

The Case of Nestorius

The following texts can be found in their original Latin and Greek in the *Patrologia Latina* among the letters and decrees of Pope St. Celestine I and of Xystus III:

<https://www.mlat.uzh.ch/index.php?app=browser>

The deposition of Nestorius by the council of Ephesus can be found in *Mansi*, vol. IV, col. 1211; and the other letters of the council in columns 1227 and 1242:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=njp.32101078252085&view=1up&seq=587&skin=2021>

The whole collection of Church councils is available here: <http://patristica.net/mansi>

English translation my own (Fr. MacGillivray).

Letter 8: St. Cyril of Alexandria to Pope Celestine

(...) At Constantinople, there was a bishop by the name of Dorotheus, who thought the same things as Nestorius; he was accustomed to flatter others in order to profit from them; and he was prompt with his tongue, even unto wrecklessness (as it is written). He, in a public gathering, while the most reverend Nestorius was sitting on the episcopal throne of the church of Constantinople, stood up and dared to cry out in a loud voice: “If anyone say that Mary is the mother of God, let him be anathema.” The whole people broke into an uproar and departed, for they did not wish to have communion any longer with those who thought such things. Even now the people of Constantinople refuses to gather [with him for liturgical celebration], aside from a few persons known for levity, who flatter him; and almost all the monasteries with their abbots, and many senators refuse to convene there, fearing lest they suffer any detriment to their faith, since both he and all those whom he has brought with him from Antioch preach perverse things. (...)

He fights against me, then, as an enemy, although he has nothing to accuse me of, except that I abhor what he thinks and have restored many [of his followers] to a sound mind, earnestly exhorting them to embrace the faith that we have received from the Fathers and learned from the divine Scriptures. Nevertheless, setting at naught all that he as machinated against me, and committing everything to God, who knows all things and is able to do all things, I have written a second letter to him, which contained, in the manner of a brief summary, an exposition of the orthodox faith, exhorting and admonishing him lest he think and speak otherwise. But yet again I accomplished nothing. For even to the present time he still adheres pertinaciously to what he originally devised, nor does he cease to teach perversities.

And let your Holiness know this, that the things that I have said apply to all the bishops of the East—that is, they are all outraged and grieve, especially the most reverend bishops of

Macedonia. And although [Nestorius] knows this perfectly well, he thinks that he is wiser than all, that he alone has attained to the right understanding of the divinely inspired Scripture, and that he alone has known the mystery of Christ. But how should he not rather have held it for certain that, since all the orthodox bishops and laity throughout the whole world confess that Christ is God, and that the Virgin who bore Him is the mother of God, he himself is the one who errs in denying this? But, swollen with pride, and abusing the power of his see in order to ensnare everyone, he thinks that he will make both ourselves and all the others subscribe to his opinion.

What, then, shall we do, since we can neither induce him to come back to his senses nor persuade him to abstain from giving such sermons? And the people of Constantinople are corrupted more and more day by day, even though they are not happy with what is going on and await the help of orthodox teachers. (...) But we do not plainly and openly separate ourselves from his communion before indicating these things to your Holiness. Deign, therefore, to declare to us what seems good to You, and tell us whether we should be in communion with him for some time, or whether we can freely declare that no one should be in communion with one who thinks and teaches such things. For it is necessary that the decision of your Holiness on this matter be manifested in writing, both to the most beloved of God and most loving bishops of Macedonia, and also to all the prelates of the East. For [thus] we will give them the help that they desire, in order that they may persist with one mind in the same belief and bring aid to the orthodox faith that is under attack. (...)

Letter 11: Pope Celestine to St. Cyril of Alexandria

(...) Christ our God, against Whom the question of His own Nativity is raised, taught us to labor for one sheep, wishing it to be brought back even on one's own shoulders, lest it lie open to become the prey of a ravenous wolf. And He who taught us to hasten to protect one sheep, how does He want us to labor for the pastor of those sheep, who, forgetting his office and title, has taken on the rapacity of a wolf, desiring to destroy the flock which he ought to guard? If we cannot correct him as we would like to, we must remove him from the sheepfold. Let there be hope of pardon to him if he corrects himself; for we prefer that he be converted and live, if only he not destroy the life of those committed to him. Let the sentence be made clear to him, if he persist: for such a wound, by which, not one member, but the whole body of the Church is hurt, must be cut off. (...)

Unless he do this, let your Holiness know, who are about to provide for that Church, that he is by all means to be removed from our body, who did not wish to allow those who would heal him to administer this care to him, but, as a disease-carrying agent, wickedly hastened to his own perdition and that of all those entrusted to him (...)

