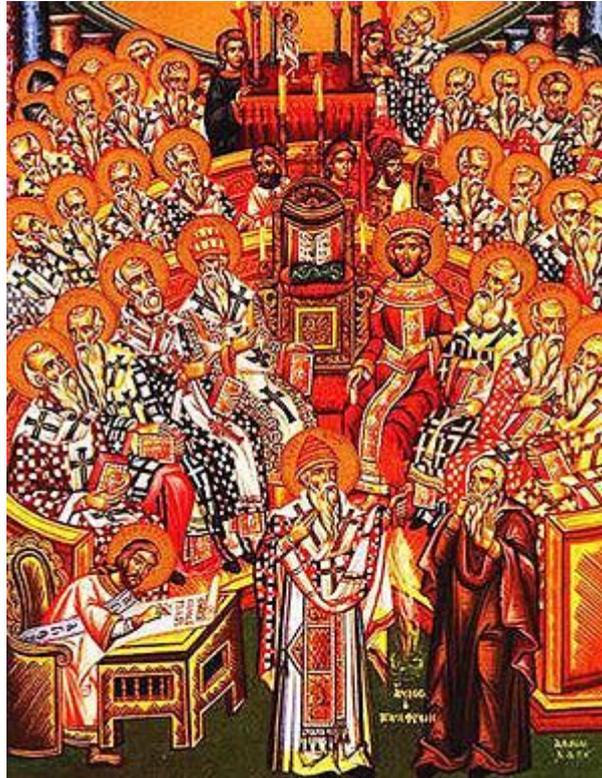


The Jesus Movement Part VIII: Towards Nicaea



Πιστεύομεν - We believe

During over two hundred and fifty years leading up to the end of the third century CE, Christianity had largely migrated from rural Palestine and had taken root in the great cosmopolitan centres of the Empire where it had grown and flourish. The Jesus Movement had successfully adjusted to its new existence and had become an honest and respected citizen in the social and economic world of its host culture. Christians had become so successful that they had become essential in the effective functioning of almost all areas of Roman society. They not only benefited from the Pax Romana, they were instrumental in validating, promoting and guaranteeing its continuation.

When Constantine became the sole Emperor he enacted the Edict of Milan in 313 CE which not only put a stop to the State persecution of Christians but actually offered the Jesus Movement protected status. It was in the interests of Constantine and his Empire that unity within Christianity was an absolute necessity for guaranteeing stability and cohesion within the Empire. A major factor in guaranteeing this was the resolution to the issues of Christology (theology of Christ) which threatened the existence of the Christian Movement.

One of the greatest challenges in the history of the Church was to arrive at a theological point of convergence where finite language, imagination and analogy were brought together in order to define and profess the mysteries of the Trinity and the subsistence of the Eternal Word in the humanity of Jesus Christ.

The Great Persecution

..if the Tiber overflows or the Nile doesn't, the cry goes up, 'Christians to the lions.'

- Tertullian, 3rd Century CE.

It was only during the middle and late third century CE that Christians became subjects of wholesale persecutions by Roman Emperors. For the most part though, it was local magistrates and provincial governors who, passed judgment on Christians and mainly as a result of complaints or accusations by vexatious or jealous non-Christian neighbours. It was during the short rule of Decius (249-251 CE) that Christians, and much to their utter bewilderment, found themselves in a position where they were being targeted as enemies of the Roman State. In order to promote and consolidate loyalty to his beleaguered Empire Decius decreed that Christians dispel any suggestion of treason by offering public worship to the protector gods of Rome. Their inevitable refusal to apostatise resulted in punishments ranging from imprisonment to death.

By 303 Rome was experiencing a rapid social, political and military fragmentation of its Empire. In order to strengthen loyalty to the State, Diocletian ordered an organised persecution of the Christian movement having determined that they stood in the way of unity. Initially, he envisioned a bloodless destruction of all Christian churches, commercial properties and other valuables such as copies of the Sacred Scriptures. The Emperor wanted to avoid creating martyrs and divided loyalties so he focused his attention on weakening Christianity's strong economic base and humiliating its leadership.

As the year progressed however, Diocletian escalated the persecution to include Christians themselves by forcing them, under pain of imprisonment, to pay homage to the gods. In 304, the Emperor issued another edict ordering the execution of Christian for refusal to comply with Roman religious law. Church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea (263-339) graphically recorded the ensuing brutal and very bloody punishment meted out for refusal to sacrifice to the Roman gods. Fortunately, the repression was mercifully brief. (1)

Diocletian resigned the emperorship in 305 CE due to poor health. Galerius, Diocletian's co-emperor and instigator of the Great Persecution, succeeded him and continued the repression until 311 CE when an Edict of Toleration was issued. (Eusebius, *The History of the Church*, VIII.17.6-10). Constantine was confirmed by Galerius the following year as Emperor in the West and a decade later he was in a position to be the sole ruler. (2) From a religious point of view, prior to his conversion to Christianity, Constantine was a devoted to the cult of *Sol Invictus*, the Unconquered Sun god but he very probably spent his life as a syncretist, combining his old beliefs with those of his new faith.

