

Nicaea and the Divinity of Jesus: Cross and Sword at the Crossroads¹

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Abstract: This article reflects on the Council of Nicaea (325) and its enduring significance for Christian faith, particularly its definitive affirmation of the divinity of Jesus Christ. Beginning with the apostolic confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, the article traces the development from the early Church's lived faith to the theological reflection that culminated in the Nicene formulation. It examines the historical, political, and theological circumstances surrounding the Council of Nicaea, especially the controversy between Arius and Alexander of Alexandria. Particular attention is given to the role of Emperor Constantine in convening the Council and to the complex intersection of ecclesial authority and imperial power, symbolized by the image of the "Cross and Sword." It further traces the post-Nicene struggle over the Creed, the use of imperial power in support of competing theological positions, and the eventual reaffirmation of the Nicene faith at Constantinople in 381. The article argues that Nicaea should be understood not simply as a historical resolution of a doctrinal controversy but as a decisive moment in the Church's continuing effort to articulate the faith received from the apostles. Its enduring legacy lies both in its confession of Christ's divinity and in its witness to the complex relationship between religious faith, ecclesial authority, and political power. Ultimately, the Nicene Creed remains both a proclamation and a prayer, inviting Christians in every age to confess Jesus Christ as Lord, Son of God, and Savior.

Keywords: Council of Nicaea, Divinity of Christ, Nicene Creed, Arian Controversy, *Homoousios*

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Introduction

On the 20th of May 2025, Christian communities worldwide commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Held in 325, the Council of Nicaea was the first of the Ecumenical Councils in the history of Christianity. I would like to refer to the Council as a council of unity. It was the proclamation of Jesus as the Son of God that united the faith of the 4th-century Christian communities, dispersed across the vast Roman Empire. The Council was, likewise, the meeting point of political power and religious authority, the intersection where the Cross and the Sword met.

The Nature of Faith in Jesus in the Apostolic Age

The confession of faith, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Mt. 16:16), is the faith of Peter and the early Church. But it was not a theologized faith or a confession produced by systematic theological reflection. It was a faith born of the Apostles’ and disciples’ firsthand witnessing of Jesus’ life and miraculous deeds, and of their narratives to the Christian communities of the Apostolic age. At the heart of this confession was a revelation of the Father (Mt. 16:17). Scholars say that the confession of Peter was actually a post-resurrection confession, after Peter had seen the Risen Christ.

The Age of the Apostles had two levels of belief: one that began with the humanness of Jesus and rose to his divinity, a “low Christology” found in the Synoptic Gospels. The other level is a belief that began with Jesus as divine and extended to his humanness. This is exemplified by the first few verses of St. John’s Gospel:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came to be through him, and without him nothing came to be” (Jn. 1:2-3).

And the Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us and we saw his glory, the glory as of the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth (Jn. 1:14).

This “high Christology” is also expressed by St. Paul in the first chapter of his *Letter to the Colossians*:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For in him were created all things in heaven and on earth, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions, principalities or powers; all things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together (Col. 1:14-17).

For in him all the fullness was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile all things for him, making peace by the blood of his cross, whether those on earth or those in heaven (Col. 1:19-20).

The early Christians simply believed. The theological affirmations that emerged in the first two centuries of the Church mainly sustained this belief in the relationship between the Father and the Son. It was not until the late third and early fourth centuries that a theological exploration took place regarding what a divine nature consisted of.

First, they believed; then they began theologizing to understand their belief. We recall the famous dictum of St. Anselm, *Credo ut intelligam* (I believe so that I may understand). Theologizing on the nature of the divinity in Jesus was then the task of the bishops gathered at the 325 Council of Nicaea.

The Historical, Political, and Theological Context

Nicaea (now modern Iznik, Turkey) was a small town in northwest Asia Minor, some 90 miles southwest of the modern city of Istanbul. Nicaea was close to the then Emperor Constantine's eastern capital of Nicomedia. Eusebius of Caesarea, the early church historian and a council participant, relays that 250 participated in the council.² In his letter to the African bishops, St. Athanasius, who was present at the council and served as secretary to his bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, explicitly set the number at 318,³ a number tradition now holds.

