



Catechetical Series:

What Catholics Believe & Why

THE FIRST SEVEN ECUMENICAL COUNCILS

Behold The Truth

Discovering the What & Why of the Catholic Faith
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Saint Augustine of Hippo:

“While the hot restlessness of heretics stirs questions about many articles of the Catholic faith, the necessity of defending them forces us to investigate them more earnestly; and the question mooted by an adversary becomes the occasion of instruction.”

The City of God 16:2



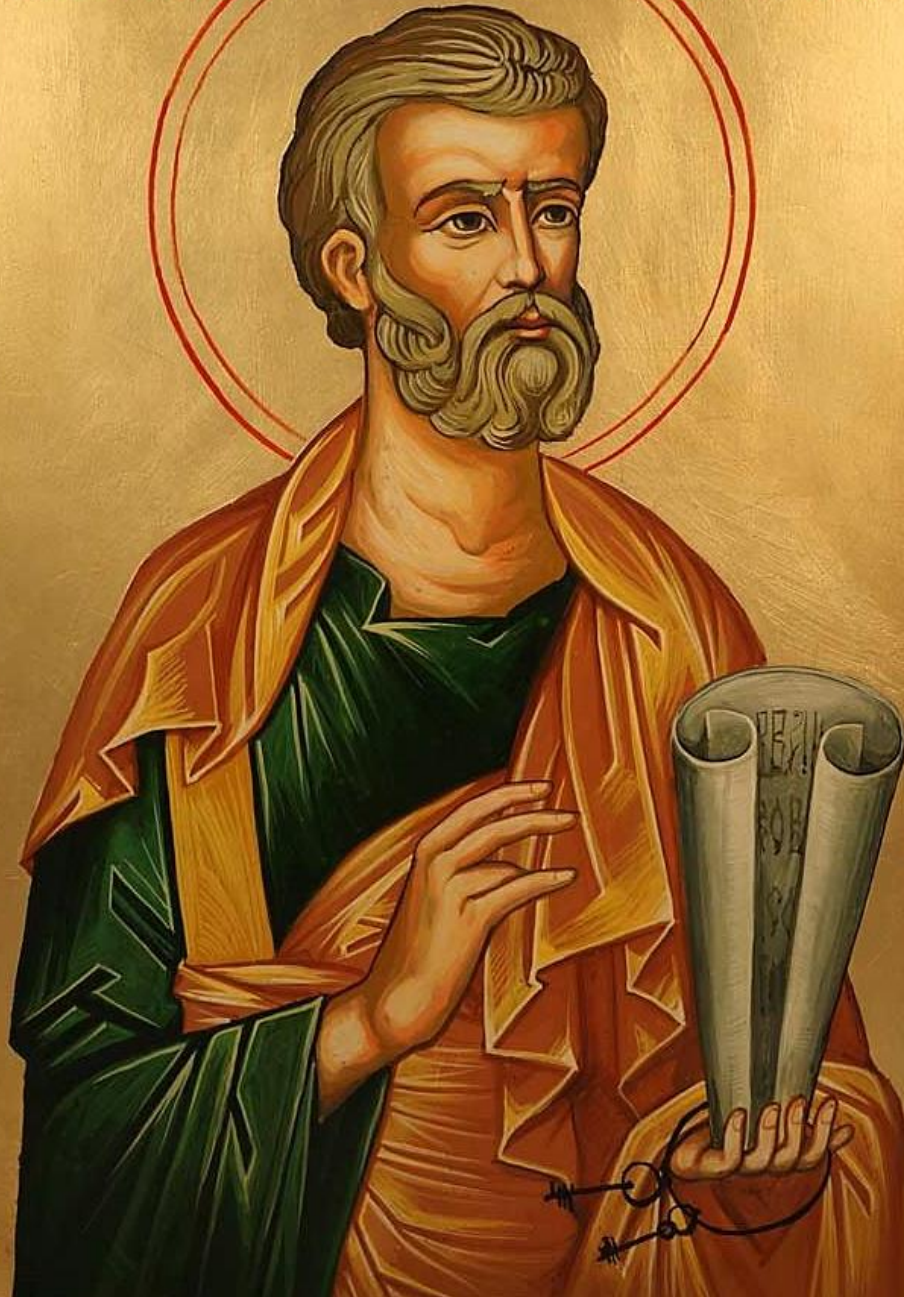
The Council of Jerusalem

Biblical Model of the Church Council

- ❖ In the first century A.D., a dispute erupted in the apostolic Church over the need for Christians to follow the Mosaic Law for salvation. Cf. Acts 15
- ❖ Believers were sharply divided over this issue; and Paul and Barnabas were appointed to take the matter to the Apostles in Jerusalem.
- ❖ To settle the dispute, the Apostles and elders assembled in council and there was “much debate” among them. Acts 15:7

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The Council of Jerusalem

Biblical Model of the Church Council

- ❖ At last Peter stood up and definitively clarified the matter: it was not necessary for Christians to keep the Mosaic Law.
- ❖ The Council addressed a letter to the faithful announcing its decision, saying: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” Acts 15:28
- ❖ The Holy Spirit spoke *through* the Church’s hierarchy, not to deliver a *new* teaching, but to clarify what had already been received in the Deposit of Faith.
- ❖ The Church has repeated this biblical model of clarifying doctrine and settling disputes down through the centuries.



