

The Monophysite and Monothelite doctrines in North Africa during the sixth and seventh centuries ADs

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Abstract---The Catholic Christians of North Africa believed that nearly a century of oppression and religious persecution endured under the Vandal rule had finally come to an end with the campaign of the Byzantine general Belisarius in 533 CE. This belief was strengthened when the new rulers restored their privileges and status to those of the Catholic Church, which King Huneric and his successors had stripped away, and when they reinstated the dominance and religious authority of Catholicism over the region. However, it soon became apparent to them that the one they had regarded as a saviour and protector was, in truth, another form of religious despot, who, much like the preceding Arian Vandals, sought to impose his own doctrinal creed upon them for political ends. The theological controversy that had flared and intensified in the eastern part of the Byzantine Empire quickly cast its shadow over the western provinces, portending a grave religious conflict, particularly in North Africa, whose inhabitants were renowned at the time for the depth of their faith, their firm adherence to the Catholic doctrine, and their pride in it.

Keywords---Monophysitism, Monothelitism, North Africa, Byzantines, Three Chapters, Justinian, Vandals, Carthage.

Introduction

The African Catholic Church suffered severe persecution during the Vandal occupation,¹ losing much of its spiritual and material authority to Arianism, which had become the official creed under Vandal rule. Donatism also reemerged, particularly in Numidia.² The intensity of religious persecution subsided

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only during the reign of King Hilderic, whose rule was marked by a policy of religious tolerance. This allowed the Church to regain part of its standing, reorganise its ranks, and resume the convening of ecclesiastical councils from the year 525 onwards. However, the number of bishops attending these councils reveals the enduring impact of Vandal persecutions and the ensuing instability. Only forty-eight episcopal sees were represented at the Council of Carthage in 525, whereas two hundred and twenty bishops had attended the Council of 484.³

The Byzantine emperors were expected to allow the African Church's affairs to return to their pre-Vandal state and grant African bishops full autonomy in managing ecclesiastical matters, particularly given the profound doctrinal divergences that existed between the African and Eastern Byzantine Churches. However, the opposite occurred. Emperor Justinian, much like Constantine the Great, was renowned for his interference in theological affairs and sought to impose a unified creed upon the Byzantine Empire as a means of securing political cohesion through religious unity.

Such attempts at intervention in doctrinal matters aggravated the situation only. Neither the Byzantine emperors nor their ecclesiastical representatives in North Africa foresaw that imperial measures and decrees concerning certain Christological writings and their authors ignited religious discord and provoked resistance from the African Church not only in Carthage but also within the capital of Byzantium itself.

Problem Statement:

The purpose of this study is to trace the historical emergence and spread of the monophysite doctrine (the belief in the single nature of Christ) during the sixth century CE and of the monothelite doctrine (the belief in the single will of Christ) during the seventh century CE in North Africa. The core problem upon which this study is based lies in examining the nature of the theological debate surrounding these doctrines, the position adopted by the African Church toward them, the response of the Byzantine central authority to that stance, and the overall repercussions of these dynamics on the religious situation in Africa and across the Byzantine Empire.

Methodology and Sources:

The methodological approach adopted in this study relies on analysing data derived from ecclesiastical sources, including the writings of both Byzantine and African bishops, which were composed to refute their opponents and affirm the validity of their own doctrines while denouncing the errors of others. In addition, the study draws upon the decisions of ecclesiastical councils convened in either Byzantium or North Africa to resolve doctrinal disputes, as well as imperial edicts and decrees issued to prohibit certain doctrines or impose others, accompanied by administrative orders to provincial governors for their enforcement. These are found primarily in the *Codex Justinianus* and in subsequent compilations of Byzantine law. Furthermore, modern historical scholarship that has critically examined the history of these theological controversies and their doctrinal and political implications is also consulted.

A chronological and methodological progression has been observed in presenting and analysing the subject. The discussion is structured into key sections: first, an overview of the general state of the African Church prior to the emergence of the monophysite doctrine; second, clarification of the doctrinal dispute with Byzantium, the events and incidents accompanying it, and its outcomes; and finally, an examination of the rise of the monothelite controversy in the seventh century, its underlying causes, the response of North African Catholic bishops, and the consequences of that response for both sides.

