

Why the Council of Nicaea still matters—1,700 years later

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Inside The Vatican
Deep Dive: The Council of Nicaea and the struggle for a common date of Easter



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The church universal this year celebrates the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council intended to address all the churches of Christianity. Though his ongoing recovery from pneumonia may prevent it, Pope Francis had planned to travel to the Turkish city of Iznik (site of the ancient city of Nicaea) in May for a meeting with Bartholomew I, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople. The proposed meeting is to commemorate the anniversary and to recognize a period of Christianity when a greater unity persisted despite significant strife and disagreements—both political and theological.

What happened at Nicaea in A.D. 325? And why is that still so important today? The following might not pass muster in a theology or church history classroom, but it might explain the importance of the anniversary.

Calling the Council

America has been around long enough that an article in the magazine’s back pages actually commemorates the *last* centennial anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Writing in 1925, the author claimed a rationale for his piece that seems apt enough to claim it for ourselves as we commemorate 17 centuries since that famous council:

Sixteen hundred years is a considerable length of time, even in the history of mankind, and it may seem like a very reactionary and ultra-conservative state of mind to refer to an event so distant as being anything which concerns our present-day life and affairs. Still more will this appeal to the modern-minded as being the case, if we announce to them that a decision, made in the year 325 of our era, is to be accepted at full face value in this year of grace 1925. Yet that is exactly what we do and that is the issue which at this moment comes before us.

The above—well, except for the ultra-conservative state of mind—still holds true a century later because Nicaea remains as important as ever for our understanding of God and the core statements of Christian belief.

The First Council of Nicaea (there was a second, 462 years later) was convened by Emperor Constantine in A.D. 325. The bishop of Rome at the time, Sylvester, did not attend the council, but sent delegates in his stead. While it would be wildly anachronistic to consider Sylvester a pope in the manner of the modern papacy, in the fourth

century the bishop of Rome was already recognized by most local Christian communities as a “first among equals” (*primus inter pares*); though he lacked jurisdictional authority over other Christian sees or local churches, appeal was often made to the bishop of Rome when disputes arose between churches.

The location of Nicaea itself—in Asia Minor, only 40 miles from Byzantium, which would become Constantinople and usurp Rome as the capital of the Roman Empire under Constantine five years later—is an indicator of where much of the political and ecclesial authority of Christianity rested at the time. In other words, it was not in Rome. In fact, before the rise of Islam in the seventh century, the presence of large Christian communities throughout the Middle East meant Christianity’s geographical center was significantly farther to the east than most of us realize.

The Nuts and Bolts

Over 300 bishops participated in the council, almost all from the East. Emperor Constantine (also in attendance) footed the bill for the proceedings, which took place from May through July. The precipitating theological conflict was an ongoing dispute in some Eastern Christian communities among differing views on the nature of Christ.

The chief antagonist (history being written by the victors) was Arius, a presbyter from Alexandria who resisted the notion that Jesus was co-equal with God and that Jesus had existed for all eternity, arguing instead that Jesus was a created being and subordinate to God the Father. Opposing him was Archbishop Alexander of Alexandria (and, eventually, Athanasius, his successor), who held that the Logos, or Son, had existed for all eternity, generated from God the Father but not subordinate to or created by God the Father. The working out of that issue and a number of ancillary theological propositions is what Nicaea is primarily known for today.

The practical results of the council included the following: the promulgation of a common statement of belief (our Nicene Creed); the rejection of certain heresies regarding the nature of Jesus, particularly Arianism (and the subsequent exile of Arius himself); the establishment of some early precepts of canon law; agreement on a common date for the celebration of Easter; practical determinations for handling repentant sinners and recalcitrant bishops; and (no small thing) the establishment of a precedent for handling ecumenical gatherings in the future.

The historian Peter Brown has argued that most of the theological issues settled at the council had already been more or less decided ahead of time, making some of the drama we associate with Nicaea more of a rubber-stamp affair. Nevertheless, the use of an ecumenical council to promulgate such decisions was a momentous development for the church, and it is one of the reasons why the Council of Nicaea has pride of place in church history, along with the Council of Chalcedon, in the estimation of most Christian historians and theologians.

Arianism, Modalism and the Nicene Creed

We are reminded of Nicaea almost every Sunday at Mass when we recite the Nicene Creed (in many places the Apostle’s Creed is used during Lent and the Easter season), affirming the core beliefs of every major Christian denomination. For the council fathers at Nicaea, the first and most important question was: Does Jesus the Son descend from God the Father, in the sense that he is a created being that is somehow subordinate, as Arius and his followers argued?

No, said the gathered bishops after much debate; Jesus is, to use the language of the Creed, “begotten, not made, one in being [*homoousios*] with the Father.” Ditto for the Holy Spirit, who is co-equal with the other two persons of the Trinity and thus fully God—though, truth be told, the Holy Spirit wasn’t a primary focus of Nicaea.

Much of the church—especially in Western parts of the empire overrun by invaders who became Christian—remained influenced by Arianism for decades and even centuries, but the heresy eventually succumbed to history.

