

# The First Seven Ecumenical Councils

By Jim Anderson

Even though our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ promised to send the Holy Spirit who “... will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you” (Jn 14:26) and to “... guide you to all the truth” (Jn 16:13), Our Lord did not promise that false teaching and confusion would not arise in the Church. As St. Paul wrote, “For there must be factions (“heresies” in the KJV) among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized” (1 Corinthians 11:19).

The earliest factions began in the first century in reaction to gentiles who were becoming Christians. The Judaizers insisted that gentile converts needed to be circumcised and obey the Laws of Moses in order to be saved. The Apostles responded to this error by convening a council in Jerusalem. This is the first known example of apostolic teaching authority (the magisterium) being exercised in the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to settle disputes and to define authoritative dogma to be held by all Christians. The Council of Jerusalem would not be the last such gathering.

Over the following centuries, the successors of the Apostles called many councils to settle disputes. During the time of the persecutions, such councils dealt with controversies in the Church and were, of necessity, small and local. With the legalization of the Church, in AD 313, freedom of association was now granted to Christians. By the providence of God, the bishops of the Church could now assemble and exercise their authority as a universal body. For, just when attacks from outside the Church came to an end, the evil one devised a new strategy – causing errors and divisions to spring up *within* the Church at an unprecedented level of intensity.

Thus, over the next few centuries, the Catholic Church would be rocked by false teachings concerning the identity of God and Jesus. The Church’s answers to these new heresies would come through ecumenical (general) councils. There have been twenty-one ecumenical councils of the Catholic Church, the latest being in the 1960s (Vatican Council II).

An ecumenical council is a gathering of Church bishops, who represent the united apostolic authority of the Church, in union with the successor of St. Peter. Such a council has the authority to infallibly define teachings of the Church concerning topics of faith and morals. A general council need not be called by the pope; the earliest ones were called into session by the emperors in Constantinople. Nevertheless, in order to have universal and general authority, an ecumenical

council must be recognized as such by the pope in Rome. The first seven ancient councils are recognized as authoritative by both the Catholic Church and the Orthodox Churches.

1

## THE FIRST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL OF NICAEA, AD 325

### **St. Athanasius vs. Arius**

*At stake: Jesus’ divinity*

This council was convened to address the new, and popular, heretical teachings of Arius, an Egyptian priest. Arius taught that Jesus was not fully God – rather, He was the highest of creatures created by



the Father, before the world was made, and “there was [a time] when he (the Son) was not.” Although Arius was disciplined by his bishop, his errors began to spread like wildfire through the Church.

At the bishops’ request, Emperor Constantine I assembled a council, with the bishops of the entire Catholic Church attending at imperial expense. Pope St. Sylvester was too elderly to attend, so St. Hosius of Cordoba presided over the council. A young deacon from Egypt, named Athanasius, was also in attendance. He would later become the hero of orthodoxy, devoting his life to the defense of Nicaea’s teaching that Jesus is fully God. From this council we were given the first version of what we now know as the Nicene Creed, which declares that Jesus is: “... the Son of God, begotten of the Father, the only-begotten, that is, of the essence of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father.”

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“While [the Arians], like men sprung from a dunghill, truly ‘spoke from the earth’ [Jn. 3:31], the bishops, not having invented their phrases for themselves, but having testimony from their fathers, wrote as they did... and censured those who said that the Son was a creature and not consubstantial with the Father.” – **ST. ATHANASIUS**

2

## THE FIRST COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE, AD 381

### **St. Gregory of Nazianzus vs. Macedonius**

*At stake: the Holy Spirit/Trinity*

In response to a  
by Macedonius I,  
Constantinople,  
assembled. Mace-  
the Holy Spirit was  
God. His followers



heresy invented  
the Archbishop of  
this council was  
donius taught that  
a creature and not  
were called *Pneuma-*

*tomachi* ("Spirit fighters"). Confirmed by Pope St. Damasus I, this council condemned Macedonius' teaching as heresy. It did so by adding a new segment to the Creed of Nicaea: "I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father, who with the Father and the Son is adored and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets."

3

## THE COUNCIL OF EPHESUS, AD 431

### **St. Cyril of Alexandria vs. Nestorius**

*At stake: Mary, the Mother of God*

St. Cyril of Alexan-  
this council, initi-  
Theodosius II in  
errors promulgated  
Nestorius and his  
denied that Jesus was



dria presided over  
ated by Emperor  
response to the  
by Archbishop  
followers. Nestorius  
fully God and Man.

He condemned an ancient title of the Blessed Virgin Mary – *Theotokos* ("God Bearer" or "Mother of God"). Instead, he taught that Mary was only the Mother of Christ the *man*, not his divinity. It was understood by many that his doctrine held that Jesus was two Persons, God the Word and the Man Jesus. The Council of Ephesus declared that Mary is the *Theotokos* because Her Son Jesus Christ is both God and Man. He is *one* divine Person with two *natures* (divine and human), intimately united. The council, confirmed by Pope St. Sixtus III, also condemned Pelagianism, which held that people could earn their own salvation through their natural powers, without the need of God's grace.

