

**The Ecumenical Councils
of the Catholic Church**

The Ecumenical Councils of the Catholic Church

A History

Joseph F. Kelly



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*To Gerard Anthony Kelly,
a good man, a good teacher,
and a good father*

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Preface

Like most church historians, I often wish that my fellow believers knew more about the forces and people who shaped the church over the centuries. Part of this problem is that many church historians, unlike theologians and biblical exegetes, have little interest in writing for general audiences. Years ago, my friend Joseph Tylenda, SJ, of the University of Scranton, told me that, after years of focusing on scholarly writings, he also wished to write for an educated but general audience, which he did with some fine books on the Jesuits. I never forgot what Joe said, and it has been my hope to do the same. The ecumenical councils have always interested me, and a study of them seemed a good topic.

But a book needs a publisher. I approached Liturgical Press, publisher of several other titles of mine, and the director, Peter Dwyer, and the editorial director, Hans Christoffersen, were both interested and supportive, as they have traditionally been for my efforts, and they encouraged me to go ahead with the book. My thanks to them for their confidence.

As an undergraduate teacher, I routinely taught church history surveys and so had a broad knowledge of the field, but the councils demanded more specialized knowledge, and so I turned to some friends for help. My thanks to Joseph Lienhard, SJ, of Fordham University, who read over the chapters on the first eight councils and offered valuable advice. For the late medieval councils and Trent, my friend and colleague at John Carroll University, Dr. Paul Murphy, director of JCU's Institute of Catholic Studies, provided valuable help on a number of historical points. Joseph Tylenda, who inspired this work some time ago, also read the chapters that Dr. Murphy did along with the one on Vatican I. He provided much valuable help on the history but especially the theology of those councils along with very useful advice. For Vatican II, my thanks to my department colleagues Dr. Joan Nuth and Rev. Jared Wicks, SJ, who drew from his virtually unrivaled knowledge of Vatican II to aid me with the book's most difficult chapter. All these scholars

helped to make this a better book; the book's deficiencies are solely the responsibility of the author.

John Carroll University has a history of supporting scholarship, a history continued by my department chairperson, Dr. John Spencer, who recommended me for reduced loads to pursue my writing, as well as by Dr. Linda Eisenmann, dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, who approved Dr. Spencer's recommendation, and by Dr. David LaGuardia, academic vice president at the time I started this work, who officially granted me the reduced loads. Thanks also to Dr. Lauren Bowen, associate academic vice president and chair of the University Committee on Research and Service, who approved research funds for me to purchase books necessary for the research. My final academic thanks go to Mrs. Elizabeth England, my graduate assistant, who read this book more times than anyone should have to.

As always, my sincerest thanks go to my wife Ellen, a loving, thoughtful, and generous spouse, who took time from her own busy schedule and made myriad sacrifices, both large and small, so that I would have time to write.

This book is dedicated to my younger brother, Gerard Anthony Kelly, my childhood companion with whom I share so many warm memories.

Joseph F. Kelly
John Carroll University

Introduction

This book deals with the twenty-one councils considered ecumenical by the Roman Catholic Church, which would make it of interest to Catholic readers, but hopefully it will attract readers from other churches and traditions as well. The first eight councils were held before the eleventh-century schism between the Western, Latin Christians—ancestors of modern Catholics and Protestants—and the Eastern, Greek Christians—ancestors of the Orthodox churches of today. In fact, all eight councils met in Greek-speaking areas and were conducted in Greek. The next ten councils, all Western, Latin-speaking councils, occurred before the Protestant Reformation. To be sure, Protestants do not consider these councils to be in any way authoritative, but they do form part of the common history of Western Christians in the pre-Reformation period. Even the archetypal Catholic council, Trent, which met intermittently from 1545 to 1563, opened while some Protestant and Catholic leaders were still negotiating to prevent the split in the church from becoming permanent, and Protestant observers attended some sessions at Trent. This book is meant to be ecumenical, but not like a council.

Councils

What exactly is an ecumenical council? The word “council” refers to a meeting of any group of people with responsibility to deal with issues facing the group, for example, a student council or a parish council. In the Catholic Church the term usually means a meeting of bishops, either on their own or with the pope. Most common are provincial councils or synods, where the bishops of a particular ecclesiastical province get together, usually under the presidency of the metropolitan or senior bishop of the province. These bishops can legislate for the province, providing that their decisions do not contradict those of higher authorities.

When bishops from several ecclesiastical provinces or from an entire country meet, they constitute a plenary council, such as the three plenary

councils of Baltimore (1852, 1866, 1884), which determined the institutional development of Catholicism in the United States for the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Sometimes, especially in missionary areas, councils call together bishops from various countries and territories under the presidency of the bishop senior in status, for example, a cardinal, or of a papal representative. Thanks to modern transportation and communication, bishops can meet as often as annually.

Distinct from all these is the ecumenical council, a gathering of the bishops of the entire world under the presidency of the pope or, more likely on a day-to-day basis, one or more papal representatives. The pope alone can now summon a council, and he alone can give the decrees final approval. The word “ecumenical” comes from the Greek *oikoumene*, meaning “the inhabited world.” Often the pope invites to the council important ecclesiastical figures such as superiors of religious orders and abbots. Since a council’s business routinely involves theological and canonical issues, “experts” (*periti* in Latin) in theology and canon law take part as advisors, some of whom exercise great influence.

In past centuries, Catholic monarchs sent representatives to the councils to make sure that their interests were served or at least preserved. In fact, several ecumenical councils were called by monarchs, not popes. Strange as this sounds today, in past centuries Christian countries did not separate church and state. Most people, including popes and bishops, considered monarchs to be sacred figures whose voices had to be heard or who often had power within the church itself, for example, in the appointment of bishops. Until the twentieth century, some Catholic monarchs could actually veto the election of a pope. Royal intervention prevailed throughout many Christian churches. For instance, the czar headed the Russian Orthodox Church, while even today the British monarch is head of the Church of England.

Given the enormous authority of the papacy within Roman Catholicism, one might ask, why does the church even have councils, at least since the advent of the papal monarchy? *The Church in Crisis*, the title of a dated (1961) but still helpful book on the councils by Monsignor Philip Hughes, sums up why councils have been called. At different points in history, the church has faced crises of such magnitude that the popes or the church at large felt it necessary that all the bishops should meet to decide what to do. As we shall see, some of these crises dealt with doctrinal issues of the greatest importance, such as the nature of the Trinity and of Christ, while other “crises” involved papal disputes with European monarchs, but the point remains that the pope felt the need to meet with the bishops.

Change and Development

As currently constituted, that is, in union with the pope, the ecumenical council is the supreme teaching authority in the Catholic Church. Its doctrinal decisions have, for Catholics, the same authority as Scripture and the traditional teachings of the episcopal *magisterium*, that is, the bishops' role as teachers in the church. This leads to another issue—do councils change Catholic teaching?

Up to the twentieth century, the answer was simple: no. “The bishops in council do not define new doctrines; they define or give witness to the teachings received from Christ and handed down in the Church from the beginning” (*Maryknoll Catholic Dictionary*, 198). This attitude reflected the traditional Catholic dependence upon the scholastic theologians of the Middle Ages, who, for all their theological brilliance, lived with a static worldview, which supported the notion that the church had never really changed its teachings.

But John Henry Cardinal Newman (1801–90) wrote about the development of doctrine, stressing that doctrines do change, not in the sense that the church teaches one thing on Monday and the exact opposite on Tuesday, but, rather, that in the course of centuries of lived Catholicism and theological reflection, the church advanced from a particular formulation of a doctrine to a more nuanced one, informed by new developments. Following Newman, most modern theologians accept that doctrine develops, although they often differ about whether a particular doctrinal formulation represents true development.

Let us consider a classic example of development, on an issue that still stirs up controversy.

In the fifth century the great North African theologian Augustine of Hippo (354–430) formulated the traditional doctrine of original sin (a phrase he created), that is, that all humans shared in the sin of Adam and Eve because we were born with the guilt of that sin on our souls and would be damned to hell forever if we did not receive baptism and have that guilt removed. But even after the guilt was removed, concupiscence, the inclination to sin, remained, and we live in constant need of God's freely-given divine grace, which we can do nothing to earn. Augustine's theology was, of course, far more nuanced than this, but these are the basics. Note that it depends upon the actual existence of Adam and Eve.