1. The State of the North African Church at the beginning of the Sixth Century:

Most of the bishops attending the ecclesiastical council of Carthage, convened in 525 CE, were from the province of Proconsular Africa, with limited participation from the bishops of Byzacium, Numidia, and Mauretania Caesariensis and the absence of bishops from Mauretania Sitifensis. It is, however,

uncertain whether this represented the actual number of episcopal sees at the time, as the number of absentees may have exceeded that of those present. The rapid convocation of the council likely prevented bishops from other provinces from arriving in due time. The threat posed by local Moorish tribes, together with internal disputes among Catholic bishops, further weakened the Catholic Church. The bishops of the province of Byzacium, for instance, were absent from the 525 council because of conflicts with their counterparts from Proconsular Africa over leadership within the African Church.⁴ The Catholic inhabitants of North Africa suffered significant harm to their churches and property.⁵ The Church lost vast tracts of land, its sacred vessels and instruments used in liturgical rites were confiscated, and a considerable number of bishops were compelled to leave North Africa as a result of the persecution they endured.⁶ A comparison between the number of episcopal sees existing at the end of the Vandal occupation and those recorded in the early years of Byzantine rule clearly demonstrates the extent of the damage inflicted upon the Church.⁷

Since the fourth century CE, North Africa has been divided into six ecclesiastical provinces, corresponding to the region's administrative divisions. However, participation in ecclesiastical councils was limited to only three provinces: Proconsular Africa, Byzacium, and Numidia. The bishops of Tripolitania customarily met with those of Byzacium, whereas the bishops of Mauretania Sitifensis and Mauretania Caesariensis were not mentioned during the reign of Emperor Justinian. This absence was undoubtedly due to the wars that erupted between the Moors and the Byzantines, which prevented their participation in the councils. By the beginning of the seventh century, however, the bishops of Mauretania Sitifensis were once again participating in the general councils convened at Carthage (Karthago).⁸

During the reign of Emperor Justinian, the province of Tripolitania comprised five episcopal sees: Sabratha, Thabraca, Tacapae, Girba, and Leptis Magna. In Byzacium, the number of bishoprics, which had reached one hundred and fifteen by the end of the fifth century, was reduced to only forty-three after a century of Byzantine rule.⁹ In Proconsular Africa, however, it appears to have been the only ecclesiastical province in which the number of bishoprics actually increased during this period. Its relative distance from the main theatres of war and raids, which had ravaged Numidia and Byzacium, contributed to this stability. The number of bishoprics, recorded as fifty-four at the council of 484, declined slightly to forty-eight at 525 but rose again in the mid-1970s to approximately seventy, most of which were concentrated in coastal and inland regions.

In Numidia, the Church lost the majority of its bishoprics during the final years of Vandal rule, particularly in the southern regions. Of the one hundred and twenty-five bishoprics recorded in 484, only fifteen remained by 525. For the two Mauretaniae, the Council of 484 lists forty-four bishoprics in Mauretania sitifensis and 120 bishoprics in Mauretania caesariensis. However, their number declined sharply in the following years; at the council of 525, Mauretania caesariensis was represented by only a single bishopric, whereas Mauretania sitifensis was absent.¹⁰

2. Emperor Justinian's religious policy and the North African Church:

With the arrival of the Byzantines, the African Church began to emerge from the state of fragmentation and weakness into which nearly a century of Vandal persecution had cast it. The emperor sought to restore the Church's standing through a series of measures and decrees, some of which stipulated the restitution of church lands that the Vandals had confiscated.¹¹ Granted bishops the right to reclaim personal belongings that had been seized and authorised the conversion of pagan and Jewish temples into churches.¹²

Following the fall of the Vandals, the bishops of North Africa convened their first council under Byzantine rule, presided over by Reparatus, bishop of Carthage (Karthago), between January and August 535. The council convened to discuss the new political and religious landscape and address

pressing issues, particularly the issue of Arianism. Two hundred and twenty bishops were assembled in Carthage, most of which were from Proconsular Africa and Byzacium. Numidia, however, remained insufficiently pacified under Byzantine control, and its bishops could not attend without risking attacks from the Moors. The assembled prelates adopted several resolutions, including one that prohibited North African bishops from travelling outside their province without an official mission and another that forbade former Arians who had converted to Catholicism from assuming ecclesiastical offices. At the conclusion of the council, they addressed a letter to Emperor Justinian, requesting the restitution of the Church's properties that the Vandals had confiscated.¹³

Justinian responded to the bishops' petition by issuing a decree in August 535 ordering the restoration of all church properties, places of worship, and liturgical vessels, and granting them the right to reclaim any assets that had been plundered.¹⁴ He was also keen to eliminate disputes between the bishops of Byzacium and Proconsular Africa concerning ecclesiastical leadership. To that end, he reaffirmed the primacy of the bishop of Carthage over all the bishops of North Africa, recognising him as the supreme representative of the African Church. The churches under his authority were accorded the right to excommunicate and banish those who renounced the Catholic faith, as well as the right to receive gifts and donations.¹⁵

To confront dissenters, eliminate the causes of religious schism, and unify doctrine, Justinian pursued a policy of persecution against Jews, pagans, Arians, and Donatists.¹⁶ Branding them in his 535 decree as heretics, thereby prohibiting them from holding public office or owning Christian slaves. They were also forbidden from propagating their beliefs or holding religious assemblies. Although he initially attempted a degree of tolerance toward the Arian clergy, intense opposition from Catholic bishops compelled him to prosecute them, deprive them of their clerical status, and forbid them from administering baptism or advancing in ecclesiastical ranks.

