

Session 5 – Questions

Conversion & Councils – Part II

A. Establish the Context

“But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.”

– John 14:26

Ten years after the Council of Nicaea, the proponents of Arianism continue to wage their war to overturn the Nicene teachings. They have the ear of the Emperor. The inferno of heresy consumes the majority of Catholic bishops in the East. One man stands in the breach. One man maintains the Faith and refuses to succumb to political pressure; he suffers exile from his diocese five times over almost half a century. The bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, St. Athanasius—the Defender of Orthodoxy—is the lone voice crying out in the desert in order to preserve the authentic Faith of the Church.

While withstanding the plague of Arianism, the Church suffers under the brief rule of the only Christian emperor to apostatize, Julian. Julian restores paganism to the Empire and even unleashes active persecution against Christians and the Church. His hatred of Christ is all-consuming and dominates his short reign. Another Roman emperor, Theodosius, finally outlaws the practice of paganism in the Empire. The conversion of the Empire is now complete.

Faced with an influx of converts since legalization, the Church is beset by numerous false teachings that seek to remake the Faith in a different image. The Holy Spirit animates three important ecumenical councils in which the pope and the bishops forge an authentic expression of the core doctrines of the Faith. The divinity of the Third Person of the Trinity is defended at Constantinople (381). The honor of the Mother of God is championed at Ephesus (431). The two Natures of Christ are confirmed at Chalcedon (451). The Holy Spirit also endows the Church with many of the Church Fathers (St. Augustine, St. Ambrose, St. Jerome, St. Basil the Great, St. John Chrysostom, St. Cyril of Alexandria, and St. Gregory Nazienzen), who cast their theological shadows thousands of years into the future.

The western half of the Roman Empire is undergoing profound change. Central authority has weakened to the point where Pope St. Leo the Great steps in to ensure the safety of Rome by convincing Attila and his savage Huns not to sack the city. But Rome is exhausted. Alaric, ethnically a Germanic barbarian but a Roman citizen by birth, sacks the city of Rome for the first time in 800 years. Only a short while later, the Western Empire collapses into independently ruled provinces. Of the local chiefs rising up to become kings, all but one are Arian heretics, and the Church is again in danger of being ruled by hostile states.

This period begins and ends with the conversion of pagan warriors who solidify the Faith and protect the Church. Almost 200 years after the rise of Constantine, Clovis, King of the Franks, is called to become a

Number of times St. Athanasius exiled
5

The end of paganism in the Roman Empire
A.D. 380

Shortest council in Church history
Council of Ephesus
(431) - 1 day

champion for the Faith. Baptized with his warriors on Christmas Day, Clovis becomes the first Catholic king. The territory of the Franks becomes the land of France—the “Eldest Daughter of the Church.”

B. Learn the Story

View Track 5, *Conversion & Councils – Part II*, of the *Epic: A Journey through Church History* 20-Week Study DVD (or listen to the audio CD). Follow the presentation by referring to your *Epic* Church History Timeline Chart.

N O T E S

C. Take a Deeper Look

Answering these questions will help you learn the story of the Church. If other questions come to mind, write them down to discuss in the group.

1. Who was St. Athanasius? Can you describe the important role he played in the story of the Church? Describe the persecution he underwent for the Faith. What made him persevere?

2. Julian the Apostate persecuted the Church after its legalization. Have you been persecuted for your faith? If so, share that experience.

3. After Nicaea, there were three other ecumenical councils during this time period. When and where were they held? What main aspects of the Faith did each council address? Which heresies did each council condemn?

D. Application

This question asks you to think about how the lessons of history apply to today—either to the Church, to society, or to you. After meditating on this question, spend time with God in prayer.

This time period was witness to four important ecumenical councils during which the Holy Spirit guided the pope and bishops to develop the authentic expression of many of our core doctrinal beliefs. These teachings were necessary to settle theological disputes in the Church so that harmony and unity could reign. Over the centuries, many theological works have been written on the teachings first articulated in this time period. Do you make time to study these and other teachings in order to grow closer to Christ and His Church? Are there teachings of the Church you disagree with? Why? Have you read and reflected on why the Church teaches these things?

