

## History is His Story

How is it that the Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches split?

The issue was prompted because of the inroads of Islam. Muslims conquered Syria and Palestine, North Africa and Egypt, then Iberia (Spain) by the early 700s. In that era Islam was tolerant, winning converts without proselytizing after an area had been conquered. A simple religion with easy self-justification, it appealed to many. Europe's Christians searched for answers; the Byzantine Empire searched to reclaim their territory. The Roman empire collapsed in the West but continued in Constantinople. There were 6 cities with patriarchs or mega-bishops who ruled over all of Christendom—Rome, Alexandria, Athens, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Constantinople. The Roman bishop or pope, claimed headship but the others did not accept this. Rome used Latin while Greek was used in the other domains.

Byzantine Emperor Leo III thought that a practice which had become popular but was not among early church practices was partly to blame. It was the idea of praying to pictures of martyrs, *icons*. In the West, the land had fallen under illiterate barbarians and church authorities thought it helpful if the new, illiterate converts would emulate the faith of the martyrs. But Leo thought this was an obstacle to evangelizing Jews and stemming Muslims. So in 726 he issued an edict for all paintings, statues and mosaics in churches to be destroyed. In Rome, Pope Gregory II disagreed and rejected this, as did John of Damascus and several later popes. However, Leo's successor, Constantine V continued in opposition to "icons". It was controversial. Those who venerated icons claimed you could feel the spirit of the departed pray with you. But as the East was desperately searching for ways to stop Islam, the West surprisingly turned back the invasion at the battle of Tours, 732, and felt exonerated in their views.

Emperor Constantine continued with his father's edict over veneration of icons. To gain ecclesiastical backing Constantine called a Synod at Hieria in 753. Only patriarchs of Athens and Constantinople attended. But there were 338 bishops from all over the world. They issued an opinion that images of Mary and the saints were idols. Many monks were thereupon killed for the sake of their venerated icons.

Then things got political. Franks, the eastern German tribal nation, had arisen as a strong force. Their king, Pepin, conquered the Lombards in northern Italy and donated their lands to Pope Stephen (which is how the papacy got into the business of ruling lands like kings). Pepin's donation set the stage for Pope Leo III to crown Pepin's son, Charlemagne, as Holy Roman Emperor in 800. (politics no longer works this way, you know) Charlemagne's kingdom claimed to be the New Rome. Meanwhile the veneration of icons gained widespread popularity and there was a backlash against the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Emperors. There was intense controversy, violent persecution and skirmishes on both sides. So the Second Council of Nicea was called. In this town, just east of Constantinople (Istanbul today), it was decided in 787 that icons could receive veneration but not adoration, which was reserved for God alone. You could pray along *with* a saint but not *to* the saint. Charlemagne defied the order but the Western Roman Popes thought they had won and it showed their authority over all Christians. Pope Nicholas I (862) put his nose in the patriarchal succession of Constantinople, choosing Ignatius over Photius. But Photius was popular and had begun evangelizing the Slavs with his pupils Cyril and Methodius. Photius managed to get Pope Nicholas deposed and get himself re-appointed patriarch. Then the next Emperor re-appointed Ignatius after a Constantiople Council in 869. Ignatius died and Photius resumed, then held another council of Constantinople in 879 to annul decisions of 869. Council of 869 is not recognized as an ecumenical council by the Orthodox to this day. (Is the reader confused yet? )

Differences in language, doctrine and authority stewed, then came to a head when Leo IX became pope in 1048. Leo was a reformer and had several issues including simony (buying benefits of the church) and marriage of priests. He established a new office, Cardinal, which made princes out of what were formerly papal advisors. And he demanded loyalty to Rome and his Cardinals. The East choked. They strongly believed church councils should hold final authority, not a Pope and his dominion. The two bodies split in 1054 after 3 centuries of bickering over icons, Byzantine emperors, and church polity. Had Popes given thought, there might have been a later Reformation of much lesser extent.