

THE DOGMATIC, PATRISTIC AND LITURGICAL VALUE OF THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325 AD): THE FOUNDATION OF ORTHODOXY IN THE FACE OF THE ARIAN HERESY*

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ABSTRACT

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD) represents a fundamental turning point in the history of the Orthodox Church, providing a clear dogmatic response to the Arian heresy. By adopting the term homoousios ("of one being with"), the Church affirmed the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, thus establishing the Trinitarian foundation of Orthodox faith. The article analyzes the historical and theological context of the synod, the contributions of the Church Fathers in the reception and deepening of the synodal decisions, as well as the integration of dogma into liturgical life, hymnography and iconography. The work also assesses the relevance of the Nicene message in the face of contemporary challenges: theological relativism, secularization, religious pluralism and ecumenical dialogue. The Council of Nicaea proves to be not only a historical event, but a living, canonical and saving norm, reaffirmed in worship, dogma and ecclesial experience. Fidelity to this confession remains essential for any authentic theological dialogue and for the preservation of Orthodox identity.

Keywords: Council of Nicaea; dogma; Arianism; homoousios; Patristics; Creed; Ecumenism;

INTRODUCTION

In the history of the Church, the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD) represents a decisive moment not only from a dogmatic, but also patristic and liturgical point of view. Convened in a tense context caused by the spread of the Arian heresy, this ecumenical council responded to the urgent need to define clearly and definitively the relationship between God the Father and the Son, in opposition to heretical assertions that undermined the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The council formulated one of the most important confessions of faith in Christianity – the Nicene Creed, which later became an integral part of the liturgy and theological identity of Orthodoxy.

The need for a firm dogmatic delimitation arose following the spread of the teaching of Arius, a presbyter of Alexandria, who asserted that the Son is not of the same being (ὁμοούσιος, homoousios) as the Father, but is a superior creature, yet created in time. This idea, although apparently subtle, overturned the entire Christian anthropology and soteriology, because if Christ is not true God from true God, then neither can man's salvation be real and complete.

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In addition to their dogmatic value, the synodal decisions of Nicaea generated a profound reaction in patristic thought. The Great Fathers of the Church, Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian¹, developed an entire theology in defense of the consubstantiality of the Son, and this foundation has remained to this day a point of reference in any theological reflection on the Holy Trinity. Also, the introduction of the Creed into the Holy Liturgy – especially in the Orthodox East gave an undeniable liturgical dimension to the decisions of Nicaea.²

From a contemporary perspective, the reevaluation of the Council of Nicaea is not only a historical obligation, but a theological necessity. In a globalized context, in which religious pluralism and theological relativism are promoted as supreme values, the reaffirmation of the dogmatic and liturgical value of the council becomes an act of fidelity to the Tradition of the Church. Moreover, in the framework of interconfessional and interreligious dialogues, the clarification of the Orthodox position in relation to the consubstantiality of the Son becomes an essential criterion of the authenticity of the confession of faith³.

Therefore, the present study aims to analyze, from a dogmatic, patristic and liturgical perspective, the contribution of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea to the foundation of Orthodox theology. We will highlight both the context and immediate implications of the council, as well as its reverberations in the theology of the Church, offering an updated assessment of its importance in contemporary ecumenical dialogue.

1. HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND CHALLENGES OF THE ARIAN HERESY

The first three centuries of Christianity were marked by sporadic or generalized persecutions, but also by a gradual and profound theological development. The lack of an explicit doctrinal unity and external pressure meant that the Church often functioned in a framework of resilience and martyr solidarity, without yet having a systematized dogma. This period was dominated by the “rule of faith” (*regula fidei*) transmitted orally and liturgically, but which required clear articulation in the face of new doctrinal challenges.

The Edict of Milan (313 AD), signed by Constantine the Great and Licinius, radically changed the condition of the Church, bringing it legal recognition and religious freedom. However, the new position of Christianity as the “imperial religion” generated internal pressure: doctrinal tensions, until then repressed by the condition of persecution, came to the surface. In this context, Arianism emerged and developed one of the most influential, but also harmful, heresies of Christian Antiquity.

