

Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Council

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!

On this day, the Sunday before Pentecost, the Church calls us to remember the Holy Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Council which was held in Nicaea (present day Turkey) in the year 325.

This commemoration takes us to a time long ago and a place far away, yet what was done at this Council by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit directly effects and impacts our lives as Christians today.

At the time of the 1st Ecumenical Council in Nicaea the world was a very different place. The Roman Empire, under the leadership of Emperor Constantine the Great, was still undergoing expansion both in wealth, power, and territory.

The Church, which had been intensely persecuted by the civil authorities since the day of Pentecost, had finally been granted legal status and her faithful were permitted at last to worship and confess Christ without penalty of torture or death.

The New Testament had not yet been compiled into 27 books as we have them today. This is because although all the books of the New Testament had already been written, the Church was still very much in the process of deciding which books were acceptable and which were not, that is which books reflected the truth revealed in Jesus Christ and which were contaminated by the errors of men.

And though the faith and belief of the Christian Church was the same throughout the world, there was not yet an official creed or set of doctrines to which everyone formally adhered to. Now to be sure, just as the Apostles were united in one Lord, one Faith, and one Baptism, so too were their descendents the bishops, clergy, and people of one mind and one heart, so too did they constitute by the grace of the Holy Spirit, the one Body of Jesus Christ. But just as the New Testament had not yet taken on its final form, so too were the doctrines of the Church not yet fully articulated.

And so we see that, while possessing all the truth and spiritual gifts of Pentecost through Her mystical and historical link to the Upper Room, the Church was still very much in the process of articulating and compiling that which belonged to the True Faith – that which the Lord had taught, that which the Apostles had preached, and that which the faithful had preserved even to the shedding of their blood.

It was during these early formative years of the Church that many great things were accomplished – churches were built, thousands upon thousands were baptized, monasteries were established, spiritual writings proliferated, and many obtained that salvation offered in and through Christ.

Yet, as we know, wherever and whenever the Church goes about doing the will of the Lord, many challenges and difficulties arise. And such was most certainly the case in the early centuries of the Church.

It was at this time, during the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries, that one of the most dangerous heresies ever to attack the Church arose. The heresy was called Arianism in that it was named after the priest Arius who was it's chief proponent.

Arius's main error was that he taught, much to the horror of the right-believing Christians, that Jesus Christ was not God. Arius believed that Jesus Christ was not equal to the Father, and that He was some kind of created being, who was not divine by nature, nor True God of True God. This of course, conflicted not only with the teaching of the Apostles, but also with the revelation of Jesus Christ Himself, Who taught that He and His Father are One.

Now, while the teaching of Arius was not only new and strange but also contradictory to the Faith the Church had held from the beginning, it was still able to take root amongst those who were unsure of their beliefs – those whose theology was wishy-washy, those who had not yet acquired the mind of the Church. And this was primarily for two reasons.

First, Arius was an eloquent and persuasive speaker – he was a man of education and status and people liked him – he was in a sense what you would call a born leader. However, as is apparent to any person with reason, a leader is only as good as the place to which he leads, and Arius was leading his followers into deception and spiritual suicide.

Now the second reason why Arius's teaching was able to spread was because the Church had not yet fully articulated her saving doctrines – the saving truths about Jesus Christ. We have already seen that at this time the books of the New Testament were not yet compiled and the Church had not yet written her Creed. And so, without these foundational texts firmly established one could more easily be lead astray, and such was the case of Arius and his followers.

And so the entire Church met together in Council to deal with the heresy of Arius and to draft what would later become known as the Nicene Creed. This Creed or proclamation of Faith, which we recite at every Divine Liturgy and during our daily prayers, proclaimed that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is begotten of the Father before all ages, Light of Light, True God of True God, begotten not made, and of one essence with the Father, the One by Whom all things were made.

In short this Creed proclaimed that Jesus Christ, who walked this earth as a man, is also fully and truly God.

But the Holy Fathers who drafted this Creed did not stop with just simply proclaiming Christ's divinity, for their Creed continues, and in continuing it is explained how we

know for certainty that this is true – how we know without a doubt that Jesus Christ is True God of True God.

The next verse of the Creed is of vital significance for it says of the Son: “Who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven and was incarnate [of the Virgin Mary] and became man.” The Fathers knew that the very key to realizing that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is fully God was found not in human reasoning but only through Divine Revelation, and specifically in the Son’s coming down from heaven for us men and for our salvation as the Redeemer of the world.

It is through the Incarnation that we realize that Jesus Christ is truly God – through the wisdom of His teaching, through the power of His miracles, through the limitless of His love, through His voluntary and sacrificial death on the Cross, through His glorious Resurrection on the third day, and through His divine ascension into heaven. All of these things proclaim the truth that Jesus Christ is truly God in a way which words alone cannot express nor contradict.

But more than this, the Holy Fathers long ago and we here today, know that Jesus Christ is true God by virtue of His action within us through His Holy Spirit. It is through the Holy Spirit that Jesus Christ and His Heavenly Father come and make their abode within us, warming our hearts and enlightening our minds with the knowledge of the Holy Trinity. And through this Holy Spirit, we become not only participants in divine life, but also witnesses to the One through Whom this life has been given – we become witnesses to Jesus Christ.

Having just celebrated the Lord’s Ascension into heaven, it is fresh in our minds how before Christ ascended into heaven, He promised power from on high which would enable His followers to witness unto Him. The Lord said unto the disciples, “Tarry in the city of Jerusalem until you receive power from on high” “when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be witnesses to Me in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.”

In so saying, the Lord was offering to His followers the gift of theological certainty, the Spirit of Truth, the Spirit who would not only testify of the Son but also glorify the Son, for He would take of what was Christ’s and declare it to His disciples. This is the Spirit of Truth who would establish and protect Christ’s Church so that even the gates of Hell could not prevail against her.

And so, brothers and sisters, as we continue to celebrate the feast of the Ascension, and as we continue looking to the renewal of the Spirit on Pentecost, let us be certain of the salvation offered through the God-man, Jesus Christ. Let us not be wishy-washy in our theology, nor hold our own private opinions about who God is or what He has done for us. Instead let us submit our thoughts to the mind of the Church and the Spirit of God.

And let us be thankful that not only has our Church given us the Holy Scriptures as a help to realize our salvation, but let us also be filled with gratitude for the Holy Fathers

who through the Creed have preserved what the Lord taught, what the Apostles preached, and what the Faithful died for – that salvation in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Glory to Jesus Christ!