

First Council of Nicaea

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The **First Council of Nicaea**, held in Nicaea in Bithynia (in present-day Turkey), convoked by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in 325, was the first ecumenical^[1] conference of bishops of the Christian Church, and most significantly resulted in the first uniform Christian doctrine. With the creation of the Nicene Creed, a precedent was established for subsequent 'general (ecumenical) councils of Bishops' (Synods) to create statements of belief and canons of doctrinal orthodoxy—the intent being to define unity of beliefs for the whole of Christendom — a momentous event in the history of the Church and subsequent history of Europe.

The purpose of the council was to resolve disagreements in the Church of Alexandria over the nature of Jesus in relationship to the Father; in particular, whether Jesus was of the same or of similar substance as God the Father. St. Alexander of Alexandria and Athanasius took the first position; the popular presbyter Arius, from whom the term Arian controversy comes, took the second. The council decided against the Arians overwhelmingly (of the estimated 250-318 attendees, all but 2 voted against Arius). Another result of the council was an agreement on the date of the Christian Passover (*Pascha* in Greek; Easter in modern English), the most important feast of the ecclesiastical calendar. The council decided in favour of celebrating Jesus on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, independently of the Bible's Hebrew Calendar (see also Quartodecimanism), and authorized the Bishop of Alexandria (presumably using the Alexandrian calendar) to announce annually the exact date to his fellow bishops.

The Council of Nicaea was historically significant because it was the first effort to attain consensus in the church through an assembly representing all of Christendom.^[2] "It was the first occasion for the development of technical Christology."^[2] Further, "Constantine in convoking and presiding over the council signaled a measure of imperial control over the church."^[2]

<i>First Council of Nicaea</i>	
Date	325
Accepted by	Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Oriental Orthodoxy, Assyrian Church of the East, Anglicanism, Lutheranism
Previous council	none considered ecumenical
Next council	First Council of Constantinople
Convoked by	Constantine I
Presided by	St. Hosius of Cordova
Attendance	250-318 (only five from Western Church)
Topics of discussion	Arianism, celebration of Passover (Easter), Miletian schism, validity of baptism by heretics, lapsed Christians
Documents and statements	Original Nicene Creed and about 20 decrees
Chronological list of Ecumenical councils	

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Character and purpose

The First Council of Nicaea was convened by Constantine I upon the recommendations of a synod led by Hosius of Cordoba in the Eastertide of 325. This synod had been charged with investigation of the trouble brought about by the Arian controversy in the Greek-speaking east.^[3] To many bishops, the teachings of Arius were heretical and a danger to the salvation of souls; to Constantine, any division in the Church was a threat to the unity of the Roman Empire. In the summer of 325, the bishops of all provinces were summoned to Nicaea in Bithynia (now known as İzmit, in modern-day Turkey), a place easily accessible to the majority of them, particularly those of Asia Minor, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Greece, and Thrace.

Approximately three hundred bishops attended, from every region of the Empire except Britain. This was the first general council in the history of the Church since the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem, which had established the conditions upon which Gentiles could join the Church.^[4] In the Council of Nicaea, “the Church had taken her first great step to define doctrine more precisely in response to a challenge from a heretical theology.”^[5] The resolutions in the council, being ecumenical, were intended for the whole Church.

Attendees

Constantine had invited all 1800 bishops of the Christian church (about 1000 in the east and 800 in the west), but only 250 to 320 bishops actually participated. Eusebius of Caesarea counted 250,^[6] Athanasius of Alexandria counted 318,^[7] and Eustathius of Antioch counted 270^[8] (all three were present at the council). Later, Socrates Scholasticus recorded more than 300,^[9] and Evagrius,^[10] Hilarius,^[11] Jerome^[12] and Rufinus recorded 318.

The participating bishops were given free travel to and from their episcopal sees to the council, as well as lodging. These bishops did not travel alone; each one had permission to bring with him two presbyters and three deacons; so the total number of attendees would have been above 1500. Eusebius speaks of an almost innumerable host of accompanying priests, deacons and acolytes.

A special prominence was also attached to this council because the persecution of Christians had just ended with the February 313 Edict of Milan by Emperors Constantine and Licinius.



