

Patriarchal and Synodal Encyclical
Issued on the Occasion of the 1700th Anniversary
of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea

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+ B A R T H O L O M E W

By God's Mercy, Archbishop of Constantinople-New Rome
and Ecumenical Patriarch

To the Plenitude of the Church: May God's Grace and Peace be with you!

We offer a hymn of thanks to the almighty, all-seeing, and benevolent God in Trinity, who vouchsafed that His people reach the 1700th anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, which bore spiritual witness to the authentic faith in divine Word born without beginning and truly consubstantial with the Father, "who for us and for our salvation descended, was incarnate and became human, suffered and arose on the third day, and ascended to the heavens, who will come again to judge the living and the dead."

The Council of Nicaea constitutes an expression of the synodal nature of the Church, the culmination of its "earliest conciliarity," which is

inseparably linked to the eucharistic realization of church life as well as of the practice of assembling together for decisions “with one accord” (Acts 2:1) on current matters. The Council in Nicaea also signifies the emergence of a new conciliar structure, namely of Ecumenical Councils that would prove definitive for the development of church affairs. It is noteworthy that an Ecumenical Council does not comprise a “permanent institution” in the life of the Church, but an “extraordinary event” in response to a specific threat to the faith, aiming at restoring the ruptured unity and eucharistic communion.

That the Council of Nicaea was convened by the Emperor, that Constantine the Great attended its deliberations and embraced its decisions with the status of imperial law, does not render it “an imperial synod.”¹ It was an unquestionably “ecclesiastical event” whereby the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, decided about its internal affairs, while the Emperor implemented the principle “Render unto Caesar the things that belong to Caesar and to God the things that belong to God” (Mt. 22:21).

In the face of the Arian heresy, the Church, in council, formulated the essence of its faith, which is experienced uninterruptedly. The pre-eternal Son and Word of God, “consubstantial to the Father . . . true God of true God,” through His incarnation, saves humankind from enslavement to the enemy and opens up to us the way of deification through grace. “He became

¹ Metropolitan John of Pergamon, *Works, Vol. 1: Ecclesiological Studies* (Athens: Domos Books, 2016), 675-6.

human so that we might become divine.”² The Symbol of Nicaea proclaims the sure conviction that the ongoing heretical deviation constitutes a denial of the potential for human salvation. In this sense, it is not simply a theoretical declaration, but a confession of faith, just like all the dogmatic texts of the Church, a genuine articulation of the living truth within it and through it.

What is of particular theological importance is the fact that the basis of the Sacred Symbol “We believe . . .” comprises a local baptismal Symbol or group of such Symbols. As the genuine bearer of the perennial self-conscience of the Church, the Council recapitulates and reaffirms the Apostolic deposit preserved by the local Churches. Athanasius the Great mentions that the Synodal Fathers “on matters of faith, do not write “It seemed to us . . .” but rather “This is what the catholic Church believes; and at once they confessed what they believe, in order to demonstrate that nothing novel was discovered in what they wrote, but that their mindset is apostolic, in other words exactly as the Apostles had taught.”³ The conviction of the divinely-instructed Fathers was that nothing was added to the faith of the Apostles and that the truly ecumenical Symbol of Nicaea comprises a proclamation of the common tradition of the catholic Church. The Conciliar Fathers, whom the Orthodox Church worthily honors and hymns as “precise protectors of the apostolic traditions,” adopted the

² Athanasius the Great, *On the Divine Incarnation*, PG 25.192.

³ Athanasius the Great, *Letter on the Councils of Ariminum in Italy and Seleucia in Isauria*, PG 26.688.

philosophical term “essence” (and its derivative “of one essence”) to express the Orthodox faith about the divinity of the Word, which Arius denied, and along with this denied the entire mystery of the universally salvific incarnate Divine Economy by becoming embroiled in Hellenistic concepts, thereby rejecting the “God of our Fathers” in the name of the “God of the philosophers.”

Another vitally important matter, which the Council of Nicaea was called to resolve for the sake of enhancing ecclesiastical unity in liturgical practice, was “when and how we should celebrate the Feast of Pascha.” The 1700th anniversary of the convening of this Council has brought back the timeliness of the matter of a common celebration of the Lord’s Resurrection. The Holy Great Church of Christ prays that Christians all over the world will return, in accordance with the decrees of the Council of Nicaea, to a celebration of Easter on a common day, as by a blessed coincidence this current year. Such a decision would serve as evidence and as a symbol of genuine progress in the struggle for our ecumenical co-sojourn and co-understanding through theological dialogue and the “dialogue of life,” as a tangible witness of our practical respect for what we have received from the undivided Church. The achievement of such a goal, in the context of this year’s anniversary, was the joint vision of the late Pope Francis of Rome and our Modesty. His passing immediately after all of Christendom celebrated

Easter emphasizes our responsibility to continue in this direction without wavering.

