

XXIII Sunday after Pentecost – Pope St Martin I

In the name of the Father...

The crisis presently enveloping the Church has been likened to the fourth century Arian crisis which compromised many bishops and even Pope Liberius. Denying Our Lord's divinity, the Arian heresy occasioned the first post-apostolic general council of the Church held at Nicaea in 325 AD. A statement of divinely revealed truth, the conciliar creed affirmed the Son as consubstantial with the Father, i.e., of numerically one-and-the-same substance and therefore divine. As those of a divine person, Our Lord's human acts were inerrant, his words irreformable.

Despite the council, bitter disputes continued, causing deep divisions both in the Church and the Roman Empire. During this turbulent period, despite episcopal and even papal denunciation, the champion of orthodoxy was St Athanasius, resolutely defending the truth against all compromise.

Such ancient disputes often seem impenetrable to moderns: why so much acrimony, even bloodshed, over theological issues beyond the grasp of all but a few? One might offer several reasons.

First, because God created us for truth, and revealed truth for our perfection and ultimately our salvation which requires subjection to God both in intellect and will. Indeed, embracing the *faith* requires an act of the will: it is a loving act. Moreover, it is a direct preparation for eternal life.¹

Second, because the Church was still in the age of the martyrs: many of those who emerged from the catacombs were still alive. It is crass to assume that, under the supposed law of inevitable progress, our love of God or understanding of the *faith* is greater than theirs. Quite the opposite. And they knew that the truth was important, worth dying for.

Third, because the speculative order takes precedence over the practical: the true precedes the good; what is to be done depends on what is. Errors in the speculative order can result in the grossest aberrations.

A century after the Arian crisis arose the Monophysite heresy, a dispute over Our Lord's two natures, he being true God and true man. Of a Monophysite formula, the Catholic Encyclopedia observes ... *no heresy in intention, but only a wrong definition... But however harmless the formula... might look at first sight, it led in fact immediately to serious and disastrous consequences,*² reaffirming the primacy of the speculative order.

The Encyclopedia treats of modern attempts - claiming a simple misunderstanding - to rehabilitate the Monophysites: *There is a prima facie argument against... these pleas. Granted that for centuries*

¹ [Jn 17:3](#)

² [Catholic Encyclopedia: Monophysites and Monophysitism](#)

*controversialists full of 'odium theologicum' might misunderstand one another and fight about words while agreeing as to the underlying doctrines, yet it remains that the [terms of the dispute] had received in the second half of the fourth century a perfectly definite meaning, as to which the whole Church was at one... If... the Monophysites [used these terms] in a new sense, not only does it follow that their use of words was singularly inconsistent and inexcusable, but (what is far more important) that they can have had no difficulty in seeing what was the true meaning of Catholic councils, popes, and theologians, who consistently used the words in one and the same sense.*³ That is, the Catholic teaching was clear, and it was rejected. We can recall here similar modern attempts to rehabilitate Luther and his cohorts, as if his disastrous revolution was born of misunderstanding and not at all of perversity and malice.⁴

The champion of orthodoxy against the Monophysites was Pope St Leo I.

The Monophysite heresy morphed into the Monothelite heresy, a dispute about Our Lord's two wills and operations,⁵ born in part of an attempt to reach out to the Monophysites on the fringes of the eastern Roman empire and re-integrate them. Thus, the heresy's origin was partly political in nature, putting human interests before the truth, a problem which plagues contemporary marital discourse, speaking of its so-called concrete complexities rather than the institution of nature, founded by God.

At Constantinople, the Emperor tried to please all: *Heraclius had spent the last few years of his life attempting to find a compromise theological position between the Monophysites and the Chalcedonians... This approach seemed to be an acceptable compromise, and it secured widespread support throughout the east.*⁶ Compromised by the compromise, Pope Honorius I was posthumously condemned for his dereliction. Heraclius' edict noted: *The people of our Christ-loving society are being led into great division and strife: because of their dissension, they cannot agree with one another, and as a result society is harmed in numerous ways,*⁷ again reaffirming the primacy of the speculative order.

Succeeding Heraclius, the emperor Constans II issued his own edict: *Constans was a young man of seventeen, and he was supremely indifferent to the religious debates convulsing the Church. However, he was certainly concerned about the effect all these arcane debates were having on the Roman Empire, and so he issued an imperial edict [which] made it illegal to discuss in any manner the topic.*⁸ Constans clearly did not like to speak of abstract topics. His edict was far from solving the problem: *In Rome and*

³ [Ibid.](#)

⁴ [Five Hundred Years of Protestant Revolt](#)

⁵ [Catholic Encyclopedia: Monothelitism and Monothelites](#)

⁶ [Wikipedia: The Type of Constans](#)

⁷ [Ibid.](#)

⁸ [Ibid.](#)

the west, the opposition to Monothelism was reaching fever pitch, and [Constans' edict] did nothing to defuse the situation; indeed, it made it worse by implying that either doctrine was as good as the other. This was imperial religious relativism or primacy of conscience.

One hero in the battle against the Monothelite heresy was Pope St Martin I, whose feast is today. Previously the papal legate at Constantinople because of the Monothelite heresy, elected Supreme Pontiff in 649 AD Martin immediately called a council at Rome which condemned the various religious formulas proposed – enforced – by the emperors at Constantinople. *After the synod, Pope Martin wrote to Constans, informing the emperor of its conclusions and requiring him to condemn both the Monothelite doctrine and his own [edict]. Unfortunately, Constans was not the sort of emperor to take such a rebuke of imperial authority lightly.*⁹

Olympius, the imperial governor at Milan was dispatched to arrest the Pope, but died before he could do so. His successor, Theodore, seized Pope Martin and abducted him to Constantinople where he was imprisoned and tortured before being banished to Cherson in the Ukraine. Here, because of both the rigors of exile and his treatment by the emperor, Pope St Martin died a martyr for the truth.

A generation later, Pope St Agatho convened a general council of the Church which definitively condemned the Monothelite heresy and its followers. There was no reserve in the condemnation of Pope Honorius: *We decide that Honorius also, who was pope of elder Rome, be with them cast out of the holy Church of God, and be anathematized with them, because we have found by his letter to Sergius that he followed his opinion in all things, and confirmed his wicked dogmas.*¹⁰ The decrees of this council were confirmed by Agatho's successor, Pope Leo II: *We anathematize the inventors of the new error... and also Honorius, who did not attempt to sanctify this Apostolic Church with the teaching of Apostolic tradition, but by profane treachery attempted to pollute its purity.*¹¹

Church history is replete with examples of those who, for whatever reasons, try to compromise or circumvent the truth to solve problems. The history of the Church also is replete with those who with heroic virtue resist. The former largely are forgotten, or - covered with opprobrium - are relegated to a footnote of history. The latter, like St Athanasius, like Pope St Leo, like Pope St Martin – a martyr for the truth and elevated to the honors of the altar - are vindicated by God and are celebrated by His Church.

Pope St Martin, pray for us.

In the name of the Father...

⁹ [Ibid.](#)

¹⁰ [Catholic Encyclopedia: Pope Honorius I](#)

¹¹ [Ibid.](#)