The Council met for three months, from the 20th of May to the end of July. The central question for the bishops attending the meeting was whether Jesus Christ is truly God, or was he created like all other beings?

The Council's time was also marked by religious and political discord. The Church had expanded throughout and outside the Roman Empire, both East and West. As the number of Christians grew, they suffered persecution by the Roman Emperors from 303 to 311, until the Edict of Toleration, signed by Emperor Galerius in 311.⁴ However, sporadic persecution of Christians continued in the East. In 313, Constantine and Licinius, who succeeded Galerius in the East, signed the Edict of Milan, which established the official tolerance of Christianity and

² Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, III.8, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 124.

³ Athanasius, *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica*, 2, translated by Archibald Robertson from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 4, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 489.

⁴ H.A. Drake, *Constantine and the Bishops, The Politics of Intolerance* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2000), 142.

restored property to the churches. However, the concession granted to Christians in the East was suspended shortly after a war broke out between Constantine and Licinius, which intensified in 322 and ended with Constantine's triumph over Licinius in the latter part of 324. The defeat of Licinius gave Constantine reason to annex the East, thereby making him the sole emperor.

Yet, at this time, religious trouble was already brewing in the Eastern part of the empire. Such a situation scandalized Constantine, who, upon entering Alexandria, witnessed firsthand the division that plagued the Church, prompting him to send his ecclesiastical adviser, Hosius of Corduba, to bring the factions together and restore unity.⁵

Arianism: Arius and Eusebius versus Alexander and Athanasius

In 318, an Alexandrian priest, Arius, first publicly taught in Alexandria that the Son of God had a beginning; that he had been created out of nothing by the Father, and therefore could not be eternal or of equal substance.⁶ The Son is divine, but in a lesser sense. The Father alone was without origin. Arius supported his argument with several Bible passages, such as Proverbs 8:22: "The Lord begot me, the beginning of his works, the forerunner of his deeds of long ago." He interpreted this passage to mean that the Son had been created before all creatures.

On the other hand, Arius' bishop, Alexander of Alexandria, taught that Jesus, as the Son of God, was eternally generated from the Father. Arius criticized Alexander's Christology, asserting that the Father alone was eternal and that the Son was created or begotten by the Father, and thus had a definite point of origin. Therefore, the Son was subordinate to the Father. Arius further accused Alexander of rendering the Father material, for, in his mind, the only way the Son can be equal in substance with the Father is if the Father's substance has been divided, the divided portion of which has constituted the being of the Son. Thus, for Arius, Jesus was not divine in the same way as the Father.⁷

In response to Arius, Alexander of Alexandria and his deacon, Athanasius, condemned the views of Arius as a denial of Christ's divinity. They argued that salvation required a redeemer who was fully God, not a created being. Then, in 320 or 321, Alexander convoked a local council at Alexandria at which more than 100 bishops from Egypt and Libya anathematized Arius.⁸ Arius refused to subscribe to

⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 18.

⁶ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 16.

⁷ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 16.

⁸ Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 17.

the council's decision, and he and his followers were excommunicated and exiled from Alexandria by Alexander. Being driven out, he went to Palestine and from there to Nicomedia. Then, he wrote to bishops around the Roman East to gain support for his view, and among his supporters were Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea, who advocated his view and his restoration to the church of Alexandria. Alexander of Alexandria also wrote letters to the bishops defending his position and informing them of how pernicious Arius's theological vision was to the Christian faith.⁹

The Entry of the Sword – The Emperor Convokes Nicaea

The Christological controversy between Alexander and Arius raged on. It spread to other regions, with bishops, clergy, and lay people choosing sides. Violence erupted in cities as churches divided. Attempts to impose local solutions failed. An Arian council in Bithynia addressed an encyclical to all the bishops, asking them to receive the Arians into the communion of the Church. The controversy provoked riots, bitter rivalries among bishops, and weakened imperial peace.

