

The First Council of Nicaea (325), Part I: Martyrs, Doctors and an Emperor November 13, 2023

- I. The Fourth Century Church and Nicaea
 - A. One of the truly eventful epochs in the history of the Church: change in the empire, rise of monasticism, great Doctors of the Church; heresies rise and fall; two ecumenical Councils
 - B. Three sections: Events, Doctrines, Characters
- II. Events: Empire and Church
 - A. The turn of the century
 1. The last great persecution of the Church in the Empire
 - a) Emperor Diocletian and his Caesar, Galerius
 - b) Eamon Duffy: “Christianity was now too entrenched in the empire to be stamped out this way.”
 2. The rise of Constantine
 - a) He became emperor in 306 (in York)
 - b) The battle of the Milvian Bridge, 311: *in hoc signo vinces*.
 - c) Edict of Milan in 313
 3. Two heresies.
 - a) Amidst a growing depth of theology and sense of orthodoxy.
 - (1) St. Irenaeus of Lyons (130 - 202), St. Clement of Alexandria (+215), St. Cyprian of Carthage (+258) — “He cannot have God for his father who has not the church for his mother.”
 - b) Donatism: Sacraments by sinners are invalid.
 - c) Arianism: a great controversy in the East.
 - (1) Arius denied that Christ was Divine.
 - d) Constantine was concerned with the unity of the empire
 - B. In 325 he summoned the Council of Nicaea
 1. By tradition, 318 Bishops came, representing the whole Church.
 2. Notables: St. Athanasius, most likely St. Nicholas, bishop of Myra,
 3. What did it do?
 - a) Reaffirmed that Christ is God; formulated the Nicene Creed; also established the date of Easter; twenty Church canons (rules).
- III. Doctrine and philosophy
 - A. The use of pagan philosophy in Catholic theology and doctrine
 1. The early Christians confronted paganism and a culture in need of redemption
 - a) Likenesses to the Gospels in some of the pagan philosophers, especially Plato.
 - b) A Providential preparation for the Gospel.
 2. Justin Martyr (+150) was one of the first philosopher saints: the *Logos*
 3. Terminology that began to be used in theology
 - a) Substance (*ousia* in Greek or *hypostasis*; *substantia* in Latin) - an individual thing
 - b) Nature (*physis* in Greek; *natura* in Latin)
 - c) essence — the “whatness” of something, the definition
 - d) Person — a substance of a rational nature (*prosopon* or *hypostasis* in Greek; *persona* in Latin.)
 4. Phrases from the Arian controversy:
 - a) *Homoousios* of the same substance; Consubstantial

- b) *homoiousios* — of like substance; double talk
- B. What Nicaea said about the Divinity of Christ (we all know it)
1. "...And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten begotten from the Father, **that is from the substance** [Gr. ousias, Lat. substantia] **of the Father, God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten** [Gr. gennethenta, Lat. natum] **not made** [Gr. poethenta, Lat. factum], **CONSUBSTANTIAL** [Gr. homoousion, Lat. unius substantiae (quod Graeci dicunt homousion)] with the Father, through whom all things came to be ..."
 2. The bold parts are what the council wanted to specify.
 3. And those who say: "there once was when he was not", and "before he was begotten he was not", and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis [Gr. hypostaseos] or substance [Gr. ousias, Lat. substantia], affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration these the catholic and apostolic church *anathematizes*.
 4. Perennial issues. The first council deals with the fundamental issue: Who is Jesus?
- C. As to Donatism, it was not dealt with by the council.
- IV. Some of the great figures of the early fourth century.
- A. St. Helena +330
 - B. Arius, died ca. 336. A priest of Alexandria. Championed by Eusebius of Nicomedia.
 - C. The desert fathers and the dangers of a privileged Christianity
 1. St. Anthony (251 - 356), a hermit
 - D. St. Lucy, one of the virgin martyrs. Martyred ca. 306.
- V. The fourth century isn't yet half over.

Sources

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