

The *Cursus Honorum* and the Western Case Against Photius

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Abstract

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The Photian crisis of the late ninth century is generally associated with various controversies between the Sees of Rome and Constantinople over issues such as Roman primacy, the conversion of Bulgaria, territorial disputes over Illyricum and southern Italy, and the *filioque*. The actual case launched against Patriarch Photius by successive bishops of Rome during the crisis was based on none of these factors. Rather, Rome attacked Photius on the ground that he was uncanonically elected and ordained as bishop and patriarch of Constantinople. It was on these grounds that Photius was deposed. This paper examines the Western canonical case against Photius, concentrating on the issue of the *cursus honorum*, i.e. sequential ordination and the interstices. The Western documents and sources leading up to and following the Fourth Council of Constantinople (869–870) are important for two reasons. First, they demonstrate the extent of the role the *cursus honorum* played in the Photian crisis, a role somewhat over-shadowed in histories of the controversy by the larger issues of primacy, territory and theology. Second, the documents bear testimony to the canonical and theological developments of the clerical *cursus* in the Western Church at the end of the ninth century. The Western position and practice was ultimately articulated in the canons promulgated by the Fourth Council of Constantinople, considered by the medieval Western

Church as eighth ecumenical council. Lastly, the impact of the Photian crisis on Orthodox ordination practice will be mentioned.



Introduction

In June, 1986, John D. Zizioulas, Orthodox layman, professor of systematic theology at the University of Glasgow, and preeminent Eastern Christian theologian of the late-twentieth century, became Metropolitan John of Pergamon. At first glance, Metropolitan John's ecclesiastical career seems odd to many Western Christians. During the week of 8 June 1986 Professor Zizioulas was ordained sequentially subdeacon, deacon, and presbyter. On 17 June, the following Tuesday, the Holy Synod met to elect Father John to the episcopate. On 22 June, the Sunday of Pentecost he was ordained a bishop and made Metropolitan of Pergamon. The rapid series of ordinations, the apparently *pro forma* election and subsequent episcopal ordination may at first seem an instance of "Byzantine intrigue." In fact, this particular time-table owes much more to the West than it does to the East, and in particular, the Western impact on Eastern ordination practice in the wake of the Photian controversy.

The Photian controversy (or schism) of the late ninth century marks a milestone in the deterioration of the relationship between the Eastern and Western Churches. The controversy is generally associated with a variety of contentions between the sees of Rome and Constantinople: the extent of the Roman primacy, the conversion of Bulgaria, the *filioque* clause, and territorial disputes over Illyricum and southern Italy. This paper, however, will focus on the actual papal canonical case against Photius culminating with the canons promulgated by the (so-called) Fourth Council of Constanti-

nople, 869–870¹, and the subsequent synod held at Constantinople in 879–880.

Although the councils occurred in Constantinople, they clearly reflect Western interests and perspectives. Since the eleventh century, the Fourth Council of Constantinople has been regarded as the eighth ecumenical council by the Western Church. This opinion has not been maintained by the Eastern Churches, who seem to have completely ignored the council. Canons from Constantinople IV, for instance, are not found in any of the canonical collections of the Eastern Church.²

The assortment of canons and ancillary material arising from the papal case against Photius are significant because they mark a *point de repère* in the development of the practice of the *cursus honorum* – sequential ordination and the interstices – particularly from a late ninth-century Western medieval perspective. Furthermore, the collection of texts to be surveyed illustrates the magnitude of the role the *cursus honorum* played in the conflict between the See of Rome and Patriarch Photius.

Prelude to Constantinople IV

The historical account of the council begins in 858 when Ignatius, the patriarch of Constantinople, was deposed by Emperor Michael III. Ignatius was arrested and exiled on charges of treason. By all accounts a holy man, Ignatius had become involved in the political machinations of Constantinople and quarrelled with Michael's uncle and regent Bardas. Because Ignatius was deposed by the emperor, not by a synod, finding a successor was a delicate matter. Ignatius was prepared to resign if his successor would agree

¹ Although the term "Fourth Council of Constantinople" will be used for convenience's sake, it is acknowledged that such an appellation follows *Western* rather than Eastern reckoning and recognition of ecumenical councils. On the other hand, the synod of 879–880 (sometimes referred to disingenuously as the "Pseudo-synod of Photius") seems to have been overlooked by the Western Church.

² Norman Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Georgetown: Georgetown University Press, 1990), p. 157.