Arius, a presbyter of the Church of Alexandria, began around 318 AD to preach ideas contrary to Church Tradition, affirming that the Son is not eternal, but “there was a time when He was not” (ἦν ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν). According to Arian theology, the divine Logos was created by the Father before the world, but is not co-eternal and consubstantial with Him. By this, Arius radically separated the divinity of the Father from that of the Son, annulling the essential unity of the Trinity and reducing Christ to a superior, but still created, creature. This theology came from a Gnostic and philosophical synthesis (especially of Platonic and Origenist origin), in which the supreme divinity was absolutely inaccessible and transcendent, unable to have direct relations with matter. For Arius, only

¹ Pelikan, Jaroslav, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine*, Vol. 1, University of Chicago Press, 1971, p. 194.

² Taft, Robert, *The Liturgy of the Hours in East and West*, Liturgical Press, 1992, p. 88.

³ Lossky, Vladimir, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Humanitas, 2002, p. 135.

the Father was "uncreated, unbegotten, and without beginning", while the Son was "produced" as an intermediary between the Father and creation. The dogmatic problem that this view raised was major: if Christ is not true God, then He cannot be true Savior. Only God can save, and if the Son is a creature, even a superior one, salvation is impossible.⁴

Arius' ideas were initially condemned by Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, and Arius was excommunicated in 321 AD. However, his ideas found supporters in the East, including Eusebius of Nicomedia and Eusebius of Caesarea. They contributed to the popularization of Arianism among the clergy and, implicitly, the faithful, leading to a major crisis within the Church.⁵

At the same time, Constantine the Great, concerned with the unity of the empire and the Church, understood that this theological dispute could become a factor of political instability. In a letter to Arius and Alexander, he minimized the dispute, calling it "a quarrel over words", but seeing that the tensions did not subside, he convened the first ecumenical council in the history of the Church at Nicaea, in the year 325 AD.

The Council of Nicaea brought together approximately 318 AD bishops, mostly from the East of the empire, and among the participants were prominent figures of the Church: Saint Alexander of Alexandria, Saint Hosius of Cordoba, Saint Macarius of Jerusalem, Saint Paphnutius of Thebes, Saint Nicholas of Myra, Saint Spyridon of Trimythunda, and the young deacon Athanasius, the future defender of Nicene orthodoxy. Although the presence of Western bishops was smaller, the representation of the universal Church was recognized. The synodal discussions focused on a clear definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son. The opposition crystallized between two groups: the Orthodox, which supported the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, and the Philo-Arian, which proposed vague terms such as homoiousios (of a similar substance) to avoid the term "homoousios", perceived by some as having Sabellian connotations.

By imperial authority and the clarity of Orthodox testimony, the council adopted the formula homoousios, affirming that the Son is "of one being with the Father," begotten, not created, and shares the same divinity with Him. Thus, the Nicene Creed became the dogmatic expression of the apostolic faith, with a decisive impact on the dogmatic and liturgical structure of the Church.

Although the council formally condemned Arius' teachings and excommunicated him and his supporters, the struggle against Arianism continued for several decades. Particularly under the influence of fluctuating imperial policy, supporters of Arianism were sometimes rehabilitated, and Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, was exiled five times for defending Nicene orthodoxy.⁶ The controversy reached its peak during the reign of the Arians-friendly emperors Constantius II and Valens. This conflict was not only theological, but also ecclesiological and political. The struggles between the Orthodox and Arians led to local schisms and a state of confusion among the faithful. Only through the perseverance of some great Church Fathers – Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus – was the Nicene truth reaffirmed and recognized at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381 AD), which confirmed the Nicene Creed and definitively condemned Arianism.⁷

⁴ Lossky, Vladimir, *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, Humanitas, ... p.4.

⁵ Socrates Scholasticus, *Historia Ecclesiastica, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol II, 5.

⁶ Williams, Rowan, *Arius: Heresy and Tradition*, Eerdmans, 1995, p. 66.

⁷ McGuckin, John, *The Orthodox Church: An Introduction to its History, Doctrine, and Spiritual Culture*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2004, p. 118.

2. THE DOGMATIC VALUE OF THE FIRST ECUMENICAL SYNOD

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) represented not only a doctrinal demarcation from Arianism, but also a canonical formulation of a central dogma of the Christian faith: the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. The decision of the council to adopt the term ὁμοούσιος (homoousios, "of one being with") as an expression of the Orthodox faith was one of overwhelming theological importance. This term, absent from Scripture in its explicit form, was chosen precisely to defend biblical revelation against a rationalist and reductionist reading, such as the Arian one.