Many believers over the centuries resented and objected to this theory because it seems so unfair, but Augustine's brilliance maintained the theory, which received new life in the Protestant Reformation. In the eighteenth century, however, Enlightenment rationalists mocked original sin: two

prehistoric people took a bite out of a piece of fruit and now all humanity is condemned to hell! But the theory held on in the churches.

Two nineteenth-century developments undermined the theory in its traditional form. One development is well known and still controversial. Two Englishmen, the geologist Charles Lyell (1797–1885) and the biologist Charles Darwin (1809–82), proved that a literal interpretation of the Garden of Eden story conflicted with scientific evidence about the origins of the earth and its creatures, evidence that has steadily increased since their day. A less well-known but equally important development was the rise of modern biblical exegesis, led mostly by German Protestant scholars, who demonstrated that the Garden of Eden story is an etiology, that is, a myth of origins, common in the ancient Semitic world, and thus should not be taken as a historical account.

These new developments traumatized many Catholics and conservative Jews but were especially difficult for evangelical Protestants. Yet as Catholic scholars accepted these new developments, the church moved away from the traditional interpretation, recognized the value of understanding the Bible in terms of the culture that produced it, and discarded the nonscriptural idea that we are all born damned, although retaining the belief that we are all sinners in need of divine grace. Recent evidence of this development is Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 abandonment of the notion of limbo, which had been formulated in the Middle Ages partly to alleviate the fears of parents that their deceased but unbaptized children were burning forever in hell.

The church's changing attitude toward the historicity of the Garden of Eden provides an excellent example of doctrinal development. While recognizing that the cultural particulars of ancient Israel cannot be *historical*, the church continues to teach the *religious* basics of Genesis: that sin separates us from God, that we sin on our own and must face the consequences, that God never deserts us and continues to aid us, and that God wishes all people to be saved (a very different view from that of Augustine, who thought that 90 percent of humans ended up in hell). The church has availed itself of modern knowledge and still maintained the importance of the Genesis account.

To this example many more could be added. John Carroll, SJ, founder of the American Catholic hierarchy (and namesake of my university), owned slaves, as did the Maryland Jesuit province, and in the antebellum South many Catholic bishops—along with rabbis and Protestant ministers—vigorously defended slavery, something that modern believers completely reject.

In some cases the change is more subtle. Many early Christian theologians accepted much of the philosophy of Plato (424–347 BCE), for whom

true reality was spiritual. For these Christians, the “real presence” in the Eucharist did not have to involve a physical change in the elements of the bread and wine. Later theologians had a more material understanding of the real presence and, accepting much of the philosophy of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), created the formula of transubstantiation to explain the real presence.

The development of doctrine rarely proceeds smoothly, and every theologian with new ideas encounters Catholics who insist on an unchanging church in an unchanging world. Popes and bishops, entrusted with preserving the deposit of faith, look cautiously at some new theories, but the Catholic Church does accept and practice the development of doctrine. We must bear that in mind when examining conciliar teaching.

History and Theology

The definition of an ecumenical council given on page 2 is a theological one, but we must be very careful not to read theology back into history. Many Christians transport the church of their own day into previous eras. Inevitably, they experience disappointment when they discover discrepancies in this scenario. For example, modern Christians cannot conceive of the church without the New Testament, but the New Testament could not exist until all the books had been written, which did not happen until circa 125. But just because the books were written did not mean that they were recognized as forming a collection entitled the New Testament. Not until 367 did Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, become the first person to list the canon of the New Testament and include the familiar twenty-seven books, no more and no less.

Today a pope must call an ecumenical council. But no pope called any of the first eight councils. Roman or Byzantine emperors called seven of them, while a woman, the Byzantine empress Irene, called the Second Council of Nicea in 787. The second ecumenical council, Constantinople I, was called in 381, met, decided the issues, and adjourned without informing the pope, Damasus I (366–84), that a council was being held. The Council of Constance (1414–18) met when three popes contested for the loyalty of Western Europe’s Catholics. The “pope” who actually convoked the council was known as John XXIII, now regarded as an antipope (false pope). So how can these councils be considered authentic?

By ecclesiastical tradition, which the popes accepted. Let me quote the last century’s greatest authority on the councils, Monsignor Hubert Jedin:

For the first millennium, and even beyond it, the ecumenical character of these assemblies is not decided by the intention of those who convened them, even if they wished them to have that character; in fact, during the whole of this period even papal approval of the decisions does not, from the first, bear the character of a formal confirmation, as was the case with regard to the ecumenical councils of a later period. The recognition of the ecumenical character of the twenty assemblies [Jedin wrote in 1959] cannot be traced back to one comprehensive legislative act of the popes. Their ecumenical character was only established by the theological schools and by actual practice. (Jedin, *Councils*, 3–4)

The first authoritative list of councils was drawn up for Roman Catholics in 1612 by the Jesuit theologian, cardinal, and saint Robert Bellarmine, who worked on the councils at the request of Pope Paul V (1605–21).

Another historical issue that may present a problem to the modern reader is the consistent and often influential role played in councils by laypeople, that is, monarchs and nobles. Emperors and an empress called the first eight councils, and the king of France pushed Pope Clement V into calling the Council of Vienne in 1311–12, while several monarchs, but especially the German monarch Sigismund, forced the supporters of the three contending popes to accede to the Council of Constance in 1414.

Why were monarchs so often involved in ecumenical councils? First, religion has an impact on people and not just on their private, spiritual lives but also on how they act in the public sphere. For example, based on their religious beliefs, people living in secular Western countries have monogamy as law. Fundamentalist Christians want to vet high school biology textbooks, while other religious groups, of both left and right, want to vet political policies and judicial nominations. At no period in history could political leaders ignore the religious views of their people.

Second, no one in the ancient and medieval eras believed in the separation of church and state, and in parts of the Catholic world this continued into the nineteenth and even the twentieth century. Believing themselves to have been chosen by God to rule, monarchs deemed it natural and appropriate to play a role in religious matters.

Third, in the Middle Ages and into the nineteenth century, the popes themselves ruled a sizeable portion of central Italy, sometimes as much as one-third of the country, so they were political as well as ecclesiastical leaders with continuing experience of the union of church and state. Furthermore, in accepting the role of monarchs in the church, the popes felt an obligation to oversee the moral behavior of monarchs in the exercise of their office. This meant that the popes routinely got involved in political matters

outside of Italy, and it explains to the modern reader something puzzling about the medieval councils, namely, why they dealt so much with church-state issues and papal disputes with secular rulers.

The first ecumenical council met in the fourth century; the most recent one met in the twentieth century. Initially the councils met in an almost regular succession (325, 381, 431, 451), thus, fifty-six years between the first two, fifty years between the next two, and only twenty between the next two. The next four were separated by a century or more (553, 680, 787, 869–70). The seven medieval papal councils met frequently (1123, 1139, 1179, 1215, 1245, 1274, 1311), the greatest gap being a mere forty years, a single lifetime, and several bishops attended more than one council. The disorder of the fifteenth century provoked two councils only thirteen years apart (Constance, 1414–18; Basel-Ferrara-Florence, 1431–45), guaranteeing that some bishops attended both councils. Political pressure provoked Lateran V to meet from 1512 to 1517, while the Protestant Reformation necessitated Trent in 1545.

The longest gap between councils, 306 years, separates Trent from Vatican I, as the popes and the Vatican administrators governed the church without a council. Vatican I (1869–70), which gave the pope ordinary jurisdiction in every diocese, led many people to think that was the last of the councils, only to have John XXIII (1958–63) surprise the Catholic world by calling Vatican II (1962–65). There is thus no real pattern as to when or how often councils will meet. The situation of the church and the will of the pope determine that.

Nor does the length of a council provide any guide to its importance. One of the most productive councils, Lateran IV, met for only three sessions—November 11, 20, and 30 in 1215—and irrevocably and effectively changed the medieval church. Lateran V, on the other hand, met for five years (1512–17), ostensibly to deal with abuses, but did next to nothing to reform anything. Trent seems to have met for an interminable eighteen years (1545–63), but, in fact, it met in three sessions (1545–47, 1551–52, 1562–63), being frequently disrupted by political events and stretching over the pontificates of Paul III (1534–49), Julius III (1550–55), Marcellus II (1555), Paul IV (1555–59), and Pius IV (1559–65). In spite of these disruptions and changes of leadership, Trent accomplished a great deal both by responding to the Protestant challenge and by largely determining how Catholic reform would progress.

The number of participants also varied, but this too had little impact on the councils' productivity. "As few as a dozen members were in attendance at one point during Constantinople IV (869–870) and only seventeen during

a particular session at Trent (1551–1552). These numbers stand in stark contrast to the 2,540 people clogging St. Peter’s basilica during Vatican II’s first session in 1962” (Bellitto, *General Councils*, 11).

