

THE CONTROVERSY OVER FASTING ON SATURDAY BETWEEN CONSTANTINOPLE AND ROME

RADIŠA ANTIĆ
Newbold College
Bracknell, Binfield, England

The question of fasting on Saturday was a significant point of theological debate between the Eastern and Western churches during the first millennium of Christian history.¹ This issue is closely related to the fact that the Christian church, during the first several centuries after Christ, celebrated both Saturday and Sunday as weekly days of worship.

For example, a church historian of the fifth century, Socrates Scholasticus of Constantinople, noted that “For although almost all churches throughout the world celebrate the sacred mysteries on the Sabbath of every week, yet the Christians of Alexandria and at Rome, on account of some ancient tradition, have ceased to do this.”² The *Apostolic Constitutions*, compiled in the fourth century probably in Antioch, states similarly that Christians should keep the Sabbath (Saturday) and the Lord’s day (Sunday) festivals “because the former is the memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection.”³ It thus seems logical to assume, on the basis of these and other statements, that, with the exception of Rome and Alexandria, “throughout the [Christian] world” there were worship services on both Saturday and Sunday as late as the fifth century,⁴ with the Western church appearing to emphasize the importance of Sunday as the weekly day of worship. On the other hand, the Eastern church seemed to be torn by its desire to remain in harmony with its understanding of apostolic tradition and its need to keep good relations with Rome.

¹Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 3 vols. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1996), 3:378-386.

²Socrates, *Ecclesiastical History* 5.22, (NPNF² 2:132).

³*Apostolic Constitutions* 7.23, titled “Constitutions of the Holy Apostles” (ANF 7:469): “But keep the Sabbath, and the Lord’s day festival; because the former is the memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection.” Cf. *ibid.*, 8.33 (ANF 7.495): “Peter and Paul do make the following constitutions. Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath-day and the Lord’s day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety. We have said that the Sabbath is on account of the creation and the Lord’s day of the resurrection.”

⁴Sozomen writes: “The people of Constantinople, and almost everywhere, assemble together on the Sabbath, as well as on the first day of the week, which custom is never observed in Rome or at Alexandria. There are several cities and villages in Egypt where, contrary to the usage established elsewhere, the people meet together on Sabbath evenings, and, although they have dined previously, partake of the mysteries” (*Ecclesiastical History* 7.19 [NPNF² 2:390]). Cf. Kenneth A. Strand, “The Sabbath and Sunday from the Second through the Fifth Centuries” in *The Sabbath in Scripture and History*, ed. Kenneth A. Strand (Washington, DC: Review and Herald, 1982), 323-332.

The Eastern-Western conflict over the day of worship is related to the question of fasting on Sabbath. These conflicts are especially evident in three historical events: the Fifth-Sixth Ecumenical Council held in Trullo in 691, the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Bulgarian church, and the Great Schism of 1054.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and critically assess the canons of the Council in Trullo regarding the Saturday-fasting controversy, the encyclical of Patriarch Photius connected to the status of the Bulgarian church, and the documents associated with the Great Schism. This analysis attempts to explain why the matter of fasting on Saturday played such a central role in disagreements between the Eastern and Western churches.

The Fifth–Sixth Ecumenical Council in Trullo

The Council in Trullo, called by Emperor Justinian II in 691, met in the imperial banqueting hall (*in trullum*) at Constantinople.⁵ The purpose of this council, also known as the Fifth-Sixth Council,⁶ was to complete the work of the Fifth (553) and Sixth (681) Ecumenical Councils.⁷ In the absence of the emperor, the council was presided over by Paul III, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, and attended by Patriarchs Petros III of Alexandria, Georgios II of Antioch, Anastasios II of Jerusalem, as well as by 211 bishops.⁸

There are disagreements among scholars as to whether the Western church was officially represented at this council. Historians and theologians of the Western church claim that Rome was not represented. An evidence of that claim is found in Pope Sergius III's rejection of certain canons of the council, particularly those statements giving the patriarch of Constantinople equal status with the Roman pope.⁹ However, historians of the Eastern church point out that the pope of Rome was represented through the delegation of bishops from Eastern Illyricum. In addition to these Western representatives, there were four bishops from Crete: Basilios of Gortyna, Nikitas of Kydonia, Sisinos of Chersonisos, and Theopemptos. Basilios of Gortyna signed the canons of the synod in the following way: "Basilios episcopus Gortinae, metropolis Christum amantis Cretae insulae et . . . totius synodi sanctae Romanae Ecclesiae" ("Basilios, bishop of Gortyna, metropolis of the Lord loving island of Crete and . . . of the whole synod of the Holy Church of

⁵Jerald C. Brauer, ed., *The Westminster Dictionary of Church History* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971), s.v. "Trullan Synod."

⁶The Fifth-Sixth Council is known also in church history as *Pentekete* (Greek) and *Quinisextum* (Latin).

⁷The Fifth Ecumenical Council was convened in 553 in order to confirm the anathema on Origen, Didymos the Blind, and Evagrius Pontikos for the Platonizing tendencies. The Sixth Ecumenical Council was also held in the *trullum* of the imperial palace in Constantinople from 680 to 681 (Isaias Simonopetrites, "The Pastoral Sensitivity of the Canons of the Council in Trullo [691-692]," *GOTR* 40 [1995]: 45-46).

