

Worshipping the Undivided Trinity: An Introduction to Eastern Orthodoxy

Written by Robert Miclean

Week 3: The development of Trinitarian doctrine; the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed and the 7 Ecumenical Councils of the undivided Church.

Prayer... *We have seen the true light, we have received the Heavenly Spirit, we have found the true Faith, worshipping the undivided Trinity, who hath saved us.*

Many modern-day Christians take for granted the doctrine of the Holy Trinity. Though the Trinitarian Name (Father, Son, Holy Spirit) occurs once in the Bible (Matt. 28:19), some assume that the Holy Trinity is *explicitly* mentioned in Holy Scripture. But this is not the case. Trinitarian doctrine, like the Nicene Creed and the understanding of the dual natures of Christ were all important developments in the life of the Church, deeper understandings of what had been taught since the beginning.

God's ways are all redemptive in the end: We see this in no greater way than in the development of doctrine. The important doctrine of the Incarnation, for instance, was explicated and clarified as the Church battled heretical teachings. As God would have it, the Orthodox Faith only grew stronger in the face of internal and external threats. But beginning in 325 when Constantine became Roman emperor and legalized Christianity and then began to favor the Orthodox Faith, threats began to grow more from *within* the Church than outside of it.

There is a reason why the earthly Church is often called "militant"—she must always be on guard against the whiles of the Enemy, who seek to destroy her. Though pagan state-sponsored persecution against the Church ended in the 4th century, the Body of Christ had by then become so dispersed throughout the known world that it became increasingly more imperative to formulate a common interpretation of the Gospel and the Apostolic Faith. In other words, there was growing disagreement from within the Church, particularly regarding the person of Jesus. A group within the Church was growing in power and influence teaching an aberrant gospel. It became imperative for the remnant Orthodox believers to continue to articulate what the Church had always taught. The problem was that this Truth was not yet doctrinally defined by a Council, that is, *recognized* by the whole Church.

Belief in the undivided Holy Trinity became *the* vital distinction between Orthodox-believing Christians and those early (and modern) heresies (e.g., Mormonism) that threatened the Church. As early as the late second century, Tertullian, an early Church theologian wrote, "the one only God has also a Son, His Word, Who has issued out of Himself... which Son then sent, according to His promise, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, out of the Father... which distributes the unity into Trinity, setting forth Father, Son and Spirit as three" (Adv. Prax. 2 in Kelly, p. 113).¹

Enter the Arians, so-called because of their founder, Arius. These heretics were the next great challenge to Orthodox Faith. But unlike the Gnostics, the Arians maintained that they *were*

¹ J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1978), 113.

the Orthodox Catholic Church. At one point, they had taken over all but a handful of dioceses in the Church. If Arianism was so popular, could it really have been that dangerous?

In short, here is what the Arians believed: (1) The Son must be a creature whom the Father has formed; (2) “there was a time when He (the Son) was not”; (3) The Son, being a creature, can have no communion with, and indeed no distinct knowledge of, His Father. He is God’s Word and Wisdom, but is distinct from that Word and Wisdom which belongs to God’s very essence; “He is a creature pure and simple”; and the Son, being a creature, must be liable to change and even to sin.²

What potential dangers do you see for the Apostolic Faith in Arianism?

In other words, Jesus Christ was a powerful and perhaps even perfect prophet but, according to the Arians, *not* to be equated with God. Arianism became so popular and such a powerful heresy to combat because the Arians “amassed such a formidable array of Scriptural texts” to assert and support their doctrines.³ Chief among these were Rom. 8:29, which references Jesus as “the first-born among many” and John 17:3, in which Jesus states: “the Father is greater than I.” Obviously there are other passages which counter such assertions, but the fact remains that the Arians were able to convince a great number of Christians to accept their heterodox interpretation of the Orthodox Faith.

