanity and full divinity and who is co-eternal with the Father. Its observance on the festival of *Natalis Solis Invicti* no doubt drove home the point of Christ's divinity, the birth itself indicating his humanity.

The introduction of the Nativity into the East from Rome seems to have been quite deliberate and closely coordinated with Theodosius's anti-Arian policy. It first appeared in the East at Constantinople and Antioch around 385³²—that is, after the Council of Constantinople and Theodosius's order that all Christians profess the faith of the Bishop of Rome. Constantinople was currently undergoing forcible conversion from Arianism to Orthodoxy by Theodosius and Patriarch Meletius of Antioch, who was exiled for his Orthodoxy by the Arianizing emperor Constantius II, was made president of the Council by Theodosius. Thus the Nativity Feast's early appearance in Constantinople and Antioch rather than some other cities is indicative of their part in a larger scheme.

Around this time in the East the meaning of the Epiphany began to shift from Christ's birth to his baptism,³³ thereby emphasizing the divine or theophanic character of this feast over its earlier more human aspect. The Nativity, which falls only twelve days previous, formed a fitting Orthodox complement to the Epiphany by emphasizing the human nature of Christ through the celebration of his birth.

Like the Ascension, the Epiphany was observed locally in some churches before the introduction of the Nativity. The Epiphany's connotations as a birth feast lingered, as Jerome's homilies indicate,³⁴ so this probably accounts for the later adoption of the Nativity at Alexandria (sometime around 430) and at Jerusalem slightly later than at Alexandria. It is also probable that the

(another reckoning for the vernal equinox). His birth occurred on December 25, the winter solstice.

³² Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 357.

³³ This is brought out quite clearly by a comparison of Jerome's homilies on the Nativity (CC 78, 524-529) and Epiphany (CC 78, 530-532). For an English translation see *The Homilies of St. Jerome*, trans. Marie Ewald, 2 vols. (Washington, 1966), 2:221-232.

³⁴ Ewald, *Jerome*, 2:225-226.

Council of Ephesus of 431 and the Formulary of 433—an attempted compromise between the Orthodox and Nestorian views on the nature of Christ—encouraged the acceptance of the Nativity in these cities.

THE MARIAN GROUP

Each of the next three feasts to be universally established was to a greater or lesser degree concerned with the Virgin Mary. It is interesting that the first feast makes a very mild statement on the Virgin's role in the history of salvation, the second a somewhat stronger one, and the third stronger still.

The Feast of the Presentation occurs forty days after the Nativity and celebrates the presentation of Christ in the Temple and ritual purification of Mary according to Jewish custom. It first appeared in Jerusalem under Cyril where, like the other Cyrillian Feasts, it had a theological objective. The feast was known as the *hypanti* or the *occursum Domini* and carried theophanic overtones. A line from Cyril's own homily on this feast, "I see the infant and I recognize God,"³⁵ is enough to clarify the Orthodox view of the Presentation. By now Cyril's anti-Arian bias is well known. However, when the feast was finally taken up two centuries later it was for purposes other than Cyril's. Theophanes' *Chronographia* is practically our only direct historical evidence that Justinian instituted the Feast of the Presentation at Constantinople in the fifteenth year of his reign (542).³⁶ Justinian had taken a commanding position in Church affairs, basing his ecclesiastical policy on the Council of Chalcedon (451).³⁷ This Council condemned both Nestorianism and Monophysitism, fixing the Orthodox position between the two.

The schismatic doctrine of Monophysitism arose in opposition to Nestorianism, claiming that Christ's two natures became a single divine nature at the moment of the Incarnation. The Council of Chalcedon magnified the tension which already existed between Dyophysite Constantinople and the Monophysite East to such a degree that espousing Monophysitism became a means of defying the Imperial government.³⁸ For its part, the government, especially under Justinian, alternately persecuted and tried to win over the Monophysites.

