

First Ecumenical Council (325)¹

- Ecumenical means worldwide. The council was represented by delegates from the whole Roman Empire (except for Britain for the 1st Ecumenical Council). In different terms; delegates were from the 5 apostolic sees (Rome, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem).
- The ecumenical councils were set to answer controversies and to clarify the true faith.
- The 1st ecumenical council was called by Constantine the Emperor in order to address divisions in the Church. The Arian controversy was among them.
- The council began on May 20, 325 in Nicea. It lasted 2 months. The farewell address was given by Constantine on his 20th anniversary as Emperor on July 25, 325.
- The invitation was sent to 1800 bishops. The number of attendees was between 220 Bishops as Eusebius of Caesarea counted and 318 as per Athanasius of Alexandria who was then a Deacon to Alexander the Bishop of Alexandria. The total number of attendees may be over 1800 because each Bishop was allowed to bring with him up to 2 priests and 3 deacons.
- 3 Patriarchs were among the attendees: Alexander of Alexandria, Eusthadius of Antioch and Macarius of Jerusalem. It was noted that some came to defend the faith with the marks of persecution on their face as Paphnutius of Thebes, Potamon of Heraclis and Paul of Neocaesarea. Nicolas of Myra (who slapped Arius on his face), Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea (the 1st Church historian), Aristakes of Armenia (son of St Gregory the illuminator), Jacob of Nisibis, Leontius of Caesarea, Spyridon Trimythous, Bishop John (Persia), Bishops Theophilus and Stratophilus (Gothic), Marcus of Calabria (Italy), Cecilian of Carthage (Africa), Hosius of Cordoba (Hispania), Nicasius of Dijon (Gaul) and Dommus of Stridon (Danube).
- At the end of the council only 2 supporters of about 20 remained faithful to Arius: Theonas of Marmarica in Libya and Secundus of Ptolemais (were ex-communicated and exiled to Illyria). Maris of Chalcedon, Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nice who were supporters of Arius accepted the Creed.
- Hosius of Cordoba may have presided the council. Constantine was an observer and did not vote. His main concern was to unite and to bring peace to the Empire. He did not have any theological knowledge.

The Agenda of the Council:

5 controversies were dividing the Church at that time:

1. The Arian Controversy (*Christological issue*)
2. Date of celebration Pascha (*Paschalion*)
3. Meletian schism
4. Validity of Baptism by Heretics
5. The status of the lapsed in the persecution under Licinius

¹ Information was collected from various sources. Wikipedia was among these sources.

➤ **The Arian Controversy: (Father and Son Relation)**

- The debate was in the Alexandrian Church. It was between Arius and St Alexander of Alexandria.
- **Arius** argued that Jesus Christ is God's perfect creation. He was a creature made from nothing and everything was created through him. This means that there was a time when the Son did not exist. The Son is not co-eternal with the Father and is not equal to Him. Arius referred to John 14:28 when Jesus Christ said: "*The Father is greater than I*) and to Paul's acclamation about Jesus that He is "*Firstborn of all creation*" in his letter to the Colossians 1:15. The Arian's argument destroys the unity of the Godhead.
- **Alexander** counters Arius' argument from the scriptures too. He proclaims the co-eternality and equality of the Father and the Son quoting the Scriptures when Jesus said: "*I and the Father are one*" John 10:30 and as in John 17:21 "*That they be all one, as Thou, Father art in me and I in Thou.*" There is no time gap between being a father and son. When a person becomes father, it is because he got a son and they are both of the same essence and hence is the term *Homoousios*.
- Alexander's argument was in accordance to the belief that was handed down from the apostles and their successors. Father and the Son are of the same essence and co-eternal and this is what the assembly has reached as a conclusion.
- This led the council to formulate a creed that expresses this faith. This creed was not a new invention. Eusebius of Nicomedia submitted the Arian creed which was immediately rejected. Then Eusebius of Caesarea submitted a baptismal creed native to Palestine for consideration, which many historians regard as being the essential framework for the Nicene Creed.
- However, this Palestinian creed included the words of St Paul "*Firstborn of all creation*" which was omitted due to its use by the Arians, which may bring confusion. Therefore, the Nicene Creed was formulated to counter Arianism by emphasizing and confirming 3 important aspects of the Christological issue, the relation between the Father and the Son:
 - a. Jesus Christ is God of God, Light of Light, and true God of True God. This proclaims the Son's divinity.
 - b. Jesus Christ is begotten not made. This determines the Son's co-eternality with the Father. There was never a time when the Son was not one with the Father.
 - c. Jesus Christ is one being with the Father. This means that the Son is consubstantial with the Father.

➤ **The Date of Pascha (Paschalion):**

- There were different methods to calculate the date of Pascha. Among them were the Alexandrian and the Antiochian calculations. The Alexandrian method determined the date of Pascha after the vernal equinox, while the Antiochian determined the date of Pascha in reliance to the Jewish tradition of Passover which begins on the 15th of Nissan and used to occur after the vernal equinox.
- The council adopted the Alexandrian method of calculation which made the date of Pascha independent from Passover and the Jewish calendar. Christ is the New Passover.

- A decree was summoned in which the fathers insisted that Pascha should be celebrated “on one and the same day.” However, it did not specify more than this and that it should be celebrated on Sunday.

➤ **The Meletian Schism:**

- Melitius of Lycopolis, Bishop of Egypt, which this schism takes his name, refused to receive in communion those Christians who had renounced their faith during the persecution and later repented. This was in contrast with the other Bishops.

