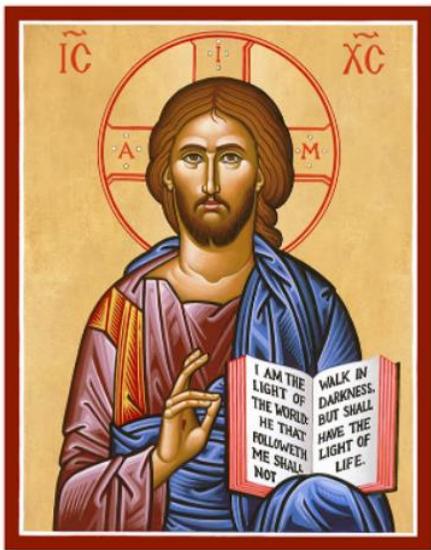


Sunday of the Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council



In today's Gospel lesson, we read what is called "The High Priestly Prayer" of Christ, the prayer that Christ offered over His disciples, and indeed over the whole world, before His Passion. His prayer was a prayer for unity of the faithful and a unity of the faith. In His prayer, He also was teaching us about the relationship between Him and His Father.

Jesus tells us that eternal life is to know God the Father, and Jesus Christ, and to know them eternally. He asks the Father to glorify Him with the glory which Son had with the Father from before the world was created. This not only speaks to the eternal Divinity of the Son of God but of the timelessness of God. His prayer is for us to share the timelessness of eternity, with the bounds of time that control us in our earthly life.

Today we remember the 318 Holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council in Nicaea, who in the year 325, authored the Nicene Creed, which we confess at every Divine Liturgy. The Creed is just over 200 words which describe succinctly what it is we believe about the Holy Trinity. The reason this Gospel is read today is because it talks about the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit which is stated in the Creed.

In order to be a Christian, there are a few things that one needs to believe. The first is that God created the heavens and the earth. Someone greater than us created the world and created the first people in the world. God made everything and He made it perfect. He created the first human beings as perfect people also. He did not create them with inherent flaws. He did endow them with the gift of free will.

The second thing one needs to believe is that the world fell through sin. Mankind used its free will to go away from God, and this event is called the Fall. The Fall opened a "Pandora's Box" of bad things for the world—sickness, strife, and eventually death.

God, because of His love, wanted to redeem the world, to give mankind another chance. But in order to accomplish this, two things needed to happen. Someone had to pay the debt for our first sin. And mankind was again presented with a choice—to be faithful or to stray. In order for our debt of sin to be paid, God the Son Jesus Christ came to the earth as a human being and died on the cross for our sins. This happened in the year 29 A.D., during the reign of Pontius Pilate. Pontius Pilate is mentioned by name in the Creed in order to historically date the event of the crucifixion. It did happen, that is historical fact. The Resurrection is a matter of faith.

Faith is the choice given to Adam and Eve, to, of their own free will, believe in the love and goodness of God or not. Faith is not imposed on us—we offer it of our own free will.

We just celebrated the Ascension of Christ into heaven, forty days after the Resurrection. And next week, we will celebrate Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came down from heaven and offered the gift of grace to the Disciples and Apostles, which He continually offers us today. The third part of the Creed concerns the Holy Spirit, the "Creator of Life, who proceeds from the Father, who together with the Father and the Son is worshipped and glorified, who spoke through the prophets," and still speaks through people to this day.

The last part of the Creed concerns the Church—that it is to be “One, Holy, Catholic (meaning universal) and Apostolic” (it is supposed to keep continuity from the time of the Apostles until the present and into the future.) We acknowledge baptism as the means by which we enter the Church, and we spend our lives learning, preparing and “looking” “for the Resurrection of the dead and the life of the age to come.”

The Divine Liturgy is offered almost entirely in the plural—it is “we” and “us” who pray to the Lord. The Creed, however, is recited in the first person. Because to believe is a personal choice, it is something that “I” must do, that no one can do for me or impose on me.

I believe in One God, the Father Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible;

And in one Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, the only-begotten, born of the Father before all ages. Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, one in essence with the Father; through Whom all things were made. For us and for our salvation, He came down from heaven and was incarnate from the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became man. He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered and was buried. He rose on the third day according to the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father, and He is coming again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His Kingdom will have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Creator of life, who proceeds from the Father. Together with the Father and the Son He is worshipped and glorified; He spoke through the prophets.

In one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. I profess one baptism for the remission of sins. I expect the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

Recite the Creed today. Over your lifetime, learn what it means, so that you can make the statement “I believe” with confidence and conviction.