Moreover, the canonical work of the Council of Nicaea was also significant, formulating and affirming synodally the perennial canonical conscience of the Church, establishing the beginning and elevating the status of the metropolitan system, as well as of the prominent position and expanded responsibility of certain Thrones, out which gradually emerged the system of the Pentarchy. Inasmuch as the canonical legacy of Nicaea is a common inheritance for the entire Christian world, this year's anniversary is called to function as an invitation to return to the sources, namely to the primeval canonical regulations of the undivided Church.

The Ecumenical Throne of Constantinople has perennially served as the guarantor of the decisions of Nicaea. This spirit of the Great Church was also described through the Patriarchal and Synodal Encyclical on the 1600th anniversary of the Council "as the first Ecumenical and truly greatest Council of the Church."⁴ The decision to celebrate the anniversary with "a festive and, indeed, joint, if possible, event of all Orthodox Autocephalous Churches, in order altogether to manifest the faith and persistence to this day of our Holy Orthodox Church in the teaching and spirit of that Council, whose inspired decision on the one hand established and sealed the one faith of the Church, while on the other also splendidly presenting the unity of the

⁴ Synodal Minutes, *Codex I*, 94 (August 10, 1925), 102–3.

structure of the church through the presence of delegates from all ends of the world.” Unfortunately, however, this event did not prove feasible due to exceptional circumstances and the vacancy of the Ecumenical Throne. On July 19, 1925, the first Sunday after the enthronement of Patriarch Basil III, the “delayed commitment” was fulfilled with the celebration of “a special Patriarchal and Synodal Liturgy” in the venerable Patriarchal Church. What is of particular ecclesiological importance is that the Encyclical underlines the value of adopting the obligation of the Church of Constantinople—“as more directly associated with and responsible for the feast”—to celebrate this anniversary “which is immense for all of Christendom . . .”

The Council of Nicaea constitutes a milestone in the formation of the doctrinal identity and canonical structure of the Church. It remained the model for handling problems of faith and canonical order on an ecumenical level. The 1700th anniversary since its convening reminds Christianity of the traditions of the ancient Church, the value of mutual struggle against misconceptions of the Christian faith, and the mission of the faithful to contribute to the multiplication of the “good fruits” of the life in Christ, according to Christ, and directed toward Christ in the world.

Today, we are called to highlight the enduring message of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, the soteriological dimensions and anthropological implications of the term “homo-ousios,” the inseparable link between Christology and anthropology in an age of anthropological

confusion and intense efforts to emphasize the “meta-human” as an open horizon and self-divinizing perspective of human evolution, with the contribution of science and technology. The principle of “divine-human reality” comprises the answer to the impasse of the contemporary vision of a “man-god.” Therefore, reference to the “spirit of Nicaea” presents an invitation for us to turn to the essential aspects of our faith, the nucleus of which is the salvation of humankind in Christ.

Our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, is the full and perfect revelation of the truth about God and man. “Whoever has seen me has seen my father” (Jn 14:9). The incarnate Word of God demonstrated “first and alone,” as St. Nicholas Cabasilas writes, “the true and perfect human being, exemplary in conduct, in the way of life, and in every other respect.”⁵ This Truth is represented in the world by the One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church; it is the same Truth that nurtures her, the same Truth that she ministers to. The Church bears the robe of Truth, “woven by theology from above,” always rightly expounding and glorifying “the great mystery of piety,” evangelizing the word of faith, hope, and love, while anticipating the “endless day that knows no evening and no succession,”⁶ the coming kingdom of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

⁵ Nicholas Cabasilas, *On the Life in Christ*, PG 150.680.

⁶ Basil the Great, *On the Hexaemeron*, PG 29,52.

The task of theology is to reveal the soteriological dimension of doctrine and its interpretation in existential terms, which, along with participation in the ecclesiastical event, demands sensitivity and genuine interest for the human being and the adventure of its freedom. In this sense, the proclamation of our faith in the incarnate divine Word must be accompanied by our tangible response to His saving word: “This is my commandment to you, that you love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12).

In memory, then, of the ineffable gifts that He made and makes in the world, we unceasingly glorify the most-holy and most-splendid name of the Lord of all and God of love, through whom we have known the Father and through whom the Holy Spirit came into the world. Amen!

On June 1st, in the year of the Lord 2025.