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Brauer, 830.

Rome¹⁰).¹⁰ Nevertheless in spite of this evidence, the question of whether Rome was officially represented at the Council of Trullo will probably remain a point of debate between the Western and Eastern churches.

However, what is of interest for this work is that out of the 102 canons issued by the Fifth-Sixth Council, the 29th, 52d, 55th, 56th, and 89th refer to the issue of fasting in general, as well as to fasting on Saturday.¹¹ Why was so much space dedicated to the problem of fasting, particularly to fasting on Saturday? What is the historical background of this controversy?

From apostolic times Christians have practiced fasting.¹² Most early Christians of Jewish background apparently followed the Jewish custom of fasting and prayer on Mondays and Thursdays. However, contrary to that Jewish practice, at least some in the Christian church near the end of the first century adopted Wednesdays and Fridays as the days of fasting.¹³ Furthermore, by the end of the fifth century, the Latin church replaced Wednesday with Saturday as a fasting day,¹⁴ probably in opposition to the Jews and to Christians of Jewish background or leanings who were reluctant to change their practice of fasting on certain days.¹⁵ Nevertheless, in the Eastern churches it was a general rule that there should be no fasting on Saturday and, specifically, that Saturday as well as Sunday should be exempt from fasting in the period before Easter.¹⁶ The Council in Trullo strongly reacted against these changes made by Rome, claiming that by introducing Saturday as the day of fasting, the Roman church acted against the apostolic tradition clearly expressed in the *Apostolic Constitutions* and that should be followed by all Christians.¹⁷ What follows is a short review of the key points mentioned in canons 29, 52, 55, 56, and 89 of the Council in Trullo concerning the controversy of fasting in general and particularly on Saturday.

Canon 29

A canon of the Synod of Carthage says that the holy mysteries of the altar are not to be performed but by men who are fasting, except on one day in the year on which the Supper of the Lord is celebrated. At that time, on

¹⁰Ioan Dura, "The Canons of the Sixth Ecumenical Synod concerning Fasting and Their Application to the Present Needs of the Orthodox Faithful," *GOTR* 40 (1995): 153-154.

¹¹See Archimandrite Akakios, *Fasting in the Orthodox Church* (Etna, CA: [np], 1990), 107.

¹²See Acts 13:2; 14:23.

¹³Tia M. Kolbaba, *The Byzantine Lists: Errors of the Latins* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 34-35. See also Brauer, s.v. "Fast Days."

¹⁴Ibid.

¹⁵Augustus Neander, *General History of the Christian Religion and Church* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1847-1855), 3:402.

¹⁶Ibid, 402.

¹⁷Kolbaba, 34-35.

account perhaps of certain occasions in those places useful to the Church, even the holy Fathers themselves made use of this dispensation. But since nothing leads us to abandon exact observance, we decree that the Apostolic and Patristic tradition shall be followed; and define that it is not right to break the fast on the fifth feria of the last week of Lent, and thus to do dishonour to the whole of Lent.¹⁸

The pronouncement issued by the Synod in Carthage declared that the Holy Eucharist can be officiated by nonfasting priests once a year on Holy Thursdays. The reasoning behind this pronouncement was that Jesus celebrated the “Pascha of the law” with his disciples before offering his own “spiritual Pascha,” and thus the apostles had not fasted when they had eaten the latter, since they had already taken “Pascha of the law.”¹⁹

However, the fathers of the Council in Trullo amended this pronouncement made by the Synod of Carthage, declaring that the clergy should fast whenever they celebrate the holy liturgy, and that the Lenten fast, as well as that of Wednesday and Friday, is obligatory. Thus the priests should follow the tradition of the apostles and the fathers, and “the fast should not be broken upon the fifth *feria* [Maundy Thursday] of the last week of Lent, and so the whole Lent be dishonoured.”²⁰ Therefore, only those priests who are fasting can perform the liturgy.

It seems obvious that this assertion was affirmed in opposition to what was the practice in the Western part of Christianity; namely, the Church of Rome was allowing its priests to carry out the holy liturgy on the Thursday of Lent without fasting.²¹

Canon 52

On all days of the holy fast of Lent, except on the Sabbath, the Lord's day and the holy day of the Annunciation, the Liturgy of the Presanctified is to be said.²²

During Lent the holy liturgy was offered only on Saturdays and Sundays when fasting was not permitted. The Synod of Laodicea in canon 49 thus established for the duration of Lent the practice of keeping a part of the gifts sanctified in the liturgy of Saturdays and Sundays on the altar so that the believers could receive Holy Communion on week days.²³ “The bread once offered and consecrated is not to be consecrated anew on another day but a new offering is made of what was before consecrated and presanctified.”²⁴ In

¹⁸“The Canons of the Council in Trullo,” *NPNF*² 14:378. Cf. N. Milas, *Pravila Pravoslavne Crkve s Tumacenjima* (Novi Sad, 1895-1896), 136.