Dear Lord ...

E. Wrap-up

Conclude your study of the Conversion & Councils period and remember the main events by doing the following:

1. What is the color of this time period? How can you remember it?
2. What is the main theme of this period?
3. Write a one- or two-sentence summary of the Conversion & Councils period in order to recall the main events of Church history during this time.

F. Further Reading

For those who want to pursue outside readings, here is a list of good books that cover this time period and whose authors approach the subject of Church history and Western civilization from a Catholic worldview. This list is not exhaustive but is provided as a starting point. Happy reading!

Carroll, Warren H. *The Building of Christendom*. Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1987. *Volume 2 of a planned six-volume work. This is a scholarly read with great detail. It is an excellent and well-documented work.*

Eusebius - The Church History. Translation and commentary by Paul L. Maier. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2007. *Eusebius of Caesarea is the father of Church history and lived during some of the most interesting times in history. He chronicles the history of the Church from Apostolic times to the reign of Constantine. Unfortunately, he was sympathetic to Arius and his teachings, but he was a top-notch scholar and his History is a classic.*

Augustine, St. *The City of God* and *The Confessions*. *There are many translations of these two books available (some are even online), and they stand as two of the greatest works by one of the Church's most revered theologians.*

Jurgens, William. *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, 3 vols. Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1970, 1979. *A three-volume set that is absolutely indispensable for anyone who wants to learn more about the teachings of the Church Fathers, from Pope St. Clement I to St. John Damascene. It includes an invaluable topical index that spans all three volumes.*

Rengers, Rev. Christopher, O.F.M. Cap. *The 33 Doctors of the Church*. Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 2000. *Contains great biographical info on all thirty-three Doctors of the Church, including St. Athanasius, St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, St. John Chrysostom, St. Jerome, and more.*

Riccioni, Giuseppe. *Julian the Apostate*. Rockford, IL: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc., 1999 (reprint). *An interesting look at this fascinating character, the only apostate Christian emperor in history.*

Waugh, Evelyn. *Helena*. Chicago: Loyola Press, 2005. *A fictional novel about Helena, mother of Constantine the Great.*

Conversion & Councils – Part II

A. Review the Context

Discussion Leaders: Make sure everyone has their *Epic* Church History Timeline chart to use when discussing questions about the time period. Briefly go over the other sections of the chart—especially the Events & Influences section—so that you can situate the story of the Church in the larger story of the world.

B. Learn the Story

Discussion Leaders: Unless there are comments or questions about Steve Weidenkopf’s presentation, dive into answering the discussion questions in Section C.

C. Take a Deeper Look

1. *Who was St. Athanasius? Can you describe the important role he played in the story of the Church? Describe the persecution he underwent for the Faith. What made him persevere?*

St. Athanasius was ordained a deacon in Alexandria, Egypt, about the same time that Arius began preaching his heresy. He faithfully assisted as a secretary at the Council of Nicaea. He was then elected as Bishop of Alexandria in 326, and from this point on his life was filled with adventure. He refused to give in to pressure from the Arians, defending the orthodox teaching from Nicaea at every opportunity. So they launched a smear campaign against him, accusing him of various crimes such as abusing a prostitute, dabbling in black magic, and even murdering a bishop. St. Athanasius’s clever defenses are legendary, but they were not enough to keep him from being exiled five times. During all of these hair-raising adventures, St. Athanasius still managed to write numerous treaties on the faith, including the Creed of St. Athanasius. His determination to preserve the True Faith as it was handed on to him, no matter what the cost, has served as an example for Catholics in every generation.

2. *Julian the Apostate persecuted the Church after its legalization. Have you been persecuted for your faith? If so, share that experience.*

Answers will vary but many Catholics in today’s world have suffered ridicule and insults for holding to the Faith. Many may even share stories of how they “persecuted” Christians before their conversion.