The war between Constantine and Licinius added to the discord during the years 322-324. Having become the sole Emperor after defeating Licinius, Constantine sought to restore religious peace, civil order, and unity. He feared that religious division might fragment the internal stability of an empire he had just reunited. So, he addressed letters to Alexander and Arius, asking them to agree without delay, thinking the issue was of no practical importance and not realizing the significance of the controversy. Bishop Hosius of Corduba (Spain), his counselor in religious matters, bore the imperial letter to Alexandria. But conciliation did not succeed. Hosius advised the Emperor to convene an Ecumenical Council as the only solution. It is probable that Constantine and Pope St. Sylvester I reached an agreement to expedite the assembly of the bishops.

Although it was not the first time Constantine had called Christian bishops together to address problems facing the Church, the Council of Nicaea was the most widely represented of such gatherings and had a long-term impact on the life of the Church. Constantine provided resources for the bishops to travel to Nicaea as well as lodging and support while at the Council.

⁹ Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Chapter II, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 3, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace and translated by Bloomfield Jackson, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 34.

The choice of Nicaea was favorable for the assembly of the bishops. It was easily accessible to the bishops of nearly all provinces, especially those of Asia, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Greece, and Thrace. Nearly all the bishops came from the eastern half of the Roman Empire, mostly from Asia Minor. Most were Greeks. Several traveled from as far as Spain, North Africa, and Gaul. It included many who had survived persecution only a decade earlier. Apparently, the profession of faith of Eusebius of Caesarea, who had been excommunicated at a local council of Antioch in 264-268, was accepted, and he was therefore restored.

Among the better-known participants of the Council were Alexander of Alexandria and his deacon-secretary, Athanasius; Eustathius of Antioch; Macarius of Jerusalem; Eusebius of Nicomedia; Eusebius of Caesarea; and Nicolas of Myra. The actual president of the Council seems to have been Hosius of Corduba, assisted by the Pope's legates, the two Roman priests, Victor and Vincentius.¹⁰

The Council of Nicaea and the Nicene Creed

The proceedings of the Council have not survived. Nevertheless, knowledge of what could have possibly happened at the Council can be derived from the following sources: the Creed, known as the Nicene Creed, that the Bishops agreed upon;¹¹ the address of Emperor Constantine to the bishops at the opening of the Council (which he delivered in Latin and was translated for the majority of Greek-speaking Bishops);¹² a synodical Letter sent to the Church of Alexandria;¹³ a letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his diocese;¹⁴ and descriptions of the Council found in histories written about 100 years after the Council.¹⁵

The sessions were held in the principal church of Nicaea and in the central hall of the imperial palace.¹⁶ The major theological issue at Nicaea was

¹⁰ See John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology, Vol.2: The Nicene Faith, Part I* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2004), 67.

¹¹ See John Behr, *Formation of Christian Theology*, 150-161.

¹² Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III.12, translated by Averil Cameron and Stuart G. Hall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 126.

¹³ See Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Chapter VIII, (NPNF 3, 46).

¹⁴ Eusebius of Caesarea, "Letter on the Council of Nicaea," in Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Chapter XI, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, vol. 3, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace and translated by Bloomfield Jackson, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892), 49.

¹⁵ Socrates Scholasticus. *Ecclesiastical History*. Translated by A.C. Zenos. From *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 2. Edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1890.); Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Second Series*, Vol. 3, edited by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace and translated by Bloomfield Jackson, (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1892).

¹⁶ Eusebius. *Life of Constantine*, III.10, 125.

the Christological issue of the divine nature of God the Son and his relationship to God the Father. The theological debates were intense and complex. Greek philosophical concepts, combined with biblical interpretation, were widely used as bishops argued over terms such as *ousia* (essence) and *hypostasis* (substance). The Council used the term *homoousios* to affirm that the Word (the *Logos* of John 1:1) is of the “same essence” as the Father and thus divine as the Father is divine.