¹⁹“The Canons of the Council in Trullo,” *NPNF*² 14:378. Cf. Dura, 150.

²⁰“The Canons of the Council in Trullo,” *NPNF*² 14:378.

²¹See Dura, 151.

²²“The Canons of the Council in Trullo,” *NPNF*² 14:389.

²³*Ibid.* See also Dura, 151.

²⁴*NPNF*² 14:389, notes on Canon 52 by van Espen.

order not to interrupt the fasting on Wednesdays and Fridays, the presanctified gifts were received in the evening after Vespers, when only the liturgy of the presanctified gifts was celebrated and not the complete liturgy.

Thus on Saturdays and Sundays, when fasting was not permitted even during Lent, the complete liturgy was celebrated. Consequently, the content of canon 52 of the Council in Trullo preserved this custom of the liturgy of the presanctified gifts decreed by the Synod of Laodicea.

Although one can find a large number of possible explanations to understand this clear distinction between Saturday, Sunday, and other days of the week, canon 52 seems to indicate that in the early centuries of the Christian church there was a special place in the worship schedule not only for Sunday, but also for Saturday. The fact that the period of Lent was considered to be one of the most sacred and significant of all festivals in the church's yearly calendar raises the following questions: Why was the liturgy during Lent offered on both Saturdays and Sundays? What was the reason for forbidding fasting on Saturdays and Sundays?

Canon 55

Since we understand that in the city of the Romans, in the holy fast of Lent they fast on the Saturdays, contrary to the ecclesiastical observance which is traditional, it seemed good to the holy synod that also in the Church of the Romans the canon shall immovably stand fast which says: "If any cleric shall be found to fast on a Sunday or Saturday (except on one occasion only) he is to be deposed; and if he is a layman he shall be cut off."²⁵

In this canon, the fathers of the Council in Trullo reacted against the noncanonical practice of fasting by the church in Rome on Saturdays and Sundays during Lent. At the end of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, "Ecclesiastical Canon" no. 64 states: "If any one of the clergy be found to fast on the Lord's day, or on the Sabbath-day, excepting one only, let him be deprived; but if he be one of the laity, let him be suspended."²⁶ On the basis of this statement, the Eastern church adopted, as a general rule, that there should be no fasting

²⁵"The Canons of the Council in Trullo," *NPNF*² 14:391.

²⁶"Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," *ANF* 7:504. The *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.23 also states on which days of the week Christians are to fast and not to fast and for what reasons: "But let not your fast be with the hypocrites; for they fast on the second and fifth days of the week. But do you either fast the entire five days, or on the fourth day of the week, and on the day of the Preparation, because on the fourth day the condemnation went out against the Lord, Judas then promising to betray Him for money; and you must fast on the day of the Preparation, because on that day the Lord suffered the death of the cross under Pontius Pilate. But keep the Sabbath, and the Lord's day festival; because the former is the memorial of the creation, and the latter of the resurrection. But there is one only Sabbath to be observed by you in the whole year, which is that of our Lord's burial, on which men ought to keep a fast, but not a festival. For inasmuch as the Creator was then under the earth, the sorrow for him is more forcible than the joy for the creation; for the Creator is more honourable by nature and dignity than His own creatures" (*ANF* 7:469).

on Sabbath, and that Sabbath and Sunday should be excluded from the period of fasting before Lent. The one exception in the whole liturgical year was the Sabbath, “which is that of the Lord’s burial,” “for inasmuch as the Creator was then under the earth, the sorrow for him is more forcible than the joy of creation.”²⁷

Contrary to the position of the Eastern church and the *Apostolic Constitutions*, the Western church, in opposition to Jews and Judaists (Christians of Jewish background or leanings), adopted the practice of observing Saturday as a day of fasting. However, Augustine, Ambrose of Milan, and Jerome claimed that this matter had not been decided by divine authority and that there was no particular connection with the essence of faith and of sanctification. They believed that “in such matters each individual should follow the custom of his own church, or of the country in which he resided, and strive that the bond of charity might not be broken by differences in such unimportant matters.”²⁸ Augustine writes that “God did not lay down a rule concerning fasting or eating on the seventh-day of the week, either at the time of His hallowing that day because in it He rested from His works, or afterwards when He gave precepts to the Hebrew nation concerning the observance of that day.”²⁹ Thus he emphasizes that neither the Holy Scriptures nor the universal tradition of the church says anything decisive on this point and that only weak minds insist on this practice as being the only right one.³⁰

In spite of Augustine’s position, however, which seems to express a great dose of religious liberty in the domain of “unessential matters,” the historical

²⁷Ibid. The period of fasting before Easter was intended to give an opportunity to Christians to engage in the process of self-examination, repentance, abstinence from the pleasures of the world, the diligent reading of God’s word in order to be able to enter into the process of commemoration of the new creation in humanity which came from the resurrection and glorification of Christ (see Neander, 3:408).

²⁸Neander, 3:402.

²⁹Augustine, *Epistle* 36, to Casulanus, in *NPNF*¹ 1:265-270.