Letter 13: Pope Celestine to Nestorius

In your letters [to Us] you have made plain the sentence, not so much concerning our Faith, as concerning your own self, since you wish to preach as the word of God something other than that which the Faith of all contains. Behold now what sentence we are obliged to give you; behold the fruits of your novelties. (...) Or will you say to our Lord, "I kept those whom you entrusted to me," when We hear that His Church is torn apart? With what conscience are you living, being deserted by nearly everyone in this city? (...) What words can We address you with, in these questions which are blasphemous even to consider? How does it happen that a bishop preaches to the people words which damage the reverence owed to the Virgin Birth? It is not right, that blasphemous words against God should trouble the purity of the ancient Faith.

Was there ever anyone who, adding to or subtracting something from the Faith, was not judged worthy of anathema? For those things which were completely and manifestly handed down to us by the Apostles do not call for addition or subtraction. (...) Hence, we prepare the heated iron to cauterize these wounds, which, because they merit to be cut off, shall no longer be tolerated. (...) Among the many things which you have wickedly proclaimed, and which the universal Church repudiates, we lament the fact that, from the Creed given to us by the Apostles, you have withdrawn the very words which give us the hope of all life and salvation. Why that is so, your own epistles unfold, concerning which there is no doubt that you yourself sent them, and which We were reluctant to take into our hands, lest We be forced to pass judgment on so great a crime. (...)

Therefore, although our brother Cyril asserts that he has already addressed you with a second letter, I want you to understand, after his first and second correction, and this of ours (which already amounts to three), that you have been completely cut off from the whole college and congregation of Christians, unless you quickly correct the things that have been badly said, and unless you return to that Way which Christ testifies Himself to be (Jn 14:6). (...)

Know plainly, then, that this is Our sentence: that, unless you preach concerning God our Christ what the church of Rome, and of Alexandria, and the whole Catholic Church holds—even as the most holy church of the city of Constantinople held perfectly up until you—and, with a clear written profession, given within ten days, which are to be numbered from the day on which you receive notice of this, you repudiate this perfidious novelty, which strives to separate what the venerable Scripture joins; you are cast off from the communion of the universal Catholic Church.

Letter 14: Pope Celestine to the Clergy of Constantinople

(...) Where is the due care of the pastor for his holy flock? Where is his solicitude for the Lord's sheepfold? What hope is there for the flock, when its very pastor shows himself to be a wolf, and so invades the sheep that he attacks each of them? For he tears them apart with his mouth,

which utters impious things. He provides fodder that is not nourishing, but noxious. But blessed is the flock to whom the Lord has given the ability to discern where to graze.

Hence (as we do not doubt that you already do) your faith ought to reject his impious disputations with horror, so that, being vigilant in Christ, you may be certain of how to discern what is food and what is poison. Remain constant in the things that you have learned from the mouths of your previous pastors, knowing that hitherto you have had priests endowed with learning and holiness, who, never deviating from the traditions of our fathers, ruled the Church of the Lord with the greatest tranquillity. (...)

He not only fails to treat the wounded, but wounds those who have been given care; he not only fails to lift up those who have fallen, but even tries to strike down those who are standing; he not only fails to gather what has been dispersed, but scatters that which has been gathered. Nevertheless, the mind dedicated to God cannot be crushed, nor can he that stands with heavenly virtue be struck down, nor can the holy crowd be dispersed. (...)

Once upon a time, Paul of Samosata raised a sacrilegious question, when he presided over the holy Church of Antioch; but the united sentence of Catholic priests cast him down from the see over which he had presided like a wild beast. For these sort are always to be cut off who, troubling the mind of the Christian people, and overturning the Gospels in favor of their own private judgment, cannot bear fruit before God. (...)

But you must watch the more diligently, that you may resist the enemy's preaching; for there is greater reason to worry about you when things contrary to the Church are spoken to you within the Church. Let them take their rest whom the adversary attacks from without; dispersed along the ramparts, they defend themselves from the safety of their walls. They know no rest who have an enemy in their midst. But in this internal war, in this domestic battle, let your faith be to you as a wall; and let it defend itself against perfidy with spiritual lances. Let us keep the faith; for, if it is kept intact, it will keep us intact. (...)

The impious disputor has been deserted by the Holy Ghost, since he has formed opinions contrary to the same Spirit. Deservedly, if he persists, he will hear from us the words of Samuel, which he, the priest, once spoke to Saul: "The Lord will reject you so that you no longer rule over Israel" (1 Kings 15:25). (...)

Whoever among you have been ejected from the church [by Nestorius] have the example of the blessed and still recent memory of Athanasius of the church of Alexandria, a most prudent priest. Who does not derive some consolation from considering what he endured? Who cannot take him as a model of fortitude? Who does not derive hope from his long-expected return? (...) Hence, no Christian ought to lament it when a temporal exile is inflicted on him, for none of them is an exile from God. Let us only fear lest we be exiles from the land of the living, that is, the land that we wish to be our fatherland. (...) Nevertheless, lest his sentence seem to carry

weight even for a time, who had already called forth a divine sentence against himself, the authority of our See has openly sanctioned that no one, whether a bishop, a cleric, or a Christian of any profession, who has been expelled from his place or excommunicated by Nestorius or his partners, from the time that they began to preach such things, should seem to be expelled or excommunicated; for all of these both were and have remained in Our communion even until now; for he who was wavering by preaching such things was unable to expell or remove anyone.

