

**Sermon for An Ecumenical Celebration of the
1,700th Anniversary of the Council of Nicaea**

**Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception
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My dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Christ is risen!

Indeed, He is truly Risen!

Two weeks ago, we celebrated the bodily resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ from the dead, and now we live and pray in its afterglow, the Easter Season.

It is a fitting time, then, as we meditate on the central saving mystery of our Faith—the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the incarnate God—to join together to thank God for His gift of the First Ecumenical Council, the Council of Nicaea, which was convened almost exactly 1,700 years ago this month in order to affirm clearly and universally this central paschal truth.

By the early 4th century, Christianity was spreading rapidly across the Roman Empire, but it faced challenges, including internal division. The Emperor Constantine, newly converted to Christianity, saw the emerging Church divided by theological disputes with the most pressing being the Arian controversy.

Arius, a priest from Alexandria, argued that Jesus, the Son of God and the second person of the Trinity, was not co-eternal with God the Father but was instead created by the Father. For Arius and his followers, God makes the *Logos* (Jesus) out of nothing, so that, as they argued, *there once was a time when Jesus was not*. If this were true, however, *there also once was a time when the Father was not the Father because there was no Son*.

There you have the crux of the problem.

Not only was Arius denying the divinity of Jesus, but he also consequently denied a Trinity of co-equal, consubstantial persons. Instead of Jesus united to His Father as the only-begotten Son who is one in being with Him, for Arius Jesus is united to the Father only by way of a moral union, dependent on will and disposition. Therefore, according to Arius'

preaching, all we are left with is a Jesus who is a model to follow, not a Savior.

For this, Arius was excommunicated by his bishop Alexander who, with many other clergy and laity, insisted that the Biblical testimony and the Tradition of the Church upheld the teaching that Jesus Christ, the Son, was indeed fully divine, co-eternal, co-equal, and consubstantial with the Father.

To bring order to the Church and peace among believers, the Emperor Constantine, a catechumen at the time, called the bishops of the Church to gather at his summer palace in Nicaea, now modern Iznik, Turkey, from May to August in the year 325 to pastorally respond to the growing agitation of Arianism.

Notice, these were not debates among academics. Here were the pastors of the Church caring deeply for both the Faith they had received and the souls placed in their care. Not only must the authentic faith be protected, clarified, and handed on in its fullness, but to get this wrong would jeopardize the salvation of souls entrusted to them.

There are no higher stakes than this.

The primary problem, as the majority of the Council Fathers came to see, is that Arius' heresy was a fundamental attack on the salvific integrity of the Christian Faith.

The key question for Arius and all Christians is: Does your Jesus save?

By denying the divinity and eternal sonship of Jesus Christ, Arius' Jesus did not save; how can Christ join together God and humanity if He is in himself neither fully divine nor fully human? The axiom of the Church Fathers was: if it is not assumed, it is not redeemed. If the true God did not assume every part of humanity, excepting sin, humanity cannot not be redeemed. If this were not to happen, then, to borrow the words of St. Paul, we are still in our sins and the most pitiable of people.¹

Here lies the problem: the Arian Jesus gains and holds Sonship in the same way as any other creature, offering his disciples only the path of following a creature like them in radical exemplarism.

What this means is that the Arian Jesus differs from other disciples in degree but not in kind. Jesus Christ would then be a representative son but

by no means the only-Begotten Son. According to Arianism, then, *If you conformed your will to God, you too could be another Messiah or Redeemer.*

Here, Arius violated the ancient kerygma of the Church—that salvation comes from God alone and, in Jesus Christ, God has visited His people.

Do Christians follow a fellow creature who “got it right”, or do they conform their lives to God made manifest in the flesh?

More than 220 council fathers weighed in on this question.

Their response to Arius, and their means of safeguarding the deposit of Faith and preserving the integrity of salvation came in the form of a Creed, a statement of belief from the Latin word, *Credo*: I believe. This creed was to be recited every Sunday during the Liturgy in order that the faithful may know the Truth of Revelation and the unity of the Church be protected.

“Although the main focus of the Nicene Creed is meant to address the Christological question of the nature of Jesus Christ as both divine and human, it actually has a Trinitarian structure, with separate paragraphs about God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit, with a

concluding paragraph about our beliefs in the Catholic Church and some essential dogmas, such as the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal life. In this sense, the Nicene Creed closely follows the structure of the Apostles' Creed, so called because it is rightly considered to be a faithful summary of the apostles' faith, although the Nicene Creed is often more explicit and more detailed than the Apostles' Creed."²

The Creed begins, "I believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible." Christians are not polytheists; we do not believe in multiple gods. We believe in one God, the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who created all things and entered into covenant with Israel as witnessed in the Old Testament. The Book of Genesis declares we are made in this God's image and likeness,³ and the Catechism of the Catholic Church confirms that we can come to know God's greatness and majesty, living in thanksgiving for all the blessings God bestows on us.⁴

As all creation comes from and returns to God and all remains in existence through Him, creation reveals the creator to us. God endowed each thing, as the Second Vatican Council says, "with their own stability,

truth, good, proper laws and order.”⁵ Such intelligent design allows for the methodical investigation of the natural world, what we call science, and knowledge resulting from it betters our lives as long as its use remains within the natural and moral law.