Consubstantiality (homoousios) is not a simple philosophical construct, but an affirmation of the truth revealed in Christ: that the Son is true God from true God, begotten of the Father before all ages, and not created, as Arius maintained. By this expression, the Church affirmed that between the Father and the Son there is no ontological distance, but an absolute unity in being, although distinct in hypostases.

This dogmatic clarification was necessary to preserve the integrity of revelation and Christian soteriology. If Christ is not truly God, then He cannot perfectly reveal the Father (cf. John 14:9), nor can He accomplish man's salvation by uniting human and divine nature. Therefore, what was at stake was not just a speculative question, but the very basis of the divine economy and the incarnation.

The use of the term homoousios was strategic and inspired. Although some bishops initially rejected it as ambiguous or associated with the errors of Paul of Samosata, the Arian context dictated its adoption with a clarified and patristically defined meaning. According to Athanasius the Great, behind the general acceptance of this term lay not political pressure but a profound spiritual recognition: "The Nicene Fathers were taught by the Holy Spirit to confess the truth."⁸

With this decision, the council proclaimed a Christological formula that would structure the entire subsequent dogma of the Church. The Son is "Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father" these expressions defining not only the nature of the Son, but also His eternity, equality with the Father, and His direct involvement in the work of salvation.

Thus, the Nicene Creed is not only a declaration of faith, but a synthesis of divine revelation, canonically fixed in the context of an intense struggle between truth and heresy. It is, at the same time, an expression of the *lex credendi* (law of faith), which will later become an integral part of the *lex orandi* (law of prayer), being integrated into the Eucharistic Liturgy. By defining the dogma of the Trinity in terms of unity of being and distinction of hypostases, the Council of Nicaea also established a norm of ecclesiastical authority in matters of faith.

The bishops present at the council did not act as mere local representatives, but as bearers of the universal apostolic tradition. Thus, the synodal decisions had a universal character, becoming norms of faith for the entire Church. This universality was guaranteed not only by the number and prestige of the participants, but also by the work of the Holy Spirit who, according to Orthodox tradition, guides the Church in defining dogma. In this regard, Saint Gregory the Theologian emphasized that: "Not all who gathered are also saints, but the truth was revealed through those who were penetrated by the Spirit."⁹ Moreover, the synodal authority was subsequently recognized by all subsequent ecumenical

⁸ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos, De Decretis, Ad Afros, in Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume IV, 20.

⁹ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos, De Decretis*, p. 9.

councils, which reaffirmed the Nicene definitions and continued the dogmatic development of the Church on this foundation. Therefore, the dogmatic value of the First Ecumenical Council is not an isolated one, but one constitutive for the entire theological construction of Orthodoxy.

The Nicene decision also has direct implications for the Christian vision of man. If Christ is truly God and Man, then in Him the reconciliation between divinity and humanity, between created and uncreated nature, is achieved. This hypostatic union of the two natures, without mixture or confusion, has as its premise the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father and, simultaneously, with us humans through the incarnation.

Thus, man is called to deification (theosis), not through a form of pantheism, but through real participation in the divine life, possible only through a Christ who is truly God. Orthodox soteriology, founded on this dogma, holds that "God became man so that man might become God by grace."

This reality cannot be understood outside the consubstantiality of the Son. Arianism, by denying the full divinity of the Son, nullifies the possibility of deification, reducing Christianity to a simple ethic or a moralistic religion without saving power.

Based on the Nicene definition, the Cappadocian Fathers would articulate Orthodox Trinitarian theology in the 4th century. Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa would clarify the distinction between *ousia* (being) and *hypostasis* (hypostasis), showing that the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are three hypostases sharing the same divine being.

This theology was essential not only for understanding the intra-Trinitarian relationship, but also for the correct relationship to creation, revelation, and liturgy. The Trinity is not only an ontological structure of the divinity, but also the supreme model of communion, in which man is called to participate by grace.

"The dogmatic definition of the consubstantiality of the Son led naturally to the reaffirmation of the divinity of the Holy Spirit, which was fully achieved at the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381 AD). Thus, the dogmatic development initiated at Nicaea was completed by a coherent and inspired theological path, culminating in the full formulation of the Trinitarian dogma.

