

## *Fathers of the First General Council, Nicaea, 325 AD*

*Once upon a time* there was one universal Christian Church. That doesn't mean that everyone agreed 100%, but in those things where it really mattered, they were one Body—the Body of Christ. Where there are sheep there are also wolves. Many men arose who taught their own beliefs and, if they were good at it, they gathered many followers. Such a man was Arius, who was a priest at Alexandria, Egypt. He taught that Christ did not exist before his birth and that he is not co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father. This caused so much division and unrest that at last the Emperor Constantine decided something must be done about it. So he invited all the disputants to a council.



The Council gathered around the enthroned Gospels. Arius, the heretic crouches below. (From Mégalo Météoron Monastery, Greece)

Before calling the Council, Constantine turned to Hosius/Ossius of Corduba/Cordova (c. 257-357), a confessor, having suffered persecution, but who was now his advisor and strong defender of the faith in the west. Constantine sent Hosius to Alexandria, where the heresy began and was flourishing, in hopes of settling the dispute. Even the famous Hosius was unable to bring about a reconciliation.

Tradition tells us that 318 people attended the Council. Sadly, no records exist to support that number. Each bishop was permitted to bring with him two priests and three deacons. The attendees were a mixed group: experienced clergy, scholars, deacons in various church positions, ascetics and parish priests.

*Left above:* Location of Iznik on a map of Turkey. It incorporates the former city of Nicaea. *Left below:* Remains of Roman theatre at Iznik.



Left: Image of Hosius (Ossius) of Corduba.



Left: Reliquary of Sylvester, Pope of Rome. He excused himself due to illness, and sent two priests as representatives.



Left: Some might have traveled like this (no springs), but most probably rode horses.

### *Church Leaders from the East*

From the East came the aged Alexander, “Pope “of Alexandria, with his archdeacon, Athanasius, who would succeed him. Potammon, bishop of Heracleopolis and Paphnutius, bishop of the Upper Thebaid, came from the interior of Egypt. Both had suffered the loss of an eye in the persecutions, and Paphnutius had an injured leg as well. Eustathius of Antioch, and Bishop Paul from a border fortress in Syria also suffered from cruel persecution. John the Persian was there, and Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, the future biographer of Constantine. Hosius of Corduba was also a confessor, having suffered persecution, but was now an advisor to Constantine and strong defender of the faith in the west.

There has been dispute over where the assembly gathered. In 2014 the ruins of a previously unknown 4<sup>th</sup> century church were discovered submerged in the waters of Lake Iznik. There has been speculation that this might have been the Council’s church.

Right: The Emperor Constantine (d.337), fresh from victory (324) over Licinius at Chrysopolis, (modern Uskudar.) This decisive battle made him sole emperor.



### *Travelers from the West*

A year and a half was probably just enough lead time for the bishops farthest from Asia Minor. It was a hard journey by boat or on difficult, unsafe roads, but they made it. Travel expenses and lodging were paid by the emperor.

The majority of the over 300 bishops who attended were from the eastern part of the empire, but the west also was represented. The Roman Pope Sylvester did not make the trip, however, he sent two emissaries. Hosius, the eminent bishop of Corduba/Cordova (256-359) from Iberia/Spain, the bishops of Milan (Italy) and of Dijon (Gaul/France.) Theophilus, bishop of the Goths also attended. He was a disciple of St. Ulfilas, apostle to the Goths. According to legend, an Irish monk made the journey and attended the sessions.



Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria Egypt (c. 296-373) was a promotor of the term homoousios (of one substance) and was an opponent of Arius. He wrote *De Incarnatione* (On the Incarnation) and firmly upheld the deity of the Holy Spirit. Above: His tomb in Cairo’s Coptic Cathedral. Most of his relics are believed to be in Italy.