The Nicene Creed declared:

We believe in one God, the Father Almighty,
 Maker of all things visible and invisible;
 And in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten from the Father,
 only begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father, God from God,
 light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one
 substance with the Father (Greek: *homoousion tō patri*),
 through Whom all things came into being, things in heaven and things
 on earth;
 Who because of us men and because of our salvation came down,
 and became incarnate, and became man,
 and suffered, and rose again on the third day, and ascended to the heavens,
 and will come to judge the living and dead.
 And (we believe) in the Holy Spirit.

But as for those who say: There was when He was not, and, before being
 born He was not;
 and that He came into existence out of nothing, or who assert that the
 Son of God is of a different hypostasis or substance, or created, or is
 subject to alteration or change – these the Catholic and Apostolic Church
 anathematizes.

The Creed notably proclaims the divinity of Christ, “Light from Light, true God from true God.” It also declares Christ as the true Son of God, “of one substance with the Father.” The Greek term, *homoousios*, consubstantial (“of the same substance”) “is meant to be understood quite literally: Yes, in God himself there is an eternal dialogue between the Father and Son, who are both truly one and the same God in the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

The term, *homoousios*, is ascribed by Eusebius of Caesarea to Constantine.¹⁸

¹⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth, From the Baptism in the Jordan to the Transfiguration* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 320; see also Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. Inc., 1967), 77-99. Exploring the limits of human knowledge of Jesus, Brown focuses on the titles of Jesus as the Messiah and as the Son of God.

¹⁸ Eusebius, *Letter to his Diocese* (Theodoret, HE I,12,7 [Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers

This is certainly doubtful. But the term would raise issues that would seriously be controverted in the future. The Creed was most assuredly opposed to Arianism and incompatible with the distinctive core of their beliefs. The text of the Nicene Creed has been preserved in a letter of Eusebius of Caesarea to his congregation, in Athanasius' works, and elsewhere.

Some bishops hesitated to endorse the term *homoousios* due to its previous association with Gnosticism and also Sabellianism, a form of "Modalism," a heresy that believed in a God who acts in various modes, as Father or as Son or as a Spirit, but where the Father, Son, and Spirit are not separate persons. In fact, Arius and his supporters before Nicaea opposed Alexander of Alexandria's view of the Son because it bears a materialist Gnostic view of God's nature. However, after the conclusion of Nicaea, the objection to Nicaea focused on the claim that it proclaims a Sabellianist view of God, collapsing the distinction between the Father and the Son.

In the end, all but two of the bishops subscribed to the final form of the Creed as adopted.¹⁹ Arius, who was accompanied by his supporters, refused to sign and was exiled by Constantine. Although Eusebius of Nicomedia had initially resisted, he eventually signed under pressure. Athanasius, still a deacon, won fame for his defense of the Creed and would later become Bishop of Alexandria.

The Support of the Sword for Arianism

But the Council did not end the Arian crisis. Although Constantine had initially enforced the Creed, he later allowed Arius to return from exile. In 336, just before his death, Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia, an Arian sympathizer.

Within a few years, the empire was again divided along theological lines, apparently because Eusebius of Nicomedia had regained imperial favor and persuaded the emperor to restore Arian supporters. Eustathius of Antioch was deposed and exiled in 330. Athanasius, then the Bishop of Alexandria, was deposed by the first Synod of Tyre in 335.

Arius returned to Constantinople to be readmitted into the Church, but died shortly before he could be received. Constantine died the next year, some 11 or 12 years after the Council, and after receiving baptism from the Arian Bishop

3,49]) as pointed out by Jannel Abogado, OP, "Preaching the Accessible God: The Sense of ὁμοούσιος in 325 Council of Nicaea," *Philippiniana Sacra* 61, no. 185 (May-August 2026), 240.

¹⁹ See Theodoret, *Ecclesiastical History*, Book 1, Chapter VI, (NDNF 3, 44).

Eusebius of Nicomedia. The Melitians also joined the Arians and caused more dissension than ever, being among the worst enemies of Athanasius.

