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Eugenius IV sends Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini to Frederick III

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THE COUNCIL OF FLORENCE

BY

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ILLUSTRATIONS

FRONTISPIECE. Eugenius IV sends Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini
to Frederick III

Pinturicchio (Detail), Siena, Libreria del Duomo. (Photo: Alinari)

PLATE I. The Greek signatures on the original Decree of Union

Mediceo-Laurenziana Library, Florence, Cassetta Cesarini

facing page 295

INTRODUCTION

THE Council of Florence made the Reformation inevitable. A dictum like that is a challenge to discussion rather than a statement of fact, because no one can say what would have happened in the three-quarters of a century that separated these two events, if the first of them had never taken place. It is, however, certain that the Council of Florence changed the course of history. Before it, the cry heard on all sides was ‘Reform in head and members’, to be achieved by a General Council that as regards faith, heresy and reform was superior to a pope. After it, though the need for reform was no less great, the demand for it was less vocal, and the definition of Florence about the primacy of the papacy had dealt a death-blow to Conciliarism. Yet Basel had passed many a decree of reform, whereas Florence had enacted not even one. The best part of a hundred years passed before the next Council met. By that time the reformation that Basel or Florence might have accomplished was on the point of turning into a revolt against Rome in the Reformation initiated by Luther.

The Council of Florence is memorable for other reasons too. It was the last and the greatest endeavour to unite the separated Churches of East and West, an attempt conceived on a grandiose scale. It envisaged union of the Latin Church with all the Christians of the East, Greeks, Russians, Armenians, Copts, Ethiopians, Chaldeans, Maronites, Nestorians. And the attempt succeeded, even if its results were short-lived. The decree of union of July 1439 bore the signatures of both Greeks and Latins. The delegations of Armenians and the rest accepted that same decree augmented and applied to their separate cases. Had subsequent historical events been slightly different—had, for example, the battle of Varna been a victory for the Christian arms instead of a defeat—the union might have survived, Constantinople might never have been taken, the development of ecclesiastical relations on both sides of the world would have been vastly different. Varna was, however, a defeat.

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Constantinople was captured by the Turk. The union that had been accomplished and that was already very insecure was thereby doomed. But that does not mean to say that the Council has remained completely ineffective. It is one of the General Councils recognised by the Western Church. Its decree of union with the Greeks abides as the definition of certain theological truths and as a norm of doctrine to guide the minds of those who hope, as all good Christians wherever they may be do hope, to heal the schism yet. It has, indeed, already served as such in the union with Rome of Churches of oriental rite, such, for example, as the Ruthenian (1596) and the Rumanian (1700), arranged on the basis of the principles enunciated at Florence.

An event of the importance of the Council of Florence deserves a more detailed study than it has hitherto received. This book is an attempt to remedy that deficiency. There have been in the past a few scholarly examinations of certain aspects of the Council and some more general, and rather superficial, accounts. But even where the writers attempted to utilise all the sources at their disposal (and that was by no means always the case), they laboured under the disability that the texts of the main sources were not certainly accurate for lack of critical editions and that the minor sources had in great measure not yet been published at all. That defect has now been largely eliminated owing to the initiative of the late Fr Georg Hofmann, S.J., who some twenty years ago conceived the idea of editing in a series entitled *Concilium Florentinum: Documenta et Scriptores* new and critical editions of the documents already published and of adding to them what relevant matter could be found in archives, sermons, theological dissertations, diaries—in a word, whatever would help to a better knowledge and understanding of the history and the theology of the Council. It is because that series is now largely complete that I felt emboldened to embark on this book, relying on the knowledge I had acquired from my part in that work and on the resources that the labours of my colleagues had put at my easy disposal.

The main documents for the history, as for the theology, of the Council of Florence are three. They are the *Greek Acts*, the so-called *Latin Acts* and the *Memoirs* written by Silvester Syropoulus. The