³⁰Augustine writes: “As to the question on which you wish my opinion, whether it is lawful to fast on the seventh day of the week, I answer, that if it were wholly unlawful, neither Moses nor Elijah, nor our Lord himself, would have fasted for forty successive days. But by the same argument it is proved that even on the Lord’s day fasting is not unlawful. And yet, if any one were to think that the Lord’s day should be appointed a day of fasting, in the same way as the seventh day is observed by some, such a man would be regarded, and not unjustly, as bringing a great cause of offence into the Church. For in those things concerning which the divine Scriptures have laid down no definitive rule, the custom of the people of God, or the practices instituted by their fathers, are to be held as the law of the Church. If we choose to fall into a debate about these things, and to denounce one party merely because their custom differs from that of others, the consequence must be an endless contention, in which the utmost care is necessary lest the storm of conflict overcast with clouds the calmness of brotherly love, while the strength is spent in mere controversy which cannot adduce on either side any decisive testimonies of truth” (ibid.). See also Neander, 3:402.

evidence shows something different; namely, that the “Roman church . . . from a very early period required uniformity in things unessential.”³¹ The Roman church unmistakably claimed that “this custom [of fasting on Sabbath] came down from Peter, the first of the apostles, and hence ought to be universally observed.”³²

Further, at the same time that Augustine voiced his opinion about fasting, the Roman bishop Innocent issued a declaration to the Spanish bishop Decentius, “that the Sabbath, like Friday, must be observed as a fast day.”³³ In opposition to the entire ecclesiastical tradition expressed in the *Apostolic Constitutions* that the Sabbath is the commemoration of the joy of creation, Innocent argued that the Sabbath necessarily belongs to the period of sorrow because after Jesus’ crucifixion the apostles were plunged into grief and hid themselves due to fear, and that the Sabbath precedes Sunday, the joyful day of resurrection.³⁴

The controversy over fasting on Sabbath unmistakably shows that “the displacement of Saturday by Sunday as the day of weekly Christian worship and rest was a long and slow process. . . . Evidence from the fifth century indicates that also at that time both Sabbath and Sunday were observed generally throughout the Christian world, except in Rome and Alexandria.”³⁵ Milas writes:

Christians celebrated Sunday, the day on which Christ was resurrected from death and through this accomplished his work of redemption. This day for Christians was a day of joy and brotherly meetings in Christ as well as the day of repentance for committed sins. Almost the same meaning was attributed to the Sabbath. Christians considered the Sabbath too as a day of joy and remembrance of the creation of the world and the rest of God.³⁶

On Sabbath in the Eastern church, assemblies were held, sermons preached, and communion celebrated.³⁷ Two canons issued by the Synod of Laodicea in Phrygia in 360 mentioned the Sabbath and some of the activities that the Christians should practice on Sabbath. Canon 16 states that “On Saturday, the Gospels and other portions of the Scripture shall be read aloud.”³⁸ However, in apparently sharp contradiction, canon 29 of the same Synod proposes that “Christians shall not judaize and be idle on Saturday, but shall work on that day; but the Lord’s day they shall especially honour, in every way possible as Christians. If however, they are found judaizing, they

³¹Neander, 3:403.

³²Ibid.

³³“Sabbato jejunandum esse ratio evidentissima demonstrat” (ibid.).

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Strand, 330. See also, Milas, 136.

³⁶Milas, 136.

³⁷Neander, 401.

³⁸“The Canons of the Synod of Laodicea,” *NPNF*² 14:133.

shall be shut out from Christ.”³⁹ While this is a statement against the practice of judaizing, however, Western Christianity was not yet ready to acknowledge fully that the real origin of the change of the day of fasting was in opposition to the Jewish communities, asserting instead that Peter established a fast on the Sabbath in preparation for the dispute with Simon Magus.

What is clear, however, is that canon 29 of the Synod of Laodicea demonstrates that, first, there were Christians resting on the Sabbath day in the second part of the fourth century, and who were doing so in recognition of the Creator’s own rest on the Sabbath at the end of Creation week. Second, August Neander rightly states that “In many districts, a punctual Jewish observance of the Sabbath must doubtless have become common: hence the council of Laodicea considered it necessary to order, that Christians should not celebrate this day after the Jewish manner, nor consider themselves bound to abstain from labour.”⁴⁰ Zeger-Bernard van Espen also writes that “among the Greeks the Sabbath was kept exactly as the Lord’s day except so far as the cessation of work was concerned.”⁴¹

Therefore, the controversy over the fasting on Sabbath, which was the point of debate at the Council in Trullo, is only the by-product of the deep conviction of the Christian church in the East during the first centuries of the Christian era that the Sabbath is the day of rest established by God at the time of the creation of the world. In addition to the evidence of canon 29, three key statements from the *Apostolic Constitutions* reinforce the statements of canon 55 concerning the Sabbath:

1. In the *Apostolic Constitutions* 2.59, the Sabbath is declared along with Sunday to be the day of church assemblies:

But assemble yourselves together every day, morning and evening, singing psalms and praying in the Lord’s house: in the morning saying the sixty-second Psalm, and in the evening the hundred and fortieth, but principally on the Sabbath-day. And of the day of our Lord’s resurrection, which is the Lord’s day, meet more diligently, sending praise to God that made the universe by Jesus, and sent him to us, and condescended to let him suffer, and raised Him from the dead. Otherwise what apology will he make to God who does not assemble on that day to hear the saving word concerning resurrection?⁴²

2. The *Apostolic Constitutions* states that on the Sabbath and on Sunday the slaves should rest from their labors and attend church with the rest of the Christians to listen to preaching from the Holy Scriptures:

Let the slaves work five days; but on the Sabbath day and the Lord’s day let them have leisure to go to church for instruction in piety. We have

³⁹Ibid., 14:148.

