

## THE FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325 A.D.): CIRCUMSTANCES AND IMAGES

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**Abstract.** Last year, 2025, marked 1700 years since the Ecumenical Council whose proceedings took place in the city of Nicaea in the year 325 AD. It was convened by Emperor Constantine I (306–337). Twelve hundred hierarchs participated, each accompanied by a group of clergy necessary for the conduct of the proceedings. The total number was around 20,000 people—a truly impressive figure for such a synod. This gathering was necessary for the unification of the Christian Church throughout the entire Roman Empire. By that time, Christians had come to represent approximately 50–60% of the total population. Through the work of the Council, the first version of the Creed was drafted, which was later defined in 396 AD by the Ecumenical Council of Constantinople. Through the decisions of the Council of Nicaea, the emperor—who presided over the proceedings—approved all the canons that would form the foundation of the Christian Church. On this occasion, all doctrinal deviations from the Christian faith were refuted. Thus, Arius’s doctrine from Alexandria, concerning the concept of filioque, was rejected. In the end, the council succeeded, for a short time, in unifying the entire Christian Church and bringing peace to the empire. The importance of this Council was illustrated in various images painted in churches, drawn on papyrus, or in miniatures found in manuscripts. This was necessary because literacy was not yet widespread.

**Keywords:** *Nicaea, ecumenical council, depiction in art*

**DOI** [10.56082/annalsarscihist.2026.1.5](https://doi.org/10.56082/annalsarscihist.2026.1.5)

Last year, 2025, marked 1700 years since the great gathering of church leaders who, convened by Emperor Constantine<sup>1</sup> (306-337), formed the first ecumenical Council – the Council or Synod of Nicaea.

The convocation of bishops from across the Roman Empire was a pressing necessity. As Santo Mazzarino demonstrated<sup>2</sup>, after the great crisis and turmoil in the Roman Empire in the third century, at the end of that century during the reign

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<sup>1</sup> For a brief biography of Emperor Constantine the Great, see R. St. Vergatti, *Characteristics of the imperial act of 313: the Edict of Milan*, in vol. *Cross and Mission. The Holy Emperors Constantine and Helena, Promoters of Religious Freedom and Defenders of the Church*, vol. II, Studies collected and published by Emilian Popescu and Viorel Ioniță, Ed. Basilica, Bucharest, 2013, p. 249-276.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Santo Mazzarino, *Il basso Imperio Antico, tardo-antico, ed era Costantiniana*, 2 vols., Bari, 1974-1980, passim; idem, *Aspetti sociali dell quarto secolo, ricerche di storia tardo-romana*, Rome, 1951, passim.

of Diocletian (284-305) fundamental reforms were attempted. The Empire was suffering. Emperor Trajan (98-117) had been the last to bring new conquered lands to Rome. From those lands, namely Dacia, wealth had been taken, especially gold, and poured into the Aerarium (the imperial treasury). The gold riches of Dacia were enough to organize great triumphal celebrations and erect imperial monuments in the rest of the empire. But they could not last forever.

Subsequently, an Aerarium crisis emerged and intensified. The imperial coinage came to have less precious metal in its content than the amount inscribed on the obverse. This situation led to a decline in the monetary value. The immediate consequence was that the army and the administration could no longer be paid normally and, as a result, no longer obeyed their commanders from the center. Local authority was imposed in the provinces.

The situation also led to a change in religious belief: people no longer obeyed the gods of the Roman Imperial Pantheon. In their place, Christianity—originating in the Levant—asserted itself, spreading rapidly and effectively throughout the entire Empire, despite all prohibitions and punishments, and supported by a strong Church, though one affected by major internal contradictions. Nevertheless, the actions of some emperors of terror against Christians were unsuccessful. Moreover, there was a reaction among common people, who increasingly embraced Christianity. By the end of the 3rd century, more than 50% of the population of the Roman Empire had embraced Christianity.

Emperor Diocletian (Gaius Aurelius Valerius Diocletianus) decided to divide the leadership of the vast Empire to get it out of crisis. In 286 he appointed Maximian (Caesar 285-286; Augustus 286-305) to rule the Empire as co-emperor. Both bore the title of imperator Augustus.

However, the turmoil and great economic hardships in the empire could not be easily overcome. Thus, in 293, Diocletian decided to appoint two additional rulers – Galerius (Caesar 293-305; later Augustus 1 May 305-May 311) and Constantius (Caesar 293-305; 1 May 305-23 July 306). These latter two were related to and subordinate to the two Augusti and bore the title of Caesar.

At the same time, Diocletian embarked on to a series of anti-Christian reforms. The Christian religion was considered a danger to the Empire, among other reasons, because it introduced a new element: it promoted the elimination of slavery. Christianity declared all people equal at the moment of birth. In this way, the economic foundation of the Roman Empire – slave labour – was seriously undermined. Diocletian was nevertheless unable to fight against the new society that was being created and increasingly influenced by Christianity.

