

Holy Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!

Today, brothers and sisters, the Church brings before us a special commemoration, that of the Holy Fathers of the First Six Ecumenical Councils.

These Holy Fathers lived between the fourth and seventh centuries, during an age of great theological discussion and debate – at a time, much like today, when various incorrect teachings circulated and many were confused about God and the nature of salvation.

But in this time of uncertainty the Holy Fathers were shown to be “lights upon the earth, guiding men to the True Faith” for they defined once and for all the fundamental and saving doctrines of the Christian Faith – the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation.

In the Orthodox Church, the definition of doctrine is never a matter of human speculation and it is not an individualistic endeavor. On the contrary, doctrine is defined by divine revelation and group experience – divine revelation from Jesus Christ and the spiritual experience of not just to one person but to the whole Church.

And so when the Fathers met in council and wrote their doctrinal statements and the Creed, which we recite to this day, they were not creating or formulating something new based upon their own ideas but were preserving that which had been handed down to them from Christ Himself, through the preaching of the Apostles, the confession of the Martyrs, and the teachings of generations of Holy Fathers who had preceded them.

We know that when we speak of something being handed down, we speak of tradition, for tradition literally means “that which is handed or passed down”. Now in the New Testament we encounter two vastly different kinds of tradition.

The first, for which Christ rebukes the Pharisees, is the tradition of men – those customs which are in conflict with the Law of God and the Spirit of the Gospel. St. Paul writes to the Colossians concerning this type of tradition. He says, “Beware lest any man spoil you through philosophy and vain deceit, after the tradition of men, after the ways of the world, and not after Christ.”

In saying this, St. Paul is telling these new Christians of Asia Minor that they have to be able to make a clear and definitive distinction between the ways of men, which are based on worldly philosophy and vain deceit, and the ways of God which are according to Christ.

These ways of God, according to Christ, are what we call Holy Tradition. And in this Holy Tradition, the Apostle Paul tells the Thessalonians, and us here today, to stand

fast, to persevere. He writes, "Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold to the traditions which you have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle."

As faithful Orthodox Christians we know that Holy Tradition encompasses many things: the Holy Scriptures, the Creed, the decrees of the Ecumenical Councils, the writings of the Fathers, the dogmatic and disciplinary canons, the Divine Services, the Sacraments, the Holy Icons, and so forth.

But let us ask ourselves: What was Holy Tradition for our ancestors in the true Faith, for the first Christians, for those who lived before the Scriptures were written, before the Ecumenical Councils were held, before the saving doctrines of our Faith were defined?

Brothers and Sisters, this is an important question for us if we want to be more than just historical descendents of the first Christians – more than just those who pass down our faith like an old family heirloom or cultural treasure.

We know that in the early days of the Church, which the Acts of the Apostles recount, we see the Christian life referred to as simply the Way – the way of the Lord, the way of God, the way of salvation. For the first Christians the tradition they received from the Apostles was simply a way of life, a way of life which was according to God, patterned upon the life of Christ, and which through the Holy Spirit led to their sanctification and salvation.

This way of life confirmed the two main doctrines revealed by Jesus Christ. It confirmed the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the doctrine of the Incarnation.

The Father sent His only begotten Son into the world – the Son reconciled man with God through His Incarnation, Passion, Death on the Cross, Resurrection on the third day, and Ascension into heaven. And the Holy Spirit, extended this reconciliation to all men, sanctifying them by uniting them to God the Father in the Body of Christ, the Church.

This is the way of salvation which God established, the Apostles preached, the Martyrs confessed, the Fathers upheld, but the heretics denied.

All of the heresies, which the Fathers exposed during the first six Ecumenical Councils, denied the salvation of man because they could not accept either the Mystery of the Holy Trinity or the Mystery of the Incarnation. Some could not acknowledge the full divinity of the Son of God or the Holy Spirit, believing them to be somehow less than God the Father. While others could not believe that the Son of God became fully man while at the same time remaining fully God.

The Fathers saw very clearly that in both cases, salvation would be denied. In the first case, if Christ was not God, then how can man be saved because only God can save from sin, death, and the devil. And in the second case, if Christ did not become fully man, how could mankind be united to God – how could the gulf between God and man, which was created by sin, be overcome?

And so we see that when the Fathers defined the doctrine of our Faith, they did not create any new teachings, but they upheld the teaching and revelation of Jesus Christ. They upheld the way of salvation as lived, preached, and witnessed to by the Apostles, Martyrs, and Saints of the Church.

This was a difficult task in that it led to much persecution, suffering, exile, and even death. Yet, in another sense it was easy for the Fathers, it was easy because by living the way of salvation they were able to immediately discern the difference between the revelation of Jesus Christ and the heresies of men – between the tradition of the Church and the traditions of men – between divine truth and human deception.

This task has now fall to us, for with inheritance comes responsibility.

We have received the purity of the Orthodox Faith and to this which must cling, but we must also engage the world which has so many different ideas about Who God is and what He has done for us. But for us to do this successfully, we have to become as the Holy Fathers, who lived the way of salvation, and became first hand witnesses to the redemption offered through Jesus Christ.

We have to confirm the revelation of Jesus Christ by the spiritual experience which the Church offers us. And if we do this, we will not only obtain our own salvation but we will also become by the grace of God, “lights upon the earth, guiding all men to the True Faith”.

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

Glory to Jesus Christ!