Generalizing about the ecumenical councils can be a hazardous practice.

Mysteries and Heresies

Many of the councils, especially the first six, dealt with major doctrinal issues, such as the nature of the Trinity and the Person of Christ. Often those theologians whose views the councils rejected received the label “heretics.” In the traditional view, this was appropriate since “everyone” knew the truth from the apostolic era onward, and these “heretics” rejected the common faith.

Modern scholars take a different approach. First, they emphasize that theologians deal with mysteries. In common parlance, a mystery means a puzzle of some kind that some brilliant scientist or detective will, with hard work and ingenious use of the little grey cells, eventually solve. But, in theology, the Greek word *mústérion* means something we cannot understand. Religion deals with the supernatural, that is, the *super naturam* in Latin, what is “beyond our nature” and thus impossible for us to understand.

When the Greek bishops at the early councils worked out the well-known trinitarian formula that the persons of the Trinity are three individual persons who share in the divine substance or essence, they did not “explain” the Trinity. That is simply impossible for humans because the divine being is beyond full human comprehension. What the bishops did do was to investigate the Scriptures and previous faith statements and creeds, and then they, as teachers of the church, devised a formula that they believed and hoped would explicate their *collective understanding* of the Trinity, not the very nature of the eternal Trinity.

A great medieval theologian, Anselm of Canterbury (ca. 1033–1109), gave theology its classic definition: *faith seeking understanding*. The theologian is a person of faith who believes in the Trinity and who *seeks* to understand it. No theologian can ever claim that her/his theology has explained the nature of the Trinity but rather that her/his theology has provided a rational explanation of Christian faith in the Trinity.

When we bear in mind that faith involves mysteries, we can understand that some theologians, trying to give shape and comprehension to those mysteries, would come up with formulas that the larger church would later reject. We should see them not always as heretics but sometimes as sincere Christians genuinely trying to make sense of their belief. Indeed, some

“heretics” had distinguished careers as bishops; the fourth-century Apollinaris of Laodicea, ironically, had won fame as a fighter for orthodoxy. Some “heretics” died as martyrs, offering the ultimate witness for their faith, acts for which their critics rarely gave them any credit. At Vatican II, prominent theologians who had been silenced by the Vatican or their religious superiors for their supposedly unorthodox views played an important role in the formulation of some of the council’s most important decrees.

The term “heterodoxy” means deviation from commonly accepted teaching, and that term better applies to many early theologies than heresy. But is there actual heresy? Absolutely. Heresy is a conscious deviation from a publicly stated doctrinal position of the church. Let me give an easy example. The church accepts the Gospel of Mark as inspired Scripture. Mark opens his gospel with “This is the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.” It would be heresy to deny that Jesus Christ *is* the Son of God, but it would not be heresy to speculate on *how* Jesus is the Son of God.

As we noted earlier, the church constantly involved itself in the affairs of the world, as it still does. Every council met within a particular historical framework, and we cannot understand a council outside that framework. On the other hand, a book on the councils cannot be a minisketch of church history. What we will do here is focus on the councils and try to illuminate their historical situations so that we can see each council against the backdrop of its era but without overburdening the historical record. In some cases, this approach presents no problems. For example, four medieval councils, the first four Lateran ones, all met in less than a century so their historical background is quite similar and can be relatively easy to follow. But more than three centuries span the gap between the closing of Trent and the opening of Vatican I, so our treatment of the historical background for Vatican I will necessarily be somewhat sketchy.

Finally, Vatican II presents some unique problems. First, there were in attendance more than two thousand bishops from around the world along with hundreds of *periti*, who produced a sizeable number of documents, making a thorough tracking of both people and writings beyond the scope of one chapter. Second, since Vatican II closed less than a half century ago, many Catholics remember the council in their own ways, and some participants, such as a young theologian named Joseph Ratzinger, are still alive and active in the church. Third, some of the effects of the council remain difficult to judge. For example, Vatican II introduced the vernacular liturgy to the Latin rite. The first generation of Catholics to grow up with *only* the vernacular liturgy, that is, those born in the 1960s, are just reaching middle

age. Scholars need to examine their worship practices and patterns to see how they differ from those of generations raised in the Latin liturgy. Fourth, a literal mountain of material exists from and on this council. Before starting this chapter, I Googled Vatican II. Under a variety of headings (“Overview,” “Documents”), some of which overlap, Google offers 11,296,000 web sites on the council. No doubt the number has grown since I wrote that sentence. In the face of an incomprehensible amount of material, this book will provide a historical sketch of the council and try to focus on what it did that was new and how it impacted the church. It will also be impossible in a book this size to go deeply into the various personalities of the council. In his masterful *What Happened at Vatican II*, John O’Malley provides a brief guide to the more prominent council participants; his list includes sixty-two names. A book can do that, but a chapter cannot. (For detailed but accessible accounts to this council, please consult O’Malley’s volume and *A Brief History of Vatican II* by Giuseppe Alberigo; both are listed in the bibliography.) This text will provide a brief, historical account of that council.

And now, on to the councils.

The Trinitarian Councils

The Earliest Christians

In the Acts of the Apostles, the evangelist Luke reports how Jesus' disciples, both men and women, including Jesus' mother, got together and determined that Jesus' work on earth must be continued by the community, guided, as Luke says, by the Holy Spirit. But divine assistance did not make the task easy, and Luke shows us a community struggling not just against outsiders but also searching for its identity.

The earliest disciples were all pious Jews, and they saw their mission as only to the Jews, a strategy that enjoyed some remarkably large conversions but also engendered hostility with the Jerusalem authorities, who had favored Jesus' execution. Early on, problems surfaced between the Jewish-Christians of Palestine and converts from the Diaspora, that is, Jews living outside Palestine. The disciples successfully dealt with the problem, but it signaled that problems would occur as Christianity moved into a non-Palestinian environment.

But move it did, led by a diasporan Jew named Saul, better known as Paul, author of epistles and relentless missionary. Paul believed that the Holy Spirit motivated him to take Jesus' message to all people, not just to Jews in the Diaspora but also to Gentiles, an idea that puzzled and even repelled some of Jesus' Jewish followers. Opposition to Paul grew, and so the leaders of the Jerusalem church called a council, circa 50, to deal with the matter. To their credit, the Palestinian Jews agreed that the faith should be brought to all people, affirming both Paul and his work.

Paul and other, now anonymous, missionaries spread the faith throughout the cities of the eastern Mediterranean, along the way picking up a new name, "Christians" (followers of the *Christos*, the Messiah), a term first used of them in the Syrian city of Antioch, home to a large diasporan community.

Luke makes it clear that the missionaries often went to cities that already had sizeable Jewish populations who would be more receptive to the message. For instance, if a missionary told a pagan audience that Jesus is the Son of God, the pagans would naturally want to know, which god? When the Christian taught that Jesus fulfilled the prophecies of the Hebrew Bible, this would make little sense to pagans who looked to oracles, not books, to know the gods' will.

But the diasporan communities lay in Gentile lands, and more and more Gentiles entered the church. Demographic evidence for early Christianity is sketchy at best, but no later than 150 a majority of the Christians were Gentiles, as they have been ever since.

Christians in the Greco-Roman World

The movement into Gentile lands also meant that the Christians came into increasing contact with the Roman state and with Greco-Roman culture.

Popular images, especially in films, portray vicious Roman emperors avidly persecuting innocent Christians, but the reality differed considerably. The Romans tolerated a wide variety of religions within the empire, and they persecuted only when they believed a religion or its adherents might cause trouble, as, for example, the druids did in Britain. Otherwise the Roman attitude was "Peace and Taxes." The empire genuinely respected Judaism as a religion and made religious concessions to its adherents. Such tolerance did not reconcile the Jews to foreign domination, and they unsuccessfully revolted twice against the Romans in 66–70 and 132–35. The Romans harshly punished the rebels but made no attempt to eliminate Judaism as a religion.

The Romans initially tolerated Christianity. In the Acts of the Apostles Luke portrays the Roman proconsul in Corinth declining to get involved in a religious dispute between Paul and the Jews of that city, and several times Luke shows Roman officials saving Paul from angry pagan or Jewish mobs. This tradition continued.

