

# Sunday of the First Six Ecumenical Councils

## Homily-Reflection

Given on July 16, 2017

Glory to Jesus Christ! In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This is the Sunday of the first six Ecumenical Councils. The Byzantine Church is known as "the Church of the Seven Councils" because -like no other church- our theology, our liturgy and our canonical tradition are impacted by, and reflect the decisions of these most pre-eminent and foundational first seven councils.

This is why we celebrate these councils on the Church's calendar as feast days: Its an invitation to all of us to celebrate the Holy Faith -these Fathers proclaimed and defended with their own lives.

It's also a reminder and challenge that we must ensure we never stray from this Holy Faith, because it is the true faith revealed by Jesus Christ and confirmed by the Holy Spirit. As we sing in today's troparion, "O Christ our God... You have established our [Church] Fathers as beacons on the earth, leading us all to the true faith through them..."

[This is one reason we proclaim the creed every Sunday. It's our personal proclamation that we are in full communion with God's Church. It's our chance to publicly declare our full acceptance of the true faith.]



The first seven Councils, by far, are the most important theologically. It was in these councils that the Church articulated her most important beliefs in the Holy Trinity and our Lord Jesus Christ.

[As a result these Councils dominate the faith, life and tradition of the Byzantine Church. The first six councils are celebrated on the Sunday nearest July 16th. The Seventh Council is celebrated separately in October and known as the "Sunday of Orthodoxy." ]

The celebration of these councils is a recognition of the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit in and through His Holy Church to bring us God's truth! The Church proclaims God's truth because, as our Lord said in today's Gospel, "...this is eternal life, that they may know You the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent" (Jn 17:3)

[Knowing the truth about God means knowing the truth about salvation. It means knowing the truth about the world which He made. It means knowing the truth about what God wants from us and how He designed us to live.] Ultimately, it's knowing the truth that makes us free!

The idea of holding councils comes from the Bible. In Acts 15 the Apostles held the first Church council together with the presbyters to address problems and questions in the early Church [The following is an adaptation of Fr. Anthony Coniaris' book, *Introducing the Orthodox Church*].

[Our Lord had promised them, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Mt 18:18-20). Jesus said this to His Apostles in the context of the authority He was giving to His Church and as a promise that He would always be here guiding His Church into all truth (Jn 16:13). According to the Scriptures, the decisions of this first Apostolic Council were seen as being confirmed by the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28). ]

This has been the pattern the Church has followed to address questions, resolve problems and preserve unity to this day through the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The word "Ecumenical," comes from a Greek word meaning "the inhabited world." In other words, an Ecumenical Council involves the entire Church throughout the world.

But today's feast is a celebration not just of the Church's orthodoxy but, just as importantly, of the Church's CONTINUITY. What is continuity and why is it important?

Continuity means: having an unbroken historical connection with the past. When we hear about this or that church we need to ask ourselves a question: Was it founded by God or by man? Does it have an unbroken historic connection with the Apostolic Church and the Church of every century? How else can we be certain that what it teaches is truly apostolic, truly Christian, truly the word of God and not [just] one man's interpretation?

[We in the Catholic and Orthodox Church understand the Church to be the Body of Christ through which He is present and active in the world today.]

The Church was founded by Christ through the Apostles and has maintained a living, historical connection with the Apostles through the ordination of its clergy.

Everyone one of our bishops [like our new bishop Milan] who ordains a priest or deacon, can trace his ordination historically all the way back to the Apostles and through them to Christ. This is a guarantee that the Church we belong to wasn't founded a few centuries ago --but by Christ Himself and traces its existence historically back to Apostles.

We call this "Apostolic Succession." It means that our Church is the authentic and genuine Church and Body of Christ in the world today. It continues to teach not one man's interpretation of the faith but the complete "Deposit of Faith" (1 Tim 6:20) as it was handed down to the Apostles by Jesus.

There is a story which illustrates this continuity:

When I was a young boy there was an assassination attempt on President Reagan. Thankfully the president lived. But in order for the bullet (used in the assassination attempt) to be used as evidence in court, the bullet had to have an unbroken connection with the bullet that was removed from the president.

Accordingly, a secret service agent was present during surgery. He witnessed the removal of the bullet. The surgeon signed a statement upon giving the bullet to the agent. The agent signed another statement when he delivered the bullet to the laboratory, etc. Such evidence of an unbroken connection between a bullet and a body is required in a court of law.

Equal evidence is required to show that a church is indeed the genuine Church founded by Jesus: It must have the 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" has not been tampered with but has been handed down to us in its entirety. ]

These first six Ecumenical Councils ARE our unbroken continuity and connection with the historic Church of 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:

A. The First Ecumenical Council was called in 325 in Nicea 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 the East as "The Symbol of Faith" b/c it is a summary of our most important beliefs.

B. The Second Ecumenical Council was called in 381 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 creed is the identical Symbol of Faith we recite in the Byzantine Church to this day.

C. The Third Ecumenical Council, held in 431 at 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" (she 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 Byzantine Church use this cherished title for St. Mary profusely in our Liturgy and Tradition to this day.

D. The Fourth Ecumenical Council, held at Chalcedon in 451, affirmed that Jesus was true God Who became true man. In other words He is one person in two natures.

E. The Fifth Ecumenical Council held in 553 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 these 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.\*

F. The Sixth Ecumenical Council in 680, the third to be held in Constantinople, was greatly influenced by the great Byzantine theologian St. Maximus the Confessor. This council clarified that the complete unity of Divinity and Humanity in Christ means He also has a human soul b/c a person cannot be truly human without a soul -and- Christ became everything that we are in order to heal us completely!

The teachings of these first six councils are THE 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 our children and share with others.

While maintaining this historic continuity our Byzantine 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 Byzantine Christians.

Let us not hide this pearl of great price [burying it in a field]. Let us be confident of the Holy Spirit's accomplishments in us. Let us share this with others so they can have this "pearl of great price" too. This way, as our Lord said today 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!

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