

# THE SEVEN ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

## **THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Held in Nicea, Asia Minor in 325. Under Emperor Constantine the Great. 318 Bishops were present.

### **The Arian Controversy**

Arius denied the divinity of Christ. If Jesus was born, then there was time when He did not exist. If He became God, then there was time when He was not. The Council declared Arius' teaching a heresy, unacceptable to the Church and decreed that Christ is God. He is of the same essence *homoousios* with God the Father.

### **The Creed**

The first part of the seven articles of the Creed were ratified at the First Ecumenical Council. The text reads as follows:

We believe in one God. The Father Almighty. Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages. Light of Light; true God of true God; begotten not made; of one essence with the Father, by whom all things were made; who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven, and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man. And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried. And the third day He rose again according to the Scriptures; and ascended into heaven, and sits at the right hand of the Father; and he shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead; whose Kingdom shall have no end.

Defenders of Orthodoxy

### **St. Athanasius the Great (297-373)**

Fearless champion of Orthodoxy; spent sixteen of his forty-five years as Bishop of Alexandria in exile; one of the most profound theologians; Father of the Church

### **St. Basil the Great (330-379)**

A natural leader and organizer; spoke and wrote against Arianism; Founded hospitals, orphanages, welfare agencies; revised and updated the Divine Liturgy; made a great contribution to Monasticism (East and West); one of the famous Cappadocian Fathers (together with St. Gregory of Nyssa; his younger brother and St. Gregory of Nazianzus the Theologian; his close friend). The Cappadocians, along with St. Athanasius the Great, laid the pattern for formulating the doctrines related to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. St. Basil the Great, along with St. Gregory of Nazianzus (the Theologian) and St. John Chrysostom are called the Three Hierarchy.

## **THE SECOND ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Held in Constantinople in 381. Under Emperor Theodosius the Great. 150 Bishops were present.

### **The Macedonian Controversy**

Macedonius, somewhat like Arius, was misinterpreting Church's teaching on the Holy Spirit. He taught that the Holy Spirit was not a person ("hypostasis"), but simply a power (dynamic) of God. Therefore the Spirit was inferior to the Father and the Son. The Council condemned Macedonius' teaching and defined the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. The Council decreed that there was one God in three persons ("hypostases"): Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

The Creed

The holy fathers of the Council added five articles to the Creed. They read as follows:  
And (We believe) in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father: who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified: who spoke by the prophets. In one Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church. I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins. I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

Defenders of Orthodoxy

### **St. Gregory of Nazianzus, the Theologian (329-390)**

He was a scholar who studied in Athens with St. Basil the Great; became Patriarch of Constantinople (379); presided at the Second Ecumenical Council; a poet and profound thinker. He wrote many poems, hymns, essays, and sermons.

St. Gregory of Nyssa (331-396)

Younger brother of St. Basil the Great. He was a theologian who delved deeply into the truths of the Faith.

### **St. John Chrysostom (345-407)**

John was born and educated in Antioch (Syria). He became Patriarch of Constantinople in 398. He is known for his eloquent and straight-forward sermons (Chrysostomos: "the golden-mouthed"); was responsible for the revision of the Divine Liturgy. He died in exile.

## **THE THIRD ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

**Held in Ephesus, Asia Minor in 431 under Emperor Theodosius II (grandson of Theodosius the Great). 200 Bishops were present.**

### **The Nestorian Controversy**

It concerned the nature of Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Nestorius taught that the Virgin Mary gave birth to a man, Jesus Christ, not God, the "Logos" ("The Word", Son of God). The Logos only dwelled in Christ, as in a Temple (Christ, therefore, was only Theophoros: The "Bearer of God". Consequently, Virgin Mary should be called "Christotokos," Mother of Christ and not "Theotokos, "Mother of God." Hence, the name, "**Christological controversies**".

Nestorianism over emphasized the human nature of Christ at the expense of the divine. The Council denounced Nestorius' teaching as erroneous. Our Lord Jesus Christ is one person, not two separate "people": the Man, Jesus Christ and the Son of God, Logos. The Council decreed that Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God (Logos), is complete God and complete man, with a rational soul and body. The Virgin Mary is "Theotokos" because she gave birth not to man but to God who became man. The union of the two natures of Christ took place in such a fashion that one did not disturb the other.

### **The Creed**

The Council declared the text of the "Creed" decreed at the First and Second Ecumenical Councils to be complete and forbade any change (addition or deletion).

## **THE FOURTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

**Held in Chalcedon, near Constantinople, 451. Under Emperor Marcian. 630 Bishops were present.**

### **Monophysite Controversies**

The Council was concerned, once again, with the nature of Jesus Christ. The teaching arose that Christ's human nature (less perfect) dissolved itself in His divine nature (more perfect): like a cube of sugar in a pot of water. Thus, in reality, Christ had only one nature, the Divine. Hence, the term: Monophysites ("mono", one and "physis", "nature".) Monophysitism overemphasized the divine nature of Christ, at the expense of the human.