St. Constantine summoned the bishops of the Christian Church to Nicaea to address divisions in the Church. (mosaic in Hagia Sophia, Constantinople, c. 1000)

The Eastern bishops formed the great majority. Of these, the first rank was held by the three archbishops: Alexander of Alexandria, Eustathius of Antioch, and Macarius of Jerusalem. Many of the assembled fathers — for instance, Paphnutius of Thebes, Potamon of Heraclea and Paul of Neocaesarea — had stood forth as witnesses of the faith and came to the council with the marks of persecution on their faces. Other remarkable attendees were Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, Nicholas of Myra, Aristakes of Armenia, Jacob of Nisibis, a former hermit and Spyridion of Trimythous, who even while a bishop made his living as a shepherd. From foreign places there came a Persian bishop John, a Gothic bishop Theophilus and Stratophilus, bishop of Pitiunt in Egrisi (located at the border of modern-day Russia and Georgia outside of the Roman Empire).

The Latin-speaking provinces sent at least five representatives: Marcus of Calabria from Italia, Cecilian of Carthage from Africa, Hosius of Córdoba from Hispania, Nicasius of Dijon from Gaul, and Domnus of Stridon from the province of the Danube. Pope Silvester I declined to attend, pleading infirmity, but he was represented by two priests.

Athanasius of Alexandria, a young deacon and companion of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, was among these assistants. Athanasius eventually spent most of his life battling against Arianism. Alexander of Constantinople, then a presbyter, was also present as representative of his aged bishop.

"Resplendent in purple and gold, Constantine made a ceremonial entrance at the opening of the council, probably in early June, but respectfully seated the bishops ahead of himself."^[4] He was present as an observer, but he did not vote. Constantine organized the Council along the lines of the Roman Senate. "Ossius [Hosius] presided over its deliberations; he probably, and the two priests of Rome certainly, came as representatives of the Pope."^[4] "Eusebius of Nicomedia probably gave the welcoming address."^[4]

Agenda and procedure

The agenda of the synod were:

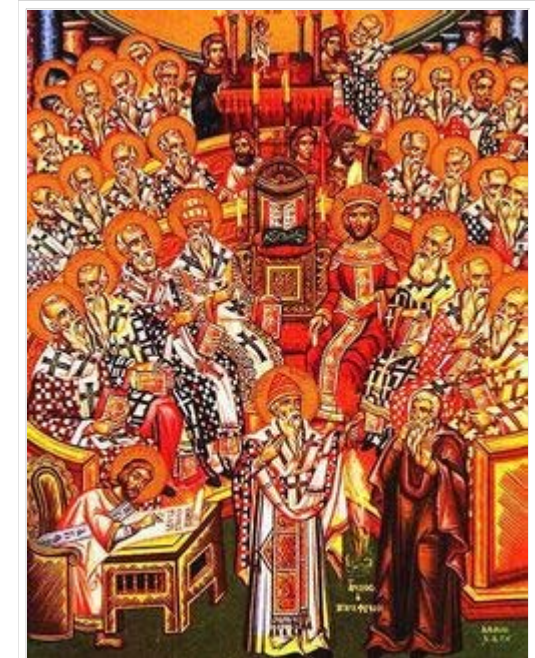
1. The Arian question;
2. The celebration of Passover;
3. The Meletian schism;
4. The Father and Son one in purpose or in person;
5. The baptism of heretics;
6. The status of the lapsed in the persecution under Licinius.

The council was formally opened May 20, in the central structure of the imperial palace, with preliminary discussions on the Arian question. In these discussions, some dominant figures were Arius, with several adherents. “Some twenty-two of the bishops at the council, led by Eusebius of Nicomedia, came as supporters of Arius. But when some of the more shocking passages from his writings were read, they were almost universally seen as blasphemous.”^[4] Bishop Theognis of Nice and Bishop Maris of Chalcedon were among the initial supporters of Arius.

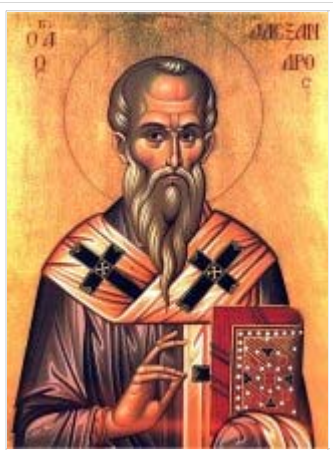
Eusebius of Caesarea called to mind the baptismal creed (symbol) of his own diocese at Caesarea in Palestine, as a form of reconciliation. The majority of the bishops agreed with him. For some time, scholars thought that the original Nicene Creed was based on this statement of Eusebius. Today, most scholars think that this Creed is derived from the baptismal creed of Jerusalem, as Hans Lietzmann proposed. Another possibility is the Apostle's Creed.