The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ In 325 A.D., the Council of Nicaea met to address the heretical teaching of Arius, a priest of Alexandria, who taught that Jesus Christ had been created by God the Father.
- ❖ Stifled by the tyranny of the pagan Roman state for three centuries, the Church had previously been unable to publically express her doctrine in the authoritative voice of an ecumenical council (*ecumenical* meaning a council which involves the entire universal Church, as opposed to a mere local gathering of bishops).



The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ In 313, only a dozen years prior to Nicaea, Christianity had been granted legal status by the Emperor Constantine through the Edict of Milan.
- ❖ Arius' false teachings threatened the unity of the Church at a time when she was finally learning to breathe free of oppression.
- ❖ Many of the 318 bishops present at the Council, such as “the old one-eyed Paphnutius,” still bore the scars of the Roman persecutions.

William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. 1, p. 280.



The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ It was Constantine who officially called for the Council of Nicaea on the advice of his spiritual advisor, Bishop Ossius of Córdoba.
- ❖ While Constantine attended the Council, however, he remained an observer, avoiding interference in theological affairs.



The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Pope Saint Sylvester I was not able to attend the Council due to infirmity.
- ❖ However, the Pontiff was represented there by Ossius, who presided over the Council, and by the priests and papal legates, Vitus and Vincent.
- ❖ The names of the Pope's representatives appear above those of the other attendants in the official register of the Council, indicating his primacy.