Byzantine decrees further targeted heretics in the social sphere, rendering their testimony against Catholics invalid in courts of law and excluding them from inheritance rights. In cases where a deceased heretic had both heretical and Catholic children, the former were disinherited in favour of the latter. If all descendants were heretical and no Catholic relatives existed, the inheritance would pass to the state. All these persecutory measures were intended to integrate heretics into the Catholic faith and compel them to abandon their doctrines. After Arians and pagans, Jews bore the brunt of Byzantine hostility, as the authorities sought to convert them forcibly to Christianity. This repression prompted many Jews to flee urban centres and settle among the Moorish tribes.

Justinian efforts to strengthen the African Church against its adversaries and consolidate its material and spiritual authority were also evident in the construction of churches and monasteries across all territories under his control. In Carthage (Karthago), he built a church within the royal palace dedicated to the Mother of Christ and another in honour of Saint Primacia. He also constructed and restored numerous churches outside the city. The remnants of Byzantine restoration works are still visible on the church of Domus Caritatis ("House of Charity").¹⁷

Justinian also constructed five churches in Leptis Magna, in the province of Tripolitania, and one church in Sabratha. In Byzacium, the remaining Byzantine churches and temples are still scattered across both inland and coastal towns, such as Taparura (Sfax), Thelepte (Feriana), Leptis Minor (Lemta), Cillium (Kasserine), Ammaedara (Haïdra), and Sicca Veneria (Le Kef).¹⁸ In Numidia, numerous churches were built during the reign of Justinian, many of which still stand today. At Thibilis, the remaining ruins can be attributed to the Justinianic period.¹⁹ Moreover, near Calama (Guelma), a new church was erected to enshrine the relics of the martyrs.²⁰

At Aïn Ghrab and Aïn Saqqar, the remaining two Byzantine-era churches have been identified. In Madauros, archaeologists discovered a Byzantine church dating from the early years of occupation.²¹ In

Aquae Caesaris (Hammam Bouhadjar) and Hippo Regius (Annaba), inscriptions attest to the preservation of Byzantine religious structures.²² In Theveste (Tébessa), the Byzantines restored Roman religious buildings and constructed a fortified monastery within the city walls.²³ When coastal cities are under their control, they undertook efforts to restore places of worship. The poor construction of one church in Tipasa, along with its distinctive cross form, confirms its attribution to the Byzantine period.²⁴ At Rusguniae (Tamentfoust), the discovery of Byzantine inscriptions suggests that a church's restoration was supervised by a commander of the local Byzantine garrison.²⁵

In return for these numerous privileges and the patronage he extended to the African Church, Justinian expected obedience and submission from its bishops to his authority and religious policies. However, his patronage did not render them compliant instruments of his will, a fact revealed by the theological dispute that emerged as early as the year 544.²⁶

A. Causes of Conflict: The Monophysite Doctrine and the Three Chapters

The religious dispute in which the North African Church became a principal party stemmed from Emperor Justinian's attempt to impose his religious policy on it, a reflection of his well-known tendency to interfere in both ecclesiastical administration and doctrinal matters.²⁷ This conflict represented a continuation of the series of theological controversies that had arisen since the beginning of the fourth century CE, proceeding through several primary stages.

The first was the condemnation of Arianism at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, due to its denial of Christ's divine nature. The second was the condemnation of Nestorianism at the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431, when it was branded as heretical and contrary to the teachings of the Catholic Church.²⁸

The development of these controversies during the fifth century led to the emergence of a new doctrine put forward by Cyril, Patriarch of Alexandria, who held that Christ was a single person in whom the human and divine natures were united. Consequently, the Virgin Mary was to be considered the Mother of Christ the God, just as she was the Mother of Christ the Man.²⁹

This doctrine was crystallised by Eutyches, a monk of a Constantinopolitan monastery, regarded as the founder of Monophysitism. He formulated a new theological conception asserting that the divine and human natures of Christ became, after the Incarnation and union, a single nature. The human nature dissolved and was absorbed into the divine, so that Christ possessed but one nature, the divine. This doctrine came to be known as *Monophysitism*, or the doctrine of Christ having a single nature.³⁰

