

The East-West Split

Looking back over the first 1500 years of Church history, the picture is not one of perfect harmony. Political conflicts, religious controversies, invasions, and condemnations created sometimes occasional, sometimes lasting rifts. For the Eastern Church and the Latin Church, the rift developed over time and proved to be enduring, lasting to this day. Let's take a look at how the split between East and West developed.

Early Differences

The divergent directions between the Latin Church of the West and Orthodox Church in the East began in gradual ways, and without outward conflict.

Language Differences

Throughout the Church's early history, people in individual areas spoke their own languages but wrote things in common languages: Greek in the East and Latin in the West. This had always been something of a problem, but as the gap grew greater and travel became more difficult because of the threat of invaders and marauders, it became less common for scholars of either area to read the language of the other. This meant that East and West were not sharing learning and ideas related to the faith, politics, and other disciplines.

Political Differences

As we have seen, the Empire prospered in the East but collapsed in the West. While the Emperor remained strong in the East, the lack of a stronger secular leader in the West eventually forced the Pope to assume that role and fill that void. Thus in the West the Pope became a *de facto*. When Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800, people in the East saw this as an attempt to take the throne that rightfully belonged to their own emperor.

Divergent Doctrine

Eastern theologians talked about Christ giving humans a way to become divine once again, while Western scholars taught of a Christ who saved humanity from the consequences of their sins. This and other differences led the Eastern and Western Churches to different conclusions about whether priests could marry, when Christians should fast, what sort of bread (leavened or unleavened) should be used in the Eucharist, how the liturgy should be celebrated, and numerous other matters. Even more important was the very different understanding of where authority should rest in the Church. In the West the Pope was accepted as the head of the whole Church, with authority over all matters within it, while the East saw the Pope simply as first among equals among the ancient patriarchal sees. The East has always believed that the Church's highest authority lay in the works of councils, not in the decrees of popes or patriarchs.



Deeper Rifts

Although the Eastern and Western parts of the Church had begun to lose much of their common ground gradually, a few big controversies brought the split to the point of no return.

Iconoclasm

The Iconoclasm controversy centered over whether it is wrong to make any art that portrays God or humans, a position called *iconoclasm*. That was the stance taken by Emperor Leo III in 726. He ordered all churches in the Empire to get rid of icons, saying that people were worshipping these pictures rather than understanding them as signs of the divine. Leo also thought having icons in churches hurt efforts to convert Jews and Muslims, both of whom believe that using “graven images” is against God’s commandments.

The next year, Pope Gregory II called a synod that denounced iconoclasm. This was more than just a fight about art: Gregory and others like him thought that icons actually helped people understand the Incarnation properly—there is no way to represent God eternal, but Christ made himself visible when he took human form, and icons help us remember that. Those on this side of the argument, called *iconodules*, thought the iconoclasts were moving dangerously close to thinking that things of the spirit are good but that things of matter (like icons) are bad.

Angered at Gregory’s position, Emperor Leo confiscated papal estates in Italy and Sicily and took some archbishoprics that had previously been under the jurisdiction of the Pope and placed them under the Patriarch of Constantinople. In effect, Rome was cut off from the Empire and the Eastern Church, and after this, popes who needed political help knew they could not turn to the East to get it.

Iconoclasm continued as a policy in the Empire until 780, when the Empress Irene put a stop to it. Just thirty-five years later, Emperor Leo V renewed the attack on icons, but in 843, another empress ordered the return of icons to the churches, and this time they stayed. This final victory over iconoclasm is celebrated in the Orthodox Churches on the first Sunday of Lent as the “Triumph of Orthodoxy.”

The *Filioque*

One thing you will not see in a Latin translation of the original Nicene Creed, in the section where it talks about the Holy Spirit, is the Latin word *filioque*, meaning “and the Son.” Instead, the Creed just says that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father. *Filioque* was added to the Creed in the sixth century as a protection against Arianism. The *filioque* puts the Son on a level with the Father, which is exactly what Arians rejected. The Creed with *filioque* became the form popular throughout France and Spain, and the form known to Charlemagne. In 792, he sent a letter to the Pope charging, among other things, that the emperor in Constantinople was a heretic because he said that only the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Father. In other words, Charlemagne called the emperor and the Eastern Church heretics for continuing to use the Nicene Creed as originally written—something the Eastern Church still does to this day.

The Pope did not use the *filioque* either, however. Popes Hadrian (772–795) and Leo III (795–816) thought that Charlemagne had the right idea but did not want to change the wording of the original creed. The *filioque* did not become part of the Roman liturgy until 1014, when the German Emperor Henry II came to Rome to be crowned by Pope Benedict VII and asked the Pope to use the liturgy common in Germany, which included the *filioque*. Five years earlier, though, Pope Sergius IV had sent a statement of faith to



Constantinople that included the *filioque*, so it had already been accepted, although it was not used in the Mass.

The Eastern part of the Church had a number of objections to adding the *filioque*. First, they did not think it was theologically sound: They saw the Father as sending both Son and Spirit into the world, and changing that [wording] gives a different understanding of how God works. Second, they thought that since the Creed belongs to the whole Church, the West was wrong to make this kind of change on its own. Finally, Church councils had clearly stated that the Creed was not to be altered, so the East was displeased that the West in general and the Pope in particular thought they could override this. The *filioque* controversy solidified the Eastern Church's belief that the Roman bishop was trying to overstep his authority.

The Great Schism

The decisive split between the two Churches occurred in 1054. The two Churches accepted the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, as the successor of Saint Peter. In the eleventh century, the Pope began to declare and assert authority over the whole Church, including the Eastern Church. The Patriarch of Constantinople felt that the Pope had taken his authority too far. After an attempt at diplomacy failed, Patriarch Cerularius closed all Latin churches in Constantinople, excommunicated all priests who continued to follow the Latin tradition, and halted the use of the *filioque* in the Nicene Creed. When the Pope sent an envoy to Constantinople to demand Cerularius's submission to the Pope, Cerularius refused. The envoy excommunicated Cerularius, and Cerularius in turn excommunicated the Pope. The Christian world was now divided into the Latin Church and the Orthodox, or Greek, Church.

Eastern Orthodox Christianity Today

Today we talk about Eastern Orthodox Christianity as if it were one Church, but really this is a name given to a number of national churches that share basic beliefs and traditions. Russian, Greek, Romanian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Albanian—these nationalities and many more are represented within the Eastern Orthodox Churches.

Those who are Orthodox often call their communion “The Church of the Seven Councils” because they look to the first seven ecumenical councils as the foundation for their beliefs. In these councils, they believe, the Holy Spirit guided imperfect people to a perfect understanding of Christian faith. The Catholic Church agrees, but Catholics also see this process continuing in later councils.

The various Orthodox Churches use different languages in their liturgies and have some differences in their practices and calendars, but the beliefs they share bind them together. Each is self-governing and falls under the authority of one of the ancient patriarchates, but they share a high regard for the Patriarch of Constantinople. The Patriarch is not an Orthodox equivalent of the Pope, though; he has certain rights and privileges that the other patriarchs do not share, but he is not understood to have supreme authority in the Orthodox Church, nor is he likely to ever get it because the issue of the Pope's authority remains a critical one in the separation of the Catholic and Orthodox Churches.

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