The Council of Nicaea

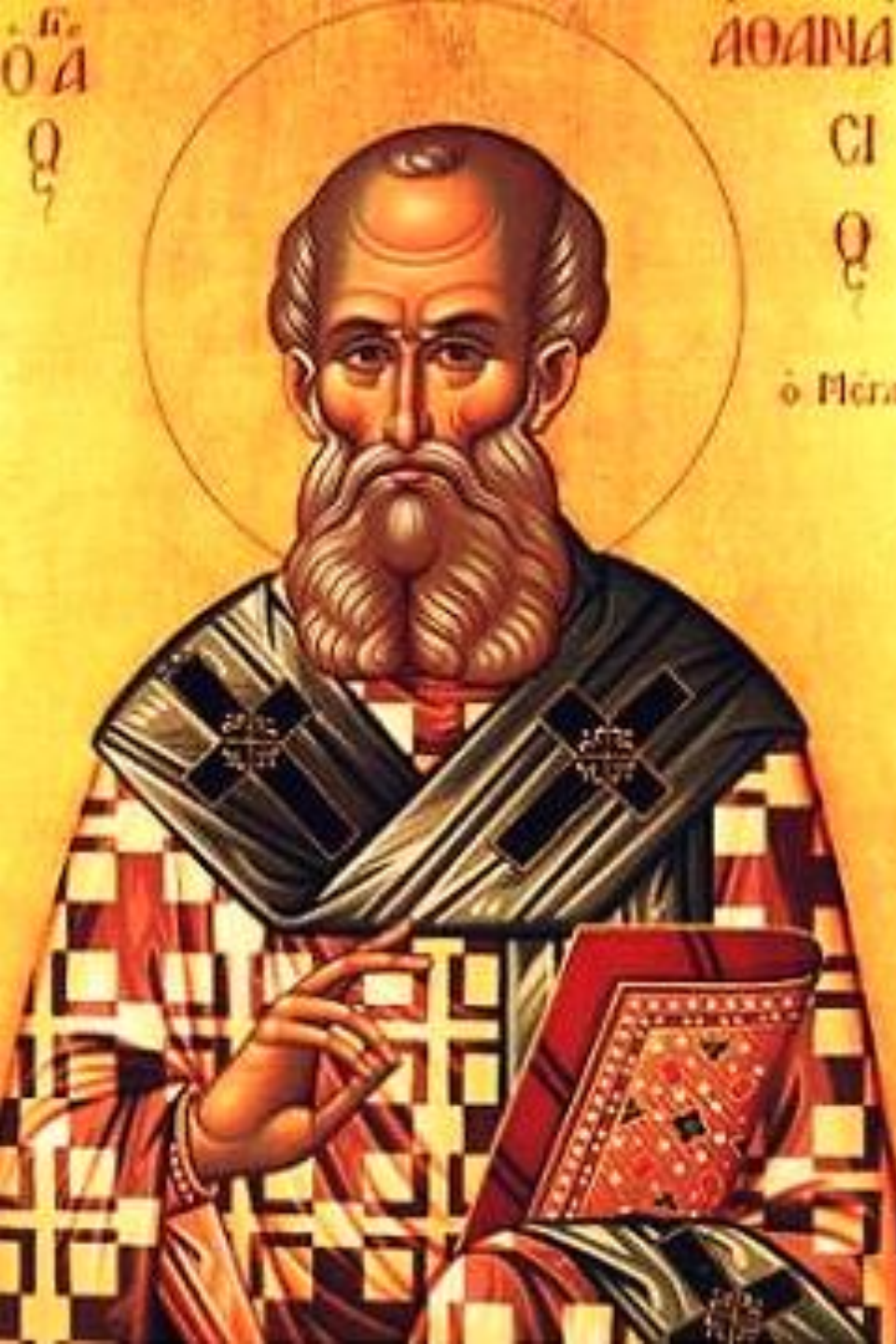
The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Arius' teaching that the Son had been created by the Father, relegating Him to the status of a creature, undermined the truth of the Atonement.
- ❖ To deny Christ's divinity is in effect to say God did not die for our sins.
- ❖ Arius was talented in twisting the Scriptures to support his position, though, making it hard to dispute his teachings from Scripture alone.

The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ To counter Arius' cunning with the Scriptures, the Nicene bishops introduced the extra-biblical term *homoousios* or *consubstantial*, meaning “of the same substance,” to describe Christ's relation to the Father.
- ❖ Similarly, the Church had earlier adopted the extra-biblical word *Trinity* to describe the nature of God.
- ❖ That Christ is of the same substance as the Father means He is uncreated and coeternal with Him.



The Council of Nicaea

The First Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Consubstantial's meaning proved difficult to reinterpret; and so it was readily inserted into the Nicene Creed, the Council's dogmatic pronouncement of Christ's divinity.
- ❖ The term *dogma* refers to a Church teaching of the highest level.
- ❖ The composition of the Nicene Creed is often attributed to Saint Athanasius, who as Bishop of Alexandria would suffer ongoing persecution at the hands of Arius' followers.