At the same time that Justinian instituted the Feast of the Presentation, he

³⁵ Cyril of Jerusalem, *Oratio in Occursum Domini*, Migne, PG 33, 1192.

³⁶ Theophanes, *Chronographia*, ed. Carl de Boor (Leipzig, 1883), 6034.

³⁷ Chadwick, *Church*, p. 209.

³⁸ George Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State* 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), p. 60.

began a new offensive to reconcile the Monophysites, hoping to gain their favor by contriving the condemnation of three Nestorianizing theologians. The new Feast of the Presentation may have been another of Justinian's efforts to aggravate the Nestorians and thereby ingratiate himself with the Monophysites. Since it honored both Christ (the Presentation in the Temple) and the *Theotokos* (the Purification of Mary) it represents a somewhat diluted attempt to establish a major Marian feast in the Church calendar. However, as a truly Marian feast it was only a prelude to those that would follow.

The Dormition was clearly a Marian feast; it marks the "falling asleep" and bodily assumption of the Virgin into heaven. The existence of this wholly Marian feast in the cycle of the twelve becomes intelligible only in the context of contemporary heresies and schismatic doctrines. Therefore Dix, who sees the Twelve Feasts as a life cycle of Christ, is totally unable to account for the Dormition and can only explain it as a "sort of afterthought."³⁹ The Dormition as an increasingly bold declaration of Marian thought makes perfect historical sense, however, when one realizes that the Twelve Feasts are not merely a life cycle of Christ but a series of doctrinal statements using Christ's life, and now Mary's, as the basis of their authority.

The Dormition was first celebrated (c. 450) in Jerusalem under Bishop Juvenal as a feast of the Memory of the *Theotokos*, on August 15.⁴⁰ According to Karl Holl, Juvenal instituted this feast both to affirm the title *Theotokos* and to assert his independence from Nestorian Antioch at a time when he was trying to establish Jerusalem as a patriarchate.⁴¹ Although it has not yet been definitely proved, it appears that Juvenal established the feast even before the Council of Chalcedon took place. During the Council, in an act of monumental insincerity, Juvenal, at the last minute, abandoned the Monophysite party he had been supporting for many years in order to join the

³⁹ Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 376.

⁴⁰ D. B. Capelle, "La Fête de la Vierge à Jérusalem," *Muséon* 56 (1943), 32-33.

⁴¹ Karl Holl, *Die Entstehung der vier Fastenzeiten in der griechischen Kirche* (Berlin, 1924), p. 17. By observing the feast on August 15, Jerusalem reinforced the idea of Mary as God-bearer since on this day Spica, the brightest star in the constellation of Virgo, is aligned with the sun in such a way as to give the appearance of "giving birth" to it. But this is also the day on which Spica sets. By the time of Justinian this feast was being celebrated at Jerusalem as a feast of the death of the Virgin. See Holl, *Fastenzeiten*, pp. 15, and 18.

party that would prevail—namely, the Orthodox. The Dormition's pro-Monophysite implications did not lessen its appeal to Orthodoxy as a weapon against Nestorianism.

Relations between the Nestorians and the rest of the Empire were not good. In 486 the Christian Church in Persia officially pronounced itself to be Nestorian, in 489 the Nestorians were expelled from Edessa; conflict between Nestorianism and Orthodoxy continued during the entire sixth century. By this time the new heresy was tolerated to such a degree in Persia that even the ruler Kavadh II was rumored to be a Nestorian Christian. Some time during the reign (582-602) of the Emperor Maurice the Feast of the Dormition was established throughout the Empire on the date of August 15.⁴² Maurice had had one war with Persia and was threatened soon after that with another. It seems likely that, with his record of religious persecution and practice of enforcing Chalcedonian Orthodoxy in the Eastern regions of his empire,⁴³ the Emperor decreed the Feast of the Dormition as part of an anti-Nestorian policy to bolster religious and political unity in the face of the Persian threat. The fact that this feast, like the one before it, was established by imperial decree demonstrates that the institution of a liturgical feast was a recognized and effective method of promulgating a particular doctrine. And this practice was not limited to the Orthodox party. Antoine Wenger points out that during the sixth century some churches kept older Marian feasts celebrated at various times of the year rather than the new one on August 15.⁴⁴ Wenger rather mistakenly suggests that Maurice instituted the Dormition to end this diversity of observance. It was not the diversity of observance to which Maurice objected, however, but the diversity of intention. The older feasts commemorated the role of the Virgin in a manner which did not acknowledge her as *Theotokos*. In fact Maurice was suppressing what he must have felt to be heterodox festal practice.