⁴⁰Neander, 401.

⁴¹“The Canons of the Synod of Laodicea,” *NPNT*² 14:133, notes by van Espen.

⁴²“Constitutions of the Holy Apostles,” *ANF* 7:422-423.

said that the Sabbath is on account of the creation, and the Lord's day of resurrection.⁴³

3. The *Apostolic Constitutions* declares that there should be no fasting on Sabbath, except for the Sabbath during which Jesus lay resting in the tomb, given that the Sabbath reminds one of the joy and delight of the creation of the world. If someone refuses to follow this decree, he should be excluded from the fellowship of the church.⁴⁴

Canon 56

We have likewise learned that in the regions of Armenia and in other places certain people eat eggs and cheese on the Sabbaths and Lord's days of the holy Lent. It seems good therefore that the whole Church of God which is in all the world should follow one rule and keep the fast perfectly, and as they abstain from everything which is killed, so also should they from eggs and cheese, which are the fruit and produce of those animals from which we abstain. But if any shall not observe this law, if they be clerics, let them be deposed; but if laymen, let them be cut off.⁴⁵

This canon demonstrates that the Christians in the East, although they did not fast on the Sabbath and on the Sundays of Lent, did, however, abstain from "everything which is killed . . . from eggs and cheese, which are the fruit and produce of those animals,"⁴⁶ from which they refrained during the fasting days. In writing this stipulation, the fathers of the Council in Trullo emphasized the need to remain faithful to canon 69 of the *Apostolic Constitutions*, which states:

If any bishop, or presbyter, or deacon, or reader, or singer, does not fast the fast of forty days, or the fourth day of the week, and the day of the Preparation, let him be deprived, except he be hindered by weakness of body. But if he be one of the laity, let him be suspended.⁴⁷

It is necessary, according to canon 56, that the whole universal church of God fast in the manner already established as it is expressed in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. This warning is especially directed toward the church of Armenia "and in other places," probably having in mind primarily the church in Rome.

In canon 56, one can easily detect the urgency of the fathers of the Council in Trullo to remain faithful to the teachings of the apostles,⁴⁸ to the earlier, original traditions, and to what ultimately leads to the teachings of the early church and Christ himself. As with the other canons, this canon

⁴³Ibid., 7:495.

⁴⁴Ibid., 7:504.

⁴⁵"The Canons of the Council in Trullo," *NPNF*² 14:391.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷"Constitutions of the Holy Apostles," *ANF* 7:504.

⁴⁸They believed that the teaching of the apostles was expressed in the *Apostolic Constitutions*.

also expresses the strong intent of the Council in Trullo to have some special regulations for Sabbath and Sunday.

Canon 89

The faithful spending the days of the Salutatory Passion in fasting, praying and compunction of heart, ought to fast until the midnight of the Great Sabbath: since the divine Evangelists, Matthew and Luke, have shewn us how late at night it was [that the resurrection took place], the one by using the words ὀψὲ σαββάτου, and the other by the words ὄρθρου βαθέος.⁴⁹

As we have stated earlier, there was only one Sabbath during the year when, according to the Council in Trullo, the faithful should fast: the Great Sabbath of Lent. The *Apostolic Constitutions* 7.23 describe this as the Sabbath of “our Lord’s burial, on which men ought to keep a fast, but not a festival. For inasmuch as the Creator was then under the earth, the sorrow for him is more forcible than the joy for the creation.”⁵⁰ Canon 89 stipulates that the fast on the Great Sabbath should end about the middle of the Holy Saturday night,⁵¹ since “the divine Evangelists, Matthew and Luke, have shewn us how late at night” the resurrection took place. At the hour of the Lord’s resurrection, after the days of fasting, contrition, and humbling of soul, the faithful should cease fasting and begin to rejoice.

Regardless of one’s position regarding the theology of fasting, one can appreciate the preoccupation of the fathers of the Council in Trullo to remain in harmony with the teachings of the apostolic tradition and to maintain an ecclesiastical unity in the observance of fasting. Moreover, it is clear that for them the Sabbath day, as well as Sunday, had to be set apart not just as a special day of nonfasting, but also as a day of worship on which the faithful should experience the joy of the creation and the resurrection of Jesus.

The Controversy Concerning the Church in Bulgaria

Long before the controversy concerning who would have the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the church in Bulgaria in the ninth century, there were numerous quarrels between Eastern and Western Christianity.⁵² In 856, Theodora, empress of the Byzantine Empire,⁵³ retired from the court; and her underage son, Michael III, was appointed to succeed her under the

⁴⁹“The Canons of the Council in Trullo,” *NPNF*² 14:403, brackets original.