Constantine was succeeded by two Arian emperors in the Eastern part of the Christendom: his son, Constantius II—who, for a short while, ruled as the sole emperor of the entire Christendom—and, later on, Valens, who unsuccessfully confronted Basil over the Nicene Creed. Imperial coercive power was used to suppress the adherents of the Nicene Creed. Consequently, Arianism continued to spread and be a subject of debate during the remainder of the 4th century.

Athanasius of Alexandria faced repeated exiles, initially for refusing to readmit Arius to communion and, later, for opposing the agenda of emperors sympathetic to a group of bishops opposed to Nicaea, a religious unity founded on a loose interpretation of the nature of the Son. Four emperors exiled him five times over the course of 30 years. Successive emperors²⁰ both in the Eastern and Western parts of the empire would alternate between supporting Nicene and Arian positions, showing that the Council's decisions, though doctrinally firm, did not hold politically.²¹

The Decline of Arianism

Eventually, the Arian dominance melted away. The Nicene Emperor Theodosius became emperor in the East and convened the 2nd Ecumenical Council, held in Constantinople in 381. The Council affirmed the Nicene Creed. In 381, Emperor Theodosius decided in favor of *homoousios*, canonized it as the official faith of the whole Christendom, and proscribed, under penalty, other religious factions that did not conform to Nicaea, marking the final victory of the Nicene Creed.²² Arianism did not disappear but was permanently considered unorthodox and heretical.

The Impact and Significance of the Council of Nicaea

The Council of Nicaea (325) is the best-known Ecumenical Council among Christians of all denominations. It was the largest gathering of bishops in the history of the Church up to that time. Despite the interventions of imperial

²⁰ There was a very brief interlude of paganism when Constantius died in 361 and Julian the Apostate became emperor in 361. The barbarian tribes, such as the Goths, became Arians for at least a century. In St. Jerome's iconic phrase, "The world groaned in wonder to find itself Arian."

²¹ See Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy*, 103-104.

²² See Leo Donald Davis, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787), Their History and Theology*, (Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 115-119.

power, the bishops of the Council decided from their faith in the Risen Christ and indicated a step in the journey towards *libertas ecclesiae*.²³ It marked the beginning of the first seven ecumenical councils in Christian history. It was the first occasion where the technical aspects of Christology were discussed.

Its Creed, the Nicene Creed, became a statement of Christian faith for the Catholic Church, the Orthodox Church, and for nearly all of Christianity. It declared what Christians believed and what they rejected, and it established a clear line between orthodoxy and heresy. It established the Trinitarian doctrine that has influenced Christian theology ever since. It became a structural and synodal model for settling future doctrinal controversies, including those at Ephesus, Chalcedon, and Constantinople.

Constantine's interventionist role in matters theological, in order to provide political unity as well as religious support, served as a template for the Middle Ages, particularly on the following matters, among others:

- The concept of a Christian ruler as God's representative on earth;
- The use of religious orthodoxy as a tool of political unity;
- The institutional partnership between bishops and secular rulers;
- The idea that theological truth could be defined by conciliar authority.

These developments helped Christianity survive and flourish, and laid the foundation for the medieval system, in which religious and political authority were deeply intertwined. From the coronation rituals of medieval kings to the very concept of religious orthodoxy, the legacy of Nicaea continues to influence how we think about the relationship between faith and power.

Conclusion

In the final analysis, the Nicene Creed is both a proclamation and a prayer. It calls us to witness with our faith to Christ's divinity through his example of love, sacrifice, compassion, and forgiveness. Our task, today and always, is to proclaim to everyone what the New Testament, the faith of the early Church, and the Council of Nicaea, have declared: Jesus Christ is our Lord, the Son of God, our Salvation – to Him be glory forever!**PS**

²³ See International Theological Commission, "'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour': 1700th Anniversary of the Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, 325-2025," no. 119. April 3, 2025. https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/cti_documents/rc_cti_doc_20250403_1700-nicaea_en.html.

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