The Feast of the Annunciation celebrates the announcement that Mary was to become the mother of Christ. Unfortunately the feast's origin is completely obscure, but we do know that it had become widespread by the seventh century.⁴⁵ As this was only a short time after Maurice's decree concerning the Dormition, the rationale for adopting the Annunciation was

⁴² Antoine Wenger, *L'Assomption de la T. S. Vierge dans la tradition byzantine du VI^e au X^e siècle* (Paris, 1955), p. 103.

⁴³ N. H. Baynes, "The Successors of Justinian," *Cambridge Medieval History* (New York, 1913), 2: 284.

⁴⁴ Wenger, *Assomption*, p. 103.

⁴⁵ Duchesne, *Worship*, p. 272.

naturally very much the same. In 612 the Nestorian Church of Persia formally rejected the term "*Theotokos*"; the military situation had intensified by this time as well. The schism between Monophysitism and Orthodoxy weakened the Empire in its struggle with Persia and therefore prompted a concerted government attempt to reconcile the Monophysites.⁴⁶ The time was ripe for the institution of this feast which, according to John of Damascus in his work *The Orthodox Faith*, marks the reception of the Divine Word.⁴⁷ As an Orthodox feast, then, the Annunciation celebrates the actual moment of Mary's becoming the *Theotokos*.

And yet Dix would have us believe that the Annunciation is really a feast of Christ.⁴⁸ While this may be the case in purely theological terms, history suggests that the feast had a different meaning for the people of the time. Among its oldest names are *sanctae Virginis festum* and *festivitas gloriosae Matris*.⁴⁹ These suggest that the contemporary mind focused on the Virgin's role in this feast, rather than on Christ's. Indeed, since the fifth century the Virgin loomed ever larger in popular Monophysite devotion, to the point of almost rivalling Christ himself.⁵⁰

There seems to have been a calculated escalation from the ambiguous Presentation to the theologically less important but wholly Marian Dormition to the Annunciation which glorifies Mary's all important role in the history of mankind's salvation. To what extent these feasts also dealt with secondary theological issues is not important here. What is important is that the Marian Feasts, like those dealing directly with the nature of Christ, did not arise from popular devotion but were devised in opposition to heterodox doctrine which threatened to divide the Empire. As such they are the logical successors to the earlier feasts.

THE TRANSFIGURATION

The last of the Twelve Feasts to be adopted throughout the Empire was the Feast of the Transfiguration. It commemorates the appearance of Christ in glory with Moses and Elijah before Peter, James, and John. While we are certain of the feast's origins, the history of its general acceptance is unclear.

⁴⁶ Chadwick, *Church*, p. 210.

⁴⁷ John of Damascus, *The Orthodox Faith*, 3.2 (46). Elsewhere John wrote of Nestorianism as in opposition to the Incarnation. See. 3.12 (56).

⁴⁸ Dix, *Liturgy*, p. 376.

⁴⁹ Cabrol, *Dictionnaire*, vol. 1, pt. 2, col. 2242.

⁵⁰ Chadwick, *Church*, p. 282.