Although Monophysitism was condemned at the Council of Constantinople in 448 and its adherents expelled from the Church, and later denounced again at the Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451, it continued to constitute the central religious problem facing the Byzantine emperors in their eastern provinces, Egypt, Syria, and Palestine, where the Monophysites formed the majority of the population. Their resistance thus threatened the political unity of the Byzantine Empire throughout the reigns of Theodosius II, Marcian, Leontius I, Zeno, and Justin I.³¹

Justinian encountered the Monophysite issue upon ascending the throne and deemed it essential to find a resolution, convinced that religious unity was indispensable to the Empire's political stability and security. He sought to reconcile the Monophysites of the eastern provinces without alienating the Roman Church and the Western Catholics, whose support he required for his expansionist ambitions in the West. When he proved unable to reconcile the two factions, he abandoned the policy of persecuting the Monophysites. He turned instead toward conciliation, recognising their political importance, mainly as their religious dissent had acquired an overtly political character that endangered imperial unity. Moreover, after his successful reconquest of Italy, he no longer depended on Western support.³²

Justinian found the key to winning over the Monophysites in the counsel of Bishop Theodorus Askidas, who persuaded him that the only way to bring them to his side and eliminate the schism was to induce them to accept the rulings of the Council of Chalcedon, which they had long and vehemently opposed. This, Theodorus argued, could only be achieved by condemning the *Three Chapters* and excluding their authors from the Church, despite their having been acquitted of heresy at that council. The aim was to present their acquittal as a concession by the council to Nestorianism.³³

The *Three Chapters* comprised three theological writings: the works of Theodorus, bishop of Mopsuestia in eastern Asia Minor; the writings of Theodoretus, bishop of Cyrrhus in northern Syria, in which he accused Patriarch Cyril of heresy; and the letter of Ibas, bishop of Edessa in northern Syria, to Maris, a bishop in Persia, in which he likewise criticised Cyril and charged him with heresy. The Monophysites accused the authors of the *Three Chapters* of subscribing to Nestorianism, which denied Christ's divine nature, presenting him not as God but as the Son of God, and rejecting the designation of the Virgin Mary as the Mother of God, calling her instead the Mother of Christ because she bore a man, not a deity.³⁴

Justinian believed that by adopting this course, he would resolve the religious schism and win over the Monophysites. He overlooked, however, that condemning the *Three Chapters* and their authors amounted to undermining the authority and decisions of the Council of Chalcedon, something the Church of Rome, and by extension the Church of North Africa, could never accept. In 544, he issued an edict condemning them. He readily secured the approval of the Eastern Churches, but fierce opposition arose from the Western Churches, led by the Church of North Africa.³⁵

B. Resistance to the Byzantine Religious Decree

Monophysitism did not gain wide acceptance among the inhabitants of North Africa; only a small group of clerics adopted it, driven by personal ambition and the desire for ecclesiastical promotion. The North African bishops strongly rejected the attempts of the Monophysites to undermine the authority of the Council of Chalcedon and to enlist Byzantine imperial support in doing so; consequently, they resolved to resist them.³⁶

The Byzantine decree condemning the *Three Chapters*, issued under Monophysite influence, was met with indignation upon its promulgation in Carthage. The bishops firmly opposed it, and Pontianus, bishop of Thaenae (Henchir Tine), addressed a letter to Emperor Justinian, warning him that condemning the dead would inevitably lead to the destruction of the living, expressing his fear that the Monophysites might exploit the decree to their advantage.³⁷

Justinian also received a letter of protest from Bishop Dacianus, who denounced the decree as illegitimate. In the absence of Pope Vigilius from Rome and wishing to strengthen Western opposition to Byzantine authority, his legates, Pelagius and Anatolius, consulted the deacon Ferrandus, residing in Carthage, concerning the appropriate stance toward the imperial decree. In truth, their goal was to draw him into formally opposing the Byzantines, knowing that his public position would carry significant weight among the people of North Africa due to his considerable standing within both clerical and popular circles.³⁸

Ferrandus responded that the decrees of the Council of Chalcedon could not be challenged, as condemning the *Three Chapters* amounted to condemning the council itself. He warned that such a decision would provoke turmoil and discord within the Church and jeopardise the religious unity of Christians. Reparatus, the primate of North Africa, shared his view.³⁹ These bishops urged Pope Vigilius, who had halted in Sicily on his journey to Constantinople, to reject the condemnation of the *Three Chapters*. The opposition of the North African bishops strengthened Vigilius's resolve against Byzantine pressure. Thus, upon his arrival in the Byzantine capital on January 25, 547, he excommunicated Patriarch Menas and sought to persuade Emperor Justinian to annul the decree of condemnation and to reconsider his pro-Monophysite religious policy.⁴⁰

