

## The Trinity, One in Essence and Undivided by Fr. Steven Kostoff

Today is the Leavetaking of the Great Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. Looking back to last Sunday, in addition to our ongoing celebration of the Ascension, we also commemorated the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicea. This is an annual commemoration on the Seventh Sunday of Pascha. This First Ecumenical Council convened in 325 AD and its great and timeless contribution to the Church is the first version of we call today the Nicene Creed. Actually, what we use to this day in the Church is the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, for the initial form of the Creed was completed at the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381 AD. But since the full title of the Creed is something of a mouthful, we shorten it to the Nicene Creed, with a hopeful understanding of the history behind it.

At Great Vespers for the Holy Fathers, we chanted a long aposticha verse that characteristically and simultaneously praised the Holy Trinity while teaching the faithful, through a summary form, the meaning of this commemoration. Often, the hymns of the Church combine praise, poetry, teaching and exhortation. This particular hymn is a very fulsome example of that. I would like to present this aposticha verse together with my own commentary added to it, so as to further expand on the hymn and discover what it is primarily teaching us about this First Ecumenical Council and the theology behind it.

*“O Orthodox faithful, let us celebrate today the yearly memorial of the God-bearing Fathers who came from all over the inhabited world to the beautiful city of Nicea.”*

The opening sentence is a somewhat rhetorical call to worship and a reminder that this is an annual celebration of these great saints of the Church. They are said to be “God-bearing Fathers,” something like flesh-and-blood “vessels of the Holy Spirit,” inspired to proclaim theological truths that open up to the faithful members of the Church some of the great mysteries of the Christian Faith. The Council Fathers came from all over the “inhabited world,” a somewhat inflated expression that means that they came from within the boundaries of the Roman Empire—the *oikomene*—or “civilized world.” Nicea was an ancient city of what was called then Asia Minor, but what is today, of course, Turkey. The city was just across the Bosphoros and the great city of Constantinople. Nicea was renamed Iznik by the Ottoman Turks long ago. As Nicea it was also the meeting place of the seventh and last of the Seven Great Ecumenical Councils. But I have no idea if it is still beautiful!

*They rejected the impious teaching of Arius as a Council, excluding him from the Church throughout the world.”*

Here is the first mention of one of the great arch-heretics of the Church—the presbyter Arius from Alexandria. A heretic promotes false teaching as if it was a legitimate expression of the Church’s Faith, which it is not. It is therefore dismissed as “impious.” The title of “heretic” is very unpopular today, as we have relativized all “truth claims;” but the early Church had to distinguish true from false teaching, in order to maintain the “unity of the Faith” and its faithfulness to the witness of the Scriptures. The teaching of Arius was challenged immediately when it became known publicly, for this teaching was clearly a real threat to the Church’s understanding of Who the Son of God actually is. For Arius, the Son is a “creature” unequal with God the Father. For Arius, “there was [a time] when He was not.” That would mean that the Son of God is not eternal. This severely compromised the claim of the Church that it was the eternal and timeless God Who entered into our world in order to save it, for only God can save. Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world precisely because in His divine nature He is truly God. God, in the Person of the Son of God, becomes incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, the “Word made flesh.” We should also take note that “as a Council” Arius and his teaching was rejected. This reveals the *conciliar* nature of the Church, based upon the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem [Acts 15]. When the apostles deliberated there over the hotly contested issue of how the Gentiles should be received into the Church, they acknowledged the role of divine grace leading them in their deliberations: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us . . .” The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council would make the same claim. The decisions of the Church gathered together in Council are not merely the results of human agency.

