CHAPTER FIVE

LEO OF CHALCEDON, EUTHYMIOS ZIGABENOS
AND THE RETURN TO THE PAST

The case of Leo, Metropolitan of Chalcedon immediately followed upon the downfall of John Italos. As we shall see, in the course of challenging the emperor’s authority over the church Leo produced a relatively poorly constructed theology of the image that sought to defend the problematic possibility that one might adore an icon. Interestingly, as we have already noted, he was one of the judges who had condemned Italos for expressing the possibility of such adoration. Leo’s argument led to the strong and extended response from Eustratios of Nicaea discussed in the last chapter. In this chapter, we shall not only examine Leo’s own definition of the icon, but will also show that the responses he provoked led to a re-assertion of the authority of the ninth-century iconophile fathers for defining the question of images in Komnenian Byzantium. He will, therefore, allow us to come full circle and to return to the theological understanding of the icon formulated by the iconophiles of the ninth century.

Leo’s difficulties persisted for many years, having their beginning in early 1082 and only being resolved in 1095. He was a figure of some eminence. He had attained the rank of Metropolitan of Chalcedon, had acted as one of the judges at the trial of John Italos, and was regarded as a holy man by supporters. Nonetheless, once he challenged the authority of the recently installed and embattled emperor, Alexios I Komnenos, he was held to account for his opinions. The dispute had its origins in late 1081 when the Emperor Alexios I was in desperate need of funds to continue his war against the Norman ruler Robert Guiscard, who had invaded Byzantine territory at Dyrrachium (Dürres in Albania). In Constantinople, Alexios’s mother, Anna Dalassena, and his brother, Isaak Sebastokrator, decided to melt down sacred vessels and works of art in order to meet this need. They had a precedent for such an action. Alexios’s uncle, Isaak I Komnenos (1057–59), had done a similar

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thing with little opposition a generation earlier. Furthermore, in order to legitimate a potentially controversial act, Isaak Sebastokrator had sought patriarchal blessing for his actions and a synod of the church had met and approved the expropriation. The ensuing expropriations were carried out only in patriarchal foundations in order to avoid questions regarding the extent of this ruling. In spite of these safeguards, when silver and gold images were removed from the doors of the church of the Theotokos Chalkoprateia in Constantinople, Leo of Chalcedon was roused to resist the synodal decision and the subsequent expropriations. In early 1082 Leo wrote a letter of protest to Alexios. His account of the events is presented in somewhat dramatic terms:

Our faith has been compromised, holy things profaned, the precious pearl has been sullied, the cross trampled under foot, and the image of God covered in blows, not having suffered the same at any other time, for this was altogether more undignified and dishonorable as the Savior’s limbs had never before been broken, yet now the Savior’s head and his eyes and all his limbs of his body are broken under a weight of iron, and he has been delivered to the fire like a murderer; and we have delivered holy things to the dogs, and thrown the pearls before swine; and as if there was nothing wrong with this, we remain wholly indifferent. Who speaks thus? It is the whole church, that is all true Christians, who have not sold the truth like Judas for present things, nor by a peridious kiss. And if you want to know more, then listen to the witnesses: here the holy monasteries, how they have been ravaged! the houses of ascetes, how they have lost their ornament! the altars, how deprived of their beauty; like naked corpses; even the tabernacles, where are the vessels which contain God, by their emptiness, like some sort of mouth, they cry more clearly than a thousand witnesses, that they are no longer what they once were: [these are] numerous witnesses of the real and therefore irrefutable. If you want written witnesses, search the diplomas: they will speak and not hide the truth. Some will tell of their being broken into pieces, others that they have been scraped, and others that they have been completely modified and transformed. Given such witnesses, who could oppose them? Who could refuse to accept them? Who could not admit the truth that they all proclaim? And so as to present you with witnesses from the enemies, for the truth has proofs in abundance, let us ask him who has produced

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