In addition to the dogmatic definition of the relationship between the Father and the Son, the First Ecumenical Council also issued a series of disciplinary canons, among which Canon 6 stands out, with major ecclesiological value. It states: "Let the customs of the Church in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis be preserved, as they are also in Rome and elsewhere." Specifically, the canon consecrated the traditional patriarchal authority of the bishop of Alexandria over certain regions, in parallel with the recognition of the authority of the bishop of Rome over Italy and those of Antioch and Jerusalem over their dioceses.¹⁰

This decision emphasizes that the synod was not only a theological event, but also a manifestation of the ecclesial catholic consciousness, in which the Apostolic Tradition and the consecrated local customs were preserved and reaffirmed. Canon 6 consecrates the patriarchal model that will gradually become normative in the structure of the Church: dogmatic unity in administrative diversity.

Theologically, this canon reflects an ecclesiology of communion, in which local bishops are called to preserve the unity of faith within a jurisdictional diversity, which prefigures the synodal structure of the Orthodox Church to this day. At the same time, the

¹⁰ Turner, CH, *Ecclesiae Occidentalis Monumenta Iuris Antiquissima*, Clarendon Press, 1914, p. 110.

reaffirmation of the traditional authority of the great episcopal sees shows the direct connection between apostolic succession and the guarantee of orthodoxy.¹¹

One of the most lasting results of the Council of Nicaea was the adoption of the Creed, in its original form, as a normative confession of faith for the whole Church. This creed, although still incomplete compared to its final form (which would be finalized at Constantinople in 381 AD), already contained the essential dogmatic foundation: the affirmation of the consubstantiality of the Son, of His divinity, of the incarnation, and of salvation.

The integration of this Creed into the life of the Church was gradual but constant, especially through its inclusion in the Eucharistic Liturgy. Although in the East the official introduction of the Creed into the Liturgy would take place later (5th-6th centuries), through the influence of Peter Fullo, the Monophysite patriarch of Antioch, and then universally through the decisions of the Byzantine emperors, the essence remains: the Nicene dogma became *lex orandi*, not just *lex credendi*.

The recitation of the Creed before the Eucharistic Anaphora has a profound significance: the believer enters into real communion with the confessed Christ, and with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, by assuming the truth revealed and sanctified by the synod. Thus, the Nicene Creed becomes a "seal" of personal and ecclesial orthodoxy, a *sine qua non* condition of authentic participation in the sacramental life of the Church.¹²

Moreover, this liturgical integration of synodal dogma consecrates a deeply patristic reality: in the Orthodox Church, theology is not a purely intellectual exercise, but the mystical expression of living in Christ. Orthodoxy is not defined solely by precise formulations, but by mystical participation in the truth confessed in the Liturgy.

Through its decisions, the First Ecumenical Council established a Trinitarian, Christological, and ecclesiological dogma that underlies all Orthodox teaching. By proclaiming the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father, it reaffirmed the essential truth of the Gospel: that God has fully revealed Himself in Christ, that the Son is equal to the Father in being but distinct in hypostasis, and that salvation is possible only because Christ is fully God and fully Man.

This dogmatic formulation is, in fact, the expression of a living tradition that comes from the experience of the early Church, from the apostolic witness and from the mystical experience of the Fathers. Nicaea did not invent a new doctrine, but expressed in precise theological terms what the Church already believed, confessed and lived.¹³

Moreover, Nicaea remains a benchmark for evaluating all subsequent theological teaching. Any departure from the consubstantiality of the Son whether through His subordination or through the confusion of the hypostases is an attack on revealed truth and a break with the Tradition of the Church. Therefore, the Fathers of the Church, led by Athanasius the Great, considered the Council of Nicaea not only a historical event, but a manifestation of the work of the Holy Spirit in the Church.¹⁴

In conclusion, the dogmatic value of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea consists of the following cardinal points:

¹¹ Zizioulas, Ioannis, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006. p. 127.

¹² Zizioulas, Ioannis, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006. p. 12.

¹³ Florovsky, Georges, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, Nordland Publishing, 1975, p. 88.

¹⁴ Athanasius of Alexandria, *Contra Arianos, De Decretis, Ad Afros*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. IV, 4.

1. The affirmation of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father the foundation of Orthodox Trinitarianism;
2. The dogmatic clarification of the person of Christ, in view of the real salvation of man;
3. The consecration of synodal authority as an expression of the catholicity of the Church;
4. Integrating dogma into the liturgical life of the Church, through the recitation of the Creed;
5. Defining traditional ecclesiological norms through synodal canons.

The Council of Nicaea, through all that it proclaimed, remains a golden pillar of Orthodoxy, an anchor of revealed truth, and a theological light that continues to shine in the darkness of the age.