Like so many others in the cycle, the Feast of the Transfiguration originated in Jerusalem under Cyril. As related by Etheria, it was at this time second only to Easter and Epiphany in importance. And for very good reason: like the Ascension, it was one of the most theologically explicit of the feasts. Functionally it duplicates the Ascension as an exposition of Christ's divine and human natures and as an attempt to counter the Arian heresy. The two feasts share not only the same concept and purpose, but also many of the same lections:⁵¹ proof of the consistency of Cyril's thought. In his homily on the Transfiguration Jerome, too, put words of the most overt reference to the Arian controversy into the mouth of God the Father: "This is my Son, of my nature, of my substance, abiding in me, and he is all that I am."⁵²

The Transfiguration figured prominently in the mosaic programs of at least two important churches Justinian built: St. Catherine's on Mt. Sinai and S. Apollinare in Classe. The depiction of the Transfiguration in these churches must be largely due in no small part to the Chalcedonian Orthodoxy upon which Justinian based his ecclesiastical policy.

The Transfiguration probably became a universal feast as a general expression of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy rather than as an argument directed against any particular heresy. After more than two centuries of trying, in the mid-seventh century the imperial government finally gave up on reconciliation with the Monophysites, who still opposed Chalcedon.⁵³ The date of the feast's widespread adoption in the East may never be determined precisely, but since all the other feasts in John of Euböa's eighth-century list were commonly observed in his day, it would follow that the Transfiguration was also.⁵⁴

In conclusion, the post-Nicene feasts followed a general pattern of institution for the most part. A feast usually originated at one specific church as the popular manifestation of opposition to a particular heresy or schismatic doctrine. Observance of the feasts was at first strictly local. The rest of the Eastern Church usually adopted them for the same reasons that the local churches had, but occasionally, due to the Orthodox character of the feasts, their doctrinal potential was redirected toward other controversies.

The Twelve Great Feasts took on the superficial character of a life cycle of

⁵¹ Van Goudoever, *Calendars*, p. 207.

⁵² Ewald, *Jerome*, 2, 167.

⁵³ C. W. Previté-Orton, *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History* (Cambridge, 1971), p. 210.

⁵⁴ John of Euböa, *Sermo in Conceptionem Deiparae*, Migne, PG 96, 1473.

Christ for two reasons. First, by presenting their theology in the form of feasts commemorating events in the life of Christ they became more accessible to the faithful and more likely to make an impression on them. Second, as appeals in theological controversies they called upon the ultimate theological authority—Christ himself.

Like so much of Christian theology whose original simplicity became more and more complicated, the post-Nicene feasts were formed in reaction to the various heresies.⁵⁵ The Core Group corresponds to the early stage of Christian theology, commemorating from the beginning the essential tenets of salvation. The Cyrillian Group comprises the first feasts formed in conscious reaction to a heresy—Arianism. Before Cyril there were no universal feasts apart from the Core Group; with him the feast as an anti-heretical device became established.⁵⁶ The Epiphany and the Nativity were likewise directed against Arianism but they derived from pre-existing feasts of local significance which probably had no original connection with heresy. The Marian Group arose in opposition to the next great threat to Orthodoxy, Nestorianism. In this group the first documentary evidence of institution by imperial decree appears, testimony to the importance of festal practice. The last feast to be adopted, the Transfiguration, seems to have been a statement of the ultimate sanction of Chalcedonian Orthodoxy as the official government position at the end of a long period of Christological argument.

The canon of the Twelve Great Feasts began to take shape as the Christological controversies began. By the time those controversies reached their indecisive conclusion, all the feasts had been instituted. Thus the post-Nicene feasts arose during the period of the great controversies, but the feasts themselves were more than the mere results of these arguments, they played an active, and at times even crucial, part in their outcome.

⁵⁵Theological aspects aside, there was undoubtedly also an attempt to win popular support for Christianity by assimilating the common culture, as it has been estimated that by the late fourth century the majority of the Empire was still pagan. For example, almost every feast can be traced to a previous pagan or Jewish feast.

⁵⁶Minor heresies also had some influence on the formation of the Twelve Feasts, but could not be discussed in this paper.

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