⁵⁰*Apostolic Constitutions*, *ANF* 7:469.

⁵¹Dura, 159.

⁵²See Jevsevije Popovic, *Opća Crkvena Istorija* (Sremski Karlovci: Srpska Manastirska Stamparija, 1912), 774-796. Frank Gavin, “Breach Between East and West,” in *An Outline of Christianity: The Story of Our Civilization*, 5 vols., ed. A. S. Peake and R. G. Parsons (London: Waverly, 1926), 2:189.

⁵³In 330, Constantine I established a second Roman capital at Byzantium (present-day Istanbul). When Rome fell in 476, the Byzantine Empire was founded on the remains of the once great Roman Empire with Constantinople as its capital.

protection of her brother, Bardas. However, Bardas and young Michael III allowed corruption and immorality to rule the court.⁵⁴ In response, the patriarch of Constantinople, Ignatius, refused communion to the young king, an act which infuriated Bardas and Michael. They removed Ignatius from his position and exiled him. Ignatius was succeeded by Photius, a layman, who was considered to be “the most learned scholar in the world . . . , the highly gifted man, distinguished as a philosopher in a generation, and displaying, as a theologian, qualities which bespeak genius.”⁵⁵

When news of the succession reached Pope Nicholas I (858-867), he sent two legates to investigate. When the legates arrived in Constantinople, they accepted gifts from Bardas’s supporters, and at the trial of Ignatius they took the side of Bardas. Thus Ignatius’s removal was confirmed.⁵⁶

However, in 862, Nicholas I reexamined the controversy and came to the conclusion that Ignatius was wrongly deposed. Because of this, he threatened Photius with excommunication, thereby further straining the relationship between Rome and Constantinople over the question of ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the church in Bulgaria.

The Bulgarians had been Christianized by missionaries from Constantinople and had received priests from the Eastern church. The Bulgarian king Bogoris (or Boris) had been baptized by Greek priests. However, Bogoris, upon further thought, decided that an ecclesiastical dependence on Constantinople might put the political independence of Bulgaria in danger. Therefore, he wrote to Rome, asking what has come to be called the “one hundred and five religious questions” and requesting the pope to send bishops to put the church in Bulgaria in order.⁵⁷ Nichols I honored Bogoris’s request, sending bishops who introduced the Latin form of worship and declared the church in Bulgaria to be the daughter of Rome. As a result, the Greek priests were humiliated and sent into exile to Constantinople. Distrust and aversion were transformed into open hostility.⁵⁸

In 867, the patriarch of Constantinople, Photius, wrote an encyclical to other patriarchs of the Eastern churches, accusing the Church of Rome of banditry and robbery of the church in Bulgaria, as well as accusing them of other abuses. The five abuses of Rome mentioned in this encyclical are:

1. observing Saturday as a fast day;
2. giving permission to the people to eat flesh food and animal products (cheese, milk, eggs) during the first week of Easter;
3. despising the priests from the East who live in a lawful marriage while their (Western) priests live in adultery and concubinage;

⁵⁴See Popovic, 778.

⁵⁵Gavin, 2:191.

⁵⁶Ibid.

⁵⁷Popovic, 780.

⁵⁸Ibid., 781; Gavin, 2:192. See also Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Spirit of Eastern Christendom (600-1700)* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 158.

4. declining to give consent to the priests and bishops to conduct the sacrament of confirmation;
5. teaching that the Holy Spirit proceeds not only from the Father, but adding the phrase “and the son” (*Filioque*).⁵⁹

This encyclical, which is sometimes called the *Magna Carta* of Eastern Orthodoxy, expresses a forceful declaration of Constantinople’s independence from Rome and finishes with the statement of dethronement and excommunication of Pope Nicholas I. At least during this short period of time, it seemed that Photius won in his criticism of Rome because of the logic of his argument and the support he had from the clergy and people.⁶⁰

It is significant for the Saturday/Sunday debate that at this critical point in the history of the relationship between the Eastern and Western parts of Christianity, the first point of disagreement mentioned in this encyclical is fasting on Sabbath. It is also interesting to notice that in this document Sunday is not mentioned as the nonfasting day. Of course, there were other issues behind this encyclical, such as the power struggle between the two segments of Christianity and aspirations to control certain territories; nevertheless, the problem of fasting on Sabbath not only remained on the agenda, but was still *the* item on the agenda of disagreements in the ninth century.

This first excommunication, in which Pope Nicholas I was also dethroned in 867, would find its echo from the Latin side in the eleventh century. Was fasting on Sabbath still an issue in the later controversy between the two Christian churches?

The Fasting on Sabbath in the Great Schism of 1054

In 1042, Constantine Monomachos was inaugurated as the new king of the Byzantine Empire. One year later Michael Cerularius become patriarch of the Eastern church. These two men would become the central protagonists in defending the interests of the Eastern Orthodox Church in the Great Schism of 1054. Michael Cerularius was the real ruler not only of the church but also of the state, since soon after Constantine Monomachos became emperor, he suffered from paralysis and became a mere figurehead.⁶¹

In Rome, Pope Leo IX believed that he inherited absolute power over all Christian people and institutions from Peter himself.⁶² It seems that the Great Schism began with a letter written by Metropolitan Archbishop Leo of Achrida and Michael Cerularius to Bishop John of the church in Trani in southern Italy. However, the letter was intended not only for Bishop John, but also through him “to all the chief priests, and the priests of the Franks, and

⁵⁹Ibid.