4

## THE COUNCIL OF CHALCEDON, AD 451

### **Bishop Eusebius vs. Eutyches**

*At stake: Jesus' humanity*

In response to  
some people ran  
extreme. One  
Eutyches, an abbot  
nople monastery.  
defend the unity of



Nestorius' heresy,  
to the opposite  
such person was  
of a Constanti-  
In his attempt to  
Christ's incarnation,

he went too far. He stressed the unity of Christ's nature to such an extent that Christ's divinity consumed His humanity, as the ocean would consume a drop of vinegar. His followers, known as Monophysites ("One Naturists"), denied that Jesus was truly human and divine. Convened to respond to Nestorius, this council was presided over by the papal ambassadors Paschasinus, Lucentius, and Boniface. It confirmed Pope Leo I's epistle, dogmatically decreeing "... that our Lord Jesus Christ is to us One and the same Son, the Self-same Perfect in Godhead, the Self-same Perfect in Manhood; truly God and truly Man; the Self-same of a rational soul and body... like us in all things, sin apart... acknowledged in Two Natures unconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, inseparably... the properties of each Nature being preserved, and (both) concurring into One Person."

5

## THE SECOND COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE, AD 553

### **Eutychius vs. "Three Chapters"**

*At stake: Jesus' humanity, part 2*

This council, called  
ian I, condemned  
Theodore of Mop-  
of Cyr, and Ibas of  
as the "Three Chap-  
tainted by Nestorian-



by Emperor Justin-  
the writings of  
suestia, Theodoret  
Edessa, also known  
ters," who were  
ism. It reinforced the

Church's condemnation of Nestorianism and condemned the teachings of Monophysitism and some teachings of the third-century Egyptian theologian, Origen. It also proclaimed ten dogmatic canons which defined Chalcedonian Christology with a new precision.

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"That anyone could doubt the right of the holy Virgin to be called the Mother of God fills me with astonishment. Surely she must be the Mother of God if our Lord Jesus Christ is God, and she gave birth to Him!"

– ST. CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA



6

## THE THIRD COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE, AD 680

### **St. Agatho vs. Monothelitism**

*At stake: Christ's divine & natural wills*

Held in the imperial  
nople, 151 bishops  
popular heresy  
Monothelitism,  
Jesus had only *one*



palace in Constanti-  
met to discuss a  
in the east called  
which held that  
will, the divine will.  
a letter by Pope St.

During the council,  
Agatho was read that explained the traditional belief of the  
Catholic Church – that Christ has *two* natural wills and *two*  
natural operations, divine and human. The bishops of the  
Council accepted the letter, proclaiming that St. Peter spoke  
through St. Agatho. They minced no words, declaring the  
heresy a tool of Satan and “ruinous to the mind,” asserting:  
“We proclaim equally two natural volitions in Him and two  
natural principles of action which undergo no division,  
no change, no partition, no confusion, in accordance with  
the teaching of the holy fathers.... His human will... was  
not destroyed by being made divine, but rather was pre-  
served... for the miracles and the sufferings are of one and  
the same.... And the two wills [are] not in opposition....  
[but] in a communion... meeting in correspondence for the  
salvation of the human race.”

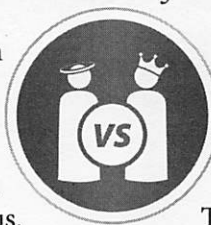
7

## THE SECOND COUNCIL OF NICAIA, AD 787

### **St. Tarasius vs. Emperor Constantine**

*At stake: veneration of icons & relics*

In an era when  
being condemned  
AD 754 Emperor  
banned the venera-  
icons (images) in  
such usage idolatrous.



Christianity was  
by Muslims, in  
Constantine V  
tion and use of  
churches, declaring

Thus began a period  
of iconoclasm (icon smashing). This ban precipitated the  
persecution of monks and others who venerated icons. Af-  
ter 34 years of persecution, a council was convened, and the  
Fathers decreed: “It is proper to accord to icons a fervent &  
reverent *veneration*, not, however, the veritable *adoration*  
which, according to our faith, belongs to the Divine Being  
alone, for the honor accorded to the image passes over to  
its prototype, & whoever venerates the image venerates in  
it the reality of what is there represented.” They also con-  
demned Adoptionism, for it held that Christ was not the  
Son of God by nature but by *adoption only*, thereby denying  
the incarnation of the Word made flesh. ■

Read more about all the Church's councils online at:  
[papalencyclicals.net/councils](http://papalencyclicals.net/councils)

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“Words are the progeny of the soul. Hence we call those that instructed  
us fathers.” – **ST. CLEMENT OF ALEXANDRIA**