Our present exhortation, therefore, embraces all of you in common, that, being strengthened more and more, and confiding in the Lord, you may not be moved, but may even heal the infirmities of others. For now We recommend to you the weak, where even the doctor himself seems to be sick—and yet we wish to help him if we still can. (...) But that you may know under what definition we have written to him, we have annexed the sentence to this letter, that you may know what formula has been devised for him. (...)

Letter 16: Pope Celestine to St. Cyril of Alexandria

(...) Now, you ask whether the holy Synod ought to receive the man, provided that he condemn what he has preached, or whether, because the time that he was given [to renounce his errors] has already elapsed, the sentence [of excommunication] that was already issued remains in force. On these matters, let us both consult our common Lord together. Will He not respond to us immediately, saying through the prophet that He does not will the death of the one that dies (Ez. 18:32), and saying through the Apostle Paul that He wishes every man to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4)? It is never displeasing to God that we hasten someone's conversion. Let this be the concern of your holiness, with the venerable counsel of your brethren: that the discord that has arisen in the Church be suppressed, and that We may learn that, with the help of God, an end has been put to the affair by the voluntary correction [of the guilty one].

(...) I am solicitous for the peace of the Church, I am solicitous for the salvation of him who is perishing, if only he be willing to admit that he is ill. And we say this, lest we perhaps seem to be lacking to one who is willing to correct himself. For if, when we hold out to him a grape, he adds to himself thorns (Is. 5:2), then let him be filled with the fruit of his own judgment, and what was decided previously shall remain in force; let him gather up what he has sowed diabolically, for he will perish, not by our counsel, but by his own doing. Let him receive proof that we do not have feet swift to shed blood (Ps. 13:3), when he learns that a remedy is still offered to him. (...)

Deposition of Nestorius by the Council of Ephesus

This holy Synod has said: Since, besides other things, the most wicked Nestorius has wished, neither to obey our summons, nor to admit the most holy and religious bishops sent by us, we

could not do otherwise than give our attention to an examination of what he impiously taught. Determining therefore—partly from his letters and commentaries, partly from the sermons which he gave most recently gave in this metropolis of Ephesus, and which have been certified by testimonies—that he thinks and preaches impiously; being compelled by the sacred canons and the letter of our most holy Father and fellow minister Celestine, the Bishop of the Roman Church; shedding tears, we come of necessity to this lugubrious sentence against him:

Therefore, our Lord Jesus Christ, Whom he attacked by his blasphemous words, defines, by this most holy Synod, that the same Nestorius is deprived of his episcopal dignity and is a stranger to the universal consort and fellowship of priests.

The Sentence of Deposition Sent to Nestorius on the Day after his Condemnation

The holy Synod gathered together by the grace of God, in accordance with the decree of our most religious and Christian emperors, in the metropolitan city of Ephesus: to Nestorius the new Judas.

Know that, on the twenty-second day of this present month of June, you, because of your impious preaching and your contumacious resistance to the canons, have been deposed by this holy Synod according to the decrees of the ecclesiastical sanctions; and you are disassociated from every ecclesiastical dignity.

Letter to Eucharis and the Clergy of Constantinople Sent by the Council on the Same Day

(...) Let it be known to your Reverence that yesterday, which was the twenty-second of the present month of June, the blasphemous Nestorius, because of his impious preaching and his contumacious resistance to the ecclesiastical canons, was deposed by this holy Synod and removed from all ecclesiastical dignity in accordance with the ecclesiastical sanctions. Keep watch, therefore, over all the things that pertain to your church, since you will have to render an account of them to the one who, by the will of God and the wish of our most pious and religious emperors, will be ordained the bishop of the church of Constantiople.

Letter to the Clergy and People of Constantinople

The holy Synod writes to the most religious clergy and people of Constantinople:

No one who dares to oppose his Creator escapes the divine vengeance, but (to the extent that man's observations have been able to reach) God quickly metes out some part of his punishment—though certainly a fuller retribution awaits him in the world to come. Wherefore also Nestorius, the author of an impious heresy, when he had come into the city of Ephesus, in

which John the Theologian and Holy Mary the Mother of God [once dwelt], withdrawing himself of his own accord from the gathering of the holy fathers and bishops, when he did not dare to come after three summons, being impeded by the guilt of his bad conscience, was condemned by the just sentence of the Holy Trinity and the divine judgment of the fathers, and was deprived of all sacerdotal dignity; and his condemnation and dismissal from office [*exauctoratio*: etymologically, “loss of authority”] were committed to writing and recorded in the minutes of the session. Rejoice, therefore, in the Lord always; again, I say, rejoice; for the stumbling-block has now been taken away, and the cockle has been uprooted from the field of spiritual cultivation. Be strengthened; and, taking up the shield of faith, expell forthwith the workers who proclaim wicked and profane novelties. Nor, indeed, will you receive a lesser reward than those who have labored here [at Ephesus]. Your sincere brethren who are with us in this place salute all of you in the Lord.