- The council retained him from exercising his Episcopalian power and authority while the clergy who were ordained by him were ordered to yield precedence to those ordained by Alexander and they should receive the laying on hands once again. He should remain in his own city and was forbidden to go into other towns.

➤ **Validity of Baptism by Heretics**

- One of the results of this 1st council’s discussions was the Enactment of new church laws, called *canons*.

- Canon XIX considered the baptism of and by the heretics as invalid. The Paulianists should be re-baptized even those clergy who repented and were found blameless. They should be re-baptized and re-ordained by a Catholic² Bishop.

➤ **The status of the lapsed³ in the persecution under Licinius:**

- Canons IX to XIV dealt with this matter.
 - I. Canon IX calls for deposition of those who were ordained without examination and found guilty afterwards of any crime as blasphemy, bigamy, idolatry, heresy, magic..
 - II. Canon X was specifically for the *lapsi*, who should be deposed while the punishment of the hierarch who ordained was not mentioned.
 - III. Canon XI deals mercifully with those who have fallen without compulsion. Those who were communicants and heartily repented should pass 3 years among the hearers, 7 years as prostrators and 2 years should communicate in prayers, but without oblation.
 - IV. Canon XII speaks about those who were in the military and casted aside their military girdles, but they wished with money to regain their status should pass 3 years as hearers, 10 years as prostrators and if they deemed worthy after strict examination and repentance in deeds with fear, tears and perseverance they may communicate in prayers and the bishop may act favorably to restore them to communicate the Eucharist.
 - V. Canon XIII allows communion to those who are dying, but when they regain their health, they may remain among those who communicate with prayers.

² Catholic Church means the one Universal Church who remained faithful to the faith handed down by the Apostles. It does not mean at that time the papal church.

³ The regular designation in the third century for Christians who *relapsed* into heathenism, especially for those who during the persecutions displayed weakness in the face of torture, and denied the Faith by sacrificing to the heathen gods or by any other acts. from the Catholic Encyclopedia.

VI. Canon XIV is concerning catechumen who lapsed. They should pass 3 years as hearers and they should pray with the catechumens.

➤ **Other Issues:**⁴

The 1st Ecumenical Council proclaimed 20 canons in total. This is in accordance to the Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers collection.

- Canon I dealt with castration. Those who were castrated by physicians or by barbarians should remain among the clergy and the laity could be ordained to become clergy, but those who self-castrated themselves should cease their ministry.
- Canon II is concerning the catechumen. They need more of time and a longer trial after baptism before any further advancement into priesthood.
- Canon III forbids clergy from having any women (*subintroducta*)⁵ dwelling with them except a mother, or sister, or aunt or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.
- Canon IV is about the election/ordination of a bishop.⁶
- Canon V asks that 2 provincial synods to be held annually and the bishops excommunicated by some should not be readmitted by others. The synod meeting should be held before Lent.
- Canon VI acknowledges the authority of the patriarchs of the sees of Alexandria, Rome and Antioch according to the ancient custom over their respective jurisdictions. It acknowledges also the dominance of the majority in case of opposition. If anyone be made a bishop without the consent of the Metropolitan is considered not a bishop.
- Canon VII recognizes the honorary rights of the see of AELIA⁷ (Jerusalem).
- Canon VIII keeps the Novatianists clergy (from Cathari), after their profession in writing the Catholic Apostolic faith, to continue as clergy. But should not have 2 bishops in one city. And those who were married twice and lapsed in persecution should have a period of repentance.
- Canon XV prevents clergy from passing from city to city. They should serve at the Churches where they were ordained (attached in the modern day).

⁴ For reading the exact words of the Canons you may consult <http://www.orthodoxa.org/GB/orthodoxy/canonlaw/canons1erconcileGB.htm> or read the in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, Vol XIV.

⁵ Some translate: "any woman in their houses under pretence of her being a disciple to them" while others translate: "as any women or a young virgin" or as "a woman who lived in the same house as a celibate clergyman."

⁶ Canon IV refers the fact that for one to be elevated to bishop, it must be done by all the bishops in the jurisdiction/province (eparchia). The word καθίστασθαι is in the infinitive form of the verb καθίστημι which by convention means to set down, or to place (to seat). In other words the bishop is seated in his diocese by all the (bishops). The canon does not specify bishop for it says, "by all", so it is assumed by the bishops of the eparchia (province/jurisdiction). If all are not able to partake in this elevation or seating (because of illness or distance etc.), then a minimum of three bishops are necessary, but they must also carry with them the "grammata" or letters which confirm the agreement of all the bishops in absentia.

The authority (confirmation= kyros/kŷros) is given by the Metropolitan of each province (eparchia), since in every election, there are three candidates, and one is elevated and confirmed. By Nicolas Panteloupolos.

Χειροτονία by convention means to raise ones hand (to intonate or accent the hand). In this case it means the laying of hands to consecrate.

⁷ Jerusalem was destroyed in year 70 AD. In the 2nd century the city was no longer called Jerusalem but AELIA Capitolina. *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, Vol XIV, p. 17.

- Canon XVI prohibits the admission or ordination of any clergy from another Church. Those who disobey the order to go back to their own Church should be excommunicated.
- Canon XVII prohibits the usury among the clergy.⁸
- Canon XVIII reminds deacons to receive the Eucharist in the hierarchal order; i.e. after bishops and presbyters and that they should not sit among the presbyters.
- Canon XX prohibits kneeling on the Lord's Day and in the Days of Pentecost.

Prepared, through the Grace of God, by Fr. Jean El-Murr

⁸ For more information read the "Excursus on Usury" by the canonist Van Espen, which may found in *the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, Vol XIV, pps. 36-38.