

The Chalcedonian and Non-Chalcedonian Churches: An Objective Presentation

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In this article, I address a sensitive issue that has been raised in various circles within our Archdiocese. I have received several questions during my pastoral visits or via email regarding the Oriental Orthodox churches (non-Chalcedonian), in general, and the Coptic Church, in particular. Many people are confused due to the lack of accurate and official information on the one hand, and the abundance of conflicting information now available on the internet through its various platforms on the other hand. The digital platforms have opened the possibility for everyone to present their own views as though they were the official church position.

I aim to offer a quick but accurate overview of what happened in the fifth century, leading up to the current reality, to provide accurate information for the faithful.

First, I tell my spiritual children that speaking about theology requires not only goodwill but also scientific and objective theological knowledge, as well as the ability to express oneself accurately, with precision in the use of terms and expressions. Additionally, humility is essential, enabling the speaker to be open to the Holy Spirit for inspiration in every word spoken. The speaker should not monopolize the Church's stance as his own, whether he is a cleric, monk, layperson, or even a theologian. This approach prevents him from assuming the role of God by distributing entry tickets to the Kingdom of Heaven, thus assuming a divine role. May God protect us from such a slip.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council convened in the city of Chalcedon (in modern-day Turkey) in 451 A.D. to resolve the issue of the Person of Christ, which at that time was a source of controversy, confusion, and misguided interpretations. This council defined the official Christian doctrine that Christ is a person (*hypostasis*) with the fullness of both divine and human natures. In simpler terms, He is one person: fully God and fully human.

The council's statement of faith included the following: "We confess the one and same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, the same perfect in divinity, and perfect in humanity, truly God and truly man, of rational soul and body, consubstantial with

the Father regarding His divinity, and consubstantial with us regarding His humanity, like us in all respects except for sin...

“One and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, acknowledged in two natures which undergo no confusion, no change, no division, no separation; at no point was the difference between the natures taken away through the union, but rather the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being; He is not parted or divided into two persons, but the one and the same only-begotten Son, God, Word, Lord Jesus Christ, just as the prophets taught from the beginning about Him, and as the Lord Jesus Christ Himself instructed us, and as the Creed of the Fathers handed it down to us.”

The churches now referred to as the Oriental Orthodox (Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian, and Armenian) refused to accept the Fourth Ecumenical Council, also known as the Chalcedonian Council, leading to what is considered the first schism in the Christian world. These churches rejected the teaching of two natures in Christ. They adhere to the belief in one incarnate nature. The Copts accept “one nature from two,” but reject the formulation of one person (hypostasis) in two natures.

The Holy Fathers distinguished between the terms hypostasis (person) and physis (nature). The Chalcedonian Fathers intentionally made this distinction to unify how these terms are used Christologically and Triadologically, that is, to have one unified dogmatic terminology. When the Orthodox say, together with the council, that Christ is one person in two natures, they mean one person with a fully divine nature and a fully human nature. (This expression is harmonious with the Church’s faith that the Holy Trinity is in three persons and one nature.)

The non-Chalcedonians, however, interpret the word "nature" to mean both "person" and "nature" at the same time, insisting on "one nature (physis) from two natures (physis). They use “nature” twice, each time meaning something different. The first time "nature" is mentioned in this phrase (one nature), the intention is to say, "one person," while the second time it is mentioned (from two natures), here the meaning is actually "nature," that is to say, a full divine nature and a full human nature. This is why they have been called Monophysites (believers in one nature), a term they reject today, but they affirm both the full divinity and full humanity of Christ.

Although early non-Chalcedonian theologians, such as Severus of Antioch, wrote in Greek, some hold the view that these churches broke away from the Greek-speaking world after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in the East.

A common view holds that the difference in terminology between the Greek language, which carries a rich philosophical heritage, and the local languages of the time played a significant role in this misunderstanding. Additionally, many scholars believe that there were other factors behind the schism, including some with a nationalistic dimension, which also contributed to this doctrinal division.¹

Whatever the reasons that fueled this schism², the primary factor remains doctrinal. The churches separated after the Fourth Ecumenical Council for centuries, sometimes engaging in conflicts, and leading separate lives. Over the centuries, each church developed its own spiritual heritage, unrecognized by the other, further entrenching the division.

In the twentieth century, a wave of dialogue emerged worldwide. Theological dialogue committees began informal discussions between the Eastern and Oriental churches from 1964 until 1971, presenting the results of their findings to their respective churches. When we say, "informal dialogue," we mean discussions conducted with the churches' approval, but with non-binding results. Each delegation takes the final resolution, which includes the dialogue's conclusions, to its church, where it is studied and either adopted or rejected, depending on its compatibility with the church's teachings. Joint dialogue meetings have concluded that the problem lies in the difference in terminology, which remains today. According to theologians who participated in these dialogues, the issue is primarily linguistic.

One drawback of these theological dialogues is that they remained at the theological level without involving the faithful or sharing the results with them, leading to the emergence of two factions among the faithful in both Churches which rejected these conclusions, considering them to be an oversimplification driven by impure motives, which rekindled controversy and debate. Consequently,

¹ Gregorios, Paulos Mar, William Henry Lazareth and Nikos A. Nissiotis. "Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite? Towards Convergence in Orthodox Christology." (1981)

² Some scholars believe that this schism had political motives. I chose not to discuss these.

not all churches have officially adopted a doctrinal statement embracing this interpretation.

However, relations began to improve on other levels, with official visits, participation in theological conferences, and the enrollment of students from non-Chalcedonian churches in theological studies or advanced theological programs in Greece, Russia and the United States, and in certain Orthodox institutes. The coexistence of Coptic, Armenian, and Syriac Churches with the Orthodox Churches in the East, facing shared existential and missionary challenges, has increased opportunities for mutual encounter in daily life.

While the churches have encouraged fraternal relations, the sharing of the Eucharist and the other sacraments has not been established between them.

Today, relations between the two sides are characterized by brotherhood, meeting in love while preserving the faith as each church understands it, striving to highlight points of convergence in the hope of reaching unified expression and overcoming the historical elements that have deepened the separation.