

A Summary of the Seven Ecumenical Councils

Fr. Anthony Coniaris writes, "Evidence is required to show that the Orthodox Church is indeed the genuine Church founded by Jesus. We must have evidence of an unbroken historical connection with the Apostolic Church. We need this historical connection in order to be assured that the 'deposit of faith' [2 Tim 1:14] has not been tampered with but has been handed down to us in its entirety." The Ecumenical Councils are our unbroken continuity and connection with the historic Church of Jesus Christ! Let's look briefly at the faith of these councils to see what they proclaimed and how this is the identical faith we proclaim today:

1. Nicaea I (325 A.D.): The First Ecumenical Council was called in Nicaea by St. Constantine the Emperor. With the help of the great teaching of St. Athanasius, the Council explained, against the false teachings of Arius, that Jesus Christ is homo-ousious (or "one in essence") with God the Father. This is based on Jesus' own words in Scripture, "I and the Father are one" and "You believe in God, believe also in Me." This council composed the first part of the Creed which is known in Orthodoxy as "The Symbol of Faith" because it summarizes our most important beliefs.
2. Constantinople I (381 A.D.): The Second Ecumenical Council was called in Constantinople. Through the help of St. Basil the Great and others, against the teachings of Macedonius, it affirmed that the Holy Spirit is a true Divine Person and one of the Holy Trinity. This Council completed the second part of the Creed (from "the Holy Spirit" on). This Nicene-Constantinopolitan Symbol of Faith is the identical one we recite in the Orthodox Church to this day.
3. Ephesus (431 A.D.): The Third Ecumenical Council, held in Ephesus, confronted the error of Nestorius who taught as if there were two persons in Christ: a human person and a Divine person. St. Cyril of Alexandria led the fight for Orthodoxy and ended the debate with his historic battle cry: "The Son of God and the Son of Mary are the same Son!" The title "Theotokos" (One who brings forth God), which Nestorius objected to, was affirmed by the Council Fathers to be completely Orthodox and even necessary! Like no other Church, we in the Orthodox Church use this cherished title for St. Mary profusely in our Liturgy and Tradition to this day.
4. Chalcedon (451 A.D.): The Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon, affirmed against the Monophysite heretic Eutyches that Jesus was true God Who became true man. Eutyches was unwilling to confess that our Lord's humanity was the same as ours. The Council explained that Jesus Christ is one person in two natures: He is consubstantial with His Father according to His divinity and consubstantial with us according to His humanity.

5. Constantinople II (553 A.D.): The Fifth Ecumenical Council, the second held in Constantinople, was called by St. Justinian the Emperor who himself was a profound theologian. This council clarified the teaching of the Fourth. Many of Nestorius' followers were twisting the statements of the Fourth Council and claiming victory for their position (including Nestorius himself)! Therefore the Fifth Council clarified just how the two natures in Christ (Divine & human) are perfectly united in one Divine Person [or hypostasis] of God the Word. The hymn we sing every Sunday, "Only-begotten Son," credited to St. Justinian, perfectly summarizes the teaching of the Fifth Council.

6. Constantinople III (680 A.D.): The Sixth Ecumenical Council, the third to be held in Constantinople, was greatly influenced by the great Byzantine theologian St. Maximus the Confessor. This council clarified against the Monothelites (those who taught there was only one Divine will in Christ) that the complete unity of Divinity and humanity in Christ means He also has a human will because a person cannot be truly human without having a will -and Christ became everything that we are in order to heal us completely!

7. Nicaea II (787 A.D.): The Seventh Ecumenical Council was the second to be held in Nicaea and the final Ecumenical Council of the Church. This council was called to address the controversy over the use of icons in the Church. The iconoclasts ("icon smashers") were against their use and veneration and created a great and violent controversy over this. God raised up St. John of Damascus to help the Church explain that because the Only-begotten Son and Word of God truly became man, He along with His mother and all the saints can be depicted iconographically in our Churches. The honor and veneration expressed to the icon is not to the material (the wood, the paint, etc.) but passes rather on to the proto-type. To deny that our Lord can be depicted and venerated iconographically is equivalent to denying He really became incarnate. Therefore Orthodox Christians use icons as an expression of the true incarnation of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ.

The teaching of the Ecumenical Councils is the very faith we recall, proclaim and celebrate each week. It's the faith we are so privileged to be part of. It's also the faith we have a responsibility to pass on to others and share with our children. While maintaining this historic continuity, our Orthodox Faith is also very beautiful, timely and relevant for today's world. Many people today are lost and seeking truth, beauty and the sacred. They seek clarity and a living continuity with Jesus Christ and His historic Church. This is what we have to offer as Orthodox Christians. Let us not hide this pearl of great price (Mt. 13:45-46). Let us be confident of the Holy Spirit's accomplishments in us His Church! Let us share this with others so they can have this "pearl of great price" too. This way, as our Lord said in the Gospel, they too can know eternal life, the only true God and Jesus Christ Whom He has sent!

Glory be to Jesus Christ!

Sub-Deacon Lazarus Der-Ghazarian