As a result, on May 1, 305, Diocletian became the first Roman emperor to abdicate voluntarily, along with his co-Augustus Maximian. Both abdicated on the same date, in separate ceremonies. Diocletian retreated to his enormous palace in Spalatos (today Split, Croatia), hoping that the tetrarchy he imposed and the reforms

carried out up to the point would save the Empire. Diocletian had organized the provincial division of the Empire, relying on a vast and bureaucratic system of government, he also established new administrative centers especially in the frontier area, built roads and access routes for subjects living in the border areas – for example in Dobrudja. At the same time, he reformed taxation and standardized fiscal policy through the Empire, making it predictable. However, he could not stop inflation, even though he issued, among other measures, the “Edict on maximum prices”. The new administrative organization of the Empire (such as the Scythia Minor – Dobrudja region) and the imposed fiscal reforms saved the Empire from the dissolution to which it seemed destined at the time of Diocletian’s accession to power.

After the abdication of Diocletian and Maximian, the remaining co-emperors intensified their rivalry among themselves. I will mention only the most relevant figures, Maxentius and Constantine, the former being the son of Maximian, and Constantine, the latter, being the son of Constantius.

Even though the tetrarchy and the dominate created by Diocletian had yielded results, they soon collapsed because of anti-Christian terror. This period was the time of the greatest official persecution of Christians (303-304), the bloodiest one, yet it failed to eliminate this religion from the Empire.

On the contrary, after the year 313, following the Edict of Milan, Christianity became an officially recognized religion and increasingly established itself within the Empire during the time of Constantine.

In the year 306, the well-organized legions of Britain, the strongest in the Empire, proclaimed Constantine (306-337) as emperor. His authority – which extended to the western part of the Empire – was contested by Maxentius. Just as two swords cannot fit in the same scabbard, so too the throne could not be occupied by two emperors, and they entered into open conflict. Writers contemporary with Constantine recorded that on 28 October 312, before fighting at Pons Milvius (Milvian Bridge – Bridge of the Eagles) against the usurper Maxentius (28 October 306-28 October 312), Constantine experienced a vision, an extraordinary dream. A sign is said to have appeared to him in the sky, representing a monogram of the name of Jesus, with the celestial meaning *celestes signum dei*<sup>3</sup>. Constantine the Great obeyed the exhortation of the dream and had the shields of his soldiers inscribed with the symbol of Jesus Christ, that is, an X with the letter I in its center, vaulted at the top<sup>4</sup>. Eusebius of Caesarea, in *his Vita Constantini*, recounted the same episode, but presented it in a modified form, as it was reportedly told to him by the

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Lactanțiu, *On the Death of the Persecutors*, bilingual edition, translation by Cristian Bejan, introductory study, chronological table, explanatory notes and annexes by Dragoș Mirșanu, Polirom, Iași, 2011, p. 138.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 138-139, 140-141.

emperor himself <sup>5</sup>. According to Eusebius of Caesarea , Constantine the Great, together with his soldiers, had a divine vision in broad daylight: a luminous cross appeared to them in the sky, with the sun positioned above it. And beneath it was written " *In hoc signo vinces* " <sup>6</sup>.



**PHOTO 1. Emperor Constantine the Great – part of the colossal marble and bronze statue (ca. 312-315, restored after 325), originally located in the Basilica of Maxentius in Rome, and today in the courtyard of the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Capitoline Museum, Rome (photo from the author's collection).**



**PHOTO 2. Emperor Constantine the Great – part of the colossal bronze statue (before 326), originally in the Domus Faustae in Rome, and currently located in the Palazzo dei Conservatori, Capitoline Museum, Rome (photo from the author's collection).**

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<sup>5</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Writings*, part two, *Life of Constantine the Great*, ed. cit., pp. 76-77 (1. 28).

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 76-77 (1. 28-32).



**PHOTO 3. The marble and bronze colossus statue of Constantine – reproduction from 2024, located in the Capitoline Museum (photo from the author's collection)**

Under this divine sign, Constantine achieved a great victory on the outskirts of Rome. There, with only 20,000 soldiers under his command, he defeated the army of about 50,000 soldiers fighting under the banner of Maxentius<sup>7</sup>. The victory at Pons Milvius, together with the conquest of Rome, meant the imposition of Constantine on the throne, as Augustus, *undisputed in the western part of the Empire. In the eastern regions of the empire, Licinius ruled as Augustus*<sup>8</sup>.