This God revealed Himself fully in the person of Jesus Christ as witnessed to in the New Testament. This is the next statement of belief in the Creed: “I believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages.” Here is no mythic tale, but a reliable account grounded in historical narrative. Jesus of Nazareth is Lord, meaning “our Sovereign King who rules over us, whom we follow in obedience, and to whom we pledge our lives.”⁶

Next, with the phrase, “Only Begotten Son of God, born of the Father before all ages” we come to the result of the Council of Nicaea’s distinction between begetting (sometimes called “generation”) and creation. According to the Council Fathers, the Son has been “begotten,” not “created,” from the being of the Father rather than made from nothing. The Son is of one being with the Father rather than merely similar to the Father.

With this statement, the bishops forcefully and without question rejected Arianism.

In his celebrated work, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis helps us better understand the distinction between generation and creation. He says, “We don’t use the words *begetting* or *begotten* much in modern English, but everyone still knows what they mean. To beget is to become the father of; to create is to make. And the difference is this. When you beget, you beget something of the same kind as yourself. A man begets human babies, a beaver begets little beavers, and a bird begets eggs which turn into little birds. But when you make, you make something of a different kind from yourself. A bird makes a nest, a beaver builds a dam, a man makes a wireless set—or he may make something more like himself than a wireless set: say, a statue. If he is a clever enough carver he may make a statue which is very like a man indeed. But, of course, it is not a real man; it only looks like one. It cannot breathe or think. It is not alive. Now that is the first thing to get clear. What God begets is God; just as what man begets is man. What God creates is not God, just as what man creates is not man.”⁷

Having clarified the relationship between Father and Son, the Council Fathers next addressed God's salvific mission by means of the Son's Incarnation, proclaiming: *"For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary and became Man."* At this, each believer may stop in awe and wonder at the very great humility of our God. When professing this section of the Creed during the liturgy, we bow at this remarkable mystery. When recited at the liturgical celebrations of Gabriel's Annunciation to Mary, and the Lord's Nativity at Bethlehem on March 25th and December 25th, respectively, the faithful kneel to honor the Incarnation of our Lord more fully with their own bodies.

Setting God within such bone and flesh reality was inconceivable for the Arians. This immediate contact between transcendent divinity and sinful humanity is ruled out by them as absurd. Yet the most absurd was soon to come, as the next four sentences of the Creed summarize the paschal mystery of the Incarnate Son, Jesus Christ: *For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate, He suffered death and was buried, and rose again on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is*

seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead."

Again, this metaphysical clarification set within the gritty history of our world has significant consequences for soteriology: "the transcendent God himself has become man, suffered for our salvation, and united our nature with his own divine nature."⁸ The greatest defender of orthodoxy against the Arians, St. Athanasius, whose feast day we celebrated this past Friday, explains it this way:

Our nature could be united with the divine nature because the Son is truly God. No creature would have been able to bring about this conjunction. Likewise, man would not have reached the presence of the Father, had not the true connatural Word of the Father taken on himself our nature...For the purpose of our Lord's incarnation was to join what, by nature, is human to him who, by nature, is God ... Thus he would have been as unsuitable for the work of salvation ... had not his nature been identical with that of the Father as if he had not taken on a true and real body.⁹

Yet Jesus is not the only person in the Creed to be called Lord. The Holy Spirit too is declared to be: "*the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from*

the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets." The Council Fathers also confirmed the Spirit as divine and consubstantial with the Father and the Son, the third person of the Blessed Trinity. Each person is distinct but inseparable.