*“They clearly taught all to confess the Son of God, consubstantial, co-eternal, and existing from before all ages.”*

The “breakthrough” achieved by the Fathers at the Council was to clearly articulate that the Son of God is equal to the Father according to His divine nature. The Son is therefore “coeternal.” He has always existed “from before all ages.” As the Son, He is “begotten of the Father before all ages . . . begotten not made.” There was never a “time” when He did not exist (as Arius claimed), just as there was never a “time” when the Father did not exist. The Son is “Light of Light; true God of true God.” And this “breakthrough” was possible because the Fathers of the Council took the very bold step of using a word not found in the Bible, to defend what was stated in the Bible about the Son of God by means of other expressions, images and terms. This word is the Greek *homoousios*, translated as “consubstantial,” or as we say “of one essence” (with the Father). What God is by nature, so is the Son of the identical nature. Yet, the Father and the Son are distinct as divine Persons. **Con’t Pg 8**



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*“They composed this explicitly in the Symbol of Faith.”*

The Holy Fathers of the Council expressed this in a creedal form—succinctly and explicitly—with a clarity that refutes the teaching of Arius so that any further misunderstanding can be avoided. The Nicene Creed now expresses Orthodox dogma, the very content of the Faith. This Truth is eternal and unchanging for such is the Son of God—“the way, the truth and the life.” The Orthodox Church will proclaim this truth to the world until the end of time and then we will experience it “face to face” in the Kingdom of God. What we call the creed (from the Latin *credo* - I believe) is actually called the Symbol of Faith. This Symbol of Faith has stood the “test of time” as it is still our surest expression of Orthodox teaching after almost seventeen hundred years.

*“Following their divine dogmas in the assurance of the Faith, we worship the Son and the Holy Spirit together with the Father: the Trinity one in Essence, one unique Divinity!”*

This very expressive hymn closes with a call to worship the Holy Trinity. Actually, the hymn is incorporating what was further expressed following the Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381 AD—that “we worship the Son and the Holy Spirit together with the Father.” After the Second Council we have the full expression of our Faith in the Holy Trinity. (Thus was the work of such great Church Fathers as Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa.) And the Trinity is “one in essence.” The Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit share the identical divine nature from all eternity, thus being “one unique Divinity!” These are “divine dogmas.” Dogmas have been described as “mystical facts” penetrating into the deepest layers of reality, because these dogmas reveal God to us to the extent that we can penetrate the mystery and majesty of God.

With the coming of Pentecost this weekend—and Pentecost Sunday is also called the Day of the Holy Trinity—we will be able to worship the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit in and through the Liturgy and the coming of the Holy Spirit that we will experience in the Church. And that sounds exciting!

## Metropolitan Tikhon expresses gratitude after 2018 Diocesan Clergy Convocation

At the invitation of His Grace, Bishop Paul, His Beatitude, Metropolitan Tikhon was the keynote speaker at the annual Diocesan Clergy Convocation during the second week of May 2018.

Metropolitan Tikhon especially highlighted the centrality of evangelization in the life and ministry of the Church.

After the Convocation, Metropolitan Tikhon sent a note of gratitude to Bishop Paul and the clergy of the diocese.

“It was an honor to be again in the Diocese of the Midwest, and my home parish of Saints Peter and Paul with Your Grace and the brotherhood of the diocese,” Metropolitan Tikhon wrote. “It was a spiritual joy to worship with you at the Divine Liturgy and the other services, especially in the presence of the Tikhvin icon of the Mother of God. Please accept my sincere gratitude for Your Grace’s invitation and for the hospitality received during my visit.

“The opportunity to speak to you and share the outlines of the ‘Four Pillars for the Fulfillment of the Apostolic Work of the Church’ was one that I greatly appreciated, and I am grateful for the feedback which you provided during the sessions, over meals, and privately,” Metropolitan Tikhon continued. “The opportunity to speak directly with you, the shepherds in the field, is of great importance to our work as the Orthodox Church in America. As you reflect on the convocation, should you have further comment I am very happy to receive them, and I invite you to send them to me through Archdeacon Joseph at [jmatusiak@oca.org](mailto:jmatusiak@oca.org).

“Finally, please accept my gratitude for the great work you are doing to expand the mission of the Orthodox Church in America in the Diocese of the Midwest,” Metropolitan Tikhon concluded. “We cannot, and should not, shy away from the fact that we have many challenges facing us today. But I left the convocation last week heartened by the talent and the good works being done in the Diocese of the Midwest. May God continue to bless, strengthen and preserve each of you and your families as you continue in your ministry to Christ and His Church.”

