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# Review of The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787): Their History and Theology, by L.D. Davis

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## BOOK REVIEWS

*The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology.* By LEO DONALD DAVIS, S.J. Theology and Life Series 21. Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1987. 342 pp. \$17.95 paper.

This is a welcome book for undergraduate and seminary teachers of church history and the history of doctrine, and graduate students, if not their professors, will likewise find it handy. It is a clear, concise history of the first seven councils which blends well the historical and doctrinal elements. In fact, this is the book's real strong point. Years ago people went through studies hearing about the great "isms" of the early church without ever knowing much about the historical circumstances in which these doctrinal positions were hammered out, while the recent tendency has been to subordinate the theological dimension to the sociopolitical dimension or, worse, to reduce it to that. Davis clearly believes that theological statements have relevance beyond their own era but are still products of that era.

Since this is a rather general book, I will not deal so much with particular councils as with the book as a whole. In a sense, Davis has much going for him: the topic is vast (Trinitarianism, Christology, Iconoclasm) and the cast of characters is both large and colorful (Constantine, Cyril of Alexandria, Dioscorus, Justinian), but Davis has done justice to both. He is particularly adept at weaving the reader through all the political rivalries of church and state (Constantinople versus Rome) and of church and church (Constantinople versus Rome, Alexandria versus the rest of the East). In spite of the book's subtitle, theology takes a back seat to history.

Since this is a survey, he has not staked new positions but rather has presented a moderate position, relying, however, upon good recent scholarship, as the handy bibliographies at the end of each chapter indicate. In general, his judgments seem sober and balanced. Davis has also put himself and thus his readers into the growing scholarly world of Late Antiquity; that is, there is no sharp patristic-medieval break. However valid this latter concept might be for the West, it is meaningless for the East. For example, Constantinople II in 553 and Constantinople III in 680 were both direct outgrowths of Chalcedon; that is, the Three Chapters and Monothelism were both attempts to placate the Monophysites in Byzantium's Eastern provinces.

Davis finishes with a sensible suggestion to his fellow Roman Catholics to reconsider their insistence upon ecumenical councils after Nicea II, pointing out that this is a significant barrier to reunion between Roman Catholics and other Christians, especially, of course, the Orthodox, and of questionable historical and theological validity. He is quite right on this point, but it is regrettable that he did not devote more space to this suggestion.

Although not written as a companion to the Glazier Message of the Fathers of the Church series, this book can be used with some of those volumes.

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*The Life of Saint Nikon.* Edited by DENIS F. SULLIVAN. The Archbishop Iakovos Library of Ecclesiastical and Historical Sources 14. Brookline, Massachusetts: Hellenic College Press, 1987. vii + 314 pp. \$23.95 cloth; \$16.95 paper.

In the mid-tenth century Saint Nikon, called *Metanoeite* ("Repent!") because of his constant preaching on that theme, entered a monastery in his native Asia Minor and lived as a hermit for twelve years. After the Byzantines recaptured Crete from the Arabs in 961, he spent seven years on the island endeavoring to win the very hostile population back to Christianity. In the 970s he settled in Sparta, founded a monastery, and remained there until his death some twenty years later.

While the *Life* has its expected complement of miracle stories, it provides many concrete details concerning the social and religious life of tenth-century Greece, and it refers to specific historical persons and events. We read of peasants mired in poverty, travellers threatened by bandits and pirates, not to mention the ubiquitous demons, sorcerers, the persecution of Jews, men playing ball outside the church on Sunday, rapacious tax collectors, foreigners, distant emperors, local officials, and monastic practices.

In this volume Sullivan presents a solid, critical edition of the Greek text. The relationship of the two extant manuscripts and the date of its composition are competently and persuasively discussed in the introduction. An English translation is given on facing pages. There follow some thirty pages of well-researched commentary. The edition itself is carefully done and is followed by an index of Greek words; the English index is limited to proper names. Despite occasional typographical errors, the book is clearly printed and nicely presented.

On the other hand, one can only regret that not as much care would seem to have been expended on the English translation. While accurate enough, it renders the Greek—admittedly not a literary masterpiece in itself—in too wooden and literal a fashion, often resulting in very awkward English phrases. In a few places the translation does not appear to convey the sense of the original. In Byzantine Greek, for example, *aidimos* does not mean illustrious, but refers to a departed one, "the late," "the revered." Rather than "for the future," *tou loipou* means simply "moreover," "well then." On pages 42–43 the meaning is not that Nikon "served the smoked meat," but that he "prepared the smoked (or salted) fish." On pages 82–83 the Greek