⁶⁰See Gavin 2:193.

⁶¹Ibid. See also C. T. Marshall, “Schism, The Great,” in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1987), 980.

⁶²Marshall, 981.

the monks, and the peoples, and to the most reverend pope himself.”⁶³ This open letter singles out two distinctive abuses of the Western church: it made a special attack on the practice of the Roman church of making the Sabbath a fast day, and the use of unleavened bread for the eucharist. It is interesting to notice that what was apparently the most controversial issue, that of the *Filioque*, is not mentioned in this letter.

Around the same time another learned theologian from the East, Nicetas Stethatos, wrote a booklet *Libellus Contra Latinos*, in which he accused the Roman church of breaking the rules of the *Constitutions of the Holy Apostles* against fasting on the Sabbath, as well as of being disobedient to the Scriptures and the canons of other church councils, which had forbidden this practice.⁶⁴

To these two accusing documents from the East came two replies from the Western side. Pope Leo IX wrote an *apologia* for the Roman church to Michael Cerularius and Leo of Achrida, claiming that “he was the successor of the apostle Peter, that he was invested with supreme authority over the universal church, and that his word was law for the faithful to obey.”⁶⁵ A second defence supporting Pope Leo IX came from Cardinal Humbert, who wrote his *Responsio* to Nicetas Stethatos.⁶⁶

Moreover, Pope Leo IX decided early in 1054 to send a group of theologians to Constantinople to discuss further the contended issues. This group consisted of three papal legates: Cardinal Humbert; Frederic, deacon and chancellor of the Church of Rome; and Peter, archbishop of Amalfi. Upon their arrival the papal legates discussed the disputed issues with the patriarch, the emperor, and publicly with Nicetas Stethatos in the presence of the emperor, his court, and other persons of high rank in affairs of state and church.⁶⁷ Patriarch Michael Cerularius was offended by the letter brought to him by the legates and responded to the accusations concerning the Sabbath observance by saying: “For we are commanded also to honour the Sabbath equally with [Sunday] the Lord’s [day], and to keep [it] and not to work on it.”⁶⁸

After these unsuccessful discussions and other attempts to bring the Eastern church into submission to the Church of Rome, there occurred one of the most dramatic and most devastating events in the history of Christianity. On July 16, 1054, the Sabbath day, when preparations had been made for the liturgy on that day, the three papal legates entered the Church of St. Sophia and laid the bull of excommunication on the altar and walked away,

⁶³Michael Cerularius and Leo of Achrida, “Epistle to John of Trani,” in *Patrologia graecae*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 162 vols. (Paris, 1857-1886), 120:835-845. See also R. L. Odom, “The Sabbath in the Great Schism of 1054,” *AUSS* 1 (1963): 74-80.

⁶⁴Nicetas Stethatos, “*Libellus Contra Latinos*,” (PG 120:1011-1022).

⁶⁵Leo IX, “Epistle 100, to Michael Cerularius and Leo of Achrida,” in *Patrologia latina*, ed. J.-P. Migne, 217 vols. (Paris, 1844-1864), 143:745-768. See also Odom, 75.

⁶⁶Humbert, “*Responsio*,” (PG 120:1021-1038).

⁶⁷Humbert, “*Breve et Succincta Commemoratio*,” (PL 143:1001, 1002).

⁶⁸Cerularius, “Letter I,” (PG 120:777, 7780).

toward Rome, shaking the dust from their feet. From that day on, the fracture between Constantinople and Rome has never been healed and the Church of Rome has considered Eastern Orthodox Christendom as excommunicated and heretical.

In his work, *Adversus Calumnias Graecorum* (*Against the Calumnies of the Greeks*), Cardinal Humbert wrote:

Therefore, in such observance of the Sabbath, where and in what way do we [Latins] have anything in common with the Jews? For they are idle and keep a holiday on the Sabbath, neither ploughing nor reaping, and by reason of custom do not work, but they hold a festivity and a dinner, and their menservants, maidservants, cattle, and beasts of burden rest. But we [Latins] observe none of these things, but we do every (sort of) work, as (we do) on the preceding five days, and we fast as we (are wont to) fast on the sixth day [Friday] next to it.

However, you [Greeks], if you do not judaize, tell (us) why do you have something in common with the Jews with the similar observance of the Sabbath? They certainly observe the Sabbath, and you observe (it); they dine, and always break the fast, on the Sabbath. In their forty day period they break the fast every Sabbath except one, and you [Greeks] in your forty day period break the fast every Sabbath except one. They [the Jews] have a twofold reason for observing the Sabbath, obviously by reason of the precept of Moses, and because the disciples were saddened and heavy (of heart) on this (Sabbath) day on account of the death of the Lord, whom they did not believe to be about to be resurrected. Wherefore, because you observe Sabbath with the Jews and with us Sunday, Lord's day, you appear by such observance to imitate the sect of the Nazarenes, who in this manner accept the Christianity that they might not give up Judaism.