But what about the persecutions? The first empire-wide persecution did not occur until 250; before that the persecutions were local and often caused by some unexpected event, such as a drought, for which the pagans blamed the Christians. Christian references to Jesus as Lord and as one who would come back to rule the world made pagans wonder if the Christians had political ambitions, while Christian liturgical terminology (eating Christ's

body, drinking his blood) caused further suspicions. Significantly, for the first two centuries, all Christian literature to and from the Roman community was in Greek, suggesting a community largely of foreigners, which probably also augmented suspicions. But there were entire provinces (Spain, Britain) where no persecution was recorded before the empire-wide one of 250.

The best-known persecution, that of the emperor Nero (54–68) after the great fire in Rome in 64, involved only members of the Roman community, and Nero's successors did not persecute. Other persecutions broke out in North Africa, Egypt, and Gaul (modern France), but these did not form part of a continuous policy, just reaction to some local problem.

In fact, 99 percent of Christians lived and died in peace. Many became prominent locally, and some went well beyond that. In 258, when he initiated a short-lived persecution, the emperor Valerian (253–60) first removed all the Christians from the Roman senate, proof that Christians had reached that high level of Roman society. Diocletian (283–305) launched a persecution in 303, supposedly because Christian members of the imperial court crossed themselves to avoid blasphemy when the emperor was presiding over a pagan sacrifice. Furthermore, Diocletian could stand on the veranda of his palace and see a Christian church a short distance away.

Perhaps the best example of the Christian ability to fit into Roman society comes from Antioch. In 272 the church there was headed by Paul of Samosata, a luxury-loving, high-living bishop of questionable orthodoxy. Furious with their bishop, the members of the Antiochene community successfully appealed to a Roman court to get Paul deposed—Christians taking a Christian-versus-Christian dispute to a Roman court!

Although few endured persecution, all Christians had to live with the possibility of it, and many Romans never fully trusted them. There were martyrs, but, in general, Christians lived in peace in the empire.

In the long term, the Christian interaction with Greco-Roman culture had a much greater effect on the development of the faith. One consequence of this interaction is very visible—literally, very visible. The ancient Jews were aniconic, that is, their religion forbade them to make images of people, which is why we have images of great Babylonians, Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, but of no Jews, not even David or Solomon. When Gentiles converted to Christianity, they had no reservations about art in religion, and so, in the late second century, Gentile artists produced the first Christian art. Having only pagan models to work from, they used those, and thus the earliest images of Jesus derive from images of Alexander the Great as the Jewish Jesus becomes a clean-shaven, toga-wearing Greek, while God the Father often looks like Zeus. Other Gentile customs and practices, which

did not disagree with Christian teaching, entered the faith, just as the modern church, with its European heritage, opens itself up to practices from Catholics of the developing world.

But the most significant change, and one that echoed repeatedly in the ecumenical councils, was the adoption of Greek philosophy. Scholars long ago noted that the New Testament gives Jesus many titles, such as Savior, Lord, and High Priest, which connote action, but the New Testament authors rarely ask questions such as how could Jesus be both divine and human (the major concern of the third, fourth, fifth, and sixth ecumenical councils). Today Catholics know the church answers this question by teaching that Jesus is one *person* (Greek term) with two *natures* (Greek term), while in the Trinity the Son of God is *homoúsios* (consubstantial; Greek term) with the Father. The great theologians of antiquity made extensive use of Greek philosophers. For example, Augustine of Hippo (354–430) drew from Platonic philosophy; the medieval theologians did likewise, favoring Aristotle; in the modern era, the greatest Catholic theologian of the twentieth century, the German Karl Rahner, SJ (1904–84), drew from both Immanuel Kant and Martin Heidegger.

How early did the Christians embrace philosophy? The New Testament provides the occasional hint, but most scholars would point to the middle of the second century and a group of writers called the Apologists. Apologetics is the science of rationally defending one's position. The Apologists, all Gentile Christians, wanted to demonstrate that Christianity was not a disloyal religion of Near Eastern peasants, and so they strove to show the Greeks and Romans the truth about the faith. This marked the first time in history that Christian writers targeted non-Christians, and, naturally, the Apologists had to use arguments that would convince outsiders. To claim that Jesus fulfilled prophecies of the Hebrew Bible might impress Jews but had no meaning for pagan Gentiles for whom different arguments were needed. The best-known Apologist, a Palestinian named Justin, used philosophical terminology most effectively and paved the way for others to do likewise. (He died a martyr in Rome circa 165 and is known as Justin Martyr.)

By the time Nicea I convened in 325, the overwhelmingly Greek-speaking bishops there had accepted the notion that Greek philosophy could help in formulating Christian teaching.

Councils before Nicea

A council is a natural idea. People with responsibilities think it best to confer with others who have responsibilities. We may safely assume that Jesus' followers were having meetings to discuss pressing matters very

shortly after his death, but the first council mentioned anywhere appears in chapter 15 of the Acts of the Apostles, where Luke recounts the Council of Jerusalem circa 50.

A great issue faced the Christians. Led by James, head of the Jerusalem community, they had focused on converting Jews, and most doubted whether they should spread the faith to Gentiles. The unquestioned champion of evangelizing the Gentiles was the apostle Paul. Basically, Paul presented his case; the assembled leaders, apparently all men, discussed what Paul had said; and James, speaking on behalf of the other leaders under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit (Acts 15:28), agreed that the missionaries could go to the Gentiles.

Luke tells us about this council in exactly one page of the biblical text. We know nothing of the discussions that must have ensued, but we can see that what the council decided became definitive. Or did it?

In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul mentions that after the council he was working among the Christians of Antioch. Peter the apostle was there, and he ate and mingled with the Gentile converts. But when representatives of the Jerusalem church arrived, they refused to eat with the Gentiles, and, to Paul's shock, Peter and even Paul's missionary companion Barnabas did likewise. Paul tells us that he rebuked Peter to his face. We do not know Peter's side of the story, and we must recall that Peter died a martyr among the Gentile Romans, so he clearly changed his attitude, but Paul's account gives the first example of a recurring problem in conciliar history: believers, even leaders, who were reluctant to accept conciliar decisions.

Evidence for councils mounts quickly. Bishops met in Asia Minor (modern Turkey) in the second century. By the end of that century, the North African Bishop of Rome, Victor I (189–98), convoked a council to deal with the thorny liturgical problem of determining the date of Easter, and he convinced other churches to meet in councils and agree with his position. The third century saw the bishops of North Africa meeting annually, when possible, to deal with matters challenging the church in that area. In 256 no fewer than eighty-seven African bishops attended a council in Carthage, a larger number than would attend some sessions of several ecumenical councils.

In the first two decades of the fourth century, just before ecumenical council Nicea I, we know of councils in Spain, Asia Minor, and Gaul. Two major elements of the ecumenical synods arose initially at these regional meetings. First, the metropolitans or chief bishops of the provinces presided at them. This practice did not apply universally, especially when bishops from mostly rural areas might get together, but it became common. The leaders were the bishops of Rome in Italy, of Carthage in North Africa, of

Arles in Gaul, of Alexandria in Egypt, and of Antioch in Syria. These bishops achieved this status not just because they were bishops of the largest cities in their provinces but because many of these churches were apostolic foundations, a prestigious point in an era and place where tradition counted heavily.

Very significantly, most of these apostolic sees lay in the East, where most apostolic missionary activity had occurred. In fact, only one metropolitan see in the West could claim an apostolic foundation, and that was Rome, which actually claimed a double apostolic foundation, namely, Peter and Paul. (In later centuries, the popes would focus primarily upon the Petrine foundation.) Except for North Africa, Rome's unique and impressive apostolic foundation usually made it the unquestioned leader among the Latin bishoprics. Roman bishops, when claiming authority over another see, did not cite the civic or secular importance of Rome but rather insisted they were writing with the authority of the apostle Peter.

The other major element that preceded Nicea was the actual conduct of the councils. To quote Leo Davis, SJ:

There is evidence to show that the deliberative procedures of the Roman Senate left their mark on the collective deliberations of the Christian bishops. Bishops adopted for many of their councils the official senatorial formulae of convocation. Like the Senate the council was a deliberative assembly, each bishop having equal rights in its discussions. Like the imperial magistrate who presided over the Senate, the principal bishop first read out a program designed to keep discussion to the point at issue. The assembled bishops were then interrogated and each offered his *sententia*, his official response. A final vote was usually not necessary, for the *sententiae* most often issued in unanimity, the result of previous negotiation. The unanimous decision was circulated among the faithful in a synodal letter. Bishops then felt themselves bound to abide by the decisions thus promulgated. [The emperor] Constantine [who called Nicea] would later find the Church governed by procedures with which he was familiar. (*First Seven*, 23)

This acceptance of senatorial procedure was just one of many ways in which the governance of the empire impacted the church, which also utilized the empire's system of dividing regions into dioceses and provinces.

