

THE ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (NICEA, 325 A.D.)

Convened under Emperor Constantine I, the First Ecumenical Council mainly battled a heresy called **Arianism**. Three-hundred eighteen bishops participated in this Council, including St. Nicholas the Wonderworker; St. James, bishop of Nisibis; St. Spyridon of Tremythous; and St. Athanasius, who was a deacon at the time. They came together because an Alexandrian priest named Arius rejected the Divine nature and pre-eternal birth of Jesus Christ. Instead, he taught his followers that the Son of God was the highest creation.

At this Council, the Church established the following:

- The Son of God is true God, begotten of God the Father before all ages.
- Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was not created and is eternal.
- As the Son of God, begotten from God the Father, Jesus Christ is of one essence with the Father.
- The Church should celebrate Pascha on the first Sunday after the first full moon after the spring/vernal equinox.
- Various rules for bishops, priests, and deacons, their jurisdiction, and their elections/ordinations respectively
- Many other canons regarding excommunication, penance, etc.

The first three bullets we listed are clearly and concisely stated in the **Creed**, or Symbol of Faith, recited by the Orthodox during almost every liturgical worship service.

SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (CONSTANTINOPLE, 381 A.D.)

The Second Ecumenical Council convened under Emperor Theodosius I. One-hundred fifty bishops attended this Council, including Gregory the Theologian, who presided over the Council, Gregory of Nyssa, Meletius of Antioch, Amphilochius of Iconium and Cyril of Jerusalem. This Council condemned the heresy called **Pneumatomachianism**. This heresy, led by Arian bishop Macedonius of Constantinople, taught that the Holy Spirit was not divine, but a creature. Therefore, the Holy Spirit was, according to this heresy, subservient to God the Father and God the Son, like an angel. In response to this heresy, the Church affirmed the following as dogma:

- The Holy Spirit proceeds from God the Father and shares the same essence (and thus equality) with the Father and the Son

Additionally, the Second Ecumenical Council added five articles to the Nicene Creed. In these articles, the Church declared her teachings about the Holy Spirit, the Church, the Mysteries (read Sacraments), the resurrection of the dead, and the life in the world to come. After adding these clarifying articles, the Church referred to the symbol of faith as the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, because of the two Councils that contributed to its content.

THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (EPHESUS, 431 A.D.)

Convened under Emperor Theodosius II, the Third Ecumenical Council condemned the heresy of **Nestorianism**. Two-hundred bishops participated in this Council. Nestorius, Archbishop of Constantinople, incorrectly taught that the Most-holy Virgin Mary simply gave birth to the man Christ. He believed that God later united with the man Jesus and dwelt in Him as in a temple, similar to the way God dwelt in Moses and other prophets. Therefore, Nestorius called the Lord Jesus Christ *God-bearing*, and not God incarnate. Moreover, he insisted on calling the Virgin Mary *Christotokos* (Christ-bearer) rather than *Theotokos* (God-bearer). In response to this heresy, the Third Ecumenical Council declared the following:

- Jesus Christ was fully God and fully Man
- Because Jesus was true God of true God, the Virgin Mary gave birth to God; thus she should be called *Theotokos*

The Council also affirmed the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, and strictly prohibited making any changes or additions to it.

FOURTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (CHALCEDON, 451 A.D.)

The Fourth Ecumenical Council convened under Emperor Marcian. Six-hundred fifty bishops met at this Council to condemn the false teachings of Monophysitism. Taught by an archimandrite named Eutychius, Monophysitism rejected the human nature of our Lord Jesus Christ. Moreover, it taught that Christ's Divine nature had completely absorbed His Human nature. Therefore, according to Eutychius, we only need to recognize the Divine nature of Christ, not the Human. In summary, this Council defined the following:

- Our Lord Jesus Christ is perfect God and perfect Man
- As God, Jesus Christ is eternally begotten (born) from God
- As Man, Christ was born of the Virgin Mary and took on our full human nature, but was without sin of His own will

Through Christ's incarnation, He unites Divinity and Humanity within Himself as a single Person. Infused and immutable, refuting Eutychius; indivisible and inseparable, refuting Nestorius.

FIFTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (CONSTANTINOPLE, 553 A.D.)