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Greek Acts, written of course in Greek and often therefore referred to by their Greek name of *Practica*, are well known, for they are to be found in all the great Collections of Councils that have been published since the beginning of the seventeenth century—the Vatican Edition, Labbé, Hardouin, Mansi. They narrate the events from the arrival of the Greeks in Venice till their departure from that same city. They have usually been considered the product of a single author, an active participant in the Council, who utilised official documents, though to what extent and with what accuracy could not be ascertained. As a historical document, therefore, they were assessed as no more than a personal, and by many critics as a biased, narrative of the events. That idea must now be abandoned. The close study of all the known manuscripts of the *Practica* that I undertook for my recent edition¹ of them has made it quite certain that the *Practica* are not a composition in which an author borrowed material and adapted it to his purpose by changing it, but a compilation, that is, an inter-weaving without change, of elements taken from different sources, and that there are three such elements. In other words, in the *Practica* are to be found three historical documents, each of which must be evaluated independently, without prejudice from its association with the others. The largest of these elements consists of the discourses delivered in the public sessions in Ferrara and Florence. This part is the authentic protocol of the sessions, the product of three Greek notaries who compiled it by collating their separate versions of the speeches written down as they were delivered during the sessions, and by checking their common account with the corresponding Latin narrative. It is, then, the most authoritative document of the discourses made in the sessions that there is, and this part alone of the *Practica* really merits the title of ‘Greek Acts’. However, to make the history of the Council more complete, for this protocol-part gives very little beyond the texts of the speeches, an early copyist, John Plousiadenus, added to it in the appropriate places an introduction describing the course of events from the arrival of the Greeks in Venice up to the first doctrinal session, an account of the negotiations about the transfer of the Council from Ferrara to Florence, and a diary-like record of what went on in the interval

¹ J. Gill, *A.G.*

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from 24 March 1439 till the promulgation of the union and the departure of the Greeks. This second element I have called the *Description*. The copyist was not himself the author of these additions. He took them from a larger work, which he refers to as the 'second book', written by a participant in the Council, a Greek metropolitan, perhaps Dorotheus of Mitylene. The rest of the 'second book' is unfortunately lost. The third, and very small, element of the *Practica* consists of a very brief introduction, the work doubtless of some scribe, and a few almost certainly authentic documents added to the protocol. In my edition of the *Practica* these three elements are clearly distinguished in the text as they occur.

What goes by the name of the *Latin Acts* is an account written by Andrew da Santa Croce.¹ The official Latin Acts have been lost and long search, beginning at least in the early years of the sixteenth century, has failed to bring them to light. Andrea da Santa Croce was a papal protonotary who, as he tells us, 'wrote down faithfully the words of the Greeks as communicated by means of the interpreter and those of the Latins as they came directly from the mouths of the speakers'.² Whether he was one of the three Latin notaries appointed to compile the Latin protocol that corresponded to the Greek protocol now embodied in the *Practica* is not certain. What he has recorded would seem rather to be only what he himself took down during the sessions, unchecked by comparison with any other version, but it agrees so closely with the text of the *Greek Acts* that its accuracy is guaranteed. These two, the *Greek Acts* and the *Latin Acts*, supplement each other, for each has omitted sessions which the other gives at length. Unfortunately the *Latin Acts* contain little more than the speeches delivered in the sessions from October 1438 to March 1439, i.e. the same material as that of the Greek protocol. A short introduction in the beginning describing the arrival of the Greeks in Ferrara and the inauguration of the Council, and one or two bits of information with the texts of a few documents at the end, dealing with the negotiations between Latins and Greeks that led up to the decree of union, are a valuable addition to our very limited knowledge of these events, especially from the Latin side, and make us regret that S. Croce did not record all the details that he certainly knew.

¹ G. Hofmann, *A.L.*

² *Ibid.* p. 39.

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The third main source is the *Memoirs* written in Greek not earlier than the year 1444 by Silvester Syropoulos,¹ a deacon and official of the Great Church of Constantinople, who came to Italy in the *entourage* of the Patriarch Joseph II. He was, therefore, an eye-witness of events and in many of them an active participant. His book is not a full and all-round account of the Council. He apparently made no systematic recording of what took place during his stay in Italy. He nowhere indicates that he was writing from notes: indeed, he implies the opposite.² He had, however, access to some archives in Constantinople, but he used them very little. Instead he refers readers eager for information on the more public events to read the *Practica* for themselves. The public sessions in Ferrara and Florence, which form more than three-quarters of the *Practica*, he dismisses in less than a dozen pages. The rest of his long account, which begins with the earliest negotiations under Martin V and ends, apart from a kind of appendix, a few months after the Greeks' return to Constantinople, is almost entirely concerned with the interplay of relations among the Greeks themselves. It is a picture of what went on behind the scenes on the Greek side of the stage.