Constantine

Nicea I met because of two momentous events in Christian history: the advent of the first Christian emperor and the final reckoning of trinitarian theology.

Diocletian, the persecuting emperor, resigned his office in 305, having prepared an ordered transition for the government of the empire, which he had divided into two parts, East and West. But the transition failed because ambitious generals and politicians who were slighted in the transition decided to take matters into their own hands. In a few years the empire suffered from a massive civil war with seven claimants for the imperial throne.

One was Constantine, a pagan who worshiped the sun god. He had enjoyed success in the war, and in 312 he faced his greatest test, a battle outside Rome against the pagan general occupying the city. Just before the battle, he had either a vision or a dream (two accounts of the event survive) in which he saw either a cross or the Chi-Rho $\chi\rho$, a symbol based on the first two Greek letters, Chi (*X*) and Rho (*P*), in the word *Christos*. Believing this to be a sign that the Christian god was on his side, Constantine had his soldiers put the Chi-Rho on their shields and then went on to win the decisive battle of the Milvian Bridge, which resulted in the death of the general opposing him.

In 313 Constantine and his ally Licinius met in northern Italy and issued the Edict of Milan, which gave Christians freedom of worship and restored to them much of their confiscated property. Using this newfound freedom, the Christians successfully evangelized in much of the empire.

But the bishops found themselves facing a totally new situation. Pagan emperors considered themselves responsible to the gods for the welfare of the empire. One persecutor, Decius (249–51), believed that by allowing the Christians to flourish, he had angered the gods and thus he had to persecute. Constantine inherited this religious obligation. With the welfare of the empire at stake, he could not afford to ignore religious matters, pagan or Christian. Still a pagan, he did not interfere in Christian doctrinal matters, but he made it clear to the bishops that he expected the churches to support order in the empire. When they did not, he was furious. A bitter dispute broke out in North Africa over who was the true bishop of Carthage. When the dispute led to disorder and even riots in 316, Constantine intervened with force. The shocked bishops watched a pagan emperor “solve” a Christian religious dispute. But there was more to come.

Circa 319 the emperor himself converted to Christianity. The impossible had happened—a Christian emperor! His example caused many aristocrats to convert, and the once despised and even persecuted church now enjoyed imperial favor. Yet with it came even more imperial involvement (= interference) in Christian affairs. When some Christian intellectuals, like the church historian Eusebius of Caesarea, began to claim that God had chosen Constantine to reign, the emperor moved from being interested politician to

sacred figure, just as sacred, if not more so, than the bishops themselves. This secular-ruler-chosen-by-God theory would haunt the churches—Catholic, Orthodox, and Anglican—down to the twentieth century.

But before Constantine tried to control the churches, he had one other matter to settle. He resented having to share the empire with the pagan Licinius. The two had quarreled and even fought some desultory campaigns as early as 316, but then they made peace. But Licinius rightly feared his former ally's ambitions, and he also feared that his own Christian subjects were disloyal, preferring Constantine to him. He foolishly began a minor persecution, which provided his rival with an excuse to invade. Constantine defeated and imprisoned Licinius in 324 and then executed him and his son and heir in 325. The new Christian emperor now ruled all of Rome.

Christian support had helped Constantine, but he knew that many of the Roman pagans, especially the aristocracy, resented his newfound faith. To thwart them, on November 8, 324, he started work on a new capital city and, with wanton pride, named it after himself, Constantinople, "the *pólis* (city) of Constantine." He nurtured the city, aiding its growth and decreeing that no pagan temple could be built there; his would be a thoroughly Christian capital. Again to thwart the pagans in Italy, he created a new senate for the new capital, thus weakening the stature of the senate in Rome. He also adorned his new city with large civic and ecclesiastical buildings, a practice followed by his successors.

Constantinople would affect the church in a significant way, as we shall see when we study the later councils. Since the leading Christian metropolitans or patriarchs traced their ecclesiastical lineage back to the apostles, naturally the emperor wanted the bishop of his city to have equal prestige. His staff made a half-hearted attempt to find some first-century martyr from the general area to give Constantinople some apostolicity, but soon Constantine and his successors made it clear: as bishop of the church in the emperor's own city, the bishop of Constantinople had equal stature to those sees claiming apostolic foundations. Some apostolically founded churches could live with this, but not the major four—Alexandria, Antioch, Jerusalem, and Rome—who resented Constantinople's *nouveau riche* status. The seed Constantine planted in 324 would bear much bitter ecclesiastical fruit in the centuries to come.

Just a year after founding his new city, the emperor made his weight felt in the universal church: he called an ecumenical council.

Trinitarian Theology

The other momentous event standing behind Nicea was the culmination of trinitarian theology. We can easily see how disputes could arise about the Trinity, whose persons appear in the opening verses of the earliest piece of Christian literature, Paul's first epistle to the Thessalonians (1:1-5). From the Jews the Christians inherited a rigorous monotheism, evident in Paul's epistles and the gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke. But in the Gospel of John a belief hinted at in other parts of the New Testament now became manifest. The prologue to that gospel, written in Asia Minor circa 100, teaches that the Word of God is God and that this divine Word became incarnate in Jesus. Evidence for Christian belief in Jesus' divinity also appears in a pagan source, written sometime between 112 and 116. Pliny the Younger, Roman governor of western Asia Minor, said in a letter to the emperor that the local Christians got up at dawn, went to a riverbank, and sang hymns to Christ "as a god." This belief spread quickly, appearing in Alexandria by 200. Indeed, Egyptians would dominate the trinitarian discussion at Nicea I.

But if God the Father is a deity, and God the Son, incarnate in Jesus, is also a deity, have the Christians not compromised monotheism by believing in two gods? (For reasons still uncertain, the earliest trinitarian debates did not include the Holy Spirit.) The Christians did not, of course, believe that, but they had to explain the mystery of how to preserve monotheism while insisting that both God the Father and God the Son are divine. This task would be theology at its most fundamental.

The earliest Christian writers after the New Testament, the Apostolic Fathers of the late first and early second century, used phrases like "God incarnate" and "God in human form" to describe Christ, but they did not work out any systematic theology. The Apologists like Justin Martyr took the matter further, using the Greek concept of *lógos* or "word" of God—well known from John's gospel—to express the relation of Father and Son, that is, the Word emanated from the Father and became incarnate. Another Apologist, Athenagoras, actually used the word *triás*, which later became the common Greek word for "Trinity." But the Apologists basically taught an "economic" trinitarianism, that is, the one Father unfolded into two and then three, his Word (= Son) and his Wisdom (= Spirit), a theologically small step by later standards but real progress.

A conservative reaction quickly set in the West, that is, in Rome and North Africa. Fearful that elevating the status of the Son and Spirit would lead to polytheism, some Roman theologians created Monarchianism, a theological approach that emphasized the unity of the three to the point of denying the distinct existence of Son and Spirit. Some Monarchian theologians adopted

modalism, that “Son” and “Spirit” are names for the different forms or “modes” of the Father’s activity, for example, “Son” for his redemptive work, “Spirit” for his sanctifying work. Other Monarchians advocated adoptionism, the belief that Jesus was just a good man in whom God dwelt as a divine, vivifying power.

Other third-century theologians turned on the Monarchians and advocated a more advanced economic trinitarianism, still seeing God as unfolding from one into three, but these theologians, especially an African named Tertullian, greatly advanced trinitarian theology with useful terminology. Tertullian first used the Latin word *trinitas* (*tria*, “three,” plus *unitas*, “unity”), from which would come the English word “Trinity.” He also used words like *substantia* and *persona*, basically arguing that in the Trinity the three persons partook in the divine substance. This sounds like later orthodoxy, but Tertullian remained an economic trinitarian who also thought of the divine in materialist terms. But the terminology he created would greatly aid later Latin theologians.

Economic trinitarianism soon fell to subordinationism, the prevalent third-century view. A great Greek theologian, Origen of Alexandria, insisted that God the Father always had to be a father, that is, the Son’s generation from the Father is eternal and not part of a gradual unfolding. Other theologians quickly followed Origen’s lead, dooming economic trinitarianism. But Origen also believed in a hierarchical relationship in the Trinity, and he subordinated the Son to the Father and the Spirit to the Son.