3. PATRISTIC REFLECTION ON SYNODAL DECISIONS

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea did not exhaust its authority only at the moment of its proclamation, but acquired its plenitude through its reception in the theological and spiritual life of the Church, through the word and writing of the Holy Fathers. The Fathers of the Church were not only exegetes of Holy Scripture, but also interpreters of the council, transposing the dogmatic decisions of the councils into living, apologetic, mystical and liturgical thought. In particular, the Fathers of the 4th century: Saint Athanasius the Great, Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian and Saint Gregory of Nyssa, played a decisive role in deepening and defending the Nicene teaching, offering the Church not only a reception, but a solid patristic foundation of the Trinitarian dogma.

This patristic reception should not be understood simply as an “explanation” or “defense” of the council, but as an act of theological communion with the revelation expressed synodally. In the Orthodox view, dogma is not an abstract system, but a living truth, embodied in the life of the Church through the holiness and testimony of the Fathers. Therefore, the patristic reflection on the Council of Nicaea is itself a constitutive part of the Tradition and synodal authority.¹⁵

Among all the Church Fathers, Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (c. 296–373 AD) is undoubtedly the most representative exponent of Nicene orthodoxy. He participated in the council as a deacon of Bishop Alexander, but his theological activity after 325 established him as the preeminent defender of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father. In the face of political pressures, repeated exiles (five in number), and pro-Arian campaigns, Athanasius remained faithful to the Nicene Creed, which he considered the unwavering testimony of evangelical truth.

His writings especially *Against the Arians*, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, *Letter to the African Bishops* are a brilliant synthesis of scriptural exegesis, theological argument and spiritual experience. In his view, the mystery of salvation cannot be understood apart from the truth that the Son is of one being with the Father: “If the Son is not true God, then he cannot make us sharers in the divinity”.

He explains homoousios not as a numerical identity (which would lead to Sabellianism), but as an identity of being within a real distinction of hypostases. This view

¹⁵ Florovsky, Georges, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, Nordland Publishing, 1975, p. 89.

will later become the foundation of Cappadocian theology and of the definition at the Second Ecumenical Council. Moreover, Athanasius understands the council as inspired by the Holy Spirit, and not as the result of a human compromise: "The Fathers did not speak according to their own judgment, but were taught by divine grace."

After the death of Athanasius, the defense and development of Nicene theology was undertaken by the three great Cappadocians: Saint Basil the Great, Saint Gregory the Theologian, and Saint Gregory of Nyssa. They faced a new stage of Arianism moderate (homoiousian) and anomoean Arianism and felt the need to deepen the Nicene dogmatic formulation, clarifying the relationship between ousia and hypostasis.

Saint Basil the Great (†379 AD), in his work *On the Holy Spirit*, proposes a clear distinction between the common being of the Holy Trinity and the distinct hypostases, emphasizing the perfect unity of the divinity. He introduces expressions such as *mia ousia*, *treis hypostaseis* – one being, three hypostases which will become normative in the formulation of the Trinitarian dogma at the Second Ecumenical Council.

Saint Gregory the Theologian (†390 AD), in his famous *Theological Discourses*, reaches a peak of patristic trinitarian thought. In a profoundly personalist and mystical way, he affirms that the Father is the "source" of the divinity, but that the Son and the Spirit share the same being, not being created, but born/proceeding from eternity: "When I contemplate the One, I am illuminated by the Three; when I look at the Three, I return to the One."¹⁶

His brother, Gregory of Nyssa, developed in his writings a unifying and mystical vision of the Trinity, explaining that the divine unity is not numerical, but a unity of being in eternal communion, surpassing any created analogy. Through Cappadocian reflection, the dogmatic theology of Nicea is definitively articulated, thus overcoming both modalist confusion and Arian subordination.

Although most patristic reflection on the Council of Nicaea belongs to the East, there were also theologians in the West who firmly supported the Nicene dogma. Saint Hilary of Poitiers (†367 AD), often called the Athanasius of the West, was a fervent apologist for consubstantiality, in his work *De Trinitate*. He combated not only Arianism proper, but also any form of semi-Arianism that sought to avoid the term *homoousios*.

In turn, Saint Ambrose of Milan (†397 AD) took up and integrated Nicene theology into his pastoral, liturgical, and catechetical work. In *De Fide*, Ambrose clearly expresses the fact that the Son is equal to the Father in everything except His birth – a formulation that anticipates the clear definition of the intratrinitarian relationship at Constantinople.¹⁷

Patristic reflection on the Council of Nicaea naturally led to the convening of the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople in 381 AD, which validated and completed the Nicene Creed, especially with regard to the Holy Spirit. The formula *homoousios* was reaffirmed, extended to the Spirit, in opposition to the *pneumatomachi*.