Constantine became brother-in-law of Licinius. The two met at the wedding of Constantine's sister Constantia to Licinius. Their meeting took place between December 312 and February 313, in the city of Mediolanum (Milan), where the imperial wedding was celebrated<sup>9</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> The numbers of the armies are reported unclearly by various authors; Lactantius claims that Maxentius' army was actually much larger (Lactantius, *op.cit.*, pp. 138-139); Zosimos indicates some figures that, of course, are exaggerated: according to him, Maxentius would have had 188,000 men, of whom 170,000 were infantry and 18,000 cavalry, while Constantine would have had only 98,000 men (Cf. Zosimos, *Historia nova* ] Zosimo, *Histoire nouvelle*, texte établi et traduit par François Paschoud, I, ed. II, Les Belles Lettres, Paris, 2000, 2, 15, 1). More modern research has concluded that Maxentius' army numbered around 50,000 men, and that of Constantine around 20-25,000 men (cf. Alexandra Wilhelmina Busch, "Militia in Urbe". *The military presence in Rome*, in vol. *The Impact of the Roman Army (200 BC - AD 476), Economic, Social, and Cultural Aspects*, Proceeding of the Sixth Workshop of the International Network Impact of the Empire (Roman Empire 200 BC - AD 476), Capri, March 29-April 3, 2005, Brill, Leiden, Boston, 2007, p. 315-341).

<sup>8</sup> Licinius, on very good terms with Galerius, was declared *Augustus* by the latter on November 11, 308.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. A.H.M. Jones, J. Morris, J.R. Martindale, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, volume 1, AD 260-395, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p. 1221; Lactantius, *op.cit.*, 45, 1. Licinius arrived in Milan in February 313 also to marry Constantia, the sister of Constantine the Great; it was a form of understanding between the two rulers of the empire, for family ties acquired, in antiquity, as in the Middle Ages, a political character. The city of Milan was chosen by the two

There, then, the two discussed, drafted and later promulgated the famous *Edictum Mediolanense*<sup>10</sup>. This act is known from its reproduction in two versions. The first known version is due to Lactantius, who transcribed it into Latin in his work *De Mortibus Persecutorum*<sup>11</sup>. The text was written in Latin, the official language of the Empire at that time for the communication of edicts<sup>12</sup>. A second version of the text has been transmitted in the form of a Greek translation, included in *the Historia Ecclesiastica* of Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea<sup>13</sup>. This version in Greek, language spoken in the eastern parts of the empire, but unofficial one, differs slightly from the first, the Latin one. The edict set the world on a new path – that of Christianity. As an imperial act approved by the magistrates, it had carried exceptional authority. However, it was not immediately and completely applied throughout the entire surface of the Empire. However, Constantine came to be supported by Christians, who from the time of this edict onward could freely, officially, practice their faith throughout the entire Roman Empire and in the border regions where they had influence.

In the year 315, an important cleric of Alexandria, Arius, began to promote even more fervently and publicly a new doctrine inspired to him by the former bishop of Antioch, Paul of Samosata<sup>14</sup>. In essence, this led to major conflicts between Arius and his increasingly numerous followers on the one hand, and Bishop Alexander of Alexandria on the other. The conflict drew in the entire empire. Arius was reproached - by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, as had happened with Paul of Samosata before Arius<sup>15</sup> - for the fact that that the new doctrine did not recognize the divine essence of Jesus Christ.

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emperors because the Roman population and the senate were not entirely favorable to Constantine in Rome; it seems that he, during his reign, was in Rome only twice.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Lactantius, *op. cit.*, pp. 148-155; Eusebius of Caesarea, *Writings*, Part Ia. *Church History. Martyrs of Palestine*, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1987, pp. 379-380 – where he discusses a Greek translation of the Edict of Milan.

<sup>11</sup> Lactantius' work is known to us preserved in a single form in the Codex Colbertinus, BN Fr. Paris, Lat. 2627, a manuscript from the 11th century; after extensive discussions among specialists, it was concluded that the author is Lactantius; for the main stages of the discussion in order to identify the author, see Dragoș Mârșanu, *Studiu introductiv la Lactanțiu*, *op. cit.*, pp. 17-39.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Bruno Rochette, *Language Policies in the Roman Republic and Empire*, in vol. *A Companion to the Latin Language*, edited by James Clackson, Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, Chichester, 2011, pp. 549-564. Constantine the Great, who had the emperor Trajan as a model in his dress and behavior, required all soldiers to understand and speak Latin; it was a necessity for the Empire to have a single language for command (*ibidem*, p. 561). He also addressed the participants of the Council of Nicaea in 325 in Latin (*ibidem*).

<sup>13</sup> Eusebius of Caesarea, *Church History*, ed. *cit.*, pp. 379-380.

<sup>14</sup> The doctrine of Paul of Samosata was also put into circulation by Arius. The belief launched by Paul of Samosata had great influence among some Christians, thus becoming one of the sources that led to the convening of the Council of Nicaea.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Pierre Batiffol, *Les sources de l'histoire du concile de Nicée*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 24, n°140, 1925, pp. 386, 390.