When the controversy reached a fever pitch and threatened to cause great disunity in the Empire, the Council of Nicaea was convened in 325 by Constantine to attend to the divisions being caused by the Arians. We are told by the historian at the time, Eusebius of Caesarea, that in attendance were bishops and representatives from Europe, Africa, and Asia—in other words, the whole Church.⁴

Most of the bishops present were, at first, more concerned with unity than Truth. After so many years of persecution they bemoaned the fact that now that there was finally peace, that such a theological controversy should, in effect, “spoil the party.”⁵ But, *by the grace of the Holy Spirit*, when Eusebius of Nicomedia got up to speak and asserted the Arian positions, he provoked an angry reaction from many of the bishops present, who shouted: “Blasphemy!” “Heresy!” We are told that his speech was snatched from his hand, torn to shreds, and trampled underfoot.⁶

Defended by then deacon but soon to be bishop, Athanasius, one of the African representatives present, in the end, the Nicene-Orthodox Faith triumphed at this Council. What emerges from Nicaea is a vital clarification of Trinitarian doctrine. St. Athanasius argued that (1) Arianism undermined the Christian doctrine of God by arguing that the Trinity is not eternal and by virtually reintroducing polytheism; (2) it undid three centuries of liturgical practice in which catechumens were being baptized by the Lord’s command in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit (in accordance with Matt. 28:19); and (3) most importantly,

² Kelly, 228.

³ Kelly, 229.

⁴ From a detailed list given by Eusebius, adapted from Justo Gonzales, *The Story of Christianity*, Vol. 1 (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1984), 162-163.

⁵ Gonzales, p. 164.

⁶ Ibid.

Arianism undermined man's very redemption by denying Christ's full divinity: salvation could only be mediated if Christ Himself was divine and thereby able to re-establish the broken relationship with God.⁷

In the end, the whole debate at the Council hinged on the word "ουσιος (ousios)" or "substance." Was Jesus of the same (one) substance (*homoousios*) with the Father or not? The inspired Creed that emerged from this intensive debate asserts that Jesus *is*, **in the words of the Creed** "begotten, not made" and "of one essence with the Father."

This Creed was amplified at the Council of Constantinople (381). The term "homousion" was added to the word 'ousion,' as found in the original Creed, to express more definitively that the Son is of the *same* "essence" or "substance" with the Father and that we worship one God in Trinity, "one in essence (or substance) and undivided," as the Orthodox continue to exclaim in the Divine Liturgy today. Additional language was also added to express a fuller doctrine of the Holy Spirit, the Church, Holy Baptism, and belief in the future resurrection and eternal life for the faithful. The Creed, as promulgated in 381, is called a "*summary of the Faith*" because it contains in sum all the important theological truths about God, which Orthodox Christians have held since the beginning.

In the Nicene Creed God gave the Church a great gift, which concisely defines for us a summary of the Orthodox Faith (handout and recitation of the Creed). Even a cursory look at the Creed reveals to us the following about the Faith:

- (1) The Creed names and defines the persons of the Godhead and the relation of each person of the Godhead to one another, thereby definitively affirming the doctrine of the Holy Trinity;
- (2) It combats heresies past, present, and future by asserting the eternal Truth of Who Jesus Christ is, the "only-begotten Son of God", begotten "before all worlds" and "not made."
- (3) The Creed affirms that Jesus Christ is of the "one essence (substance)" with the Father and that all things were made through Him.
- (4) The Creed gives testimony to the historical reality of the Incarnation as well as the Virgin birth.
- (5) The Creed bears witness to Jesus Christ's passion, death, resurrection and ascension, as well as His promise to come again to judge the world and reign eternally.
- (6) It testifies to the Holy Spirit as the third person of the Trinity, Who proceeds *from the Father* (show the original Greek transparency) and is worthy of praise and foretold by the prophets; and
- (7) the Creed presents to us the belief in one undivided Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, one Baptism for the remission of sins, and one resurrection of the dead with the promise of eternal life with God.

Why do you think the Orthodox Church became convinced of the need to promulgate one authoritative summary of the Apostolic Faith?

The Creed makes explicit (or clear and definite) what in Holy Scripture is implicit (or implied). The Creed puts in words what had been handed down orally since the beginning by the Apostles. Hence, the Church has always believed that it is the divine inspiration of the Holy Spirit that led the Church to the promulgation of this Orthodox statement of the Faith, which Orthodox Christians share with all the Saints through the ages. When we meditate on and study the words of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, we cannot help but come away

with an incredible sense of awe for the God who has inspired in the words of the Creed such a profound and resolute summary of the Orthodox Faith.