3. *After Nicaea, there were three other ecumenical councils during this time period. When and where were they held? What main aspects of the Faith did each council address? Which heresies did each council condemn?*

The second ecumenical council was called in 381 in the city of Constantinople by the emperor Theodosius. This council reaffirmed the declarations of the Council of Nicaea and further developed teachings on the Holy Spirit. Since the Arian heresy had denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit as well as the Son, the bishops added the phrase, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Life-giver, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and Son is worshipped and glorified” to the Nicene Creed. The council was attended only by eastern bishops, and their addition of a canon declaring the

See of Constantinople the second most important (Rome being the first) was not confirmed by the pope because it sought to replace the ancient ordering of Sees—Rome, Alexandria, Antioch.

The third ecumenical council was called in 431 in the city of Ephesus by the emperor Theodosius II. Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, attacked the veneration of the Blessed Virgin Mary as Mother of God, or *Theotokos* on Christmas Day, 428. He taught that there were two natures *and* two persons in Jesus Christ, completely dividing the human person from the divine person. St. Cyril of Alexandria was the primary defender of the orthodox faith, and the council lasted only one day as Nestorius was excommunicated and Mary confirmed as *Theotokos*.

The fourth ecumenical council was called in 451 at Chalcedon. Eutyches, a monk from Constantinople, now went in the opposite direction of Nestorius and declared that Jesus had only one nature. This heresy is known as Monophysitism (one nature) and essentially denies the humanity of Christ. Proponents of the Monophysite heresy hi-jacked a council that met at Ephesus in 449 (forever known as the “Robber’s Council”). Pope Leo the Great refused to confirm its decrees. Instead, a new council was called at Chalcedon, and Pope Leo’s letter, known as the *Tome of Leo*, declared that Christ is one divine Person with a united divine and human nature (theologically, this is known as the hypostatic union).

4. *The Roman Empire had persecuted the Church for hundreds of years, and a strong anti-Catholic sentiment thrived amongst the still generally pagan populace who continued to blame warfare on the frontier and natural disasters on Christians. One might guess that Christians would have celebrated the collapse of the Roman Empire, but this was not the case. How can you explain the sadness that many Catholics, like St. Augustine and St. Jerome, expressed when they saw the demise of Rome?*

Answers may vary. Here are two ideas to consider:

1. Despite the widespread growth of the Christian Faith, Roman culture had remained decadent. After legalization many converts turned to the Faith for reasons of social gain, they had little true devotion and were often as decadent as the pagans. It was a common theme among the Church Fathers to preach that the barbarians were being sent against Christian Rome as a chastisement from God for their sinful ways, much in the way ancient Israel was sent into exile by the Babylonians. Pope St. Leo the Great even called Attila the Hun the “Scourge of God.” In seeing the fall of the Roman Empire, many devout Christians saw the divine judgment of God, and their sorrow was an expression of their penitence.
2. The Church has always recognized authentic civil leaders as endowed with authority by God. Jesus told Pontius Pilate that his authority was given to him from above (John 19:10-11), and St. Paul wrote, during the reign of the mad Emperor Nero, that the state was given certain rights by God including punishment of criminals (Romans 13:1-4). The early apologists, such as Tertullian, encouraged Catholics to be good citizens and even encouraged prayer for the emperor. It was clear that, despite the abuse of power and personal flaws of the emperors, Catholics still realized the importance of sound government in fostering the common good. The early Church Fathers knew that order was always preferable to anarchy, and that it was only through civilization that the Gospel could spread and the Faith could grow.
5. *Pope St. Leo I is one of the few popes in all of history to be called “Great.” What were some of his significant accomplishments? Why do you think he is called “great”? What makes a pope “Great”?*

Pope St. Leo defeated the Monophysite heresy at the Council of Chalcedon (451), and his Tome is a masterful explanation of the Faith in Jesus Christ as fully God and fully Man. Perhaps his most well known accomplishment was his meeting with Attila the Hun in 452. While it is not clear if Attila turned

back because he was paid a ransom, because he was short on supplies, or because he was superstitious, the fact is that it was Pope St. Leo’s embassy that gave Attila a chance to change his mind. St. Leo saved Rome from another barbarian horde in 455, and while he was unable to keep the Vandals from looting the city he did convince them to leave the inhabitants and ancient monuments unscathed. Considering the Vandals track record, this was an impressive victory. He defended the Primacy of the See of Rome by refusing to approve the extra canon added by Eastern bishops claiming that Constantinople was equal in authority to Rome at the Council of Chalcedon.