In any case, as the council went on, the orthodox bishops won approval of every one of their proposals. After being in session for an entire month, the council promulgated on June 19 the original Nicene Creed. This profession of faith was adopted by all the bishops “but two from Libya who had been closely associated with Arius from the beginning.”^[5]

Arian controversy



Icon depicting the First Council of Nicaea.



St. Alexander of Alexandria held the first position of the Council of Nicaea.

The Arian controversy was a Christological dispute that began in Alexandria between the followers of Arius (the *Arians*) and the followers of St. Alexander of Alexandria (now known as *homoousians*). Alexander and his followers believed that the Son was of *the same* substance as the Father, co-eternal with him. The Arians believed that they were different and that the Son, though he may be the most perfect of creations, was only a creation. A third group (now known as *homoiousians*) tried to make a compromise position, saying that the Father and the Son were of *similar* substance.

Much of the debate hinged on the difference between being "born" or "created" and being "begotten". Arians saw these as the same; followers of Alexander did not. Indeed, the exact meaning of many of the words used in the debates at Nicaea were still unclear to speakers of other languages; Greek words like "essence" (*ousia*), "substance" (*hypostasis*), "nature" (*physis*), "person" (*prosopon*) bore a variety of meanings drawn from pre-Christian philosophers, which could not but entail misunderstandings until they were cleared up. The word *homoousia*, in particular, was initially disliked by many bishops because of its associations with Gnostic heretics (who used it in their theology), and because it had been condemned at the 264-268 Synods of Antioch.

Homoousians believed that to follow the Arian view destroyed the unity of the Godhead, and made the Son unequal to the Father, in contravention of the Scriptures ("The Father and I are one", John 10:30 (<http://php.ug.cs.usyd.edu.au/~jnot4610/bibref.php?book=%20John&verse=10:30&src=!>)). Arians, on the other hand, believed that since God the Father created the Son, he must have emanated from the Father, and thus be lesser than the Father, in that the Father is eternal, but the Son was created afterward and, thus, is not eternal. The Arians likewise appealed to Scripture, quoting

verses such as John 14:28 (<http://php.ug.cs.usyd.edu.au/~jnot4610/bibref.php?book=%20John&verse=14:28&src=!>): "the Father is greater than I". Homoousians countered the Arians' argument, saying that the Father's fatherhood, like all of his attributes, is eternal. Thus, the Father was always a father, and that the Son, therefore, always existed with him.

The Council declared that the Father and the Son are of the same substance and are co-eternal, basing the declaration in the claim that this was a formulation of traditional Christian belief handed down from the Apostles. This belief was expressed in the Nicene Creed.

The Nicene Creed

By and large, many creeds were acceptable to the members of the council. From his perspective, even Arius could cite such a creed.

For Bishop Alexander and others, however, greater clarity was required. Some distinctive elements in the Nicene Creed, perhaps from the hand of Hosius of Cordova, were added.

1. Jesus Christ is described as "God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God," confirming his divinity. When all light sources were natural, the essence of light was considered to be identical, regardless of its form.
2. Jesus Christ is said to be "begotten, not made," asserting his co-eternalness with God, and confirming it by stating his role in the Creation.
3. Finally, he is said to be "from the substance of the Father," in direct opposition to Arianism. Some ascribe the term *Consubstantial*, i.e., "of the **same** substance" (of the Father), to Constantine who, on this particular point, may have chosen to exercise his authority.

Of the third article only the words "and in the Holy Spirit" were left; the original Nicene Creed ended with these words. Then followed immediately the canons of the council. Thus, instead of a baptismal creed acceptable to both the homoousian and Arian parties, as proposed by Eusebius, the council promulgated one which was unambiguous in the aspects touching upon the points of contention between these two positions, and one which was incompatible with the beliefs of Arians. From earliest times, various creeds served as a means of identification for Christians, as a means of inclusion and recognition, especially at baptism. In Rome, for example, the Apostles' Creed was popular, especially for use in Lent and the Easter season. In the Council of Nicaea, one specific creed was used to define the Church's faith clearly, to include those who professed it, and to exclude those who did not.