This dogmatic synthesis, born of a process of patristic reception illuminated by the Holy Spirit, represents the culmination of the theological reflection of the 4th century. The Fathers of the Church did not limit themselves to defending a synodal formulation, but transformed it into a living paradigm of living, thinking, and confessing the truth.

The patristic reception of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea is a living testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit in the history of the Church. The Fathers not only faithfully preserved the decisions of the council, but also deepened, articulated, and

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Eunomius*, in *Patrologia Graeca* 45, p. 41.

¹⁷ Ambrose of Milan, *De Fide*, in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. X, 6.

embodied them in the spiritual life of the Church. Athanasius the Great provided the apologetic foundation; the Cappadocians perfected the conceptual articulation; the Western Fathers supported the universality of confession.

Patristic reflection is therefore not a retrospective commentary, but an essential part of synodal authority, without which no ecumenical council can be truly “ecumenical,” that is, of the whole Church. In the Orthodox Tradition, the Fathers are “living icons of dogma,” embodying synodal truth in their lives, in their writings, and in their sacrifice.

4. LITURGICAL ECHOES OF THE SYNOD – INTEGRATION OF DOGMA INTO ECCLESIASTICAL LIFE

One of the deepest truths of the Orthodox Tradition is that lived theology becomes liturgy, and liturgy expresses living theology. In this sense, the decisions of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea did not remain merely doctrinal documents, but were assumed and embodied in the liturgical life of the Church, where the people of God communally testify to revealed truth.

The synodal decision proclaiming the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father – homoousios – was transposed liturgically in the Nicene Creed, but also in the structure of the services, in hymns, in prayers and in iconographic symbolism. This transposition was not a simple formality, but a spiritual necessity: what the Church had defined through the synods, she began to confess with full voice in her worship.

The most obvious liturgical echo of the Council of Nicaea is the integration of the Creed into the Divine Liturgy. Initially, the Creed was not recited during the Liturgy in the East, but was reserved for catechetical moments and baptismal initiation. It was only from the 5th century, in contexts of dogmatic tension (such as in Antioch or Constantinople), that the Creed began to be recited publicly during the Liturgy, before the Eucharistic Anaphora, as a common confession of the Orthodox faith.¹⁸

The introduction of the Creed into the Liturgy has a profound ecclesiological significance: before the Eucharistic sacrifice is offered, the Church affirms her dogmatic unity. The *lex orandi* thus becomes the visible expression of the *lex credendi*: you cannot participate in the Body of Christ if you do not recognize His divinity and consubstantiality with the Father, as formulated at Nicaea.

Thus, the believer does not pronounce the Creed as a historical formula, but as a living testimony, as an entry into the communion of the Holy Trinity, alongside the entire visible and invisible Church. This awareness of “dogmatic communion” is specific to Orthodox spirituality and has been liturgically strengthened by this inspired practice.

Byzantine hymnography, especially that dedicated to the great feasts, faithfully reflects the synodal dogmas. In the troparion of the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord, we find a clear formulation of the Nicene dogma: “Thy Nativity, O Christ our God, has dawned upon the world the light of knowledge.” Here, Christ is presented as the dawn of divine knowledge, as the true God who illuminates through His incarnation.¹⁹

Also, in the troparion of Resurrection Sunday: “You who descended into hell and broke the eternal locks...”, Christ's divine power over death is affirmed, possible only if He is truly God. These hymns are not just poetic expressions, but liturgical confessions of faith, in which the dogmatic essences formulated at Nicaea are found.

¹⁸ Jungmann, JA, *The Early Liturgy: To the Time of Gregory the Great*, University of Notre Dame, 1959, p. 231.

¹⁹ Moisiil, Teodor, *General Liturgy*, Ed. Basilica, 2005, p. 142.

In Orthodox worship, poetry becomes theology. Saint Roman the Melodist, in his Kontakion, puts on the lips of the Mother of God the expression "My Son, my God," emphasizing the dogma of the two natures and of divine consubstantiality. Thus, the liturgical becomes dogmatic, and dogma becomes experience, prayer, and praise.