In 313 Constantine, the Western emperor and Licinius, his counterpart in the East, jointly issued the Edict of Milan which reaffirmed universal religious tolerance. It also explicitly acknowledged Christianity's already established place in Roman society. (3) Both emperors had most likely formed the view quite early that Christianity had become so important a part of the social, economic and bureaucratic fabric of the Empire that its unity and stability depended upon the continued existence and flourishing of Christianity. The religion was not, however, proclaimed the official religion of the Empire until 381 CE and this coincided with the Council of Constantinople which completed and confirmed the Creed of Nicaea.

Doctrinal threats to the stability of Church and Empire

The ferocity of the Great Persecution under Diocletian caused a large number of Christians, clergy and laity, to become apostates after publicly offering sacrifice to the gods, betraying fellow Christians along with community secrets or by handing over the sacred texts. These were the *Lapsi* and the *Traditores* who subsequently presented the entire Christian Church with a huge problem when many sought reconciliation and to resume full communion with their fellow Christians. It was the resultant heated debate about what to do with the *Lapsi* and the *Traditores* that triggered the Schism of Novatian in Rome. (4)

But a rift far more serious and insidious than *Novatianism* had begun in North Africa. It came to be known as *Donatism* after Donatus who became the bishop of Carthage in 313. Donatus taught that apostates forfeited their baptismal dignity and could be no longer considered genuine Christians. If the lapsed person was a bishop or a priest then any sacraments celebrated by them were considered by the Donatists to be null and void. As a result Donatus and his followers began to re-baptise bishops and presbyters who had compromised the Faith.

The ensuing debates became so intense that they polarised the Church and severely tested its unity and resilience, perhaps even more so than external persecutions ever did. After two years of episcopal investigation and inquires, Constantine called the Synod of Arles in 314 to resolve the *Donatist* issue once and for all. The thirty bishops who gathered at Arles condemned Donatus, declared him a heretic and exiled him. The *Donatism* was, however, difficult to eliminate completely because it appealed to the deeply embedded sense of honour and indignation of those who had remained loyal to their faith in Christ and despite experiencing dreadful suffering and loss. As a schismatic movement, *Donatism* persisted in some form or other for decades after Donatus' death around 355 CE especially among the Punic speaking Christian communities in Libya and Numidia.

Christological controversies in the 4th Century

During the 4th Century, Christianity faced the on-going challenge of attempting to reconcile the theological tensions between God's transcendence and immanence. The thorniest issue in this debate was to address the question of why and how the utterly transcendent Being

intervened so decisively, so personally and relationally in the human enfleshment of the divine Word.

From the final edition of his Gospel, John's language and images reveal an underlay of a much higher Christology, where there are definite signs of a growing understanding of the divine nature of Christ all the while acknowledging and respecting the integrity of his humanity. It was the task of the Council of Nicaea to address this matter so seriously that two thirds of a magisterial Creed was drawn up at that Synod and completed at another in Constantinople just over half a century later. But first, there were other matters which needed attention.

Another, even more serious heresy than *Donatism* quickly overtook the Church. It was *Arianism* and it was a very complex version of the great question Jesus had put to his disciples centuries before: "Who do you say that I am." Back then, Jesus' chosen Twelve thought of themselves as the privileged and entitled insiders but they could only provide an inadequate answer. Ironically, one of the great twists in the Gospels was that it was those outside the inner circle who got it right.

The same issue of who Jesus really was became more intense and complex in the second century as theological positions favouring either his humanity or divinity became more ideological and brittle. This was and is not new. Particularly from the latter part of the first century CE, members of the Jesus Movement have been strongly drawn either to the human or the divine dimension of Christ's being. The tensions involved have come into sharp focus again in recent decades following the Second Vatican Council. The Church's constitution, its Sacraments, worship and the way it imagines itself in the secular society have all been profoundly affected by theologies which are not only in tension but which are practically incompatible. (5)

Arianism

Given the sheer size of the Christian population of the Roman Empire, its combined economic power and the indispensable social and professional positions occupied by Christians, it was in the interests of Roman politicians to take the internal stability of Christianity very seriously indeed. This was severely tested once again as a result of a schism triggered by the teaching of Arius, an Alexandrian priest (250?-336 CE). A number of early theologies of Christ (*Christologies*) had been heavily influenced by *Gnosticism* which seriously understated the importance of Christ's human nature. Therefore, any notion of the utterly transcendent God coming into direct contact with created matter was regarded as a 'contamination' of God. Arius took a view completely opposite to the Gnostic ones. He emphasised the humanity of Christ and proposed the idea that Christ was merely a semi-divine being, a kind of go-between created reality, including his own with the One Transcendent God.