Opinion on the historical value of these sources, particularly of the two Greek documents, is widely divided. The reason is that they differ so greatly in tone. The *Practica* breathe a spirit of conciliation at the beginning, and at the end clearly approve of the union that was effected. The general impression conveyed by the *Memoirs* is well summed up in the title that their first editor, the English Bishop Robert Creyghton, invented for them, *Vera historia unionis non verae*. The gist of them is that the Greeks signed the decree of union under duress. The Latins wore them out with interminable debates and forced one concession out of them after another by withholding the means of sustenance and reducing them to want and misery, keeping them in Italy and making union the price of their return home. The Emperor, aided and abetted by a few treacherous Latinisers among the Greeks, and intent solely on obtaining aid for Constan-

¹ Edited by R. Creyghton under the title: *Vera historia unionis non verae* (Hagae Comitum, 1660). Creyghton's Latin translation, or rather paraphrase, is so inaccurate that it is altogether unreliable. Recourse must always be had to the original Greek text.

² *Ibid.* VIII, 10, p. 231; XII, 9, p. 345.

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tinople for which union was a necessary condition, himself managed the whole Greek side of the affair, overriding the Church, allowing no freedom of speech, gaining the consent of the prelates by threats or by cajolery as occasion served. All this is conveyed in a series of incidents (there is very little theological discussion at all to be found in the *Memoirs*), described with such a wealth of circumstantial detail as to convey a *prima facie* impression of truth. What, then, is to be said about them?¹

Comparison should no longer be instituted between the *Practica* as a whole and the *Memoirs*. That was justified, albeit mistakenly, only so long as the *Practica* could be considered the work of a single author, even though it was agreed that here and there he had incorporated into his personal account bits of authentic protocol. Now that the various elements that were combined to form the *Practica* have been clearly and decisively distinguished, the only legitimate question still open to discussion is the relative values of the *Description* and the *Memoirs*, for the protocol-part, the Greek Acts proper, is the official Greek transcript of the speeches, and so not open to suspicion of Latinising tendencies. And, in point of fact, the passages of the *Practica* that have led some critics to accuse them of a pro-Latin bias have been taken from the *Description*.

The *Memoirs*, however, are not so self-evidently truthful in every detail, still less in their overall picture, as to justify the condemnation of the *Description* out of hand. If one of the two sources is to be distrusted (and both cannot be wholeheartedly accepted, they differ too much), it should be the *Memoirs*. They are, in fact, an *apologia* for those Greeks who signed the Florentine decree in Italy and repudiated their signatures in Constantinople. And Syropoulos was

¹ For a detailed study of this question cf. J. Gill, 'The "Acta" and the Memoirs of Syropoulos as History', in *O.C.P.* xiv (1948), pp. 303–55; also T. Frommann, *Kritische Beiträge zur Geschichte der Florentiner Kircheneinigung* (Halle a/S. 1872), pp. 45–62; L. Mohler, *Kardinal Bessarion als Theologe, Humanist und Staatsmann*, I (Paderborn, 1923), pp. 65–7, 69–74.

It can be said in general that Catholics prefer the *Practica*, non-Catholics the *Memoirs*. The attitude of the oriental Churches is well reflected in these words of A. N. Diamantopoulos: 'The trustworthiness of the exposition of the events by Syropoulos is beyond all doubt, his impartiality so manifest that his work is one of the best historical works of that unfortunate time, the most reliable of the sources known till now of the history of the union in Florence.' (Μάρκος ὁ Εὐγενικός καὶ ἡ ἐν Φλωρεντίᾳ σύνοδος (Athens, 1899), p. 27.)

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one of them. The Metropolitan of Ephesus, Mark Eugenicus, was opposed to union throughout, did not sign the decree and would, if necessary, have taken the consequences of refusal. Syropoulos, according to his own account, was as hostile to union as Eugenicus. But he signed when Mark did not. He was not made of the stuff of martyrs. He was, doubtless, ashamed of his own weakness. He was, too, suspect to others when he returned to Constantinople. He had to rehabilitate himself in the minds of men like John Eugenicus, Mark's brother, who wrote to him chiding him about his 'sad fall in Italy'.¹ The *Memoirs* are his defence. That does not necessarily mean that all, indeed that any, of the incidents he narrates are fictitious. Most probably every single one of them is based on fact. But it does mean that he viewed the events from a definitely personal angle; that unconsciously at least he selected his material and so was led to confine his narrative largely to the less happy incidents, the squabbles, the intrigues, the weaknesses of his colleagues; that he gratuitously attributed motives, sometimes demonstrably false, at other times open to grave suspicion but for lack of other sources of information suspicion that cannot be settled one way or the other. It means that his dissatisfaction with himself caused him to forget the light and remember only the shadow in the picture, the weariness, the want, the homesickness. It means that he tended to emphasise anything that would exonerate himself and to exaggerate his anti-unionism. It means, in other words, that even though all the events he narrates may be factual, his readers must allow for his perspective and his apologetic purpose.