The dogma of the Trinity and the consubstantiality of the Son has also decisively influenced Orthodox iconography, which visually expresses the truths of faith. The image of Christ Pantocrator present in the spire of Orthodox churches is a visual expression of the Nicene dogma: Christ is the Son of God, the Word made flesh, co-existent with the Father, eternal king and judge. His image is not a simple artistic representation, but a testimony to the true incarnation of the Son, possible only if He is fully God. In this sense, the theology of the icon is inextricably linked to the Nicene dogmatic decisions. Saint John Damascene, in *The Three Treatises Against the Iconoclasts*, states that: "If God made Himself visible in the flesh, then He can be painted in an icon."²⁰

Therefore, in Orthodoxy, iconography becomes the secret expression of dogma. To worship Christ in an icon is not to separate Him from the Father, but to confess His consubstantiality, as affirmed at Nicaea. The icon thus becomes a "visual Creed," a silent catechism of the Church.

Orthodox prayer is profoundly Trinitarian. In every service, at the beginning of every prayer, the Church invokes God in the Trinity: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." This formula is not a simple preamble, but a liturgical affirmation of the Nicene dogma, which recognizes that among the divine Persons there are no hierarchies of being, but unity in being and communion in work.

The little doxology "Glory to the Father and to the Son and to the Holy Spirit..." is another eloquent example: in it, the Church glorifies each Person of the Holy Trinity equally, without subordinating the Son or the Spirit. These formulas, which have become part of the daily prayer of every believer, educate the soul in dogmatic truth, making prayer a school of Trinitarian faith. The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea offered the Church not just a dogma, but a truth to live, to sing, to pray, and to venerate. The liturgical echoes of this council have been embodied in the life of the Church as a living testimony of revealed truth, transposed into the Liturgy, into hymns, into icons, and into prayer.

Therefore, Orthodoxy does not know a separation between theology and worship: theology is done on one's knees, and worship becomes living theology. And the Council of Nicaea, through its liturgical impact, continues to shape the ecclesial soul, preserving dogmatic purity at the heart of the life of the Church.

5. THE CURRENT RELEVANCE OF THE SYNOD'S MESSAGE IN THE CONTEXT OF CONTEMPORARY THEOLOGICAL DIALOGUE

In the postmodern era, theology is faced with challenges that, although apparently different from those of the fourth century, essentially retain the same tension: the relationship between revealed truth and human interpretation, between the Tradition of the Church and the demands of culture. In this context, the message of the First Ecumenical Council becomes exemplary and normative, because it offers a model of authentic theological discernment, in which the Church, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, knew how to discern between sound teaching and heresy, between revealed truth and reductive rationalism.

²⁰ John of Damascus, *Treatise against the Iconoclasts*, p. 16.

The decision to use an extra-scriptural term *homoousios* to defend the content of biblical revelation shows that the Church is not bound by the letter, but by the Spirit of truth, and that it has the authority to interpret, formulate and confess the faith in forms appropriate to the era, without betraying the essence of the dogma.²¹

Thus, at a time when theological relativism is increasingly confused with openness and dialogue, Nicaea teaches us that fidelity to the truth does not exclude dialogue, but conditions it, setting as criteria spiritual discernment and communion with Tradition.

The ecumenical movement of the 20th century, although motivated by a sincere desire to restore the unity of the Church, has generated numerous theological challenges. Among them is the often-stated idea that unity can be built on a “minimum consensus,” accepting a plurality of theological traditions as complementary. This branch theory approach, however, risks relativizing dogma, reducing it to historical opinions, negotiable in the context of a “theological contract.”

In the face of this temptation, the Council of Nicaea remains a milestone: it was convened precisely to exclude doctrinal relativism and proclaim a unique, normative, universal truth. Dogma is not a theological opinion, but a saving truth, essential for ecclesial communion. In this sense, Saint Gregory the Theologian states: “Not everything that is old is also good; but what is from the Spirit is true”.

Therefore, in ecumenical dialogue, fidelity to the Nicene Creed becomes the essential criterion of authenticity, without which the desired unity becomes a sterile compromise.

The dogma of the consubstantiality of the Son with the Father is the key to all Orthodox anthropology and soteriology. If the Son is not true God, salvation is not real. The Incarnation becomes a mere pedagogical descent, and the union of man with God by grace impossible. In many contemporary approaches, Christ is reduced to an ethical model or a symbol of divine love, losing precisely the theandric and soteriological dimension of His presence. The Council of Nicaea, by resolutely affirming consubstantiality, reestablishes the fundamental truth: only God can save, and Christ is true God.