But the Latin church, in compassionate regard for the Lord in (His) suffering and death, rejoice in (His) resurrection on the [Sunday] Lord's day, when concern much troubled the Jews as they were seeking to corrupt the guards of the sepulchre by means of money. Wherefore, we [Latins], holding unto the present time the apostolic tradition concerning the Sabbath, and desiring to hold (it) unto the end, are careful to subscribe to that which our ancient and venerable fathers declared and confirmed, among whom the most blessed Pope Sylvester, the spiritual father of the Emperor Constantine the Great, said, among other things:

“If every [Sunday] Lord's day on account of the [Lord's] resurrection is to be kept in the joy of Christians, then every Sabbath day [on account] of the burial is to be estimated in execration of the Jews. For all the disciples of the Lord had a lamentation on the Sabbath, bewailing the buried Lord, and gladness [prevailed] for the exulting Jews. But for the fasting apostles sadness reigned. Let us [Christians], therefore, be sad with the saddened on account of the burial of the Lord, if we would rejoice with them on account of the resurrection of the Lord. For it is not proper that we should observe on account of Jewish custom, the subversions of the foods and ceremonies of the Jews.”

These and similar things having been said by St. Sylvester, this tradition of the apostolic see did not please some of the Easterners, but they choose rather to observe the Sabbath with the Jews.⁶⁹

Cardinal Humbert argued that the Christians from the East celebrate the Sabbath in a similar way as do the Jews (“why you have something in common with the Jews in a similar observance of the Sabbath?”; “They certainly observe the Sabbath, and you observe [it]”). He also states that the Jews and by analogy the Christians from the East “are idle and keep a holiday on the Sabbath, neither ploughing nor reaping, and by the reason of custom do not work.” Further, he explains the theological reasons why the Jews and the Christians from the East observe the Sabbath: observing “the precept of Moses,” most likely meaning the revelation given to humanity through the prophet Moses in the Pentateuch and more specifically the Ten Commandments, and (2) the fasting of the Orthodox Church on only one Sabbath during the year—the day when Christ was in the tomb and “the disciples were saddened and heavy (of heart) . . . on account of the death of the Lord.” Cardinal Humbert concludes that since the Christians from the East “observe the Sabbath with the Jews” and the Lord’s Day (Sunday) with the Latin church, they must be designated as a sect.

At least equally important, if not more so, is the response given by Patriarch Michael Cerularius, in which he states that Christians are “commanded also to honour the Sabbath equally with the [Sunday] the Lord’s [day], and to keep [it] and not to work on it.” Consequently, Cerularius does not deny the accusations made by Humbert, but argues that the Christians are “commanded,” probably meaning by biblical revelation and the apostolic tradition, to honour, worship, and not work on the Sabbath, even as on Sunday.

Summary and Conclusions

The dispute between Rome and Constantinople on the fasting on Sabbath was one of the most controversial theological issues between the two segments of Christianity, lasting for more than one thousand years. Although sometimes this theological quarrel is blurred with cultural and nonbiblical elements, one cannot but appreciate the resolve of the fathers of the Council of Trullo, Patriarch Photius, and Patriarch Cerularius to remain faithful to the tradition of the apostles and church fathers.

Five canons of the Synod in Trullo emphasize, in one way or another (four directly), the necessity for the Christian church to remain faithful to the truth about not fasting on Sabbath as expressed in the *Apostolic Constitutions*. The Sabbath, along with Sunday, was a day when Christians should assemble, sing psalms, and pray in the house of the Lord. On Sabbath, the slaves should rest from their labors, attend church, and listen to the preaching from the Holy Scriptures with the rest of the Christians. Finally, there should be no

⁶⁹Humbert, “Adversus Calumnias Graecorum,” (PL 143:936, 937); cited from Odom, 77-79.

fasting on Sabbath (or Sunday), because the Sabbath reminds us of the joy and delight of the creation of the world.

In the dispute between the East and the West on the subject of the ecclesiastical jurisdiction over the Church in Bulgaria, Patriarch Photius in his encyclical against Rome mentioned, in the first place, the fasting on Sabbath, that is, the decision of the Roman church to reject and disregard the *Apostolic Constitutions* and to pronounce the Sabbath a day of fasting. It means that the struggle to understand the mystery of the Sabbath is still there in the ninth century.

Finally, in the eleventh century, after the Great Schism in 1054, Patriarch Cerularius made a tremendous statement that Christians are “commanded to honour the Sabbath . . . to keep [it] and not to work on it.”⁷⁰ Unfortunately, the Eastern Orthodox Church did not follow the words of Patriarch Michael Cerularius. In the centuries to follow, little by little, Eastern Orthodoxy distanced itself in its understanding of the Sabbath from the *Apostolic Constitutions*, from the fathers assembled at the Synod of Trullo, and from Patriarchs Photius and Cerularius, and came ever closer to the Church of Rome’s understanding of the Sabbath.

⁷⁰Cerularius (PG 120:777, 778).