

Acta Sanctæ Sedis

Pope Pius XII

Encyclical Letter *Sempiternus Rex Christus* on the Council of Chalcedon

1. Christ, the Eternal King, before he promised the headship of the Church to Peter, the son of John, called together his disciples, and asking them what they and other men believed about himself, praised the faith which would conquer all the storms and attacks of the evil powers, and which Peter, enlightened by the Eternal Father, had declared in these words: 'Thou art Christ, the Son of the Living God'. It is this faith which is 'the strength of God for the salvation of every believer', and which brings forth the apostle's crown, the martyr's palm and the virgin's lily. This faith has been defended and lucidly clarified especially by three oecumenical councils, those of Nicea, Ephesus and Chalcedon. It is now fifteen hundred years since the last of these was concluded. It is fitting, therefore, that both at Rome and in the whole Catholic world, this most happy event should be celebrated with due solemnity; and so giving thanks to God the inspirer of all holy counsels, with deeply moved hearts, we institute those solemnities.

2. As our predecessor Pope Pius XI of happy memory solemnly commemorated the Nicene council in 1925 in the sacred city, and by his encyclical letter *Lux Veritatis* recalled the sacred council of Ephesus in 1931, so we by the present letter pay a tribute of equal honor to the Council of Chalcedon. For inasmuch as both councils, Ephesus and Chalcedon, were concerned with the hypostatic union of the Incarnate Word, they are intimately connected with one another. From the earliest times both councils have enjoyed the highest honor, equally in the East, where they are celebrated in the liturgy, and in the West. St. Gregory the Great bears witness in the West to this fact when he praises both councils together with two of the preceding century, namely, those of Nicea and Constantinople, in the memorable sentence: - 'On them, as a four-cornered stone, the building of the holy faith stands erect, and whoever does not hold their firm doctrine, whatever may be his life or activity, even if he seems to be a rock, nevertheless lies outside the building'.

3. From the consideration of this event and its attendant circumstances, two points arise and stand out, and these we wish, as far as possible, to make yet more clear. They are: the primacy of the Roman pontiff which shone forth clearly in this very grave christological controversy and, secondly, the great importance and weight of the dogmatic definition of Chalcedon. Let those who, through the evils of the time, are separated from the bosom and unity of the Church, especially those who dwell in Eastern lands, not delay to follow the example and the customs of their ancestors in paying due respect to the Roman primacy. And let those who are involved in the errors of Nestorius or Eutyches penetrate with clearer insight into the mystery of Christ and at last accept this definition in its completeness. Those, also, who are led by an excessive desire for new things and, in their investigation of the mystery of our redemption boldly dare to go beyond the sacred and inviolable limits [of true doctrine], should ponder this definition more truly and more deeply. Finally, let all those who bear the Catholic name draw from it

strong encouragement; let them hold fast this evangelical pearl of great price; let them profess and hold it with unadulterated faith; let them render it due honor inwardly and outwardly; and - what is still more important - let them pay it the tribute of lives in which, through God's mercy, they shun whatever is unworthy, incongruous or blameable, and in which they shine with the beauty of virtue, so that they may become sharers of this divinity, who deigned to be a partaker of our humanity.

4. Now, to treat of things in due order, let us recall from the beginning the events which we commemorate. The originator of the whole controversy under discussion at Chalcedon was Eutyches, a priest and archimandrite in a famous monastery in Constantinople. This man, in refuting the Nestorian heresy which maintained that there were two persons in Christ, fell into the opposite error.

5. 'A rash man and quite unskilled', with an extremely obstinate disposition, Eutyches asserted that two moments of time should be distinguished: thus before the Incarnation there were two natures in Christ, the human and the divine; after their union, however, only one existed, since the Word had absorbed the human nature (*hominem*); the body of the Lord came from the Virgin Mary, but was not of our substance and matter; if, indeed, it was human, it was not consubstantial with us, nor with her who gave birth to Christ according to the flesh. Therefore, it was not in true human nature that Christ was born, suffered, was fastened to the cross and rose from the tomb.

6. Eutyches did not grasp that before the union the human nature of Christ did not exist at all, for it only began at the time of his conception; and it is absurd to suppose that after the union one nature resulted from the coalescence of two; for there is no way in which two true and distinct natures can be reduced to one, and the more so [in this case] since the divine nature is infinite and unchangeable.

7. Whoever judges wisely of these opinions will quickly conclude that by them the mystery of the divine dispensation is dissipated into shadowy absurdities and riddles. It was quite clear to those who were of sound piety and theology that this absurd novelty, so repugnant to the teachings of the prophets, to the words of the Gospel and to the dogma contained in the Apostles' Creed and the Nicene profession of faith, had been taken from the vaults of Apollinaris and Valentinus.

(To be Continued.)

8 September, 1951