It is the Orthodox conviction that while we affirm the Holy Scriptures as inspired and authoritative we do well also to affirm the authority of the Nicene Creed as a comprehensive summary of the basics of the Faith, given that the same conciliar method was employed by the Church to canonize the Holy Scriptures of the New Testament. *In both cases, the Holy Spirit guided the Church in the Truth.* If we fail to affirm one, we cannot affirm the authority of the other.

Remember, Orthodox Christians have, in a figurative sense, always seen the Orthodox Faith as a large room, so to speak, within which there is space to roam freely, room for holy mystery to operate. The Creed sets the boundaries around this room, dividing what is Truth from what is error. Unlike the Roman Catholic Church, particularly following the Great Schism of 1054, the Orthodox Church has preferred to allow a prominent place for *Divine Mystery*, usually defining the details of the Mysteries of the Faith only when they are challenged from within. There is no catechism like the one in the Roman Church, which defines *all* doctrine and discipline in such great detail. Instead, the Orthodox rely on the collective voice of the Church through the ages, founded on the Apostles and the Fathers of the Church, as well as the pronouncements of the 7 Ecumenical Councils.

There were seven Ecumenical Councils of great importance to the Church prior to the Great Schism. Each one of them occurred in response to a threat to the Orthodox Faith and only because a conciliar response by the Church became necessary.

The Ecumenical Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea II

In addition to the Councils of Nicaea I and Constantinople I, two other Ecumenical Councils demand our attention. They are the Councils of Chalcedon and Nicaea II (we could easily have had a six-week course just on the 7 Ecumenical Councils themselves!).

New heresies and old continued to threaten the Orthodox Church even after the acceptance of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed by the Patriarchates of the historic Church just as these heresies do today. The Jehovah's Witnesses are in reality just a modern version of the Gnostics, denying the Holy Trinity, while the Mormons strongly resemble the Arians in their denial of Christ's full deity as "one essence with the Father." There really are no *new* heresies! The Church has encountered them all in the past and responded to them all before.

At the time of Chalcedon in 451 (show map), it was the Nestorians who posed the greatest threat to the Church. Nestorius and his followers asserted that in Christ there were two persons—one human, one divine, unlike the Orthodox belief that *in Christ there is one person with two natures*. It is telling that Nestorius could not affirm the Orthodox title given to Mary as the *Theotokos*, that is, the "Mother of God" (or more literally, the "birthgiver of God"), a term which refers more to Christ than to Mary. If Christ truly is God, as the Orthodox have always believed, then Mary is, *in this sense*, the *Theotokos*. The Council of Chalcedon responded both

to Nestorius and then to Eutyches and his followers. The Eutychians denied that Christ shared our humanity and thereby committed the opposite heresy to that of Nestorianism.

Thus, the watchword from the Council of Chalcedon and the statement from the Council, the so-called “Definition of Chalcedon,” became the re-affirmation, once again, of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed *as well as* of the term Theotokos, which was subsequently incorporated permanently into the liturgical prayers of the Church.

More Honorable than the Cherubim...

A word about Mary is appropriate here. The Virgin Mary is honored in the Orthodox Church because she is the *Theotokos*, but also because of the purity and Godly submission which she exhibited her whole life and, most notably, when she responded in obedience to the Archangel Gabriel upon the announcement of her miraculous virgin conception, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.” Gabriel refers to Mary as “blessed among women.” It is in this spirit that Orthodox Christians have always referred to Mary. The hymn to Mary sung at Vespers (evening prayer) reads,

More honorable than the Cherubim and more glorious beyond compare than the Seraphim, thou who without corruption bearest God the Word and art truly Theotokos, we magnify (honor) thee.