Fr. Stavros Akrotirianakis

EPISTLE AND GOSPEL FOR THE SUNDAY OF THE FATHERS OF THE 1ST ECUMENICAL COUNCIL

Apostolic Reading: From the Acts of the Apostles, 20: 16-18a & 28-36

In those days, Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus so as not to lose time in Asia, for he was eager to get to Jerusalem by the feast of Pentecost if at all possible. Paul sent word from Miletus to Ephesus, summoning the presbyters of that church. When they came to him he delivered this address: "Keep watch over yourselves, and over the whole flock the Holy Spirit has given you to guard. Shepherd the church of God, which he has acquired at the price of his own blood. I know that when I am gone, savage wolves will come among you who will not spare the flock. From your own number, men will present themselves distorting the truth and leading astray any who follow them. Be on guard, therefore. Do not forget that for three years, night and day, I never ceased warning you individually even to the point of tears. I commend you now to the Lord, and to that gracious word of his which can enlarge you, and give you a share among all who are consecrated to him. Never did I set my heart on anyone's silver or gold or envy the way he dressed. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have served both my needs and those of my companions. I have always pointed out to you that it is by such hard work that you must help the weak. You need to recall the words of the Lord Jesus himself, who said, 'There is more happiness in giving than receiving.' "

After this discourse, Paul knelt down with them all and prayed. They began to weep without restraint, throwing their arms around him and kissing him, for they were deeply distressed to hear that they would never see his face again. Then they escorted him to the ship.

Gospel Reading: According to St. John, Chapter 17, Verses 1-13

At that time Jesus looked up to heaven and said: "Father, the hour has come! Give glory to your Son that your Son may give glory to you, inasmuch as you have given him authority over all mankind, that he may bestow eternal life on those you gave him. Eternal life is this: to know you, the only true God, and him whom you have sent, Jesus Christ. I have given you glory on earth by finishing the work you gave me to do. Do you now, Father, give me glory at your side, a glory I had with you before the world began. I have made your name known to those you gave me out of the world. These men you gave me were yours; they have kept your word. Now they realize that all you gave me comes from you. I entrusted to them the message you entrusted to me and they received it. They have known that in truth I came from you, they have believed it was you who sent me. For this I pray -- not for the world but for these you have given me, for they are really yours. Just as all that belongs to me is yours, so all that belongs to you is mine. It is in them that I have been glorified. I am in the world no more, but these are in the world as I come to you. O Father most holy, protect them with your name which you have given me that they may be one, even as we are one. As long as I was with them, I kept careful watch, and not one of them was lost, none but him who was destined to be lost -- in fulfillment of Scripture. Now, however, I come to you; I say all this while I am still in the world that they may share my joy completely."

CATECHETICAL SUMMARY

This Sunday is the Sunday of the Fathers of the 1st Ecumenical Council. Obviously, the “fathers” of the council refers to the 318 Bishops that traveled from all over the world to join together to give voice to the Faith as it was established and received from the Apostles. Primarily, the fathers of the council focused their attention of the Arian heresy and proclaimed with one voice that Jesus is truly God and truly man, an Eternal Divine Person with two distinct natures. One of the bishops that joined the council was the great Saint Athanasios, Bishop of Alexandria.

It was Saint Athanasios who, in his debates with the arch-heretic Arius, uttered the famous statement “God became man that man might become God.” This truth, so central to our Christian faith, restates the foundational Christian belief that the purpose of the Incarnation, the reason why God became a man in the womb of Holy Theotokos, was so that He might reclaim His creation from the dominion of the devil and reunite us with Him. Through our baptism, we are joined to Christ in a real way so that we are able to say with Saint Paul, “it is no longer I who lives, but Christ who lives in me.”

Challenge Questions:

1. What is the purpose of the Incarnation according to Saint Athanasios? Explain in your own words.
2. How does Saint Athanasios’ statement impact how I see my life as a Christian?
3. How does the truth of our real transformation through baptism impact those around us?

Come Holy Spirit and fill the hearts of Your faithful

Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He instructed the apostles to return to Jerusalem and await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

The apostles with the Theotokos returned to Jerusalem and spent the next nine days in prayer as they awaited for the coming of the Holy Spirit.

This is the purpose of the devotional booklet that has been provided. During the days between Ascension and Pentecost, we use this booklet to assist us in our prayer as we await the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Mary and the Bible – Part 4

Mary In Salvation History

Genesis is the first book of the Bible. In Genesis we read that God created the universe and everything in it including the first man and woman, Adam and Eve. Genesis recounts that Adam and Eve failed to obey God and hence they fell from grace and they knew Sin and Death.