Arius' theory largely consisted of several statements: 1) God the Father is the uncreated and unbegotten principle. However, the use of the term Father inevitably implied superiority over the Son and therefore assumed an inferior position of the Son. 2) Jesus was created by the will of the Father, out of nothing, as the first creature. From this arose the idea that the Son would not be eternal, since He was created from nothing; likewise, being "created", He did not exist previously, and therefore the Son did not possess the quality of eternity. 3) Nevertheless, the Son enjoys the highest honor. 4) The purpose for which God created Jesus is the salvation of the world. 5) At creation, the Son received from the Father's greatness and creative power, thus Jesus would have been a kind of adopted son, with a divinity borrowed from God the Father.

These ideas spread by Arius and his followers sparked passionate ideological and not only ideological struggles throughout the Empire within the Christian church and even among believers.

Emperor Constantine, seeing the unrest in the empire caused by this dispute, wrote to both parties, urging them to stop fighting. He did not succeed in convincing them. He then decided to convene a council of bishops, but of all the bishops of the Empire. They had to arrive at a unified point of view, common to all those who were Christian believers, regardless of what that position might be concerning the ideas of relation Arius. Other dogmatic issues and matters of organization and discipline of the Christian clergy also had to be resolved. Consequently, the council or synod was convened in the Byzantine city of Nicaea, today Iznik in Turkey.



**PHOTO 4 – Map of the Roman Empire – with the location of the city of Nicaea (Iznik, Turkey), cf. Historical Atlas, Ed. Didactică și Pedagogă, Bucharest, 1971**

Constantine had invited about 1,800 bishops. Not all of them attended. Approximately 1,200 bishops came. Among them were representatives from the

regions of the Lower Danube: bishop Theophilus of Gothia (probably of the Goths settled in today's Romania or, according to other opinions, in Crimea), bishop Dominius or Domnius of Sirmium (Voivodina), bishop Protogenes of Sardica, bishop Dacus of Scupi, bishop Pistus of Marcianopolis, bishop Marius or Marcus of Comeea (probably also in Moesia)<sup>16</sup>. Each bishop could be accompanied by four or five attendants.

To facilitate the journey, the emperor ordered the *Aerarium* to provide the bishops with transportation, lodging, meals, food for horses or pack animals for relay, and reimbursement or advance of expenses. This resulted in an extremely large crowd gathered in Nicaea, where a total of approximately 20,000 people had arrived, of whom about 1,200 were high-ranking hierarchs. This created a problem, as there had to be space to accommodate the proceedings of the most important church leaders. Archaeologically, the official, imperial hall large enough to accommodate the emperor and all the Christian bishops who came to the council, together with their companions, has not been found. In any case, according to the account of Eusebius of Caesarea, the proceedings took place in a hall larger than all others in a very large building. Since there was neither a church of appropriate size in Nicaea, nor an imperial palace there - either in documentation or archaeological remains - the most likely scenario is that the sessions were held in a large hall of a palace belonging to a private personage, who wanted to assist the emperor<sup>17</sup>.

The sessions began, according to some opinions, on May 19, 325, and according to others in June. They lasted two or three weeks and concluded in July 325. Emperor Constantine was chosen and recognized as the president of the work. This was the first Ecumenical Council. During the sessions, the famous Nicene Creed was adopted, as well as a series of regulations compiled into canons.

The precise circumstances and exact motives for convening the Council of Nicaea in 325 are not fully known. Most likely, they also have their origin in another smaller Episcopal Synod, which had met in Antioch towards the end of 324 or the beginning of 325. There, several Eastern bishops gathered to discuss the succession of Bishop Philogonus. The Council of Antioch was presided over by Bishop Osius of Cordoba, an envoy of Emperor Constantine. This Council of Antioch was of great importance for Nicaea, because there, in Antioch, a so-called creed opposed to the teachings of Arius was formulated for the first time. Three of the bishops were discussed in Antioch (among whom were accused in that council of Arian sympathies), and among them was a very influential one, Eusebius of Caesarea.

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<sup>16</sup> Cf. Mircea Păcurariu, *History of the Romanian Orthodox Church*, vol. 1, ed. I, IBMBOR, Bucharest, 1980, pp. 96, 107; see also the list of bishops in F. Delmas, *Les Pères de Nicée et Le Quien*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 4, n°2, 1900, pp. 87-92.

<sup>17</sup> For a more recent discussion of the location of the council of 325, without reaching a definitive conclusion, see Ine Jacobs, *Hosting the Council in Nicaea: Material Needs and Solutions*, in Young Richard Kim (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, Cambridge University Press, 2021, pp. 65-89.