By her submission to God’s will, Mary serves as a virtuous example to us all. It is also the Orthodox belief, however, that Mary needed her Son as Savior just as we do. Everyone in the race of Adam is in need of the Savior, who became for us the “new Adam.” Also, the “deathless” *Assumption* of Mary, which Rome teaches, is also seen as a distorted understanding of the Virgin’s passage to Heaven. The Orthodox Church has always taught that Mary, the Theotokos, died, ‘fell asleep’ in the Lord (referred to as the Dormition), and was then taken to heaven by her Son, where she and all the other Christians who have completed the race of faith in this life and gone to be with the Lord “cheer us on” and pray for those of us who are still running the race on earth. Mary above all these generations of Saints is honored, as the hymn proclaims.

The Second Council of Nicaea

We are now prepared to hear the story of the Seventh (and last) Ecumenical Council, which like the First Ecumenical Council was held at Nicaea in 787(show map). This Council, like all the others before it, concerned the person of Jesus Christ and whether Jesus, the Saints, and the biblical accounts could be depicted in the form of pictures—specifically, icons, whether on wood or frescoes, or mosaics, or even glass (as in Romania),.

From the first centuries of the Church, we see in house churches and basilicas icons of Christ, biblical events, and the lives of the Saints, such as these icons from the house church at

Dura Europos (which dates from 240 A.D.), or this image of the Last Supper from the Catacombs in Rome, which depicts a beardless Christ (mid 2nd-3rd century).

In the early Church icons were seen as objects of veneration, that is, tools for prayer and means of edification, God ministering His grace through the glorified representation of the one depicted. The earliest icons were of Christ and His mother Mary, as well as biblical scenes. In an age when most Christians could not read and ‘books’ (scrolls) were copied by hand, icons served as great teaching tools to communicate the Orthodox Faith, such as this icon called “Christ of Sinai,” which dates to the 6th century (one of the oldest iconic representations of Christ as He *may* have looked) and is still housed at St. Catherine’s Monastery on Mt. Sinai at the site of the Burning Bush (explain the icon).

Icons convey heavenly realities and are thus thought of as “windows to heaven” through which the glory and truth of Christ and the Orthodox Faith shine. Thus Christ, even while on the cross, is depicted iconographically in a glorified state—even while His human suffering is very much in evidence as well. As we discussed earlier, this also became a difference between East and West in that the West, *beginning in the Middle Ages*, often portrayed Christ as Victim and neglected His victory over death (as we can see here in the icon of the Resurrection, shown in class).

Thus, from the first centuries of the Church icons were seen as more than merely sacred art. They were tools to strengthen the faithful, teach the Faith, depict the historical reality of God’s redemptive acts, *and convey the Grace of that reality to the worshipper.*

The iconoclasts (literally, the “icon-smashers”), those who objected to the depiction of Christ and all iconography and sacred art, such as the cross, began to grow in number in the 8th century and demanded the destruction of all icons, saying they were idolatrous. It is interesting to note that the iconoclasts may have been influenced from outside sources, including a revitalized Judaizing presence and the impact of the quickly-spreading Islamic religion. Significantly, three years before the first outbreak of iconoclasm, the Muslim Caliph Yezid, demanded the removal of all icons from his lands. Muslims do not depict the faces of humans in their mosques. Only geometric and animal shapes may be represented. Islam certainly had an influence, but there was also a *puritanical* element within the Church that saw all iconography as idolatrous.⁸

A systematic persecution of the Orthodox broke out in many places of the Byzantine Empire. St. John of Damascus wrote of the times,

Although it is best for us to be ever aware of our unworthiness and to confess our sins before God, nevertheless it is good and necessary to speak when the times demand it, for I see the Church which God founded on the Apostles and Prophets, her cornerstone being Christ His Son, tossed on an angry sea, beaten by rushing waves, shaken and troubled by the assaults of evil spirits.⁹

⁸ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penquin Books, 1993), 30f.

⁹ St. John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimirmir’s Seminary Press, 2000), 13.

The struggle between the iconoclasts and the iconodules (those upholding the Orthodox teaching regarding icons) was about a lot more than religious art. Orthodox iconodules saw in the icons of Christ a testimony to the historic reality of the Incarnation and God's desire to deify all mankind. The Saints were portrayed in their glorified state, as they would be with Christ in heaven, having finished the race of Faith in this life as described in Hebrews 12. They are the "cloud of witnesses." Having gone before us and completed the race, the icons of the Saints remind us both of our own destiny and that we are not alone as we struggle daily against sin and strive to live for Christ.

