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The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils Peter L'Huillier

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PETER L'HUILLIER. *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils*. Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1996. xii; 340 pp. Index. Paperback, \$19.95.

Reviewed by Carl W. Griffin

Following apostolic precedent (Acts 15), Christian leaders from early times convened local councils and synods to discuss and resolve ecclesiastical problems. When Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire in the fourth century, ecclesiastical issues became problems of state that could affect the peace of the entire empire. The Emperor Constantine convened the first ecumenical (or universal) council to address one such set of problems, and succeeding emperors would do the same to resolve other problems. The first four ecumenical councils came to have a particular authority: Nicea (A.D. 325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431), and Chalcedon (451).

The work of the councils was twofold. Matters of faith and doctrine were always of predominant concern, and doctrinal definitions were issued as creeds, or "symbols" of faith. But the councils also discussed issues of church discipline and organization, judgments on which were issued as canons, or "rules of conduct." Collections of these canons, such as the Roman Catholic Church's Code of Canon Law, are analogous to the LDS Church's *Church Handbook of Instructions*, though much larger and broader in scope. Most of the very numerous scholarly works on the first four ecumenical councils focus on their theological projects and the controversies surrounding them. This book departs from the norm by focusing instead on their canonical legislation.

Peter L'Huillier is archbishop of the New York and New Jersey diocese of the Orthodox Church of America and adjunct professor of canon law at St. Vladimir's Theological Seminary. He originally composed this work in French some twenty years ago and translated it into Russian for submission as a doctoral thesis in canon law at the Theological Academy of Moscow. This second translation, into English, is substantially unrevised in content. Following a brief introduction, the author treats the four councils in chronological order, first discussing the history and circumstances of their convocations, then providing an English translation of and commentary on each of the canons. L'Huillier, as an Orthodox canonist, is naturally interested in the interpretation of the conciliar legislation within Eastern Orthodox canon law. His introduction provides a historical conspectus of the subject, and his commentary, when it deals with the broader history of interpretation, is largely confined to the Orthodox tradition. Such discussion is valuable and interesting (and rare in an English-language

publication) though perhaps not of general interest. But the author's primary aim is to provide a careful grammatical and historical exegesis of the texts, focusing on the life situation (*Sitz-im-Leben*) and intentions of the original legislators. This he accomplishes admirably. Such analysis is valuable to church historians because canonical legislation is a critical source of information on ecclesiology, church discipline, and even social life.

By way of example, the third canon of Nicea "absolutely forbids any bishop, priest, deacon, or any other member of the clergy to have a woman living with him, unless she is a mother, a sister, an aunt, or any other woman completely above suspicion" (34). This canon is directed towards the practice of clergy cohabiting chastely with virgins. These women were taken in (thus their Latin epithet *subintroductae*) for their work as housekeepers as well as for their own maintenance and protection since the church was obliged to provide for a large number of widows and consecrated virgins. In some cases, the union was maintained to challenge ascetic virtue. Opponents charged that the motivation was often, in fact, carnal, even if not adulterous, and that in any case the practice gave cause for suspicion. L'Huillier notes both previous and subsequent legislation on the practice, indicating that it was persistent, and also argues that this legislation in no way implies mandatory clerical celibacy, as some would apparently read into the omission of a wife as a licit female companion. His concern on this point perhaps betrays his own confessional stance (with which Latter-day Saints would agree), but his assessment is doubtless correct.

The second canon of Chalcedon also addresses clerical regulation and reform, in this case the sale of church offices. This canon was enacted at the request of the Emperor Marcian (a relevant detail L'Huillier omits) to combat what had for some time been a widespread abuse. While one certainly might profit from office in one of the wealthier sees, many men would purchase a clerical appointment either to avoid military service, which was hereditary, or to escape the heavy taxation and compulsory community service that was the onus of landowners. As one of his first benefactions upon conversion, Constantine granted clerics and their families exemptions from such, but alarmed at the response, he attempted (and failed) to stem the flood of soldiers and landowners fleeing into holy orders. By the time of the Council of Chalcedon, the problem was critical. While naturally silent about the West, Pope Gregory the Great (died 604) would quip: "In the churches of the East, no one attains holy orders except through bribery" (217, reviewer's translation). L'Huillier briefly documents the persistence of simony, or the purchase or sale of religious offices, up to the present, as revealed particularly in the repeated enactment of this canon.

However useful his contribution towards such, L'Huillier has not attempted a synthetic analysis of canonical legislation within the church

history of the fourth and fifth centuries. Rather, he has written a precise philological and historical study of sixty-five early and influential canons, and within the ambit he describes, he has done so with judgment and acuity. Of particular value is his substantial text-critical and lexical study of each canon, which at times comprises more than half of his commentary. L'Huillier's frequent (but fragmentary) citation of the Greek text and of the Latin and Old Slavonic versions are useful for the specialist, though these citations and his discussion in general would have been much more useful if he had included the full Greek text on which his translations and commentary are based. The nonspecialist, however, will regret that his Greek, Latin, and Old Slavonic citations are not translated. In these respects, the needs of both specialist and nonspecialist might have been better met. Less venial is the author's decision not to update his twenty-year-old bibliography. Nor did L'Huillier "deem it indispensable" to revise his dated text at several points he might have (xi). But as an Orthodox churchman and canonist, he is able to make relevant to the present what others might consider dead history. Even in relatively recent times, he notes, a Russian bishop could, invoking the fourteenth canon of Chalcedon, forbid the marriage of a priest's daughter to a nonbeliever on pain of church discipline (243).

While this work is intended primarily for church historians and canonists, Latter-day Saints may find it of interest for the light it sheds on the struggles of the early Christian priesthood. Many of these early canons deal with issues of clerical misconduct, such as conspiracy, abduction, embezzlement, self-castration, heresy and schism, illegal translation to other sees, simony, ordination of neophytes, and similar irregularities. One ought not to generalize about such abuses, but they make more intelligible why there were reform movements at this time, and perpetually thereafter, that sought for an apostolic purity that the state church had lost.

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