

The Empress's Council

Jeffrey Shott

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The Second Council of Nicaea was largely a family affair. The iconoclast (“image-breaker”) controversy that it addressed was initiated by the eighth-century Byzantine Emperor Leo III, whose son and successor, Constantine V, zealously continued his father’s war against sacred images. Ultimately, Leo’s granddaughter-in-law, Empress Irene, would be the one to convoke Nicaea II in an effort to bring peace to Christendom and restore the holy icons to their rightful place in Christian worship. In doing so, she would earn a position among the most influential figures in the history of the Church and play a critical role in the development of human culture.

Driven by the belief that icons were idolatrous and that he, as “God’s chosen emperor,”¹ was obliged to eradicate them, Leo III began his “propaganda campaign”² against sacred images in AD 726. When mere propaganda failed to bring about the desired effect, Leo ordered his soldiers to cleanse the empire of holy images. Many churches were subsequently purged of icons, not a few of which were destroyed. Certain notable clerics and a number of devout laymen resisted the emperor’s religious war against images (and were dealt with accordingly); overall, however, the people tolerated Leo’s iconoclasm, grateful for the defense He provided against the encroaching Muslim forces.

Upon Leo’s death, his son, Constantine V, assumed the throne. His iconoclastic zeal would prove greater than his father’s, and his campaign against the Muslims more effective. He brought the iconoclast controversy into the realm of Christology, claiming that icons were not only idolatrous but heretical; and, he routed the Mohammadans, bringing the war into their territory. With the support of the people assured by his military might, Constantine sought to

¹ Joseph F. Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church: A History* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2009), 43, Hoopla eBooks.

² Leo Donald Davis, S.J., *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 231, Hoopla eBooks.

cement victory over the iconophiles (“image-lovers”) by calling a council which would condemn them. In AD 754, over three hundred bishops gathered at the Council of Hieria to do just that. Iconoclasm thus became “the defined teaching of the Imperial Church.”³

Constantine’s son, Leo IV, would reign for a mere five years, leaving his own son, Constantine VI, to assume the throne at the tender age of ten years old. Constantine’s mother, Irene, herself an iconophile, took this opportunity to establish herself as empress. Once in power, she sought to overturn the iconoclastic policies of her predecessors. After consulting the then reigning pope, Hadrian I, Irene called for the bishops to assemble at the Second Council of Nicaea, thereby becoming the only woman in history to convene an ecumenical council.⁴ The assembled bishops declared the legitimacy of art in worship, on account of the fact that icons inspire devotion in the faithful and “confirmation that the becoming man of the Word of God was real and not just imaginary.”⁵ In the years after the council, Emperor Constantine VI, having now obtained his majority, sought to overthrow his mother and reign alone. However, in order to maintain the throne, Irene had him blinded so as to render him incapable of ruling. He died shortly thereafter.

A true historical irony. The woman whom the world has to thank for the many beautiful images of God the Son which it now has the pleasure of viewing, deprived her own son of sight. And indeed, the world must thank Empress Irene, for had iconoclasm not been defeated, “the western world would never have witnessed the glorious achievement of its figured sacred art. It would have been immeasurably poorer artistically.”⁶ The aesthetic component of the Church’s

³ Davis, *The First Seven*, 236.

⁴ Kelly, *The Ecumenical Councils*, 44.

⁵ “Second Council of Nicaea – 787 A.D.,” *Papal Encyclicals Online*, accessed July 6, 2022, <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum07.htm>.

⁶ Davis, *The First Seven*, 244.

liturgical and devotional life would be rather bleak to say the least. There would be no Sistine Chapel, nor Chartres Cathedral; no *Last Supper* by da Vinci, nor *Last Judgment* by Michelangelo. These and innumerable other masterpieces would simply not exist if not for the Empress's Council. Irene caused her son to die blind to the world, yet her council allows the Church and the world to live in view of God the Son.

Bibliography

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