At the Council of Nicaea II the Orthodox responded to the iconoclasts that while it was indeed idolatrous to depict God the Father iconographically, since no man has ever seen the Father, it was a testimony to the historical reality of the Incarnation, the taking on of human flesh, to depict Christ and the Saints and scenes from Christ's life and the redemption of the world. To the Orthodox, the iconoclasts represented a sort of resurgent Gnosticism, holding that all matter was evil and thereby diminishing the importance of the Incarnation.

Nicaea II upheld the Orthodox belief in the use of icons, distinguishing between the adoration or worship (Gk.-*latría*.) that is due to God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit alone and the veneration (honor, Gk.-*proskynesis*) that is due the Book of Gospels, the cross, and the icons, which reveal heavenly realities and revelation. *Proskynesis* literally means "bowing down before" and this is what the Orthodox still do today before an icon or a relic of the Holy Cross *to honor God's presence in that which is being represented*. Following the bow and making the sign of the cross, Orthodox kiss the icon, cross, or Gospel book—the object being venerated. *Why?* Because just as we would kiss a close relative or show respect and honor to a beloved grandparent, so too the Orthodox maintain that through the icon, this window to the heavenly reality, they are honoring God for the work of redemption revealed in the icon.

Significantly, the Moslems of the 6th century derived their practice of prostrating themselves before Allah from the worship of the early Christians. While the West has largely broken with this sacred tradition and lost the understanding of veneration, Orthodox Christians have retained the worship practices of the early Church precisely because of what it says about the God we worship as Christians. Indeed, the Hebrew word which we translate from the Scriptures to mean "worship" does not do its more precise meaning justice. Many of our modern misconceptions about worship and for *Whom* worship is intended comes from our lack of understanding of *Shahah*, which literally means "to bend down or prostrate oneself." When you prostrate yourself, you kneel, touching hands and forehead to the ground in reverence or worship. Inherent in the use of this word (Gen. 22:5; I Sam. 1:3; I Chron. 29:20, Pss. 66:4, 99:9, 138:2, and Is. 66:23) is the acknowledgment that the One being worshipped is holy and worthy of such a prostration.¹⁰ He is God, worthy of all praise and He determines how He is to be worshipped.

St. Athanasius, writing in the fourth century (four centuries before the iconoclastic controversy) sums up the Church's teaching on icons as follows:

¹⁰ See also Robert Webber, *The Biblical Foundations of Christian Worship*, pp. 5-9 for a fuller description of "worship" in this context.

We the faithful do not worship images as gods, as did the heathen Greeks—God forbid!—but our only purpose and desire is to see in the image a reflection of the facial form of the beloved. Therefore if the image should be obliterated, we should throw it into the fire as so much scrap lumber. Just as when Jacob was about to die, he bowed down before the point of Joseph’s staff, not honoring the staff but its owner, so also the faithful do not embrace images for their own sake, but kiss them as we often embrace our children or our parents, to show the affection in our hearts. So also the Jew, when he venerated the tables of the law, or the two cherubim, hammered from gold, did not honor stone or gold for its own sake, but the Lord who had ordered them to be made.¹¹

The battle over icons continued for another century, but since the conciliar voice of the Church had spoken in continuity with what the Fathers had taught before, in the end, the Truth triumphed. The final victory came in 843 with the ascension of the Empress Theodora in the East, which brought an end to the persecutions against the Orthodox. Every year since then the Orthodox have dedicated one Sunday as the Triumph of Orthodoxy (this year, March 16).

We reverence thy spotless icon, O gracious Lord, and ask forgiveness of our transgressions, O Christ our God: for of Thine own good will Thou wast pleased to ascend the Cross in the flesh, that Thou mightest deliver from bondage to the enemy those whom Thou hadst fashioned. Wherefore, we cry aloud unto Thee: Thou hast filled all things with joy, O our Savior, for Thou didst come to save the world.

(An Orthodox Christian prayer)

¹¹ St. John of Damascus, 92f.