However, in order to be able to defend themselves, the respective bishops were invited to repent on the occasion of another synod that was to take place at Ancyra, in a form of appellate jurisdiction that would examine their faith.

Most likely, this condemnation in Antioch of some very important Eastern bishops who sided with Arius seems to be the primary reason for convening the Council of Nicaea. The meeting in Antioch prefigured the central role of this urgent need for doctrinal regulation – that is, reaching a consensus on the establishment of the nature of Jesus. There were also other disputes to be settled: the so-called African dispute, the Egyptian dispute, which largely concerned problems of the election of the clergy, especially of bishops, the conduct of the clergy, the situation of those who had abjured during the persecutions, etc. So, there were multiple issues to be settled, not only the Arian dispute. The question of the Paschal calendar also needed clarification.

Emperor Constantine, after trying to reconcile opposing factions, became convinced that his role as emperor was sufficiently important to restore and enforce peace in the Church through norms adopted and accepted by the entire clergy in the Roman Empire and the areas under its influence.

Restoring peace in the church was very important to the emperor. Thus, he also achieved order in public affairs, which were greatly affected by dogmatic disputes among Christian leaders.

Emperor Constantine specifically chose Nicaea as the venue, rather than his own city of residence – Nicomedia – precisely to ensure the neutrality of the population. There was no important seat of any influential bishop in Nicaea.

The most important document of the Council of Nicaea was the so-called Nicene Creed, or the Symbol of Faith of Nicaea.

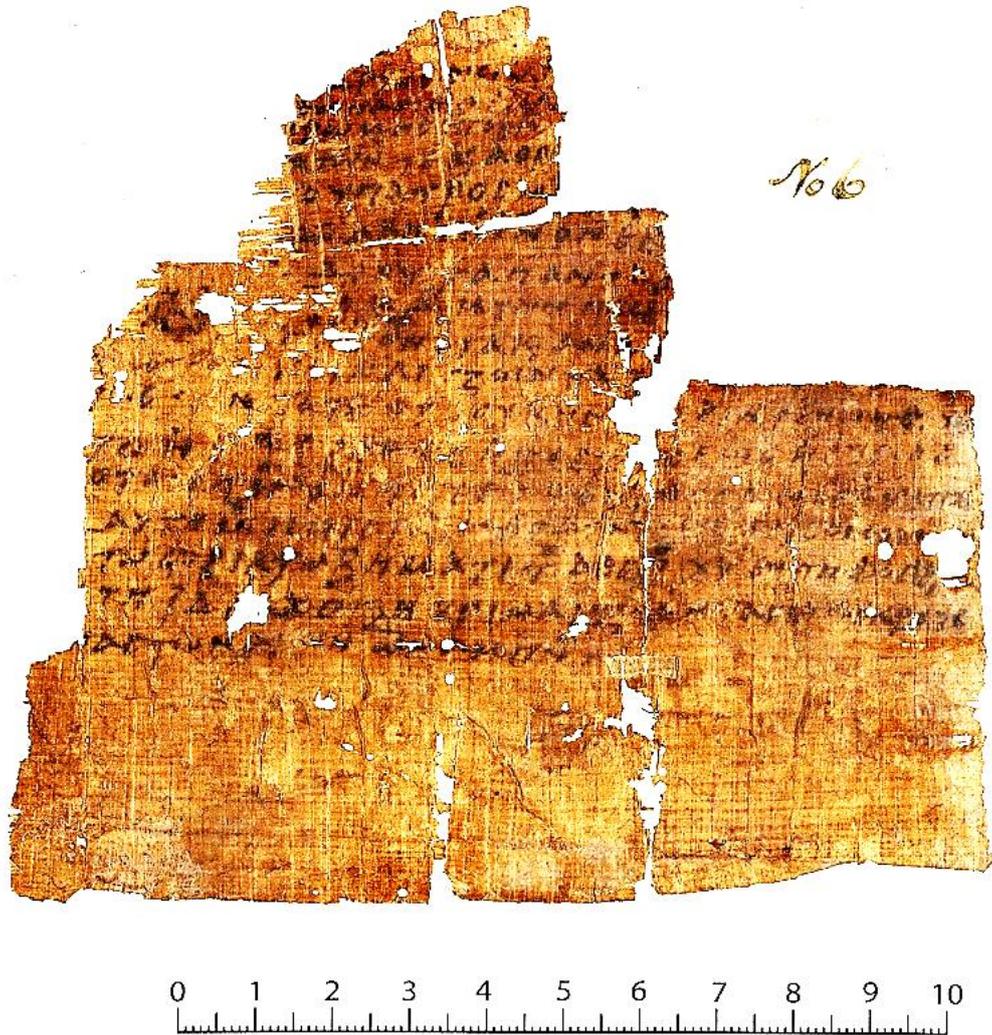
What was decided at Nicaea was not preserved in the original form of minutes, although they must have existed, but we know it from later accounts, even from some direct participants<sup>18</sup>.