Convened under Justinian I, the Fifth Ecumenical Council met to quell a controversy between Nestorians and Monophysites. One-hundred sixty-five bishops met at this Council to condemn the well-known works of the Antiochian school of the Syrian church, entitled *The Three Chapters*. The writers of these works – Theodore of Mopsuestia, Theodoret of Cyrus, and Ibas of Edessa – clearly expressed Nestorian errors. But nothing was said of their works at the Fourth Ecumenical Council. When debating with Monophysites, Nestorians referred to these works. Monophysites found in those works an excuse to reject the Fourth Ecumenical Council and to slander the universal Orthodox Church, charging that it had deviated toward Nestorianism.

The Council condemned all three works and also condemned Theodore of Mopsuestia himself, as not having repented. As for Theodoret of Cyrus and Ibas of Edessa, they themselves received pardon. In other words, the Council limited censure only to their Nestorian works. Theodoret and Ibas renounced their false opinions and died in peace with the Church. Moreover, the Council reiterated its condemnation of the heresies of Nestorius and Eutychius.

SIXTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (CONSTANTINOPLE, 680 A.D.)

The Sixth Ecumenical Council convened under Constantine IV. It consisted of 170 bishops who collectively condemned **Monothelitism**. (*This is different from Monophysitism, which we covered earlier.*) This heresy taught that while Jesus Christ had two natures, both God and Man, He only had one Divine Will. In other words, this heresy rejected that Christ, as a man, had His own free human will. In response, the Council clarified that in Jesus Christ are *two natures*, Divine and human, and in these two natures there are two wills. However, the human will in Christ is not against, but rather is submissive to His Divine will.

Additionally, this Council pronounced excommunication against a number of other heretics, including the Roman Pope Honorius, who acknowledged these false teachings. A Roman delegation of presbyters and deacons signed the formulation of this Council, thus clearly illustrating that the highest power in Christendom belongs to the Council, not to the Pope.

THE QUINISEXT SYNOD (691 A.D.)

After eleven years, the Council again opened a meeting in the imperial palace to resolve questions about the Church hierarchy. Because it supplemented the Fifth and Sixth Ecumenical Councils, it is called the Fifth-Sixth (Quinisext) Synod. This Council established canons to guide the Church. These include:

- 85 Canons of the Holy Apostles
- Canons of the seven Ecumenical and nine Local Councils, which serve as the foundation of Orthodox Church government

Moreover, this synod condemned several innovations of the Roman Church on the grounds that these changes were not in agreement with the spiritual decisions of the Ecumenical Church. The main Roman innovations mentioned at the synod included the requirement that priests and deacons be celibate, a strict fast on Saturdays of the Great Fast, and the depiction of Christ in the form of a lamb, or in any way other than He appeared on the earth.

SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL (NICEA, 787 A.D.)

Convened under Empress Irene (widow of Leo IV), the Seventh Ecumenical Council fought against the heresy of **Iconoclasm**. At the time of the Council, iconoclasm had raged for sixty years under the Greek Emperor Leo III. Leo III wanted to convert Mohammedans (Muslims) to Christianity, and believed it necessary to do away with veneration of icons in order to convert them. This heresy continued under his son, Constantine V Copronymus, and his grandson, Leo IV.

The Council resolved to provide holy icons and place them in churches, together with the likeness of the Life-giving Cross of the Lord. The faithful were to honor and venerate (but not worship) the icons, elevating their souls and hearts to the Lord God, the Theotokos and the Saints, who are represented in them.

However, after this council, persecution of the holy icons continued under Emperors Leo V, Michael II, and Theophilus. Thus, iconoclasm disturbed the Church for another 25 years. The local synod of Constantinople in 843 A.D. finally restored and affirmed veneration of the holy icons under the Empress Theodora.

This Council also established the celebration of the Triumph of Orthodoxy on the first Sunday of Great Lent, which we celebrate in thanksgiving to the Lord for granting His Church victory over the heresy of iconoclasm.

CONCLUSION

The Seven Ecumenical Councils clarified the unshakable foundations of the Christian Faith and protected them against the danger of mutation from heresy. Over the centuries, the Church continues to protect her precious dogmas and preserve them. Without them, we could have gone astray and lost the fullness of the Truth revealed to us by Our Lord Jesus Christ. So, the next time you profess the Creed, remember to be thankful you can profess it at all.