The text of this profession of faith is preserved in a letter of Eusebius to his congregation, in Athanasius, and elsewhere. Although the most vocal anti-Arians, the Homoousians (from the Koine Greek word translated as "of same substance" which was condemned at the Council of Antioch in 264-268), were in the minority, the Creed was accepted by the council as an expression of the bishops' common faith and the ancient faith of the whole Church.

Bishop Hosius of Cordova, one of the firm Homoousians, may well have helped bring the council to consensus. At the time of the council, he was the confidant of the emperor in all Church matters. Hosius stands at the head of the lists of bishops, and Athanasius ascribes to him the actual formulation of the creed. Great leaders such as Eustathius of Antioch, Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, and Marcellus of Ancyra all adhered to the Homoousian position.

In spite of his sympathy for Arius, Eusebius of Caesarea adhered to the decisions of the council, accepting the entire creed. The initial number of bishops supporting Arius was small. After a month of discussion, there were only two left: Theonas of Marmarica in Libya, and Secundus of Ptolemais. Maris of Chalcedon, who initially supported Arianism, agreed to the whole creed. Similarly, Eusebius of Nicomedia and Theognis of Nice also agreed, except for the certain statements.

The emperor carried out his earlier statement: everybody who refuses to endorse the Creed will be exiled. Arius, Theonas, and Secundus refused to adhere to the creed, and were thus exiled aside from being excommunicated. The works of Arius were ordered to be confiscated and consigned to the flames^[13], although there is no evidence that this occurred. Nevertheless, the controversy, already festering, continued in various parts of the empire.

Separation of Easter from the Jewish Passover



Icon depicting the Holy Fathers of the First Council of Nicaea holding the Nicene Creed.

After the June 19 settlement of the most important topic, the question of the date of the Christian Passover (Easter), was brought up. This feast is linked to the Jewish Passover, as the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus occurred during that festival. By the year 300, most Churches had adopted the Western style of celebrating the feast on the Sunday after the Passover, placing the emphasis on the resurrection, which occurred on a Sunday. Others however celebrated the feast on the 14th of the Jewish month Nisan, the date of the crucifixion according to the Bible's Hebrew calendar (Leviticus 23:5 (<http://php.ug.cs.usyd.edu.au/~jnot4610/bibref.php?book=%20Leviticus&verse=23:5&src=!>) ,John 19:14 (<http://php.ug.cs.usyd.edu.au/~jnot4610/bibref.php?book=%20John&verse=19:14&src=!>)). Hence this group was called Quartodecimans, which is derived from the Latin for 14. The Eastern Churches of Syria, Cilicia, and Mesopotamia determined the date of Christian Passover in relation to the 14th day of Nisan, in the Bible's Hebrew calendar. Alexandria and Rome, however, followed a different calculation, attributed to Pope Soter, so that Christian Passover would never coincide with the Jewish observance and decided in favour of celebrating on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, independently of the Bible's Hebrew calendar.

According to Duchesne,^[14] who founds his conclusions:

1. on the conciliar letter to the Alexandrians preserved in Theodoret;^[15]
2. on the circular letter of Constantine to the bishops after the council;^[16]
3. on Athanasius;^[17]

Epiphanius of Salamis wrote in the mid-4th Century, "... the emperor ... convened a council of 318 bishops ... in the city of Nicaea. ... They passed certain ecclesiastical canons at the council besides, and at the same time decreed in regard to the Passover that there must be one unanimous concord on the celebration of God's holy and supremely excellent day. For it was variously observed by people..."^[18]

The council assumed the task of regulating these differences, in part because some dioceses were determined not to have Christian Passover correspond with the Jewish calendar. "The feast of the resurrection was thenceforth required to be celebrated everywhere on a Sunday, and never on the day of the Jewish passover, but always after the fourteenth of Nisan, on the Sunday after the first vernal full moon. The leading motive for this regulation was opposition to Judaism, which had dishonored the passover by the crucifixion of the Lord."^[19] Constantine wrote that: "... it appeared an unworthy thing that in the celebration of this most holy feast we should follow the practice of the Jews, who have impiously defiled their hands with enormous sin, and are, therefore, deservedly afflicted with blindness of soul. ... Let us then have nothing in common with the detestable Jewish crowd; for we have received from our Saviour a different way."^[20] Theodoret recorded the Emperor as saying: "It was, in the first place, declared improper to follow the custom of the Jews in the celebration of this holy festival, because, their hands having been stained with crime, the minds of these wretched men are necessarily blinded. ... Let us, then, have nothing in common with the Jews, who are our adversaries. ... avoiding all contact with that evil way. ... who, after having compassed the death of the Lord, being out of their minds, are guided not by sound reason, but by an unrestrained passion, wherever their innate madness carries them. ... a people so utterly depraved. ... Therefore, this irregularity must be corrected, in order that we may no more have any thing in common with those parricides and the murderers of our Lord. ... no single point in common with the perjury of the Jews."^[21]