The oldest manuscript that preserves the Creed in written form dates from the 6th century<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. Pierre Batiffol, *Les sources de l'histoire du concile de Nicee*, loc. cit., pp. 386-402; idem, *Les sources de l'histoire du concile de Nicée (Suite et fin.)*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 26, n°145, 1927, pp. 5-17.

<sup>19</sup> The creed is preserved in the Oxyrhynque Papyrus, XVII 2067, 5th century, in the Sackler Library, Bodleian Library, Oxford.



**PHOTO 5 – Nicene Creed – fragment from a Coptic papyrus probably from the 6th century, MS-Greek-P-00006: Nicene Creed, John Rylands Library, Manchester.**

From the point of view of the text of the Creed, researchers have concluded that the Creed of the year 325 was most likely modified at the Second Ecumenical Council of 381, held in Constantinople, this being the version we have today. Of course, there are various changes here compared to the original act, imposed by the circumstances of that time. Therefore, researchers have called this document the “Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed”.

What is the Creed, in fact? The Creed represents the official doctrine adopted for the first time then by the Christian Church, which established in an ecumenically manner

what constituted the true faith. From its adoption in the year 325, the Creed has become the doctrinal basis of all Christian churches, regardless of their confession, with relative later differences, in the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Evangelical Lutheran, Anglican Church, in other Protestant churches, such as the Waldensian Church ("the Poor of Lyon"), as well as in the Calvinist Church.

In the Orthodox faith, the text of the Creed is:

"I believe in One God,  
The Father Almighty,  
Maker of heaven and earth,  
To all seen and unseen.  
And in One Lord Jesus Christ,  
Son of God, the Only-Begotten,  
Begotten of the Father,  
Before all ages.  
Light from Light,  
True God from true God,  
Begotten, not made, of one essence with the Father,  
Through Whom all things were made.  
Which for us people  
And for our salvation  
Came down from heaven.  
And He was incarnate by the Holy Spirit  
And from the Virgin Mary  
And He became man.  
And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,  
And He suffered and was buried.  
And he rose again on the third day, 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.  
And in one the Holy Spirit,  
The Lord, the Giver of life,  
Who proceeds from the Father,  
Who together with the Father and the Son  
He is worshipped and glorified,  
Who spoke through the prophets.  
In one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church,  
I confess one Baptism for the forgiveness of sins,  
I await the resurrection of the dead.

and the life of the age to come.

Amen!”

At the time of its adoption, the Creed served to distinguish between the true believers and those who held a separate opinion, ending up being considered as heretics – at that time the followers of Arius.

At the same time, several rules were adopted at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, contained in twenty canons. These can be divided into five thematic groups: issues of hierarchy and rules of discipline for the clergy (canons 1, 2, 3, 9, 10, 17, 18), canons regarding the organization, leadership and administration of the Church (4-7, 15-16), canons regarding repentance (11-14), canons concerning reconciliation with those who, during the anti-Christian persecution, had declared that they had renounced the faith (apostates) and the question of their forgiveness (canons 18, 19) as well as a liturgical provision (canon 20).

The essence of the canons is as follows: 1. Self-mutilators cannot (or may no longer) be part of the clergy – thus excluding those who deliberately inflicted such acts upon themselves. 2. Neophytes cannot be received into the clergy immediately after their conversion to the faith (that is, immediately after baptism). 3. Clergymen must not have concubines. 4. Concerning the Election and Ordination of Bishops. 5. Concerning Metropolitan Synods. 6. Concerning Exarchates and the Election of Bishops. 7. Concerning the Veneration of the see of Jerusalem. 8. Concerning the Reception of schismatics into the Church. 9. Concerning the Temptation (testing) of those entering the Clergy. 10. Those who have once fallen from the faith shall not enter the clergy. 11. The Steps of Repentance of Those Who Have Fallen away from the Faith. 12. Concerning the Repentance of Those Who Came from the pagan military service. 13. The communion of the dying. 14. The repentance of the catechumens who have fallen from the faith. 15. The uncontrolled transfer of the clergy is forbidden. 16. The condemnation of the clergy who relocate on their own initiative. 17. The condemnation of the charging of interest and the practice of usury. 18. The establishment of the place of the deacons in relation to the rest of the clergy. 19. About the Paulician Heretics (who returned to the Church). 20. The prohibition of kneeling on certain days.

The decisions of the Council of Nicaea were not initially very widespread, partly because the science of reading and writing was known to a small portion of the population and even of the clergy. Therefore, for the knowledge and understanding of the Creed and the popularization of the condemnation of Arius and Arianism, images were resorted to.

