

The First Ecumenical Council

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Today we remember the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council, convened at Nicaea in 325. The results of the Council were very important, but so was its personal meaning for those who attended, as Father Alexander Schmemmann described:

For the first time, after centuries of semi-subterranean existence, prelates gathered from all parts of the Church, many still with the marks of wounds and mutilations received under [the persecutions of the emperor] Diocletian. The unprecedented magnificence of their reception and the hospitality and kindness of the emperor [Constantine] confirmed their joyous assurance that a new era had begun and that Christ was indeed victorious over the world. Constantine himself was the first to interpret the council in this way.

The great accomplishment of the Council was to refute Arianism, a widely-held heresy that threatened to divide the Church. It was a dispute, as the emperor said, that was "more dangerous than war and other conflicts" because it called into question Jesus' ability to be our Savior.

The Arians claimed that Jesus was not eternal, not equal to His Father, but a created being. The Church insisted that He had to be the divinely powerful Son of God in order to be able to save us. So, opposing

Arianism, the Fathers of the Council at Nicaea proclaimed that Jesus Christ is of the same substance as His Father, and there was never a time when He did not exist. His perfect divinity, therefore, was able to assume perfect humanity, and save all who are human.

This teaching is squarely Biblical. In one verse of the reading chosen for this day, John 17:5, Jesus prays, "And now, Father, glorify me in thy own presence with the glory which I had with thee before the world was made." Father and Son have the same glory, and have had it forever.

Despite its clear Biblical basis, there are many who don't accept the Church's teaching, including Unitarians, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Mormons whose work is so generously supported by the devout Marriott family's hotel empire. Even immediately after the decisive declarations of Nicaea, there was conflict. Saint Athanasius was the hero of the Council because he formulated the term "homoousion" (meaning "of one substance" and referring to Christ and His Father.) But Athanasius was hounded ever after by his Arian enemies; they managed to get him condemned and exiled.

He...wanted a gala occasion and rejoicing; as he said in his speech to the assembled bishops on the opening day, disputes were "more dangerous than war and other conflicts; they bring me more grief than anything else."

The truth established at Nicaea remains basic to our faith. But then, as now, truth was accompanied by deceitfulness and the persecution of truth tellers. We must take comfort, as fourth century Orthodox Christians also had to do, in another verse (16:33b) from John's Gospel: "In the world you have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world."