The *Description*, on the other hand—or at least that part of it that has been preserved in the *Practica*—is in an altogether different style. With the exception of the early part that recounts the reception of the Greeks in Venice, where the anonymous author tries to record his admiration of the pageantry of the scene, it consists of synopses of speeches and short entries on events, for all the world like the notes of a diary. Dates are very frequent, less commonly of the month, more often the day of the week and of a particular week specified by its name in the liturgical calendar. There is little of that background of personal relations in which the *Memoirs* abound, but it is not

¹ Lambros, I, p. 191.

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altogether lacking. In short, there is little room in the *Description*, taken by and large, for prejudice one way or the other. What is regarded as an indication of tendentiousness is that the author does not go into detail on some points of friction that certainly arose between Greeks and Latins, that he records only in passing the divisions within the Greek community, and that, being at least towards the end of the Council an ardent supporter of union, he recounts with approval the activities of the unionists. His account is limited to the narration of the more important public events, and what he states in it positively would seem, generally speaking, to be true. That he does not dilate on the intricacies of personal relationships is owing to the character of the work he was composing.

The historian has to evaluate his sources and then to utilize them in accordance with his judgement. My opinion about the main sources of the history of the Council of Florence is recorded above. The *Greek Acts* combined with the *Latin Acts* furnish safe material for the record of the public sessions. The *Description* offers a chronology of the other events so consecutive and so closely integrated with the events themselves, which are outlined rather than described, as to dispel suspicion of conscious distortion. So, in what follows in this book, I accept the positive statements of the *Description* unless error can be proved, filling them out and supplementing them from the *Memoirs*, references to which will be found in great numbers in almost every chapter. I have tried to omit nothing of importance from Syropoulos' work, but it is so long that much abbreviation and no little omission were necessary. Where it was possible, I have checked the more seemingly exaggerated of the Greek Deacon's assertions: where that could not be done—and unfortunately it could not be done often—I have recorded what he says for what it is worth, leaving the reader to assess it for himself. Such, at least, has been my intention and such, I hope, my execution.

The first few pages of Syropoulos' *Memoirs* have been lost, but to judge from the beginning of the part preserved they would seem to have dealt with a question of authority in the Eastern Church between the Emperor and the hierarchy, included probably by the author because he considered that it had some connection with the conduct on the Greek side of the Council. All the rest refers directly

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to the Council. It starts with the negotiations about union under Martin V, continues with those between Constantinople and Eugenius IV and Constantinople and Basel, and then recounts the story of the arrival of the Greeks in Italy, the events during the Council, the departure for home and the reception in Constantinople of the union.

Syropoulos is right, historically, in beginning his account of the Council of Florence as far back as the Council of Constance, because the negotiations that culminated in the Council of union being held in Ferrara and Florence and not in Constantinople or Basel or Avignon began then, and went on in an uninterrupted series till they issued in the actual Council. I have followed the same plan. After a brief introductory chapter of broad background, I trace in some detail the relations between East and West under Martin V, then the much more complicated pattern of negotiations under Eugenius IV, before introducing the Greeks, in chapter four, into Italy. Then comes the Council proper. My treatment of it all is more historical than theological. But it was, of course, an Oecumenical Council that judged and decided points of doctrine, so theology and indeed very abstruse theology enters into the narrative. If the reader does not understand it all, he can console himself with the thought that no one does understand the Mystery of the Blessed Trinity. But he will, I hope, learn something about it and come to appreciate a little better the grounds of difference in its regard between East and West, and their diverse lines of approach. Very many long speeches occur in the main sources, which I have synopsised, leaving them, however, in direct speech form, because lengthy periods of indirect speech would have made heavy reading. All—and only—exact quotations in translation are indicated by inverted commas or by small type.

I have reason to be grateful to many people for help and encouragement generously given to me while I was engaged on this book. To the late Fr Georg Hofmann, S.J., I am most deeply indebted. Besides being the initiator of the series *Concilium Florentinum*, etc., he was, too, its most prolific contributor, giving to it the fruits of long years of painstaking work in many archives. References to his volumes and to his numerous articles will be found abundantly in

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the pages that follow. Besides that, I had the advantage of his ready advice and I could draw on his secure memory and wide knowledge, even in the long months of his last illness, a privilege that I availed myself of freely. May he rest in peace. Two others also I would like to thank by name, who have read my book in manuscript and offered me many fruitful suggestions, Fr Emil Herman, S.J., and Dr J. A. Watt. To them, and to all the others who have helped me, I return my sincere thanks.

