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## The Great Schism of the Church

July 6, 1054 was rapidly approaching, and the Christian world was about to experience a major event on the road to a rupture that continues to our day — the schism or split between the Western and Eastern Christian churches. The central actors in the looming conflict were Michael Cerularius, the patriarch of Constantinople,<sup>1</sup> and Leo IX, the bishop or pope in Rome (left).



In the months leading up to July 6, 1054, Cerularius had strongly condemned the Western church for some of its religious practices and beliefs.<sup>2</sup> As part of his attack, Cerularius excommunicated the bishops of Constantinople who followed certain rites of the Western church, and he closed down their churches.

Meanwhile, in April 1054, Leo had sent a legation to Cerularius, headed by Cardinal Humbert, with his own set of demands and accusations against the patriarch. As it turned out, Leo died in the midst of the mission, but the legation continued with its task. Tragically, the meetings between Cardinal Humbert and Patriarch Cerularius were acrimonious. Mistrust and a desire to maintain ecclesiastical power ruled the day. No useful dialogue could occur in such a poisoned atmosphere.

### Mutual excommunication

Finally, relations between Cerularius and Humbert were strained to the breaking point. The Roman legates marched into Constantinople's St. Sophia church and placed a papal bull (decree) on the altar, excommunicating Cerularius. That fateful day of July 6, 1054 had arrived. After being excommunicated, Cerularius convened his bishops and issued further polemical statements against the practices of the Western church. These also condemned the legation from the papacy and anathematized Humbert. With the mutual excommunications, the possibility of healing and reconciliation became a shattered dream.

The mutual excommunications of 1054 were but a dramatic interlude in a centuries-long period of growing estrangement between the two areas of the church, East and West, despite the fact that in earlier centuries they had been solidly united against a number of heresies, including Arianism.<sup>3</sup>

The split between the Eastern and Western halves of the church also had much to do with the political and geographical reality of the Roman Empire. The political disunion in the Roman Empire was replicated in the church. The last Roman emperor to rule over a united empire was Theodosius the Great, who died in A.D. 395. The empire was then divided into eastern and western halves, with each having its own emperor. The Western Roman Empire was torn apart by barbarian invasions at the end of the fifth century, while the Eastern Roman Empire, or Byzantine Empire, continued, with its capital at Constantinople, the modern Istanbul, Turkey.

The churches of Rome and Constantinople grew in power and became rivals more for their political status rather than for any spiritual or religious reasons. In earlier centuries, ecclesiastical authority in the church had become concentrated in five bishops in the main Christian centers of Alexandria, Antioch, Constantinople, Jerusalem and Rome. This had occurred as early as the fourth century A.D.

## **A growing reconciliation?**

For hundreds of years after the tragic events of July 1054, the Eastern and Western churches essentially went their separate ways, though there were contacts between them and periodic attempts at reconciliation. Meanwhile, the Western church expanded into the Americas and experienced further splits, which created the Protestant Christian world. The Eastern church pushed northward, making many converts in the Balkans, in Slavic Eastern Europe and in Russia.

A significant step toward reconciliation began in March 1991, when the Eastern Orthodox Church and the World Alliance of Reformed Churches reached a consensus on the Filioque Clause disagreement. Theologian Thomas F. Torrance was instrumental in the dialogue.

Overtures have also been made by the leadership in the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches to build relations between them. On Dec. 7, 1965, Pope Paul VI and Orthodox Patriarch Athenagoras issued a joint text that mutually nullified the joint excommunications of 1054. The declaration was read simultaneously at a public meeting of the ecumenical council in Rome and at a ceremony in Istanbul. The declaration showed a desire for reconciliation between the two churches.

In June 1995, Patriarch Bartholomew<sup>4</sup> met with Pope John Paul II in a series of meetings intended to pull the two churches closer together. The patriarch, along with other leaders of Eastern churches, attended the funeral of Pope John Paul II on April 8, 2005. This provided a hopeful symbol — an olive branch extended to the Roman Catholic Church for reconciliation. The new pope, Benedict XVI, has said that he, too, wants to find reconciliation and dialogue with other Christians.

Only time will tell whether full reconciliation will occur in the future and what shape it will take. Christians can only pray that the unifying love and Spirit of Christ will shine forth from all who desire his body, the church, to exhibit a genuine unity and oneness.

## Footnotes

1. The city once called Byzantium was renamed Constantinople after the Roman Emperor Constantine, who moved his capitol to the city in A.D. 330.
2. Perhaps the most notable difference had to do with the issue of the procession of the Holy Spirit. The Western church added what's called the Filioque clause to the Nicene Creed, affirming the double procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father and the Son. This was rejected by the Eastern church, which taught that the Spirit proceeded solely from the Father.
3. In the later Patristic period (ended about A.D. 450) theologians from areas that in 1054 became the original Eastern church had an integral part in fighting heresies and in giving authentic expression to the New Testament understanding of God's nature through their theological leadership and participation in the first seven ecumenical councils. One of the biggest threats confronting the church had been the ideas of Arias, who claimed that Jesus Christ was not true God of true God, but a created being. Churchmen from the East were instrumental in combating this heresy. The Second Council of Nicea, in 787, was the seventh and last council accepted by the Eastern Orthodox Church.
4. Bartholomew, whose seat is in Istanbul, the former Constantinople, is given the honor of primacy in the broader Orthodox faith. Self-governing national Orthodox churches choose their own patriarchs.

2005

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