

The FRIENDS of the HOLY FATHER

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NEW PAPAL NUNCIO

Pope Francis appointed Spanish Archbishop Miguel Maury Buendía, as the new Apostolic Nuncio to Great Britain in April 2023.

He succeeded Archbishop Claudio Gugerotti who was appointed Prefect of the Dicastery for the Eastern Churches in November 2022 and who was recently made a Cardinal.

Archbishop Maury Buendía, has spent most of his working life in the diplomatic service of the Holy See and was made titular Archbishop of Italica in 2008. He has been Apostolic Nuncio to several countries, most recently to Romania and Moldova. His previous post as Nuncio was to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.



ON THE HISTORY OF SYNODS & SCHISMS

2024 will see the 970th anniversary of what is often called the ‘Great Schism’ of 1054 – the break between the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches. 2024 will also see the concluding phase of the Holy Father’s four year-long ‘Synod on Synodality’, which is intended to emphasise the collegial aspects of the Church, whereby both the college, or synod of Bishops, together with the laity, will take a more active role in the direction of the church. These two events are put together, not to scaremonger about possible threats of new schisms, but to highlight that, throughout the history of the Church, councils and synods have held the potential for renewing and re-energising the Church on earth, while also having the potential for future schisms, due to misunderstandings, politicking, and disagreements about the nature of that Church.

The so-called ‘Great Schism’ between east and west was not inevitable, and in fact a series of meetings between eastern and western Christians almost maintained unity, so any thoughts of an inevitable ‘Great Schism’ should be treated with some scepticism. It is through such meetings that Christians have the power to unite and deepen their understanding of God and each other.

It is worth stating at the outset the gospel basis for the theology of councils, and in particular the ecumenical councils, that is the councils that decide issues affecting the entire Christian world, known in the Greek as the *oecumene*. Matthew 18:20: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, I am there among them”, together with Mt 18:18, Mt 28:19-20, and Lk 22:19, form the basis for Jesus giving the apostles the power to teach, sanctify and govern the church.

From this Gospel basis, we then have St Paul in Romans 1:4 stating how the resurrection gave power both to the original apostles individually, and in a different form to their college. It is from this that the bishops, in succession to the apostles, retain this power. Acts 15 described the first assembly of apostles and elders in Jerusalem, which debated whether the gentiles should be circumcised and keep the law of Moses, that is the Jewish laws of purity. In this section of Acts, it is recorded that the assembly considered and debated the issue, and then they, “with the whole church”, sent a letter to the Gentiles, requiring only that they abstain

from food sacrificed to idols and from sexual immorality, as indeed such a message was the one revealed to them by the Holy Spirit.

However, as the church grew in both size and influence, so too politics began to creep in. This is evidenced by the 4th century Archbishop of Constantinople, St Gregory of Nazianzus, arguably one of the leading patristic writers, who opined that: “For my part, if I am to write the truth, my inclination is to avoid all assemblies of bishops, because I have never seen any Council come to a good end, nor turn out to be a solution for evil”. He referred to the fact that, though these early ecumenical councils established fundamental articles of belief for Christians, many of which we still recite in the creed every Sunday, they also alienated and divided the church. The 4th century Councils of Ephesus and Chalcedon in particular led to permanent schisms with the Coptic and Syriac Christians. St Nicholas of Myra, now often transposed into Santa Claus, was also infamous for supposedly punching the heretic Arius at the Council of Nicaea in 345. Though this incident is often raised in a light-hearted way, we should still be conscious of the atmosphere prevailing in the church which led to these revered bishops turning to fisticuffs.

With this background in mind, we come to the eleventh and twelfth century, where Christians in both the east and west had become increasingly aware of the huge number of issues which divided them theologically. With increased contact between the two groups brought about by the Crusades, it was first suggested by the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos and Patriarch Nicholas III of Constantinople, that a new ecumenical council be held to resolve these issues. This was made in a letter to Pope Urban II in 1089, inviting him to Constantinople for this purpose. Although we do not have a direct response from Pope Urban or his successors, from then on an increasing number of meetings, debates, councils (or indeed ‘synods’) ensued between east and west where these differences were debated.

The first major synod was held at Bari, in Southern Italy, in 1098 and began to address pressing theological questions. Even the great western theologian St Anselm of Canterbury was involved, demonstrating that the west was drawing on all Western Europe in the cause of engagement with the east. Emperor Alexios’ Norman rival, Bohemond of Taranto, also suggested an ecumenical council to Pope Pascal II in 1106 or 1108, as a way both to resolve these theological issues and adjudicate his disputes with Alexios, though neither made any real progress. In a letter from Pope Pascal to Alexios, the Pope summarised the impasse: he

insisted on recognition of papal primacy by the Patriarch of Constantinople before negotiations continued, whereas the east would only do so if they were sure of the orthodoxy of the west and that Rome did not intend to rule over them after such recognition. Still, efforts continued to be made. Peter of Grossolano, Archbishop of Milan, debated with seven eastern theologians in Constantinople in 1112, which led directly to further debates in the 1130s involving not only Constantinople, but also Rome and Merseberg in Germany, in the presence of Pope Innocent II and Emperor Lothar of Germany.

One specific debate held in a Latin Church in Constantinople in 1136 between Bishop Anselm of Havelberg and Bishop Niketas of Nikomedeia should be highlighted. The dramatic account of this debate teaches that when the two bishops tried to trick each other with traps of logic and contradictory precedents, they got nowhere. Whereas, when they approached each other in the spirit of Christian brotherhood, they made progress. This debate produced texts in both east and west, which continue to inform ecumenical debate between the two until today, especially regarding the accepted formula for differences in Communion and the differing forms of the creed. Only the issue of Papal primacy remained to be negotiated. Sadly, events overtook these debates as Byzantium became involved in multiple political coups before its capital was taken brutally by the army of the fourth crusade, and the west lost its unity through its own internal schisms.

Although there is much more that can be said about these events, we can take comfort from the desire of those who came before us, to try to fully unify Christians of all kinds, and to recognise that this must be done through council meetings. St Gregory of Nazianzus's opinion could certainly be considered as true today as it was in the 4th century. However, so too was the attitude shown by Bishops Niketas and Anselm, as our bishops attempt to deepen their understanding through the Holy Spirit, and for that understanding then to be promulgated to the church, by the Holy Father.

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[*Emperor John II Komnenos: Rebuilding New Rome 1118-1143*](#)