The North African resistance in Constantinople was embodied by Facundus, bishop of Hermiana in southern Byzacium, who supported Pope Vigilius upon his arrival and severed ties with Patriarch Menas. Facundus began writing a twelve-volume work dedicated to defending the *Three Chapters* and the Council of Chalcedon. He continued his opposition even after the Pope retracted his initial stance, submitted to Byzantine authority, and accepted the condemnation of the *Three Chapters* at the council he convened in Constantinople to secure the approval of the Latin bishops for the imperial decree. Facundus steadfastly refused to sign the final act of the council that condemned the *Three Chapters*.⁴¹

On April 11, 548, Vigilius formally declared his condemnation of the *three chapters* in a decree contained in his letter to Patriarch Menas. His decision provoked strong opposition from the North African bishops present in Constantinople, foremost among them Facundus, who engaged him in debate,

attempting to persuade him that his act constituted both an affront to the Council of Chalcedon and a betrayal of the Church. When persuasion failed, Facundus severed his relations with both the Pope and the Patriarch and published a treatise directly attacking Emperor Justinian.

In this work, he reminded the Emperor that his duty as a Christian ruler was to ensure the enforcement of ecclesiastical law rather than to violate it, emphasising that he possessed no authority to determine matters of doctrine. Facundus also admonished Justinian by invoking the example of his predecessors, such as Theodosius II and Marcian, who had been faithful servants of the Church, urging him to follow in their footsteps.⁴²

Vigilius's decree met with fierce opposition in North Africa, particularly in Carthage, where the bishops resisted and openly condemned it. A group of them travelled to Constantinople to support their North African counterparts already present there. Among them was Felicius, a monk from the monastery of Gillium (Henchir el-Fras), who joined Facundus and succeeded in mobilising opposition against Pope Vigilius. He accused the Pope of conspiring with the Byzantines against the Western Church for his own personal gain. In response, Vigilius resorted to excommunicating Felicius and his followers from the Church.⁴³

In 550, the North African bishops convened a general council in Carthage, presided over by Reparatus, bishop of Carthage and primate of North Africa. During this council, they denounced the Pope's position and declared him excommunicated from the Catholic Church unless he retracted his stance. They then addressed a letter to Emperor Justinian condemning both his decree and that of the Pope, reaffirming their commitment to the *Three Chapters* and proclaiming their readiness to defend them.⁴⁴

The opposition of the bishops of North Africa compelled Vigilius to withdraw his decision and alter his stance. He requested Justinian to revoke the condemnation decree and to convene a general council to resolve the dispute. Their firm resistance also led the patriarchs of Alexandria and Jerusalem to withdraw their support and retract their signatures from the decrees of Justinian and Vigilius. In an effort to quell the resistance of North African bishops and secure their approval of his religious policies, Justinian summoned them to Constantinople, among them Reparatus, bishop of Carthage and head of North Africa; Firmus, bishop of Tipasa Numidarum and head of Numidia; Primasius, bishop of Hadrumetum (Sousse); and Verecundus, bishop of Junca, who attended on behalf of Boethus, primate of Byzacium.⁴⁵

The bishops of North Africa arrived in Constantinople in mid-551. Justinian endeavoured by all means to secure their approval of the second condemnation decree he issued earlier that year. Their agreement would have meant reversing all the decisions made at their general council of 550. However, they again opposed him, especially Reparatus and Verecundus, who, despite threats and bribes, refused the Byzantine proposals. Consequently, the Byzantines resorted to political tactics by accusing Reparatus of conspiring against Areobindus, the Byzantine governor of North Africa, and of betraying him to the rebel commander Guntharis, who murdered him in 546. Reparatus was then deposed and exiled to a monastery by the Caspian Sea, where he died on January 7, 563. His deputy, the deacon Primosus, was appointed in his place, with the condition that he implement the Emperor's religious policies in North Africa.⁴⁶

Facundus resumed his resistance at the beginning of 552, publishing a letter in which he exposed the methods employed by Byzantine officials in North Africa to coerce the clergy into acquiescence. His efforts contributed to the withdrawal of several bishops from condemning the *Three Chapters* and thwarted attempts by other pro-Byzantine bishops to disseminate the imperial religious decree and rally local support for it.⁴⁷

C. Consequences of the Dispute and Its Impact on the Church

Pope Vigilius withdrew from his position and entered into conflict with Emperor Justinian after demanding the revocation of the second condemnation decree in 551. The North African bishops supported Vigilius in this stance, with Primasius, bishop of Hadrumetum (Sousse), and Verecundus, bishop of Junca, attending the session that excommunicated Patriarch Menas and Bishop Askydas. Both accompanied Vigilius during his flight from Constantinople to Chalcedon on December 23, 551.⁴⁸

However, Justinian yielded to the Pope's insistence and called for the convocation of an ecumenical council in Constantinople to resolve the religious dispute. He took precautions to prevent North African bishops from attending, fearing that their presence might have hardened Pope's stance. The council opened its sessions on May 5, 553. Bishop Primasius refused to participate unless Pope himself was present; however, he signed the reconciliation decree issued by Vigilius on May 14, 553, which marked Pope's withdrawal from his decision on April 11, 548.