A second question addressed what has been variously called monarchianism, modalism or Sabellianism. This heresy was, in the eyes of the church of the third through fifth centuries, an attempt to collapse the three persons of the Trinity into one—God the Father, who acted in different modes or performed different functions or showed different manifestations of divinity. Followers of Arius—stressing the difference between God the Father and Jesus the Son—accused Alexander of Sabellianism for insisting on their equality.

A follower of monarchianism or the other aforementioned variations might say that God the Father creates; God the Son redeems; God the Holy Spirit sanctifies. In other words, it's all God, we just see different aspects of God and give God different names when we observe God acting in different ways. Not so, said the bishops at Nicaea. Even if every theologian admits our language for the Trinity—in terms of persons or essences or unities or functions and more—is by nature imprecise and approximate, for the Nicæan bishops as much as in any other area, the language still mattered. There is one God; that God exists in three persons.

All of the theological terms above might sound a bit academic—or a bit of a mystery—to the average Joe, but they were fighting words in certain times and places in the church. Violence broke out, and bishops and theologians were exiled over matters such as this. Even today, East and West remain divided over Western Christianity's addition of the famous "*filioque* clause" to the Creed beginning in the sixth century, stating that the Holy Spirit proceeds "from the Father *and the Son*." Even if theologians now agree that both sides mean more or less the same thing, the words remain different.

A Common Date for Easter

A more concrete result of the Council of Nicaea was the establishment of a common date for the celebration of Easter, recognized as the church's primary feast and a point of desired unity for all Christian communities. That happy result was confounded 12 centuries later when the Catholic Church chose the Gregorian calendar over the Julian one in 1582, separating East from West. The date of Easter in some years can differ by as much as five weeks between Eastern and Western churches (almost all Protestant denominations follow the Roman Catholic calendar regarding Easter).

While the consensus at Nicaea on a common date can be seen as a remarkable expression of the desire for Christian unity, the decision may also have been an attempt to decouple Easter from the Jewish celebration of Passover, as the date of the commemoration of the latter in Judaism is determined by a similar but slightly different calculus. While Scripture makes it clear that the events of Jesus' death and resurrection were closely tied to the Jewish celebration of Passover, our differing calendars don't always reflect the connection.

Returning Sinners to the Flock

A relatively minor detail—but one with significant repercussions in sacramental history—dealt with at Nicaea was the question of the status of Christians who had fallen into public sin. Could they be welcomed back into the Christian community? If they were ministers in the church, were the sacraments they administered somehow defective or invalid?

It was a question that bedeviled the early church for centuries, particularly during periods of persecution, when some Christians apostasized but then later attempted to return to the community. The canons promulgated at Nicaea made it clear that a consensus was developing among the church's bishops: Sinners can come back. There might be public penances, it might not be a *kumbaya* moment for all, but they can come back.

Historical theologians will point to decisions such as these as important in our development of the sacrament of reconciliation over time—the notion that even grave sin can be forgiven by God and through God's church.

Legends of Nicaea

So what *didn't* happen at Nicaea? The prominence of Nicaea in Christian history has contributed to the durability of certain legends about the council that have very little basis in fact, but provide some color.

Perhaps the most dramatic legend is that the bishops in attendance at Nicaea placed all the books of the Bible then believed to be canonical on an altar and waited to see which ones fell off the pile, thus giving us the contemporary canon. It's completely false; many venerable Christian churches included different books in the Bible for centuries after—ever read 3 Corinthians? Western Christians can largely blame Voltaire, who revived an ancient tall tale, for the persistence of this legend.

The second legend—one popularized in social media with endless memes—is that Santa Claus hopped up at Nicaea and slapped the heresiarch Arius across the face. What's this? As the story goes, Nicholas of Myra, the venerable saint who developed into Santa Claus in Western cultures, was listening to Arius go on at length that Jesus the Son could not be considered equal to God the Father. Nicholas finally decided enough was enough and gave Arius the back of his hand.

Since no one mentioned the story for half a millennium after Nicaea ended (and it's not clear that Nicholas was even at the council), this tale too seems a bit too tall to be believed—even if it still slaps.

Nicaea and the Future

Pope Francis has openly expressed the hope that the Christian churches can agree on a common date for Easter again. By happy coincidence, this year and in 2028 it will fall on the same day in almost every Christian church, be it Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox. Will the 1,700th anniversary of that council be the occasion when the Christian churches can settle this beef?

While the Trinitarian and Christological controversies debated at Nicaea can sometimes seem like ancient history, they do still crop up today. Even in recent years, for example, the Catholic Church has ruled illegitimate those baptisms done with the *au courant* formula of “the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier.” Why? Because it's a formula that fails to express the Trinity's relationality, and it is modalism all over again. Similarly, the teachings of some Christian sects today still embrace the notion of Jesus as God's created son, or of the Holy Spirit as an action of the Father and the Son rather than a person of the Trinity, notions anathema to Christian denominations since Nicaea.

Perhaps the greatest impact of Nicaea is not theological in nature, but ecclesial. It showed that the Christian community, wracked though it was by theological, political and social divisions, was capable of coming together in a way modelled by Scripture itself in the Acts of the Apostles—and in that walking together, capable of hearing each other out and reaching a consensus on important issues. We have a word for that these days, too. Is it too much of a stretch to call Nicaea a consummate example of synodality at work?
