

The concordat between the Byzantine emperor & the Eastern Orthodox Church at 14th century (Norman Russell)

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A new situation arose after the capture of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade in 1204. The emperor in Asia Minor had an important advantage over his rival in Western Greece because he had the patriarch with him. Working in concert, emperor and patriarch established Nicaea as the political and ecclesiastical capital of a reconstituted East Roman empire. In 1261 Michael VIII Palaeologus retook Constantinople. His entry into the city was more of a religious than a military occasion as he made his way on foot to Hagia Sophia preceded by the icon of the Hodegetria.



Eleven years later, he issued a jubilant chrysobull to mark the occasion of the ‘*apokatastasis* of the Romans’, restoring valuable properties to Hagia Sophia and bestowing gifts and honours on the patriarch Joseph ‘since God, because of his great favour towards me has entrusted to my reign the *epistemonarkhian*’. The chrysobull was drawn up in 1272 ‘in which year our pious and “God-impelled” [*theoprobletos*] power has signed it’. Deno Geanakoplos comments: ‘Note the use here of *theoprobletos*, a term which was then and today still is applied to a bishop, and which was probably used here by Michael purposely in order to point up once again his selection as the chosen instrument of God’s will’. Michael did well to emphasise his role as *epistemonarkhes* of the Church and instrument of God’s will. The patriarch Joseph, who had legitimised his succession by absolving him from the sin of blinding the young John IV Lascaris, was turning away from him because of his policy of pursuing union with the Elder Rome. After the union of 1274, Joseph was replaced as patriarch by the more compliant John Beccus, but Michael could not force acceptance of the union. After Michael came a period of rapid political decline. The Church, however, flourished. As Ostrogorsky observes, ‘While the state was disintegrating the Patriarchate of Constantinople remained the centre of the Orthodox world, with subordinate metropolitan sees and archbishops in the territories of Asia Minor and the Balkans now lost to Byzantium, as well as the Caucasus, Russia and Lithuania.’

The shifting balance between patriarch and emperor reached a critical point in the latter part of the reign of Michael VIII’s great-grandson, John V. John, as already

mentioned, became a Roman Catholic in 1370. His chief minister for much of his reign, Demetrius Cydones, was also a Roman Catholic. In practice the Orthodox Church was left to regulate its own affairs without imperial interference under a succession of able pro-hesychast patriarchs from Kallistos I to Antony IV all through the second half of the fourteenth century. So what was the emperor's role? In this unprecedented situation John V needed guidelines. Accordingly, at some time in the 1380s he convoked the standing synod at the Stoudios monastery and asked the then patriarch, Neilos, to specify the emperor's role in the government of the Church. The resulting document has been described, not entirely misleadingly, as a concordat. It sets out in nine articles the emperor's rights with regard to the Church. These are:

- (1) The emperor can veto the election of a metropolitan.
- (2) He can move bishops and amalgamate bishoprics.
- (3) He sanctions nominations to the high offices in the patriarchal administration.
- (4) He must respect the boundaries of dioceses.
- (5) He is immune from all patriarchal censure.
- (6) He can keep in Constantinople or return to their dioceses bishops who come to the capital on important business.
- (7) He can exact from every new bishop an oath of loyalty to his person and the empire.
- (8) He can make all bishops sign synodal acts.
- (9) The bishops in their turn are not to propose for a diocese a candidate who is not a friend of the emperor.

These all concern administrative matters. There is no mention of the sacral aspects of the imperial office. The emphasis is entirely on the emperor's indispensable role as *epistemonarkhes*. It is significant that two vital imperial prerogatives did not even come up for discussion: the right to convoke an ecumenical council and the right to appoint the ecumenical patriarch. These were simply taken for granted.

Norman Russell,

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