"The phrase professing that the Holy Spirit '*proceeds from the Father and the Son*' has been the source of much controversy and division in the Church. In Latin, the phrase '*and the Son*' is translated as '*filioque*.' The affirmation of the *filioque* did not appear in original version of the Creed. Pope St. Leo I, following an ancient Latin and Alexandrian tradition, proclaimed it dogmatically in 447. The use of this formula in the Creed was gradually admitted into the Latin liturgy between the eighth and eleventh centuries. The introduction of the *filioque* into the Nicene Creed by the Latin liturgy constitutes a point of disagreement with the Orthodox Churches that persists to this day. At the outset, the Eastern tradition expresses the Father's character as first origin of the Spirit. By confessing the Spirit as He '*who proceeds from the Father,*' it affirms that He comes from the Father through the Son. The Western tradition expresses first the

consubstantial communion between Father and Son, by saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*)."¹⁰

“When we say that the Holy Spirit *“has spoken through the prophets,”* the faith of the Church here understands ‘all whom the Holy Spirit inspired in the composition of the sacred books, both of the Old and the New Testaments’ (CCC 702).”¹¹

“Since we are all baptized ‘in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit,’ our very identity as Christians is rooted in our faith in the Holy Trinity and so we look to the grace of the Holy Trinity to keep us united in faith.”¹²

The final paragraph of the Creed consists of two sentences: *“I believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins and I look forward to the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.”* The Church’s four marks or characteristics—one, holy, catholic, apostolic—are central to her mission and established by Jesus through the Holy Spirit. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains, the Church is one in her source, the Trinity; she is one because of her founder,

Jesus Christ; she is one because of her soul, the Holy Spirit. Unity is her essence.¹³

Her unity, however, has been wounded over the centuries by heresy, rifts, dissention, and separation. The night before He died, within the context of the Last Supper, Jesus prayed for the unity of his disciples, that “all may be one.”¹⁴ Moreover, that unity looks like something; we have received visible bonds of communion. They are: 1) the profession of one faith handed down to us from the apostles; 2) the common celebration of divine worship, especially the sacraments; and 3) apostolic succession through the sacrament of Holy Orders.

The Church too is holy, not because of her members, but because of her Spouse, Jesus Christ, who gave Himself up for her to sanctify her. “He joined her to himself as his body and endowed her with the gift of the Holy Spirit for the glory of God.”¹⁵

The Church is Catholic, and it is so in a double sense. First, because Christ is present in her. Where Christ is, the Church is; where the Church is, Christ is. She receives from Him the fullness of the means of salvation. Second, because Christ has sent His Church on mission to all humanity.¹⁶

The Church is Apostolic. Built on apostolic foundations, She hands on their teachings while still taught, sanctified, and guided by the apostles through the magisterium.

By rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit, sins are forgiven and the newly baptized believer comes to walk in newness of life.¹⁷ So said Jesus to Nicodemus, so explained Paul to the Romans.

The final affirmation of creedal faith is in the resurrection of the dead and the life in the world to come. All will be resurrected from the dead, some to eternal life in heaven and some to eternal torment in Hell. Purgatory too awaits those in need of purification before entering heaven.

The last word of the Creed, as of the Bible, is “amen.” It is not a period at the end of a statement. In Hebrew, “amen” means “I believe”. It too is an assent to what has come before, becoming a small creed to the longer one just professed.

Unfortunately the promulgation of the Creed did not fix all problems. Arius did not accept the Creed and Arianism continued on in the Empire, and still exists today. The Second Ecumenical Council, Constantinople I,

would be called to confirm and clarify the Nicaean Creed, making it the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed.

But the Creed protected the apostolic faith given to us; it rejected the heresy of Arius; it maintained the salvific integrity of the Christian Faith. Jesus Christ is the incarnate Son God, the Second Person of the Trinity, co-eternal, co-equal, and consubstantial with the Father and the Holy Spirit. He became man, suffered, died, and resurrected, instituting the Church and the life of grace that we who are baptized into His death be raised also in His resurrection and forever united with Him.

During that gathering in Nicaea, in the year 325, the Council delegates came to a unified statement of our faith as Christians. We are the heirs of those who gathered so long ago, and we pray for God's grace to fulfill Our Lord's prayer for His disciples, that "all may be one."¹⁸

May God give us this grace. Amen.

¹ 1 Corinthians 15:17

² Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, "A History and Explanation of the Nicene Creed," *Catholic Times*, February 2, 2025, pp. 4-5.

³ Genesis 1:26

⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraphs 222-27

⁵ *Gaudium et Spes*, 36.

⁶ Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, "Why Nicene Creed Talks More about Jesus than God the Father and Holy Spirit," *Catholic Times*, March 2, 2025, p. 4.

⁷ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, Book 4, Chapter 1.

⁸ Roch Kereszty, *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, 228.

⁹ Athanasius, "Second Oration against the Arians," 69-70.

¹⁰ Bishop Thomas John Paprocki, "What the *Nicene Creed* Tells Us about the Holy Spirit," *Catholic Times*, March 16, 2025, pp. 4-5.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 813.

¹⁴ John 17:21

¹⁵ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paragraph 823.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 830-31

¹⁷ Romans 6:3-5

¹⁸ John 17:21