The Council of Nicaea, however, did not declare the Alexandrian or Roman calculations as normative. Instead, the council gave the Bishop of Alexandria the privilege of announcing annually the date of Christian Passover to the Roman curia. Although the synod undertook the regulation of the dating of Christian Passover, it contented itself with communicating its decision to the different dioceses, instead of establishing a canon. There was subsequent conflict over this very matter. See also Computus and Reform of the date of Easter.

Meletian Schism

The suppression of the Meletian schism was one of the three important matters that came before the Council of Nicaea. Meletius, it was decided, should remain in his own city of Lycopolis, but without exercising authority or the power to ordain new clergy; moreover he was forbidden to go into the environs of the town or to enter another diocese for the purpose of ordaining its subjects. Melitius retained his episcopal title, but the ecclesiastics ordained by him were to receive again the imposition of hands, the ordinations performed by Meletius being therefore regarded as invalid. Clergy ordained by Meletius were ordered to yield precedence to those ordained by Alexander, and they were not to do anything without the consent of Bishop Alexander.^[22]

In the event of the death of a non-Meletian bishop or ecclesiastic, the vacant see might be given to a Meletian, provided he were worthy and the popular election were ratified by Alexander. As to Meletius himself, episcopal rights and prerogatives were taken from him. These mild measures, however, were in vain; the Meletians joined the Arians and caused more dissension than ever, being among the worst enemies of Athanasius. The Meletians ultimately died out around the middle of the fifth century.

Other problems

Finally, the council promulgated twenty new church laws, called *canons*, (though the exact number is subject to debate^[23]), that is, unchanging rules of discipline. The twenty as listed in the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers are as follows:^[24]

1. prohibition of self-castration; (see Origen)
2. establishment of a minimum term for catechumen;
3. prohibition of the presence in the house of a cleric of a younger woman who might bring him under suspicion;
4. ordination of a bishop in the presence of at least three provincial bishops and confirmation by the metropolitan;
5. provision for two provincial synods to be held annually;
6. exceptional authority acknowledged for the bishops of Alexandria and Rome, for their respective regions;
7. recognition of the honorary rights of the see of Jerusalem;
8. provision for agreement with the Novatianists;
- 9–14. provision for mild procedure against the lapsed during the persecution under Licinius;
- 15–16. prohibition of the removal of priests;
17. prohibition of usury among the clergy;
18. precedence of bishops and presbyters before deacons in receiving Holy Communion, the Eucharist;
19. declaration of the invalidity of baptism by Paulian heretics;
20. prohibition of kneeling during the liturgy, on Sundays and in the fifty days of Eastertide ("the pentecost"). Standing was the normative posture for prayer at this time, as it still is among the Eastern Orthodox. (In time, Western Christianity adopted the term Pentecost to refer to the last Sunday of Eastertide, the fiftieth day.)^[25]

On July 25, 325, in conclusion, the fathers of the council celebrated the emperor's twentieth anniversary. In his valedictory address, Constantine again informed his hearers how averse he was to dogmatic controversy; he wanted the Church to live in harmony and peace. In a circular letter, he announced the accomplished unity of practice by the whole Church in the date of the celebration of Christian Passover (now called Easter).

Effect of the council

The long-term effects of the Council of Nicaea were significant. For the first time, representatives of many of the bishops of the Church convened to agree on a doctrinal statement. Also for the first time, the Emperor played a role, by calling together the bishops under his authority, and using the power of the state to give the Council's orders effect. This was the start of the Constantinian shift, an entangling of church and state that still gives rise to debate today.