Proclamation

The Council condemned Monophysitism and proclaimed that Christ has two complete natures: the divine and the human, as defined by previous Councils. These two natures function without confusion, are not divided nor separate (against Nestorius), and at no time did they undergo any change (against Eutyches: Monophysites).

## **THE FIFTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

**Held in Constantinople in 553. Under Emperor Justinian the Great. 165 Bishops were present.**

## **Nestorian and Eutychian Controversies**

The Council was called in hope of putting an end to the Nestorian and the Eutychian (Monophysite) controversies). The Council confirmed Church's teaching regarding the two natures of Christ (human and divine) and condemned certain writings with Nestorian learnings. Emperor Justinian himself confessed his Orthodox faith in a form of the famous Church hymn "Only begotten Son and Word of God" which is sung during the Divine Liturgy in Eastern Rite communities.

## **THE SIXTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Held in **Constantinople in 680. Under Emperor Constantine IV. 170 Bishops were present.**

### **The Monothelite Controversy**

It concerned the last attempt to compromise with the Monophysites. Although Christ did have two natures (divine and human) He nevertheless, acted as God only. In other words, His divine nature made all the decisions and His human nature only carried and acted them out. Hence, the name: "Monothelism" ("mono" one and "thelesism" will.)

The Council's Pronouncement

"Christ had two natures with two activities: as God working miracles, rising from the dead and ascending into heaven; as Man, performing the ordinary acts of daily life. Each nature exercises its own free will." Christ's divine nature had a specific task to perform and so did His human nature. Each nature performed those tasks set forth without being confused, subjected to any change or working against each other. The two distinct natures and related to them activities were mystically united in the one Divine Person of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

Defender of Orthodoxy

St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662)

A simple, but enlightened monk; died in exile (Caucasus).

St. Andrew of Crete (+ 740)

Participated in the deliberations of the Council; author of the famous "Canon" which is read during Great Lent in Eastern Rite communities.

## **THE QUINISEXT ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

Held in Constantinople in 692. In the dome of the Imperial Palace, the "In Trullo" (dome) Council, from which it derives the name: "Trullan" Council.

Legislative Matters

It is regarded as supplementing the Fifth and the Sixth Ecumenical Councils, hence, it is called "Quinisext." Its work was purely legislative, it ratified 102 canons and the decisions of the previous Ecumenical Councils.

Doctrinal and Disciplinary Canons

Sanctioned the so-called "Eighty-five Apostolic Canons" and approved the disciplinary decisions (Canons) of certain regional Councils. The Council added a series of disciplinary decisions or canons to the existing ones. The "Quinisext" Council laid the foundation for the Orthodox Canon Law.

## **THE SEVENTH ECUMENICAL COUNCIL**

**Held in Nicea, Asia Minor in 787. Under Empress Irene. 367 Bishops were present.**

### **The Iconoclast Controversy**

It centered around the use of icons in the Church and the controversy between the iconoclasts and iconophiles. The Iconoclasts were suspicious of religious art; they demanded that the Church rid itself of such art and that it be destroyed or broken (as the term "iconoclast" implies).

The iconophiles believed that icons served to preserve the doctrinal teachings of the Church; they considered icons to be man's dynamic way of expressing the divine through art and beauty.

The Iconoclast controversy was a form of Monophysitism: distrust and downgrading of the human side.

### **The Council's Proclamation**

"We define that the holy icons, whether in color, mosaic, or some other material, should be exhibited in the holy churches of God, on the sacred vessels and liturgical vestments, on the walls, furnishings, and in houses and along the roads, namely the icons of our Lord God and Savior Jesus Christ, that of our Lady the Theotokos, those of the venerable angels and those of all saintly people. Whenever these representations are contemplated, they will cause those who look at them to commemorate and love their prototype. We define also that they should be kissed and that they are an object of veneration and honor (timitiki proskynisis), but not of real worship (latreia), which is reserved for Him Who is the subject of our faith and is proper for the divine nature { {Opr rendered tyypis icon is in effect transmitted to the prototype; he who venerates the icon, venerated in it the reality for which it stands."}

Defenders of Orthodoxy

### **St. John of Damascus (675-745)**

John Mansur was educated at the Caliphate Court in Damascus. He held a position comparable to that of a Prime Minister. He was a devout Orthodox Christian. He entered the Monastery of St. Sabbas in Palestine, where he wrote many poems, hymns and treatises, one of which is called "An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith." This work is a systematic theological summary of all the basic doctrines of the first seven centuries, a monumental work which became a classic in Orthodox Theology.

The Triumph of Orthodoxy

An Endemousa (Regional) Synod was called in Constantinople in 843. Under Empress Theodora. The veneration of icons was solemnly proclaimed at the St. Sophia's Cathedral. Monks and clergy came in procession and restored the icons in their rightful place. The day was called "Triumph of Orthodoxy." Since that time, this event is commemorated yearly with a special service on the first Sunday of Lent, the "Sunday of Orthodoxy."

Note: This is a brief history of the Seven Ecumenical Council and of the faith.