The third century also revealed a serious tension in Greek and Latin approaches to the Trinity. The Greeks feared that the Latins put such emphasis upon the unity of the Trinity that the individuality of the persons could be lost. Conversely, the Latins feared that the Greeks put so much emphasis on the individuality of the persons that the oneness of the deity would be obscured. To this was added a serious terminological problem.

As anyone who has studied a foreign language knows, the words for the same object in two languages often do not match exactly. For a piece of furniture, that may be inconvenient, but for advanced theology, it could be devastating. Some Latins spoke of three “persons” and one “substance” in the Trinity, but the standard Greek equivalent of “person” was *hypóstasis*, which could also mean “substance.” There was also another Greek word for “substance,” namely, *ousía*. When Greeks spoke of three *hypóstases*, Latins often heard “three substances,” raising fears that Greeks were compromising the unity of the Trinity. Clearly this situation could not endure forever. In the early fourth century, an Alexandrian priest named Arius (ca. 260–336) put an end to it.

Arius recognized the inherent weakness of subordinationism: can a divine being be subordinate? Clearly the answer was no, and Arius then drew a crucial conclusion: the Son of God is subordinate because he is not divine. The Word is a creature, that is, a created being. He existed long before us because God created the world through him; he has perfections we cannot dream of, but he did not share God's being or enjoy any of God's manifest perfections. In a crucial phrase for Arius and his followers, "there was when he (the Son) was not." Although damned in Christian tradition as a diabolical heresiarch, Arius deserves credit for getting to the real question: how can the Son and the Father both be divine?

Arius commanded much attention as a preacher, and his teachings spread. The bishop of Alexandria opposed him, but Arius found support among other bishops, especially in Palestine. Some Christians loathed Arius for what he taught; others loathed him because they had no answer to the questions he raised. The Arian controversy quickly divided Christians in the eastern Mediterranean, which infuriated the most important Christian of all: the emperor Constantine.

The First Council of Nicea

Emperor first and Christian second, Constantine was enraged that his newfound faith, which he hoped might unite the sprawling empire, was now dividing it. But the emperor came up with an imperial idea: a council of the entire *oikoumene*, the inhabited (Christian) world. As a divinely chosen emperor, he had the right—which no Christian questioned—to call such a council. He eventually decided upon the town of Nicea in modern northwestern Turkey, a short journey from his palace in Nicomedia. He sent a summons to all bishops to attend. In fact, not all bishops, especially Westerners, could attend. The aged Bishop of Rome, Sylvester I (314–35), sent two priests to represent him. In addition, the emperor's theological advisor was a Westerner, a Spaniard, Hosius of Cordova (ca. 260–357). As for the emperor's participation, he did not take part in the daily discussion nor did he vote on any issue. He considered it his task to make sure the council got the job done.

On May 20, 325, the overwhelmingly Greek-speaking council of more than three hundred bishops opened to a welcoming speech by the emperor, who arrived in state, a very public witness to the new status of Christianity. Bishops who had been maimed in Roman persecutions were kissed by the emperor, a gracious show of his appreciation for their suffering. But perhaps not completely gracious—at least two bishops came from beyond the imperial

borders, living proof that the emperor's new religion extended beyond his political jurisdiction, a pointed demonstration of Christianity's range and significance. (And no account of the bishops at Nicea would be complete without mention of a charitable but barely-known bishop from the southwestern Asia Minor town of Myra: Nicholas, who as St. Nicholas, would evolve into Santa Claus and become the best known of all Christian saints.)

Regrettably, the acts of the council do not survive but only accounts given by those who were present. Theologians had been attacking Arius for some time, but he had brilliantly used diverse scriptural passages to support his teaching. The bishops had to create some formula that would answer him while simultaneously reflecting the faith of the church. Arius had some supporters at the council, who put forward the creeds of their local churches as sufficient for a doctrinal statement, but the rest of the bishops rejected these, settling instead on a creed used in a Palestinian church, possibly Jerusalem. But to that creed came a crucial addition.

The bishops had learned that Arius could accept any kind of scriptural formulation and give it his own interpretation, and he had also managed to accept various creeds in a similar way. The bishops needed a formula that would pin Arius down, but this approach faced formidable opposition from a sizeable number of conservative bishops who objected to using terms not found in Scripture. The more theologically advanced bishops recognized something had to be done, and help arrived from a surprising source.

Constantine wanted to know if the bishops would agree to the term *homoousios*, a Greek version of the Latin *consubstantialis*, that is, that the Father and Son were consubstantial, sharing the same divine substance. The emperor was a sharp man but no theologian; scholars assume the term came from his theological advisor, Hosius of Cordova, although "consubstantial" did not have official status in the Latin churches. Although some bishops, such as those in union with the Alexandrians, would have been open to this, most bishops reacted with surprise or indignation, and for two reasons. First, the term does not appear in the Bible. This meant that the bishops would have to go outside of Scripture to find an adequate way to express their faith. Although this is normal today, this represented a step many hesitated to take. Second, *homoousios* had a somewhat questionable history.

As we saw earlier, Greek terminology relating to person and substance allowed for different shades of meaning. *Homoousios* could mean that Father, Son, and Holy Spirit partook in the same divine substance, but it could also mean that they were literally identical with no distinction among them. To many bishops, the Latin-speaking emperor and his Latin theological advisor

were trying to force a Greek version of a Latin term that would in turn force the bishops to assent to Western Monarchianism.

But the controversial term had several advantages. First, more and more bishops were coming to realize that Arius could not be pinned down by relying only on Scripture and that an extrabiblical term that represented the essence of Scripture would suffice. Second, “consubstantial” was widely, if unofficially, used in the Latin West, and rejection of a Latin concept would impair church unity at a crucial time. Third, although the term had been created by second-century Christians called Gnostics, who were widely reviled as heretics, *homooúsios* had been used by orthodox Christians as well. Fourth, and most important, Arius could not accept the term.

The bishops accepted the imperial suggestion and adopted a statement of faith that said that the Father and Son are of one substance, that the Son was begotten of the Father and was not created, and that the Son was True God of True God. As would be typical of councils down to Vatican I, the bishops included anathemas (denunciations). They declared anathema the notions that there was a time when the Son did not exist, that he was created from nothing, and that he did not share the same substance with the Father. Arius and his supporters could not accept these. Constantine banished Arius to Illyria (modern Balkans), and two Arian bishops who refused to sign the council’s statement were deposed. Victory for the “homooousians,” as they were called, seemed complete, but events after the council would shatter that illusion.

Although best remembered for its trinitarian formulation, Nicea also did important pastoral work, passing what are typically called disciplinary decrees. None was more important than trying to standardize the reckoning of the date of Easter, a major problem since the second century. Considering it scandalous that some Christians celebrated the feast of the Resurrection on different days, the bishops ordered the churches using the traditional Jewish calendar to reckon the date by following the method used at Rome and Alexandria, apparently unaware that those two churches did not agree completely on the method of computation.

The bishops also attempted to settle two schisms, one in Egypt and one in Syria, and they also dealt with moderation and compassion with how to readmit to communion Christians who had lapsed during persecutions. Institutional issues also emerged. The bishops acknowledged the supremacy of Alexandria in Egypt and of Antioch in Syria; they also accepted Rome’s supremacy in “the West” but did not spell out any formal geographical range. This basically acknowledged an existing situation since the three great bishoprics had already emerged as leaders. Jerusalem also obtained

special status, but its bishop remained under the authority of the bishop of Caesarea, the Roman administrative capital in that area. Constantinople did not yet exist as a city (its solemn inauguration as a *pólis* occurred in 330) and subsequent councils would deal with its status. The bishops also handled lesser issues, such as forbidding a bishop to ordain as a cleric someone from another diocese. The general tendency was to impose more order on the daily life of the church.

Nicea also set a pattern for future councils by issuing decrees and canons. In general, decrees are dogmatic statements, proclaiming the faith of the church on a point of dogma, although some councils passed disciplinary decrees. Canons were ordinances, often brief, that included a penalty for ignoring or disobeying them. The penalty often took the form, “Let him be anathema,” that is, cursed, but some canons had more specific penalties.

On June 19, 325, the bishops officially approved the council’s decree on the Trinity. The emperor’s theological advisor, Hosius, was the first to sign the decree, followed by two priests representing the Bishop of Rome. The Eastern bishops recognized the primacy of the Roman see as a double-apostolic foundation (Peter and Paul) and as the church of the imperial capital. Then, as now with the Orthodox churches, the Eastern bishops did not acknowledge any Roman jurisdictional authority over their churches.