In the short-term, however, the council did not completely solve the problems it was convened to discuss. The Arians and the Meletians soon regained nearly all the rights they had lost, and Arianism continued to spread and to cause division in the Church during the remainder of the fourth century. Almost immediately, Eusebius of Nicomedia used his influence at court to sway Constantine's favor from the orthodox Nicene bishops to the Arians. Eustathius of Antioch was deposed and exiled in 330. Athanasius, who had succeeded Alexander as bishop of Alexandria, was deposed by the First Synod of Tyre in 335 and Marcellus of Ancyra followed him in 336. Arius himself returned to Constantinople to be readmitted into the Church, but died shortly before he could be received. Constantine died the next year, after finally receiving baptism, from an Arian bishop, and "with his passing the first round in the battle after the Council of Nicaea was ended."^[26]

Notes

- [^] *Ecumenical*, from Koine Greek οἰκουµενικός, literally meaning worldwide but generally assumed to be limited to the Roman Empire as in Augustus' claim to be ruler of the οἰκουµενή/world; the earliest extant uses of the term for a council are Eusebius' *Life of Constantine* 3.6[1] (<http://kharzarar.skeptik.net/books/eusebius/vc/gr/index.htm>) around 338 "σύνοδον οἰκουµενικὴν συνεκρότει" (he convoked an Ecumenical council), Athanasius' *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica* in 369[2] (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2819.htm>) , and the Letter in 382 to Pope Damasus I and the Latin bishops from the First Council of Constantinople[3] (<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-14/Npnf2-14-63.htm#TopOfPage>)
- [^] *^{a b c}* Richard Kieckhefer (1989). "Papacy". *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. ISBN 0-684-18275-0
- [^] Carroll, 10
- [^] *^{a b c d e}* Carroll, 11
- [^] *^{a b}* Carroll, 12
- [^] Eusebius of Caesaria. *Life of Constantine* (Book III) (<http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/25023.htm>) pp. Chapter 9. Retrieved on 2006-05-08.
- [^] *Ad Afros Epistola Synodica* 2
- [^] Theodoret H.E. 1.7
- [^] H.E. 1.8
- [^] H.E. 3.31
- [^] *Contra Constantium*
- [^] *Chronicon*
- [^] Socrates Church History Chapter IX (<http://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf202.ii.iv.ix.html>)
- [^] *Revue des questions historiques*, xxviii. 37
- [^] *Hist. eccl.*, I., ix. 12; Socrates, *Hist. eccl.*, I., ix. 12
- [^] Eusebius, *Vita Constantine*, III., xviii. 19; Theodoret, *Hist. eccl.*, I., x. 3 sqq.
- [^] *De Synodo*, v.; *Epist. ad Afros*, ii.
- [^] Epiphanius, *The Panarion of Epiphanius of Salamis*, Books II and III (Sects 47-80), De Fide. Section VI, Verses 1,1 and 1,3. Translated by Frank Williams. EJ Brill, New York, 1994, pp.471-472).
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- [^] From the Catholic Encyclopedia article on Meletius (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/10164a.htm>) .

23. ^ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. XIV, Excursus on the Number of the Nicene Canons (<http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-14/Npnf2-14-24.htm#TopOfPage>) . *Early Church Fathers*. Retrieved on 2006-05-08.
24. ^ Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series II, Vol. XIV, The Canons of the 318 Holy Fathers Assembled in the City of Nice (sic), in Bithynia. (http://www.ccel.org/fathers2/NPNF2-14/Npnf2-14-13.htm#P561_131414) . *Early Church Fathers*. Retrieved on 2006-05-08.
25. ^ For the exact text of the prohibition of kneeling, in Greek and in English translation, see canon 20 (<http://www.srocco.org/Liturgies/NicaeStanding.dsp>) of the acts of the council.
26. ^ Leo Donald Davis, S.J., "The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325-787)", 77, ISBN 0-8146-5616-1

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External links

- Catholic Encyclopedia: First Council of Nicaea (<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/11044a.htm>)
- The Road to Nicaea (<http://www.christianitytoday.com/ch/2005/001/7.18.html>) a descriptive overview of the events of the Council, by John Anthony McGuckin.
- The Council of Nicaea and the Bible (<http://www.tertullian.org/rpearse/nicaea.html>) . This article deals with the legend that the canon of the bible was discussed at the council.

- Council of Nicaea in the 1911 Encyclopædia Britannica (http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Council_of_Nicaea)
- Council of Nicaea (<http://www.legionofmarytidewater.com/faith/Ecum01.htm>)

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