J. G.

ROME
January 1958

ABBREVIATIONS

- Acad. Roum.* *Académie Roumaine: Bulletin de la section historique.*
A.A.V. *Acta Academiae Velehradensis.*
A.C.A. *Acta camerae apostolicae et civitatum Venetiarum, Ferrariae, Florentiae, Ianuae, de Concilio Florentino*, ed. G. Hofmann (Romae, 1950).
A.G. *Quae supersunt actorum graecorum Concilii Florentini*, ed. J. Gill (Romae, 1953).
A.L. *Andreas de Santacroce, advocatus consistorialis: Acta latina Concilii Florentini*, ed. G. Hofmann (Romae, 1955).
Arch. O.P. *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum.*
B.Z. *Byzantinische Zeitschrift.*
Byz. *Byzantion.*
Cecconi E. Cecconi, *Studi storici sul Concilio di Firenze*, vol. 1 (Firenze, 1869).
D.T.C. *Dictionnaire de la Théologie Catholique.*
E.E.B.Σ. Ἐπετηρίς Ἑταιρείας Βυζαντινῶν Σπουδῶν.
E.O. *Echos d'Orient.*
E.P. *Epistolae pontificiae ad Concilium Florentinum spectantes.* 3 vols., ed. G. Hofmann (Romae, 1940–6).
Frag. *Fragmenta protocolli, diaria privata, sermones*, ed. G. Hofmann (Romae, 1951).
Greg. *Gregorianum.*
Haller *Concilium Basiliense. Studien und Dokumente.* 8 vols., of which the first four are edited by J. Haller, the rest by various authors.
H.L. Hefele-Leclercq, *Histoire des Conciles*, vol. VII (Paris, 1916).
Jorga N. Jorga, *Notes et extraits pour servir à l'histoire des Croisades au XV^e siècle*, vols. I–III (Paris, 1899–1902).
Lambros S. Lambros, *Παλαιολόγεια καὶ Πελοποννησιακά*, 4 vols. (Athens, 1912–30).
Mansi *Sacrorum Conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio*, ed. G. D. Mansi (1784).
M.C. *Monumenta Conciliorum generalium saec. XV* (Vindobonae, 1857–86).
Muratori *Raccolta degli storici italiani*, ed. L. A. Muratori (2nd edition unless otherwise stated).

ABBREVIATIONS

N.E.	Νέος Ἑλληνομνήμων.
O.C.	<i>Orientalia Christiana</i> .
O.C.P.	<i>Orientalia Christiana Periodica</i> .
Pastor	L. v. Pastor, <i>History of the Popes</i> , English trans. ed. F. I. Antrobus.
Petit, <i>Docs.</i>	<i>Documents relatifs au Concile de Florence. I: La question du Purgatoire à Ferrare; II: Oeuvres anticonciliaires de Marc d'Éphèse</i> , ed. L. Petit, published in one volume from <i>Patrologia orientalis</i> , xv, pp. 1–168; xvii, pp. 309–524.
P.G.	Migne: <i>Patrologia graeca</i> .
Phr.	G. Phrantzes, <i>Chronicon</i> , ed. I. B. Papadopoulos, vol. 1 (Lipsiae, 1935).
P.L.	Migne, <i>Patrologia latina</i> .
Raynaldus	O. Raynaldus, <i>Annales ecclesiastici</i> .
Schol.	<i>Oeuvres complètes de Gennade Scholarius</i> . 8 vols. ed. L. Petit, X. A. Sidéridès, M. Jugie (Paris, 1928–36).
S.T.	<i>Studi e Testi</i> .
<i>St. biz.</i>	<i>Studi bizantini e neoellenici</i> .
Syr.	S. Syropoulos, <i>Memoirs</i> , ed. R. Creyghton under the title <i>Vera historia unionis non verae</i> (Hagae-Comitis, 1660).
Trav.	A. Traversari, <i>Ambrosii Traversari . . . latinae epistolae</i> , etc., ed. L. Mehus (Firenze, 1759).
Valois	N. Valois, <i>Le Pape et le Concile</i> . 2 vols. (Paris, 1909).