The ones about which we have the oldest information were most likely created after the iconoclastic era, but very few of them have survived to our time.

Thus, inside churches and other public places, including palaces, images of the Council of Nicaea were displayed - with Arius portrayed as the condemned character.

Representations of the condemnation of Arius were generally shown alongside to other synods – whether ecumenical or provincial.

It is known, for example, that in the 8th century there were fresco representations of the ecumenical councils in the *Augsteion* and *Million* (imperial palaces in

Constantinople) but that they were also removed at that time on the orders of some basileus (Philippicos – usurping basileus 711-713; he was a Monothelite and the 6th ecumenical council condemned this heresy).

In response to these sacrilegious acts, the six councils were restored in fresco in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Some scholars consider this to have been a fresco, while others suggest it was a decorated reliquary containing the acts of the six ecumenical councils up to that time.

Furthermore, before the year 797, it is known that Bishop Stephen of Naples commissioned the painting of the six ecumenical councils - including the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325. The fresco was placed in the Church of St. Peter within the episcopal complex of Naples (which no longer exists today).

This would in fact be the earliest known depiction of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 made in fresco in a church, though it no longer survives today.

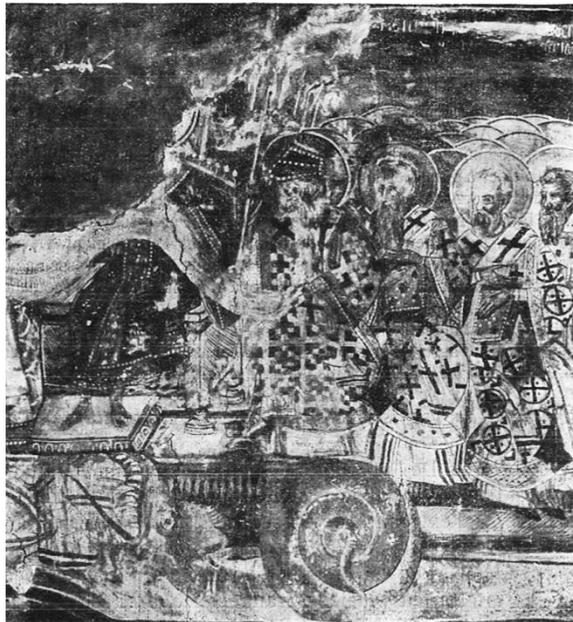
The councils – both ecumenical and provincial – were also represented in mosaics, for example in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. During the restoration of the decoration in 1169, under King Amaury of Jerusalem, and by order of Basilos Manuel Comnenus, mosaics were created by the mosaicist Ephrem and the painter Basil. These mosaics in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem have not survived entirely. They represented a political program of unity between East and West, emphasizing the official doctrine common to the two churches - the Eastern and the Western.



**PHOTO 6 – Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, mosaic (ca. 1169) on the south wall, recent restoration. The central part represents the Council of Constantinople in 381, where the Nicene Creed of 325 was resumed. The left part of the mosaic, lost, most likely represented the Council of Nicaea in 325 (photo R.Št. Vergatti collection).**

The depiction of the first ecumenical council of Nicaea was also seen in 1839 in the Great Church of the Iviron Monastery, a fresco of course older and subsequently disappeared.

Other representations of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, along with other ecumenical councils, existed until 1913, when there was a great earthquake, in the Church of Saints Peter and Paul in Tarnovo (Bulgaria). The painting in question is attributed to the 14th century, or perhaps earlier. The appearance of these frescoes is known from reproductions prior to the destruction in 1913. They were kept in the Bulgarian National Museum in Sofia.



**PHOTO 7 – The First Ecumenical Council of 325 in Nicaea, as represented in the Church of St. Peter and Paul in Tarnovo, fresco missing due to the 1913 earthquake, previously photographed by the National Museum in Sofia (cf. Séverien Sallavine, *L'iconographie des « sept conciles œcuméniques »*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 25, n°142, 1926, photo p. 162).**

Also in the Bulgarian area, the depiction of the ecumenical councils, including the Council of Nicaea in 325, is mentioned in the fresco of the Church of the Nativity in Arbănași (Bulgaria), which has been repainted several times. What has survived to this day dates from the year 1681, at the time when prince Șerban Cantacuzino (1678-1688) was on the throne of Wallachia. His court painters were Pârveu Mutu Zugravul (the Painter) and Constantinos. Consequently, one can assume that the fresco in the Church of the Nativity in Arbănași also belongs to these two painters, sent from Wallachia to work in that place of worship. The stylistic analysis of the fresco leads to their way of working.