In Genesis there is a stunning prophecy. God said, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise him on the heel” (Gen. 3:15). This passage is called the Protoevangelium, meaning “first gospel.” It is here we find the first announcement of the Messiah. There is a battle between the serpent and the woman, and we find prophesied the final victory of a descendant of the woman over Satan. It is Jesus who crushed the head of Satan at the cross of Calvary. Fittingly, the site of Calvary where Jesus defeated Satan means “skull place,” reminiscent of crushing Satan’s head. Because Jesus is the seed or offspring of the woman, the woman must be the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is prefigured right here in the beginning of Genesis.



In John’s account of the crucifixion, Mary stood near the cross as Jesus said to her, “Dear woman, here is your son,” and to the disciple, “Here is your mother” (John 19:26-27). Mary was not John’s biological mother, yet John is called Mary’s son, and Mary John’s mother! The beloved disciple is a model that must be true of all disciples of Jesus, including us. The disciple whom Jesus loved took Mary into his home and became a spiritual son to her. Equally, Mary became the spiritual mother of the beloved disciple. Christians following the model discipleship of the “disciple whom Jesus loved” must ask: Am I like the beloved disciple by taking Mary into my home? When we consider how this disciple was faithful in obeying the command of Jesus to receive Mary as his mother, it becomes natural for all Christians to do likewise.

Mary In The Book Of Revelation

After the Babylonians crushed Jerusalem and destroyed Solomon’s Temple in 587 B.C., the Ark of the Covenant that held the Ten Commandments was never seen again. In 2 Macabees, it says that the place of the Ark will “remain unknown until God gathers His people together again and shows them mercy” (2 Macc 2:7). God has shown His people mercy through the Incarnation.

The apostle John is the author of the Book of Revelation. While John was exiled on the Isle of Patmos, he wrote something that would have shocked any first-century Jew. The Ark of the Old Covenant had been lost for centuries—no one had seen it for about 600 years.

In Revelation 11:19, John makes a surprising announcement: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant was seen within his temple.”

At this point chapter 11 ends and chapter 12 begins. But the Bible was not written with chapter divisions—they were added in the 12th century. When John penned these words, there was no division between chapters 11 and 12; it was a continuing narrative.

What did John say immediately after seeing the Ark of the Covenant in heaven? “And a great portent appeared in heaven, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars; she was with child” (Rv 12:1-2). The woman is Mary, the Ark of the New Covenant, revealed by God to John. She was seen bearing the child who would rule the world with a rod of iron (Rv 12:5). Mary was seen as the Ark and as a queen. The Bible begins with a real man (Adam), a real woman (Eve), and a real serpent (the devil)—and it also ends with a real man (Jesus, the Last Adam [1 Cor 15:45]), a real woman (Mary, the New Eve [Rv 11:19-12:2]), and a real serpent (the devil of old). All of this was foretold in Genesis 3:15. Later in the same chapter we read that the devil went out to persecute the woman’s other offspring—Christians. Remember that in John’s Gospel, at the crucifixion, Jesus gave Mary to John as His mother and Mary became the mother of all Christians.

In Revelation, there is another exciting connection verifying Mary as the woman and spiritual mother of Christians. “Then the dragon became angry with the woman and went off to wage war against the rest of her offspring, those who keep God’s commandments and bear witness to Jesus” (Rev. 12:17). The woman in Revelation has other children who keep the commandments of God and “bear testimony to Jesus.” They are Christians. Recalling that Jesus calls Mary the mother of John and John now calls Mary the mother of all Christians, we can easily see the scriptural basis for the acknowledgment of Mary as our spiritual mother and mother of the Church.

John wrote about a woman and a child in Revelation: “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and the ark of his covenant could be seen in the temple. There were flashes of lightning, rumblings, and peals of thunder, an earthquake, and a violent hailstorm. A great sign appeared in the sky, a woman clothed with the sun, with the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. She was with child and wailed aloud in pain as she labored to give birth. Then another sign appeared in the sky; it was a huge red dragon, with seven heads and ten horns, and on its heads were seven diadems. Its tail swept away a third of the stars in the sky and hurled them down to the earth. Then the dragon stood before the woman about to give birth, to devour her child when she gave birth. She gave birth to a son, a male child, destined to rule all the nations with an iron rod. Her child was caught up to God and his throne” (Rev. 11:19-12:5).

This woman clothed with the sun has a male child who is destined to rule all the nations, an obvious reference to Jesus and his kingship. Jesus was caught up to heaven, which is what apostolic Christianity calls the Ascension. Thus, the identification of the woman clothed with the sun is Mary.

Mary is prefigured in the book of Genesis, she participates with Jesus in the Gospels, and she is observed fighting Satan in the book of Revelation. From the very first pages of the Bible to its last book, Mary’s role in salvation history is astonishing.