Letter of St. Cyril of to the Clergy and People of Alexandria

(...) Know, therefore, that a holy Synod convened in the great church of the city of Ephesus, which is called [the church of] Mary the Mother of God, on the twenty-eighth day of the month of *Pauni*. When the whole day had been spent there, we at last condemned Nestorius, who had not even dared to come to the holy Synod, and subjected him to the sentence of deposition, and removed him from the episcopal dignity; and the bishops who had gathered were about two hundred, more or less; and the entire city populus, from dawn to dusk, awaited the judgment of the holy Synod. As soon as it was heard that that author of blasphemies had been deprived of his dignity, all began to praise the holy Synod with one voice, and to glorify God because this enemy of the faith had been laid low. When we emerged from the church, they went so far as to accompany us with torches from that point all the way to the inn: for it was evening: and there was much joy everywhere, and many luminaries were lit, and there were even women who went before us with thuribles. (...)

Sermon of St. Cyril of Alexandria after the Council

(...) You, blinded and infatuated with folly in this blasphemous undertaking, and wishing to alienate yourself from your episcopal see, have blotted yourself out of the register of your brothers, not acknowledging Him who had given you your share in the episcopate. (...) Thinking that you could have dominion over all the churches, you became oblivious of the One who had lifted you out of the dung and carried you up to your heavenly sublimity, (...) insulting the temple of God and wishing to divide Him who was born of the virgin Mary. (...) While you blasphemed God, you were not content with destroying yourself, but you spread your blasphemies throughout the whole world. But behold this saying, too, has been fulfilled in you: “The sinner has been trapped by the works of his own hands.” Because the holy clergy of priests and deacons rebuked you for your insolent madness, and admonished you not to

resemble Arius in your thinking, you threw them out of the church. And now, indeed, seeing that you are fallen, I do not cast you down; and seeing you tossing about on the waves I do not submerge you; but I break the insanity of your wicked counsels. Who has seen a ship suffer shipwreck in a serene and tranquil harbor? Who, I ask, has ever seen an athlete, fallen flat on his face in the arena, who was not lifted back up? But when you fell from the faith and suffered shipwreck, did we not stretch out our hands to help you? Take as a witness of this the honorable and holy Archbishop of great Rome, Celestine, who by his letters sedulously admonished you to withdraw from this vain and useless doctrine, which has no reasonable foundation. Likewise, take as a witness our own insignificant self, for with brief letters I exhorted you to listen to what I had to say to you about God. But you, putting on a certain obduracy and foolishness, did not take our words into consideration at all, glorying in your own malice as one who is powerful and devises wicked things. And you have become a sharp razor directed against yourself, machinating guile. And therefore God, whom you have scorned, has cast you down, and has uprooted you from the land of the living, because you had had no consideration for Him. (...)

First Letter of Pope Xystus III: to the Bishops of the East

(...) But our holy brother and fellow bishop, the prelate of the church of Alexandria, showing in what manner and how greatly he cares for the faith, and contemning the insults that he suffered gloriously in imitation of the Apostle (2 Cor. 12:9), rather desires that order be restored to the churches, than that he himself be avenged. And without delay he asks that a safe harbor be provided for those who are still suffering from shipwreck, being content with the death of one alone, who, because he seemed in his inexperience to be learned, won for himself the office of governing the Lord's ship; but he who did not know how to teach could not long remain in his see. Let him, then, be the only victim of shipwreck, who, seeing nothing in the utter darkness of his own doctrines, was caught up in a wave of impiety and dashed against the rock of deposition. One tempest, it is true, engulfed them all; but now that Nestorius its author has been submerged, [Cyril] wants the rest to be healed. We, therefore, are of the same opinion. For he offers to be merciful to those who will cease to offend God with their impious conduct. Hence, let those who want to return to the straight path be received. Of them it is not necessary to speak much, for these few things suffice. Let them know that we will claim possession of the churches occupied by them, unless they look to their own interests and agree to believe the same things as we believe. But of John of Antioch we command those things to be observed that have already been written in the letter sent previously; let him know that he will be one of us Catholics if, rejecting all the teachings that were rejected by the Synod, he show himself to be a Catholic priest. (...)