This dogma thus becomes the antidote to any form of self-sufficient humanism, secularization of theology, or religious moralism. Orthodoxy offers not only an ethics, but an ontology of salvation, founded on the truth that the Son is of one being with the Father.

In a globalized context, in which interreligious dialogue is promoted as an expression of tolerance and peace, the Council of Nicaea offers us essential criteria: dialogue cannot be achieved at the price of renouncing revealed truth. The consubstantiality of the Son and the uniqueness of salvation in Christ are not points of negotiation, but fundamental confessions of the Christian faith.

Dialogue does not mean syncretism. Orthodoxy does not reject the encounter with the other, but roots it in a clear confession of what is and remains the truth of faith: “One Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ephesians 4:5). In this sense, the model of the Nicene Fathers – who condemned Arianism not with hatred, but with discernment – shows us how the truth can be maintained in love (Ephesians 4:15).

Thus, interreligious dialogue becomes possible only if it is clearly delimited: personal respect, without dogmatic compromise. Otherwise, we risk transforming theology into religious diplomacy, and truth into relativistic politeness.²²

²¹ Florovsky, Georges, *Bible, Church, Tradition*, Nordland Publishing, 1975, p. 88.

²² Zizioulas, Ioannis, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2006. p. 219.

One of the most subtle current threats is the secularization of theology: the tendency to explain mystery through reason, to reduce faith to cultural values, to transform dogma into metaphor. In this atmosphere, the Council of Nicaea reminds us that God is not a concept, but a Person; that Christ is not a symbol, but true God and true Man.

Theology of the Church must remain a science of salvation, and not an academic discipline uprooted from the liturgical and spiritual life. Nicaea teaches us that truth is received through holiness, not just through logic. Therefore, the synodal fathers were not only scholars, but men of prayer, fasting, and asceticism. Orthodoxy is life in the Spirit, not just written doctrine.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea is not only a monument of the past, but a compass for the present and future of Orthodox theology. In the face of theological pluralism, dogmatic relativism, and secularization, Nicaea offers us a model of fidelity, discernment, and confession.

The synodal message that the Son is of one being with the Father remains the foundation of all Christian life, and the criterion of any theological dialogue: with other confessions, religions or schools of thought. Without Nicaea, we have no dogma, we have no Liturgy, we have no full Christ.

Therefore, in every context, in every age, the Church will continue to say, in the Liturgy and in life: "I believe... and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Only-Begotten, who was born of the Father, before all ages, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father...".

CONCLUSION

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea (325 AD) was and remains a cornerstone of the Orthodox Church, a moment of synodal revelation in which the Holy Spirit guided the council of bishops to formulate a dogma that would express, in a canonical and universal way, the revealed truth about Christ the Son of God, of one being with the Father. This proclamation of consubstantiality was not a theoretical act, but a redemptive one, with profound implications for the theology of the Trinity, in soteriology, in liturgical life and in the entire Orthodox identity.

Faced with the Arian heresy, which threatened not only the unity of the Church but also the very reality of salvation, the Council of Nicaea offered a firm response, faithful to the Apostolic Tradition. The formulation of the Creed and the adoption of the term *homousios* consecrated a teaching that transcends the immediate historical context, remaining relevant to this day.

Subsequent patristic reflection through Athanasius the Great, the Cappadocians, the Western Fathers strengthened and deepened the dogmatic foundation of the Council, showing that the Fathers not only defended the synodal formulations, but also spiritually assimilated them and transmitted them as life and confession. This process of reception was reinforced by the integration of dogma into the Liturgy, hymnography, prayer and iconography – proof of the continuity between theology and worship.

In the contemporary context, characterized by theological pluralism, relativism and ecumenical challenges, the message of the Council of Nicaea becomes an essential criterion: truth is not negotiated, but confessed with love and discernment. Dialogue cannot be separated from fidelity to Tradition, and the consubstantiality of the Son remains the key

to any authentic soteriology. Without it, Christianity becomes a moral humanism, emptied of the saving power of Christ.

Finally, the Council of Nicaea teaches us that theology is not just word, but life in Truth; it is not just dogmatic formulation, but the union of the heart with the Triune God, in faith, prayer and Liturgy. Today, as then, the Church is called to confess, on her knees and boldly: Christ, the Son of God, is of one being with the Father Light from Light, true God from true God – the salvation of the world and our hope.

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