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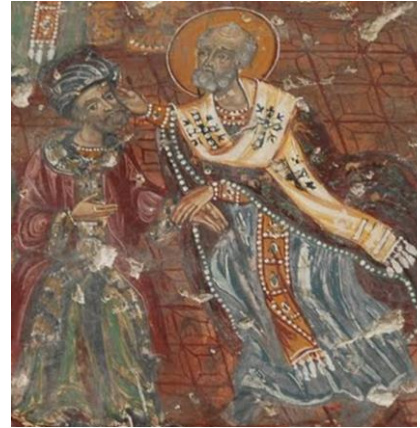
Tradition tells us that 318 people attended the Council. Sadly, no records exist to support that number. The attendees included, bishops, priests, deacons and advisors. They were a mixed group: experienced clergy, scholars, ascetics and parish priests.

Most accounts say that the bishops sat in a semi-circle around a throne placed in the narthex of the church. Constantine ordered that the Gospels be placed on the throne, and he sat with the bishops. Constantine gave the opening address then turned the session over to Hosius. Eustathius, bishop of Antioch and Metrophanes, archbishop of Constantinople are not mentioned in western accounts.

The teaching of Arrius was presented by Eusebius of Nicomedia and was overwhelmingly rejected. A number of canons were enacted of which about twenty survive.



*Left:* One of the four remaining gates in the walls of the ancient city of Iznik.

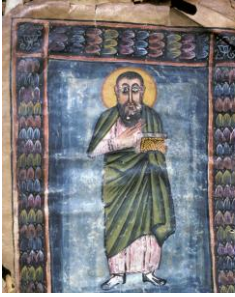


### **A Legendary Scandal**

At Nicaea, Nicholas, the kind and generous archbishop of Myra, in Turkey (near modern Antalya) accidentally came face to face with Arrius. A few hot words were exchanged and Nicholas struck Arrius. The bishops were shocked, although probably many sympathized with him.

Reports that he was imprisoned for this action are unsubstantiated. Instead, as punishment for behavior unsuited to a bishop, his fellow bishops deprived him of the right to wear the mitre. It was returned to him later in life.

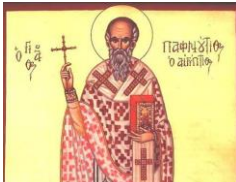
Of course no one knew that one day he would be loved by children as Santa Claus.



Eusebius Pamphilus, (ca 260- ca 340) bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. (Image is Ethiopian.)

Eusebius tells us in his *History of the Christian Church*, that Constantine wrote two letters, one to Alexandria and one to the rest of the Church. (

Eusebius defended Arius at the Council, but in the end signed the Confession. Back home he wrote a long and detailed review of the decision of the council to his flock. Because of his celebrated book he is known as the “Father of Church History.”



The ascetic father Paphnutius, bishop of a city in the Upper Thebaid, Egypt, was a disciple of St Anthony the Great, the founder of desert asceticism. He was highly respected and his voice carried when the matter of clerical celibacy arose at the council. Some wanted to separate lawfully married priests from their wives and to enforce celibacy. He won, as the motion did not pass.

*Where was the Council Held?* Tradition says that the Council was held in the church of Hagia Sophia at Nicaea (below). Possibly some sessions were held in the great hall of Constantine’s residence, but nothing survives of that structure.



### *Why Was the Council of 325 Important?*

It was the first general council in which all the churches of east and west could meet to discuss common concerns and come to conclusions. It is the only council whose conclusions were accepted by all churches after their divisions: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox.

It established the basis for a universal Christian creed, it began a system of canon law, and

### *Six General/ Ecumenical Councils followed Nicaea:*

The decisions of the first seven general or ecumenical<sup>1</sup> councils are accepted by all Orthodox Churches. Some traditional Anglicans agree. Most Protestant churches acknowledge only the first council. Many others deny the validity of, and even the need for councils.

The Six other Ancient Councils were: Second, 381 in Constantinople; Third, 431 in Ephesus; Fourth in Chalcedon; Fifth, 553 (the second of Constantinople); Sixth, 680, (the third of Constantinople; Seventh, 787 (the second of Nicaea.)

1. Oecumenical/ Ecumenical: The Whole Inhabited World.