Only a small number of bishops residing in Constantinople attended the council, including Firmus, bishop of Tipasa Numidarum; Crescentius, bishop of Cuicul; Cresconius, bishop of Zattara; and Restitutus, bishop of Milev. The representative Byzacium were Pompeanus, bishop of Vibbiana,⁴⁹ and bishop of Victoriana. Proconsular Africa was represented by Valerianus, bishop of Obba, and Sextilianus, bishop of Tunes, who attended on behalf of Primosus, bishop of Carthage, and Victorius, bishop of Sinna.⁵⁰

The council concluded its sessions on June 2 with the condemnation of the *Three Chapters*. While Vigilius accepted the council's decisions, the North African bishops opposed them, compelling Justinian to resort to force to compel their submission. His animosity toward them had grown due to their opposition, which constituted the sole obstacle to implementing his policies.⁵¹

He began persecuting those among them present in Constantinople. Bishop Primasius was imprisoned in the Stoudion monastery in the capital. The deacon Liberatus was exiled alongside Bishop Reparatus, while the monk Felicius was banished with the deacon Rusticus to Thebes in southern Egypt in 557. Victorius, bishop of Tunnenna, and Theodorus, bishop of Cabarussi, were also exiled to Egypt. Facundus, who had disappeared from the capital's surroundings, was eventually apprehended and tried in 564 together with a group of bishops summoned from North Africa. When they refused to sign the council's decisions, they were imprisoned.⁵²

Bishop Verecundus died in exile in Chalcedon in 552. Firmus was permitted to return to North Africa, where Byzantine officials sought to secure his compliance, but he died en route.⁵³

The resistance of the bishops of North Africa to the council's decisions continued, as they accused the Pope of Treachery and officially expelled him from the Catholic Church. They severed all ties with bishops who had succumbed to Byzantine authority. In 554, bishops from Byzacium convened a council to condemn Primasius, bishop of Hadrumetum, for abandoning resistance after being appointed head of the province's bishops, succeeding Boethus, who had recently died. This condemnation was based on his alleged adoption of Monophysitism and his defence of it in North Africa.

Bishops of Proconsular Africa and Numidia opposed the appointment of Primosus as bishop of Carthage, considering him an outsider and a usurper of religious authority.⁵⁴

Justinian resorted to persecution as the only means to quell opposition. Byzantine officials employed all necessary measures, physical punishments, imprisonment, and exile to force bishops into compliance. Despite opposition from clergy and residents, they forcibly installed Primosus in place of Reparatus, leading to bloodshed in churches and casualties on both sides. They also employed bribery and intimidation, particularly by Moncianus, to break the resistance of stubborn bishops. Sometimes, they offered large sums of money and promises of prominent positions. At the same time, they also threatened that continued opposition would lead to a schism in North Africa and the disintegration of Christian unity.⁵⁵

This persecution brought a measure of calm to North Africa, as Primosus obtained the recognition of the bishops of Proconsular Africa and Numidia as their authority in 554 or 555. To prevent the exiled bishops who continued their resistance from reigniting opposition, punitive measures were again imposed on them. Victorius, bishop of Tonnenna, and Theodorus, along with four primates, were retried and imprisoned in monasteries in Constantinople. Although the monk Felicius died in exile in 557, Primasius in 588, and Reparatus in 563, Pope Pelagius claimed in 560 that peace had returned to North Africa and its bishops had condemned the *Three Chapters*. However, the persecution persisted until the death of Justinian and the accession of Justin II in 565. The latter ordered the bishops to cease religious controversies and focus their efforts on spreading Christianity in North Africa.⁵⁶

The resistance of the North African bishops led to the exile and martyrdom of prominent church officials. Moreover, the dominance of bishops loyal to Byzantine authority and the presence of others in unfit ecclesiastical positions transformed the African Church into a compliant instrument of Byzantine interests. It lost its independence from Byzantine administration, being entrusted with administrative duties unrelated to its religious function.⁵⁷

B. The Dispute over Monothelitism

Justinian's policy failed to resolve the Monophysite problem and only intensified the Monophysites' hostility towards Byzantine authority. Their opposition threatened the secession of the provinces of Syria, Egypt, and Palestine from the Empire. This schism became particularly dangerous during the reign of Emperor Heraclius when the Persians invaded and occupied these provinces in early 613, aided by the Monophysites who regarded them as liberators from Byzantine rule. The Persians exploited this division by inciting the Monophysites against Byzantine authority.⁵⁸