The council continued until August 25, and the emperor invited the bishops to a sumptuous feast, which, understandably, none of them passed up.

A question that scholars still debate is the nature of the Nicene Creed. The evidence suggests that the bishops chose a baptismal creed from the church of Jerusalem and then revised it. As we shall see, what believers know as the Nicene Creed was actually drawn up at the next ecumenical council, Constantinople I, in 381. But we do know that the creed that Nicea produced did affirm that Father and Son are *homooúsios*, but the council did not pronounce on the Holy Spirit, merely noting, “. . . and [we believe] in the Holy Spirit.”

Nicea’s Historical and Ecclesial Significance

Historians consider Nicea’s greatest significance as the establishment of a new, creative way for the church to deal with crises. The assembled bishops, speaking as a group, could now affirm what was Christian teaching on particular doctrinal points. Christians were no longer bound to twisting the Bible endlessly to prove a point. The bishops strove to keep to the biblical text but, failing that, strove to propound a teaching that respected

the Bible and was consonant with it. For example, trinitarian references or allusions to Christ's divinity abound in the New Testament, and so the bishops claimed that their teaching drew out what the Bible did not say fully, but, at the same time, they recognized that they had indeed taught something new. Later generations would call this process the development of doctrine.

Did the Nicene bishops recognize what they had done? We cannot be sure, but Constantine was. After the council, he wrote to some bishops that he considered the judgment of three hundred bishops to be none other than the judgment of God.

After the Council

This initial ecumenical council foreshadowed elements of many others, one of which was a confused reaction following the council. Although, theologically speaking, the Holy Spirit guides the councils to their ultimate conclusions, historically speaking, after councils some participants often have second thoughts about what happened or are surprised at the reaction of others to the council's work. In fairness to Nicea I, it was the first ecumenical council and did not have the prestige and acceptance that came regularly to later councils, but the reaction to this initial council was genuinely traumatic.

The problem lay in *homoousios*. The term proved too innovative for many conservative bishops, whose concern about its lack of a scriptural foundation had not abated, but the real problem was a fear that the term had Monarchian overtones. Nicea's opponents sensed this unease and slowly worked to discredit the council and its leaders. The politically minded and well-connected Arian bishop Eusebius of Nicomedia targeted three chief Nicenes: a bishop of Antioch who had made disparaging remarks about Constantine's mother (who had been his father's mistress); a bishop of Ancyra who had genuine modalist leanings; and Athanasius, an Alexandrian deacon who accompanied his bishop to Nicea and who now reigned as patriarch of the Egyptian city. The first two targets fell easily, but Athanasius proved a tougher one to hit. An autocratic ruler, he made many enemies, and his enemies had much ammunition to use against him, including telling Constantine that the Alexandrian bishop could, if he wished, halt the flow of grain from Egypt to the emperor's new capital, Constantinople. In 336, Athanasius went into exile in Trier, Germany, virtually the end of the empire for an Egyptian. So successful were Nicea's enemies that in 336 Constantine even agreed to the rehabilitation of Arius in Constantinople. Amazingly, the

evening before the formal ceremony of rehabilitation, Arius died of an intestinal hemorrhage in a public toilet, which the Nicenes enthusiastically interpreted as a sign from God. When the emperor died in the following year, the Nicenes looked to a new day.

But that day did not arrive. Constantine's three sons—Constantine II, Constantius II, and Constans—divided the empire. But Constans warred against Constantine II, conquered, and executed him, so Constans, a Nicene, ruled in the West, while Constantius II, an Arian, ruled in the East. Given the great role of the supposed divinely appointed emperor in Roman society, it made a great difference who the emperor was. Generally, the Western bishops supported Nicea, and they supported the Eastern Nicenes. In 340 Pope Julius I (337–52) offered refuge to Athanasius, and the pope made it clear to the Eastern bishops that Rome supported Nicea. In the East, the bishops were divided. Some openly professed Arianism, but the greater number rejected this yet had no way to express their faith in such a way that responded to Arianism but did not commit to *homoousios*, still thinking it to have Monarchian overtones.

Naturally, this situation distressed the bishops, who worked to rectify it through a series of councils, both regional and larger. But they could not avoid imperial intervention in their activities, and the Arian emperor Constantius had no qualms about meddling in the councils, with the result that the Eastern councils produced a wide variety of creeds that managed to please many and offend just as many. Furthermore, the Western bishops would accept nothing less than complete support for Nicea, and so they routinely rejected the Eastern creeds. A confused situation worsened in 350 when the Western Nicene emperor Constans lost his empire and his life to a usurper, whom Constantius in turn defeated and executed. Now one man ruled the empire, and he was an Arian.

But even an emperor's power had limits. Despite his strongest efforts, Constantius could not convince the people of Alexandria to abandon Athanasius, who frequently fled his see to avoid arrest, once escaping to the desert where he enjoyed the hospitality of the desert monks before his triumphal return to his episcopal city in 346. The emperor never abandoned his attempts to compromise Nicea, but Athanasius was slowly coming to the conclusion that he had to reach out to the bishops who had reservations about *homoousios*.

Many Nicenes took a hard line toward dissidents, treating them as heretics. But, as is so often the case with the promiscuous use of that word, the bishops were not so much "heretics" as concerned about what the council had actually taught. Athanasius did not help things by making no distinction

between *ousía* and *hypóstasis*, so that Greek-speaking bishops could conclude that Nicea taught that the Father, Son, and Spirit were actually just one person, not three. Furthermore, for a time after the council Athanasius himself rarely used the word *homooúsios*. Indeed, the leading Western Nicene theologian, Hilary of Poitiers (d. 367), had not heard of *homooúsios* and the Nicene Creed until after the year 350.

In what was becoming an uncertain theological environment, some Eastern bishops hoped to refute Arius and avoid Monarchianism by saying that in the Trinity, Father and Son are *hómoios*, that is, “like” one another. This term avoided several problems, but its general vagueness obviated its value. Far more acceptable was *homoioúsios*, that is, “alike in substance.” As a way of opposing Arianism and avoiding *homooúsios*, this term enjoyed great popularity. Even Liberius of Rome (352–66), a supporter of Nicea, enjoyed communion with homoiousian bishops.

Athanasius now worked to make his theology clearer, but politics constantly weakened his attempts at reconciliation with other bishops. Constantius II arranged for council after council to find some formula to replace Nicea, only to be foiled by Western resistance and by Eastern Nicenes. When he died childless in 361, his only living male relative was Julian, known to history as Julian the Apostate because he had abandoned Christianity for paganism. For his own safety, he had kept his views private, but, as emperor, he tried to reinvigorate paganism. Athanasius again went into exile but assured his people that he would return soon. He did. Julian’s reforms failed, and the emperor died in battle against the Persians in 363, after a reign of only twenty months. But from Julian comes the definitive observation on the post-Nicene battles: “Wild animals do not attack one another as fiercely as do these Christians.”

After the brief (363–64) reign of an elderly Nicene, two emperors again shared rule, the Nicene Valentinian I (364–75) in the West and the Arian Valens (364–78) in the East. Occupied with barbarian invasions until 369, Valens could cause only limited problems for the Nicenes, and at this time Athanasius took up a new aspect of Nicene theology: the person of the Holy Spirit. What strikes modern believers about the Nicene Creed is the brief phrase “and in the Holy Spirit,” an oddity after the more detailed descriptions of the Father and Son. As he so often did, Athanasius responded to the misunderstandings of Nicea.

Many bishops considered the Holy Spirit to be a lesser person in the Trinity and possibly not even fully divine. Athanasius realized that such a belief would weaken *homooúsios*, and so he made it clear that just as the Son shares the essence of the Father, so does the Spirit partake in the essence of

the Son, that is, he was *homooúsios* with the Son. But, as Davis puts it, “Yet, according to the custom of the time, Athanasius did not call the Spirit God” (*First Seven*, 107).

Always remembered as the great defender of Nicea and as the most important of ancient trinitarian theologians, Athanasius was nevertheless not the man to bring the post-Nicene controversies to an end. He remained a polarizing figure, and his high-handed treatment of others, especially in his own diocese, made him widely resented. He had effectively created a strong alliance with Rome, but many Eastern bishops had reservations about Western theology, and, as papal claims grew in the fourth century, the Rome-Alexandria alliance did not endear Athanasius to bishops in the East. Fortunately for the church, three men emerged to secure Nicea’s triumph.