There has never been an official definition of what makes a Pope “great.” While opinions may vary as to what St. Leo did to merit this great title, here are a few ideas:

1. Pope St. Leo forever changed the way in which the world viewed the papacy. Although the Christian Faith was the official state religion, many powerful pagans were still skeptical and often blamed the barbarian invasions and poor economic state on the fact that Rome had abandoned the pagan gods in favor of Jesus Christ. When St. Leo single-handedly stopped Attila the Hun, he forever changed this perception, showing the pagans that Rome was saved by the vicar of the Christian God.
2. In saving the city of Rome from the Huns and from the full savagery of the Vandals, Pope St. Leo may have saved the entire Church herself. Heresies had consistently plagued the Church in the East, and the Eastern bishops would often cave to pressure from the Emperor. With these problems plaguing the East and the Western Empire in splintering shambles, if the See of Rome had been destroyed the Church would have lost its only source of orthodox and independent authority.
3. The Tome of Leo is a masterwork of theology that explains the mystery of the Incarnation. Not only did the Tome end a potentially devastating heresy it helped to provide the words to understand and explain how Christ can be both God and man. The Council Fathers motivated by Pope St. Leo’s Tome wrote, “Our Lord Jesus Christ [is] ... to be acknowledged in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division and without separation.” Pope St. Leo’s influence on theology is greatly significant.
4. Pope St. Leo was the lone great figure during this span of history. During his lifetime there were no great emperors or powerful Church Fathers. Pope St. Leo took up the responsibility of defending the Church from heretics, the state from barbarians, and the poor from famine. Perhaps it is the solitary nature of his Herculean effort that won him the mantle of “Great.”
6. *The baptism of Clovis in 496 is another monumental event in Church History. Why is it important?*

The tribal chiefs that were seizing power all throughout the fallen empire were Arians. They were, for the most part, hostile to the orthodox Catholic Faith, and either persecuted or barely tolerated Catholics in their lands. The exception was Clovis, a pagan barbarian, who came to rule most of what is now France. His conversion not only secured a safe haven in which the Church would grow strong, but it also showed that the Catholic Faith was not simply the stale state religion of a crumbling empire but a universal religion that embraced barbarian warriors as well as Roman nobles. The kingdom of Clovis (modern-day France) would become the homeland of a myriad of holy saints, the site of beautiful cathedrals, and the last line of defense against Muslim and Viking invaders.

D. Application

Discussion Leaders: If time permits, ask the group members to share their personal responses to the application question.

This time period was witness to four important ecumenical councils where the Holy Spirit guided the Pope and bishops to develop the authentic expression of many of our core doctrinal beliefs. These teachings were necessary to settle theological disputes in the Church in order for harmony and unity to reign. Over the centuries many theological works have been written on the teachings first articulated in this time period. Do you make time to study these and other teachings in order to grow closer to Christ and His Church? Are there teachings of the Church you disagree with? Why? Have you read and reflected on why the Church teaches these things?

Close with the prayer found in the Leader's Guide.

E. Wrap-up

1. *What is the color of this time period? How can you remember it?*

Remember the Conversion & Councils time period by its color, white: a symbol of the empire's conversion as it is clothed white in Christ and of the Holy Spirit guiding the Church through the four ecumenical councils.

2. *What is the main theme of this period?*

The main theme of the Conversion & Councils period is the conversion of the Roman Empire to the Catholic Faith as well as the conversion of Clovis and the Franks and the development of Church doctrine by the first four ecumenical councils.

3. *Write a one- or two-sentence summary of the Conversion & Councils period in order to recall the main events of Church history during this time.*

Answers will vary but they should contain most of the main events listed on the *Epic* Church History Timeline chart.