Fearing an alliance between the Persians and Monophysites against Byzantium, Heraclius recognised the necessity of adopting a new religious policy that would attract the Monophysites to his side and enable him to restore religious unity in Egypt, Syria, and Palestine a unity deemed crucial for confronting external threats.⁵⁹

Heraclius found a solution to his religious dilemma in a proposal by Sergius, Patriarch of Constantinople, who formulated a new theological formula claiming that Christ possessed two natures, divine and human, endowed with a single will and a single operation derived from the Father. This formula was a compromise, borrowing the principle of a single will and operation from Monophysitism while retaining the Catholic doctrine of the duality of Christ's divine and human natures. This doctrine became known as Monothelitism (*Monoenergeia*), or the doctrine of the single will in Christ. Sergius believed that this new formula would reconcile Catholics, Monophysites, and Byzantine authority.⁶⁰

Heraclius became convinced that Monothelitism could achieve religious unity among his subjects. He endeavoured to persuade the heads of the Eastern Churches in Syria, Egypt, Palestine, and Armenia to accept the new formula of unity, succeeding in this effort. The Monophysites in these provinces readily adopted Monothelitism, except in Egypt, where Patriarch Cyrus was compelled to resort to force to impose it on the Copts.⁶¹

Sophronius, who became Patriarch of Jerusalem in 634, led the opposition against Monothelitism in Palestine, declaring it incompatible with both Catholicism and Monophysitism. Nonetheless, Sergius succeeded in silencing his dissent and informed Pope Honorius of the doctrine's true nature. Honorius, who acknowledged the existence of a single will in Christ but stopped short of admitting a single operation, forced Sergius to abandon the latter and to limit the doctrine to the single will alone.⁶²

Heraclius officially sanctioned Monothelitism in its revised form through the Creed or Symbol of Faith decree of 638, which prohibited any discussion of the principle of Christ's operation. However, Pope Honorius's successors, particularly John IV, repudiated Monothelitism, deeming it a heresy to be combated. John IV convened a council on February 11, 641, which condemned Monothelitism, declared it heretical, and excommunicated all who adhered to it.⁶³

The stance of the Church of Rome catalysed resistance among the Western Churches, especially the Church of North Africa, which was regarded as the principal bastion against Monophysitism and other heretical doctrines.⁶⁴

C. The Response of the North African Church to Monothelitism:

Heraclius's decree provoked indignation and opposition among the Catholic bishops and inhabitants of North Africa. Patriarch Pyrrhus, a successor to Sergius, failed in his efforts to defend and propagate the heresy, as well as in gaining supporters among North African bishops. New developments from 634 onwards cast the North African Church once again as a central party in religious disputes. With the onset of Islamic conquests in eastern Byzantine provinces, Syria fell in 636, followed by Egypt in 640. This prompted a mass migration of Christians seeking refuge from Muslim rule to North Africa, where the governor, Georgius, welcomed them and provided all the necessary conditions for their settlement.

Among the migrants were many priests, monks, and monothelites from Syria, Egypt, and Palestine, who began to spread their doctrine forcefully among the local Catholic population.⁶⁵

The activities of the monothelite heretics alarmed the North African populace and nearly provoked a revolt. Georgius intervened to calm the situation, attempting to alert Heraclius, the Pope, and Patriarch Pyrrhus to the unrest in North Africa caused by the monothelite mission. However, Heraclius died before receiving Georgius's message and was succeeded by his son Constantine III, a Catholic by faith. Constantine III ordered Georgius to use force against the Monothelites, imprisoning them in Catholic monasteries, expelling the extremists from North Africa, and confiscating their properties. These measures restored peace to the region.⁶⁶

The situation changed with the death of Constantine III in the same year and the ascension of Heraclonas to power under the regency of his mother, Empress Martina, a monothelite. The monothelites regained their former influence and received full support and endorsement from her. She ordered Georgius to cease the persecution of Monothelites and even sent a Byzantine official to North Africa to release those who had been imprisoned. However, Georgius questioned the authenticity of these orders, considering them forged and doubting that they were genuinely issued by the Empress, thus refusing to comply.