**PHOTO 8 – The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, as painted in the Church of the Nativity in Arbănași (17th century, image from 1925 – cf. Sévérien Sallavine, *L'iconographie des « sept conciles œcuméniques »*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 25, n°142, 1926, photo on p. 163).**

In Bucharest, the image of the seven ecumenical councils, including the first ecumenical council of Nicaea in 325, has been preserved and reproduced through the existing painting in the porch of the small but beautiful Church of the Stavropoleos Monastery. Built in 1724, founded by Prince Nicolae Mavrocordat and the monk Ioanichie and his monk-brothers, those painting was restored in 1904 and subsequently after 1991.



**PHOTO 9 – The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325, painted in the porch of the Church of the Stavropoleos Monastery in Bucharest, founded in 1724 (photo from the author's collection)**

We also have images of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in miniatures found in manuscripts. Such is the *the Menologue* of Basil II, ms.gr. 1613 in the Vatican Library, dating from the late 10th or early 11th century. The work of seven artists, the manuscript contains on folio 108 the depiction of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325<sup>20</sup>.



**PHOTO 10** – miniature representing the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325 – in the *Menologue* of Basil II (Bulgarocton), manuscript from the 10th-11th centuries in the Vatican Library, Vat. gr. 1613. Fol. 108 (photo in [https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS\\_Vat.gr.1613/0130?sid=a7590df9b8aca22111c8359533716419](https://digi.vatlib.it/view/MSS_Vat.gr.1613/0130?sid=a7590df9b8aca22111c8359533716419) , accessed September 10 , 2025)

An icon with an explicit, extensive representation of the Council of Nicaea, which has survived to this day, belongs to the Greek painter Michael Damaskinos. It is an icon from 1591. It has the same iconographic program used in the other representations: the emperor Constantine to the left of the throne on which is the Gospel, a pontiff to the right, probably Sylvester of Rome (although he did not participate), other bishops seated in rows, all around the Gospel. In front of the assembly, fallen like a defeated man, stands Arius. He holds in his hand a scroll on which one can read: "Arius, the enemy of God and the first of those who burn."

<sup>20</sup> Sévérien Sallavine, *L'iconographie des « sept conciles œcuméniques »*, in "Échos d'Orient", tome 25, n°142, 1926, p. 150.



**PHOTO 11 - Icon painted by Michael Damaskinos, 1591 – First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. The icon is kept in the building of the Church of the Monastery of St. Catherine of Sinai in Heraklion (Crete, Greece), which during the Venetian occupation was a school, and today is a museum. (photo col. R.Št. Vergatti)**

Another icon representing The First Ecumenical Council of 325 in the city of Nicaea is the 18th-century work of several painters: F. Pavlovsky, I. Maksimovich, A. Galik, G. Karataev, etc. and belonged to the Holy Trinity Church at the Pechersk Lavra in Kiev.



**PHOTO 12 – The 18th century icon of the First Ecumenical Council located within the "Holy Trinity" Church in the Pechersk Lavra (Kiev, Ukraine) (photo from the author's collection)**

Finally, I should mention here another preserved but degraded image from the exterior painting of the church of the former Sumela Monastery (formerly Trebizond, today Trabzon, Turkey) from the 14th century. In this image, it is not entirely the classical representation of the synod, but St. Nicholas of Mires slaps Arius.



**PHOTO 13 – Fresco from the Church of the Sumela Monastery (Trabzon, Turkey) of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea in 325. In the lower left corner you can see St. Nicholas slapping Arius. (photo from the author's collection)**

In conclusion, I can state that the Council of Nicaea in 325, although today we consider it to have been ecumenical, did not immediately lead to the full unity of the Church as Emperor Constantine had hoped.

Even though this unity was clearly affirmed by the Creed.

A number of bishops signed the essential act of the synod, the Creed, fearing their own anathema.

Later, Emperor Constantine, in order to bring peace within the Empire, threatened by the ongoing tumult among the clergy and their followers, resorted to lifting the anathema on some of the so-called followers of Arius.

Thus, in the year 327, he invited Arius himself to the imperial palace and thus personally the Emperor lifted the anathema on him. In turn, Arius declared that he accepted the Creed and read it, but avoided uttering the word *homoousios*.

In the year 380, following the Council of Thessalonica, the emperor Theodosius I (379-395) promulgated an edict.

In its preamble, it did not explicitly refer to the Nicene Creed, but the edict makes it clear that in official imperial doctrine the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equal and equally divine.

In this way, the decisions of the councils of September 359 and 360 were resumed and reaffirmed when the basileus Constantius had adopted what was discussed at the two councils.

Theodosius I was the first Christian Roman emperor to proclaim in an official civil act of the empire the equality of the Holy Trinity – God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. He reinforced and emphasized this idea in the ecumenical council of Constantinople in 381. From that moment on, peace was brought among the Christian Church in this regard – dogmatically – concerning the equivalence of the Holy Trinity.

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