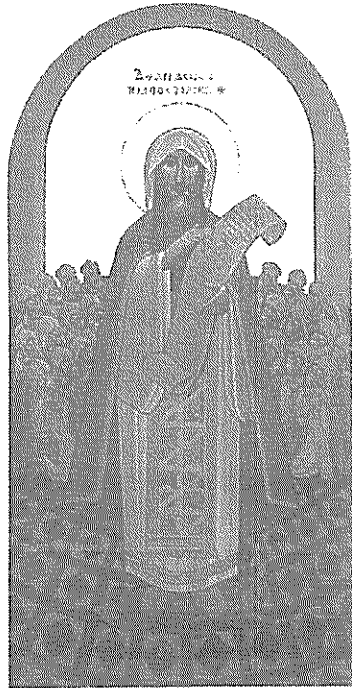


BACK TO BASICS



Ecumenical Councils

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“Remember What Your Fathers Did”¹

Some time ago a father took his fourteen-year-old son to see Omaha Beach. He wanted him to see where once he had stood between life and death. Then he had been lieutenant colonel with the Rangers of the United States Army. As he and his boy stood on the naked beach of France, everything became vivid in his mind. He recalled the scaling of the walls; he experienced again the fierce combat; he remembered the horrors of war. Everything he touched – a rotting piece of rope, an iron hook, a rusty chain, a broken tree – came back to life. It stood for something. Like the warriors of Joshua’s time, he wanted to say to his son, “Remember what your fathers did.” In the same way, the Orthodox Church wishes to remind her members, “Remember what the Church Fathers did. Remember the one, holy, universal, and apostolic Church; undivided and orthodox in her faith.”

In the Divine Liturgy, we remember “what our fathers did” at three ecumenical councils in which they defended the Faith. These councils took place at Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus. In this article, we will answer: 1) what are ecumenical councils, 2) what happened at the aforementioned councils, and 3) what these councils mean for us today.

Ecumenical Councils

In Acts 15, we read of a dispute that arose in the early church concerning whether or not Gentile Christian converts should keep the Law of Moses, particularly the rite of circumcision. In response, the Apostles gathered in Jerusalem to resolve the issue. This set the precedent for all future gatherings of Church leaders.

The Lord also gave us instruction saying that the unresolved problem of a sinful brother should be brought to the Church, and likewise gave His apostles and their successors the authority to bind and loose (Matthew 18:15-20).

As the Church grew and spread, it became necessary for bishops of a given area to meet over and address common concerns. Some issues, such as questions over doctrine and dogma, concerned more than just the churches of a particular region, and thus it became necessary for a larger gathering of bishops to meet over the problems of the universal church. The largest and most important of these gatherings were the Ecumenical Councils.

Nicea, Constantinople, and Ephesus²

The Coptic Orthodox Church recognizes three Ecumenical Councils:

1. **Nicea (325 A.D.)** – This council comprised of 318 bishops gathered to deal with the heresy of Arianism – the teaching that the Word and Son of God is a created being. The first part of the Nicene Creed was drafted here. Saint Athanasius was a deacon and the hero of this council and explained the Orthodox faith saying that the Son, Jesus Christ, is of one essence with the Father.
2. **Constantinople (381 A.D.)** – This council comprised of 150 bishops met to condemn the new heresy of Macedonius, patriarch of Constantinople, who taught that the Holy Spirit was created. The council completed the Nicene Creed and affirmed the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The theology of the Cappadocian

Fathers (Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa) was particularly influential.

3. **Ephesus (431 A.D.)** – This council comprised of 200 bishops gathered to deal with the false teachings of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople, who refused to accept the unity of humanity and divinity in the person of Christ. Thus, he refused to call Saint Mary, *Theotokos* ('birth-giver of God'), but rather, he wanted to call her *Christokos* ('birth-giver of Christ'). Saint Cyril, the bishop of Alexandria and the Pillar of Faith, was the hero of this council, who refuted the teachings of Nestorius.

What do the Councils mean for us today?

It is important for us to realize that these councils did not meet to invent new doctrine. The purpose of a council, in general, is to meet and to express the mind and the heart of the Church as a whole. Specific situations, such as heresies, necessitated the development of the Church's vocabulary to express the correct doctrine of the Church as taught by our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Scriptures, the Apostles, and their successors.

We can learn two lessons from the councils today. First, we thank God that our Church Fathers preserved the faith for us and often suffered to do so. The heresies that were brought to these Ecumenical Councils always involved the crucial question that Christ asked of His disciples (and us), "Who do you say that I am?" This answer is vital to our salvation and to our spirituality.

Also, these heresies exist in other forms today, and we pray that we have the same zeal and spirit as our fathers to defend the faith. The study of theology is not an academic exercise, but a way to know and experience God in prayer. The Orthodox Church maintains a living connection with the early Church Fathers. We have inherited the experience of 19 centuries of Christian living and thinking and believing and witnessing and dying.

Second, the councils teach us that the Church is conciliar; that is, the decisions of the Church are brought to council and are not left to one individual. As we learn from Acts 15, all the apostles brought forth their experiences, and under the guidance of and in agreement with the Holy Spirit, they made a decree concerning the conversion of the Gentiles. Saint James, as the bishop of the city in which the council took place (Jerusalem), speaks and summarizes the consensus of the council. He leads among equals, but does not set forth his own opinion.

The Faith, our understanding of God, and the interpretation of scripture are not based on one man's experience, but rather on the whole of redeemed humanity. The Orthodox Christian experience agrees and does not depart from the collective experience of the Church as a whole, from the apostles down to the present. The Church Fathers still speak to us today from their vast experience and we benefit from their teachings.

This all reminds us of the great sense of community that we have in the Orthodox Church. We never pray alone, but as members of the body of Christ. We do not stand alone, but we bear each other's

burdens. We are not individualistic, but part of a living community. Behind us stands a cloud of witnesses: the Mother of God, Saint Mary, the angels and archangels, the apostles, the prophets, the patriarchs, the martyrs, the confessors, and all the saints, who were made perfect in the Faith.

We pray that God gives us the strength necessary to defend the faith when we are called to. Let us always remember that we have a living connection with the Church Fathers and that we can use their vast experience and knowledge of God and the Scriptures as the basis of our own personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, we ought to consciously receive the great treasures left for us and to remember "what our fathers did."

¹ Coniaris, Anthony M. *Eastern Orthodoxy: A Way of Life*. Minneapolis, MN: Light and Life Publishing Company, 1966 (59).

² Carlton, Clark. *The Faith: Understanding Orthodox Christianity*. Salisbury, MA: Regina Orthodox Press, 1997 (173-177).