The intervention of Byzantine authorities in favour of the Monothelites sparked protests and indignation among the population of North Africa, who accused the authorities of waging war against Catholic doctrine.⁶⁷

To manage the situation, Georgius attempted to convince the angry Catholics that Martina remained committed to Catholicism and asserted that he would continue prosecuting the Monothelites, subjecting them to corporal punishment and imprisonment, in direct defiance of imperial orders. Consequently, Georgius was summoned to Constantinople to explain his position and justify his disobedience to the emperor's commands.⁶⁸

The departure of Georgius from North Africa in such a manner enraged the population. It deepened their resentment towards the Byzantines, especially since his actions were perceived as a defence of Catholicism against the heretical Monothelites and their Byzantine patrons.⁶⁹ This only strengthened their ability to resist Byzantine religious policy. This resistance was led by Father Maximus, renowned for his hostility to monothelitism. He combated the doctrine in Alexandria and Constantinople with the support of Sophronius before relocating to North Africa in 640 after the Islamic conquest of Syria and Egypt. He chose North Africa as his base to continue opposing monothelitism and the Byzantine authority that supported it. Knowing the firm Catholic roots of the province and the people's attachment to the faith, he took upon himself, with the assistance of Father Thalassius, a monk in a monastery near Carthage, to organise the resistance of the North African bishops against the Monothelites and Byzantines. Maximus openly declared that religious peace could not prevail as long as Heraclius ruled the empire and endorsed monothelitism.⁷⁰

The accession of Constans II in October 641 led to the removal of Martina and Heraclonas from power, forcing Pyrrhus to resign and be exiled to North Africa in 645. There, he was confronted by Father Maximus in the presence of North African bishops and compelled to renounce his heretical doctrine and cease promoting it. Pyrrhus's renunciation of Monothelitism dealt a severe blow to the Byzantine authorities who supported it, as he was its chief proponent, and his rejection of it called into question the legitimacy of the doctrine.⁷¹

Maximus exploited the religious enthusiasm of North African bishops following their victory, calling them to convene religious councils and condemn Monothelitism in order to eradicate it permanently.⁷² Based on his call, three religious councils were convened in early 646, chaired, respectively by Columbus, Bishop of Numidia; Istephanus, Bishop of Pisa; and Reparatus, Bishop of Mauritania. However, it was impossible to convene a council in Proconsular Africa because Fortunus, a Monothelite, held the position of bishop of Carthage.⁷³

The leaders of the three provinces sent a letter to Paul, Patriarch of Constantinople, demanding that he renounce heresy. Following the dismissal of Fortunus from his position, Victorinus was appointed in his stead on July 16, 646. The North African bishops then held a general council with the participation

of 112 bishops, of whom 69 were from Proconsular Africa and 43 from Pisa. The number of bishops from Numidia and Mauritania remains unknown.⁷⁴

The assembled bishops condemned Monothelitism and reaffirmed the dual nature of Christ's will. They warned the Byzantines of the dangers that heresy posed to the unity of the Church and threatened to excommunicate anyone who adhered to heresy.⁷⁵

Additionally, they sent three letters:

- The first was to Paul, demanding that he deny heresy and cease spreading it.
- The second was Emperor Constans II, urging him to combat heresy and to use his authority to force Paul to return to orthodoxy.
- The third letter to Pope Theodore I, informing him of their decisions and requesting him to use his religious authority to deprive Paul of ecclesiastical status and to encourage the Emperor to suppress heresy and promote religious unity among his subjects.⁷⁶

D. Byzantine Retreat from Monothelitism

The resistance of North African bishops was strengthened by the defiance of Father Maximus and Pope Martin I against the Byzantine authority and its religious policies. Martin, I sent a letter to North African bishops congratulating them on their firm stance and commitment to Catholicism and its defence. He convened a council at the Lateran Palace in Italy, attended by Victorianus, bishop of Vassalis, which annulled the decree issued by Heraclius in 638. Martin's position led to his accusation of rebellion against Byzantine authority in the West, resulting in his trial and exile. Father Maximus shared a similar fate: he was arrested and tried in Constantinople on charges of fomenting sedition and inciting the archon Gregorius to rebel against the Byzantine central government, with the intention of seceding from North Africa. He was tortured and exiled.⁷⁷

The support of the North African Church for the Church of Rome in its religious conflict with the Byzantines enabled it to withstand imperial pressure and eventually triumph, forcing the Byzantines to abandon their religious policies. Moreover, the Byzantines sought to regain their influence in the western provinces under their control. They therefore renounced monothelitism after it lost its political significance following the permanent loss of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine. Emperor Constantine IV convened the Sixth Ecumenical Council in Constantinople in 680, which definitively condemned monothelitism and affirmed the coexistence of two wills—human and divine—in Christ.⁷⁸

Summary:

On the basis of the detailed presentation of the religious events that unfolded in North Africa after the arrival of the Byzantine conquerors and the explicit positions taken by the local Church and its bishops against attempts by the Byzantine political authority to interfere with the faith of the people, it can be concluded that the profound religious dispute caused by the imposition of the monophysite and monothelite doctrines evolved into a political and sectarian rupture between the inhabitants and the ruling authority. This rupture, particularly in the mid-1970s, led the people of the region to sympathise less with the Byzantines when they faced the Islamic conquest armies from that period onwards.

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