Scholars refer to these three as the Cappadocians, because all came from the same area of eastern Asia Minor. They were Basil of Caesarea (330–79), his brother Gregory of Nyssa (ca. 335–ca. 395), and their friend Gregory Nazianzen (329–89). The Orthodox churches revere Basil as a great ecclesial statesman and a major theoretician of Orthodox monasticism, Gregory of Nyssa as a great mystic, and Gregory Nazianzen as a great theologian; indeed, in Orthodox tradition he is known simply as “Gregory the Theologian.”

For our purposes, their greatness lies in their ability to see that the Nicenes and homoiousians were not far apart. They worked for decades to show that what Nicea teaches is that in the Trinity are one *ousía* and three hypostases, that is, to finally equate *ousía* with the Latin notion of substance and *hypóstasis* with the Latin notion of person. That one sentence sums up a great deal of complicated theology and complicated negotiating, but slowly and surely the Cappadocians showed their episcopal brethren that Nicea, still firmly supported in Egypt and the West, could be understood in a way that proclaimed genuine Christian teaching, did not violate biblical statements about the Trinity, and did not contain Monarchian sentiments. The Holy Spirit presented more of a problem because Basil, although suggesting the Spirit’s divinity, never taught it openly. But Gregory of Nyssa took the Nicene Creed to its logical conclusion. Again, to quote Davis: “While confessing the unity of nature [in the Trinity], he [Gregory] insisted that the difference among the hypostases rises out of their mutual relationships. The Father is the Cause, the Son is of the Cause directly, the Holy Spirit of the Cause mediately. The Father had no origins; the Son is generated by the Father; the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son” (*First Seven*, 113). But generation in the Trinity is eternal and implies no lessening of the divinity of Son and Spirit.

Although not every problem disappeared, finally theologians had cleared up Nicea’s terminological inexactitude, and the Eastern bishops (excluding,

of course, the confirmed Arians) could now accept Nicea. The struggles continued but not for much longer. The Arian emperor Valens died in battle against the Goths in 378. The Western emperor, a Nicene named Gratian (367–83), appointed a Spanish Nicene named Theodosius as emperor in Constantinople; he reigned as Theodosius I (379–95). Both Nicene emperors moved against the Arians, depriving them of churches, removing them from office, and finally outlawing Arianism. (In fact, this move did not eliminate Arianism, since Arian missionaries had successfully evangelized among the Germanic tribes north of the Danube, and when these tribes eventually conquered much of the Western empire, Arianism returned for some centuries, although it would never be the majority faith.)

Yet no one could ignore the troubles of preceding decades, and now on the throne of Constantine, Theodosius I decided to imitate his predecessor, and so he called a council to meet in Constantinople in 381 to put an official stamp on the end of Arianism.

The First Council of Constantinople

In addition to its dealing with trinitarian doctrine, this council also shows clearly the Catholic notion of the relation of the papacy to an ecumenical council. The emperor and his theological advisors invited 150 Eastern bishops. They did not inform Damasus of Rome, and the West was practically unrepresented. The popes of later ages did, however, accept Constantinople I as an ecumenical council for Catholics.

Regrettably for historians, the acts of the council do not survive, so the story must be put together by accounts provided by participants. One thing is evident: ecclesiastical politics played a great role, a harbinger of what would happen at future councils. The emperor had the bishop of Antioch appointed president of the council, but he died shortly after it began. In the meantime, the great theologian Gregory of Nazianzus had become bishop of Constantinople, having transferred from a smaller see, and the emperor now appointed him the council's new president. Since the ancient church often used the imagery of a bishop being wedded to his see (it was used in a canon at Nicea), many bishops had reservations about the legitimacy of Gregory's transfer and, in effect, his promotion, although the council initially approved of his presidency. But when the bishops from Egypt arrived, things changed. Accustomed to being the East's premier theologians and bishops, the Alexandrians resented the bishops of Constantinople who, in Alexandrian eyes, owed their prominence to a secular event, being bishops of the Eastern capital. Again the issue of the transfer arose. Gregory could

have weathered the ensuing storm, but he was a theologian, not a politician, and he resigned the presidency of the council and his bishopric. Piqued by the treatment of his bishop, the emperor Theodosius I recommended (= ordered) the bishops to accept the appointment of “Nectarius, an elderly civil official from the imperial legal department. Though only a catechumen, he was hurried through baptism and ordained a bishop in his baptismal robes, two bishops being assigned to instruct him in his episcopal duties. The new bishop of Constantinople became the third president of the council” (Davis, *First Seven*, 120). Yet, despite this inauspicious beginning, the council did good work.

Most important, it confirmed the teaching of Nicea. The labors of the Cappadocians bore fruit. But, in a significant example of the development of doctrine, the bishops moved beyond the previous ecumenical council to affirm the full divinity of the Holy Spirit, causing a number of bishops from Macedonia to leave the council in protest of this “innovation.” The creed of the council in its original form does survive, and many scholars think, as at Nicea, the bishops adopted an existing creed from a local church, in this case, from a Constantinopolitan baptismal creed. Other scholars wonder if there even was a creed, simply because no mention of such appears in church documents until 451. But Norman Tanner, an expert in creedal statements, speaks of the “creed of 381 . . . usually called the Nicene creed . . . since it was considered a development of the creed of 325, not something different from it. In scholarly circles, however, it is more accurately called the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed . . . in order to distinguish the two” (*Councils*, 24–25). Some scholars consider the two creeds to be distinct (Kelly, *Creeeds*, 304). The general consensus, however, is that the council did not draw up a creed but rather adopted one that could be harmonized with Nicea. We will thus speak of such a creed from Constantinople I, even though it does not appear in history until the Council of Chalcedon in 451.

In addition to affirming its predecessor and proclaiming the Holy Spirit as fully *homooúsios* with the Father and Son, Constantinople I also passed some canons, the largest number dealing with groups now deemed heretical by Nicene standards. The council warned bishops to restrict their ecclesiastical ventures to their own dioceses, proof that the earlier warning of Nicea was being widely ignored. But the most important canon turned out to be the third: “The Bishop of Constantinople shall have primacy of honor after the Bishop of Rome because Constantinople is the new Rome.” This was genuinely revolutionary. Traditionally, the prestige of a see had depended upon its apostolic foundation (many Eastern sees had been founded by the apostle Paul) and its tradition of doctrinal orthodoxy. Now the secular status

of the bishop's city became a determinant. To be sure, this was a primacy of honor, not jurisdiction, and it certainly did not allow the bishop of Constantinople to interfere in sees in Syria or Egypt, but the writing was on the wall—and Damasus of Rome read it very clearly.

By the late fourth century, the bishops of Rome enjoyed *de facto* leadership over the bishops of Italy, and the popes routinely extended their authority beyond Italy's borders. Papal authority never enjoyed much success in North Africa, but Spanish and Gallic bishops usually accepted it. Rome's authority rested upon its double apostolic foundation, although by the third century its bishops emphasized the Pauline base less and less, relying instead on the Petrine base, especially Christ's words to Peter in Matthew 16:18: "you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church." Indeed, by the late fourth century, the popes had begun to address other bishops as "my son" instead of "my brother." To be sure, the pope's authority certainly derived heavily from his being bishop of the Western capital, but the fourth-century popes had developed an extensive theology to justify their prominence in purely ecclesiastical terms.

Damasus recognized the danger in the third canon. If ecclesiastical prominence rested upon secular prominence, the day might come when Constantinople would outrank Rome in a secular sense (this did, in fact, happen in the sixth century) and thus would outrank Rome in an ecclesiastical sense. A council of Italian bishops in 382, quoting Matthew 16:18, affirmed that the Bishop of Rome "has obtained the primacy by the voice of our Lord and Savior in the gospel" and then cited the deaths of Peter and Paul in the Eternal City. Following Damasus's lead, the bishops of Rome have never accepted the third canon of Constantinople I. Actually, papal suspicion about the council remained deep. Felix II (483–92) did not acknowledge it; not till the time of Hormisdas (513–23) did Rome acknowledge this second ecumenical council.

The reception of the council in the East was little better. Many conservative Nicene bishops feared that by adding to the creed of 325, Constantinople I had somehow compromised the authority of Nicea. Furthermore, was it even an ecumenical council? Unlike Nicea, Constantinople I did not have an Athanasius to battle on its behalf. Yet, it had put an end to the Arian threat, and after 381 almost all bishops accepted the full divinity of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, unlike Constantine, Theodosius did not abandon "his" council. Slowly but surely the two councils gained stature in the East.

But now the bishops had a far different problem to deal with.