The First Council of Constantinople

The Second Ecumenical Council

- ❖ A generation after Nicaea, the Church was called to defend the divinity of the Holy Spirit against the Macedonians.
- ❖ Consequently, the doctrine that the Holy Spirit is coequal with the Father and the Son was elevated to the level of a dogma at the Council of Constantinople in 381.



The Council of Ephesus

The Third Ecumenical Council

- ❖ In the following century, the assault on the Trinity refocused on the person of Christ, as Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople, questioned the Lord's humanity.
- ❖ This controversy was touched off by Nestorius' refusal to call Mary the Mother of God (Greek, *Theotokos*), insisting instead on calling her the Mother of Christ (*Christotokos*).



The Council of Ephesus

The Third Ecumenical Council

- ❖ This was not an attack on Marian devotion, but on the *Incarnation*, the belief that Christ was truly God in the flesh.
- ❖ Nestorius refused to call Mary the Mother of God because he could not accept that the Child she bore was God.
- ❖ He demanded instead that God had merely come to dwell within Jesus' human body as within a tent.



The Council of Ephesus

The Third Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Nestorius' teaching affected the truth of salvation, for if Mary's Child was not truly God, then the man who was nailed to the Cross and rose from the dead could not have been either!
- ❖ The Church settled this dispute at the Council of Ephesus in 431, dogmatically declaring that Christ is one divine person with two natures, divine and human.



The Council of Chalcedon

The Fourth Ecumenical Council

- ❖ However, the Council of Ephesus' ruling did not fully put to rest questions about the union of God and man in Christ.
- ❖ Attempting to correct the errors of Nestorius, Eutyches, a monk in Alexandria, concluded that Christ's divinity and humanity are melded into a single nature.
- ❖ This teaching, called *Monophysitism*, went against the orthodox belief in the two natures of Christ.



The Council of Chalcedon

The Fourth Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Therefore, the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, dogmatically declared that Christ possesses two distinct and perfect natures.
- ❖ This Council was greatly aided by Pope Saint Leo the Great, who wrote, “In the whole and perfect nature of true man, therefore, the true God was born, complete in what pertains to His own nature and complete in what pertains to ours.” *Letter to Flavian, Bishop of Constantinople*

The Second Council of Constantinople

The Fifth Ecumenical Council

- ❖ Chalcedon's decision was upheld in 553 by the Second Council of Constantinople.
- ❖ This Council also confirmed the Emperor Justinian's condemnation of the *Three Chapters*, theological writings promoting Nestorianism.

The Third Council of Constantinople

The Sixth Ecumenical Council



- ❖ In the seventh century, the belief that two perfect wills, divine and human, are present in Christ was challenged by the Monothelites, who taught instead that He had merely a single, divine will.
- ❖ *Monothelism* was formally denounced in 681 at the Third Council of Constantinople.
- ❖ The Council was assisted by a letter of Pope Saint Agatho upholding the orthodox belief in the two wills in Christ.



The Second Council of Nicaea

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

- ❖ In the eighth century, the Iconoclasts, driven by a misinterpretation of the *Book of Exodus*, set about destroying sacred images throughout the East.
- ❖ The previous heresies had attacked the person of Christ directly.
- ❖ Iconoclasm was an implicit attack on the Incarnation; for the Church had always understood a deep and innate connection between its devotion to images and worship of God come in the flesh.



The Second Council of Nicaea

The Seventh Ecumenical Council

- ❖ The Second Council of Nicaea, which met in 787 to address the crisis, ruled the use of devotional images was not idolatry.
- ❖ Iconoclasm's anti-materialistic spirit would resurface seven centuries later in the Protestant Revolt, leading again to the desecration of sacred art.



Trinitarian Heresy In the Modern Day

The Old Is New Again

- ❖ There's an old saying: the more things change, the more they stay the same.
- ❖ In our time, sects such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and Mormons have denounced the doctrine of the Trinity anew.
- ❖ Even among those groups who are closer to orthodox Christian teaching, such as the Evangelicals, there are some who deny the Eternal Sonship of Christ, professing He was not always the Son of God, and in effect embracing a modern form of Arianism.



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