Arius taught that the one called Father is alone God; that God's Word (*Logos*), called the Son who was a being created being, fashioned before the rest of the created universe and was the pinnacle of God's creation and everything was 'created through him.' But the Son, in Arius'

theology, was neither pre-existent nor timeless. In effect, although Arius acknowledged Christ that was both the Son and Word, he denied his eternal being. For Arius, Christ was not God; every dimension of his was created.

The appeal of Arius' Christology quickly became widespread and proved attractive across the whole social spectrum. It affirmed Monotheism unambiguously and it also provided a simple, non abstruse, explanation of the relationship between the One God and the created Son-Word. Arius' Christology carefully avoided the philosophical and theological complexities of explaining the connection between the impassable (immune to suffering) God and the human pain, suffering and death of Christ. The latter point appealed mightily to Christians who had emerged marked in one way or another by savage persecutions and who strongly identified with the suffering Son of God.

Arius was not only a gifted theologian; he was also extraordinarily skilled at spreading his message an ancient form of social media namely, popular songs. The simple message of *Arianism* was quickly disseminated throughout the commercial centres, public squares and transport routes across the Empire. The tradition of Arius' propaganda ditties was preserved in some saved fragments of the writings of Philostorgios of Cappodocia (368-439 CE):

“He (Philostorgios) says that Arius, after his secession from the church, composed several songs to be sung by sailors, and by millers, and by travellers along the high road, and others of the same kind, which he adapted to certain tunes, as he thought suitable in each separate case, and thus by degrees seduced the minds of the unlearned by the attractiveness of his songs to the adoption of his own impiety.” - *Epitome* 2.2 (6)

The Council of Nicaea

Constantine became so alarmed at the threat to the religious unity and social cohesion of the Empire that he convened a formal, general (Ecumenical) Council and instructed the bishops to find a doctrinal solution for *Arian* schism and to decide on effective ways and means to strengthen the bonds of unity in the Church. The Council began probably early June 325 CE and concluded around a month later. It is estimated that of the 1800 bishops in total, between 230 and 250 of them gathered at Nicaea to constitute the Church's first Ecumenical Council.

For many, it was a miracle that they were able to get that far. Theodoret, an early Church chronicler, recounted that Nicaea was full of the 'walking wounded'. These were *Confessors*, including bishops, deacons and presbyters who had suffered terribly during the Great Persecution of Diocletian two decades before. Unlike the Apostates, they had held firm and not denied the Faith. Theodoret claimed that many of these men had been tortured brutally: blinded, tongues torn out and limbs lopped off. These Confessors of the Faith were venerated as “the assembled army of martyrs.” (7) There are, however, other sources which challenge or contradict Theodoret, making it difficult to verify the accuracy of his account of history.

The task of the Council of Nicaea was not only to provide a sound and convincing theological solution to the problems posed by the Arian heresy. A far more important challenge was to provide a statement of belief which spelt out in creedal form the relationship between the

Father, the Word and the Spirit. Its primary goal was to find a way to reconcile Arius' transcendent monotheism with the immanence of the Incarnation. Nicaea was as much a Trinitarian Council as it was a Christological one.

In order to do this, the Council was forced to deal with varying degrees of philosophical abstractions which involved concepts of spirit, being, persons and natures. Fortunately, the bishops had at their disposal a highly sophisticated 'theological' lexicon which had been developed by the great rhetoricians of Greece's Golden Age (5-4th centuries BCE) and later by the great Jewish scholar, Philo of Alexandria (c 25 BCE – 50 CE). It was now a matter of working this conceptually abstract language into clear statements and, ultimately, into a profession of Christian Faith agreeable to the Church in both the East and West.

A major obstacle in the way of finding common creedal ground was the fact that most of the Bishops at the Council of Nicaea were actually Arians.

The major burden of attempting to bridge the theological gulf fell on three Cappadocian Bishops: Basil of Caesarea (330–379), his younger brother Gregory, Bishop of Nyssa (c.332–395), and their close friend, Gregory, Bishop of Nazianzus (329–389). He was later made Patriarch of Constantinople and, in 381 CE, presided over the great Council which completed the Nicene Creed with the statement of belief in the Holy Spirit. The three bishops skilfully crafted an almost poetic creedal formula which described God as a community of Being, three transcendent Persons who chose, out of love, to act immanently as Creator, Saviour and Sanctifier. The Nicene Creed also provided a theological affirmation that the Son/Word is of the same being as the Father.

Finally though, it was not the weighty theological arguments of the Cappadocians which countered and eventually overcame *Arianism* but the Faith of the Christian people's instinct for and internal persuasion about the truth. This deep and abiding instinct has come to be known as the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium*. The theologians simply articulated that sense of the Faith which was firmly grounded in a much earlier affirmation of faith from the Prologue of John's Gospel: "...and the Word was God, and the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us."

"In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God....

And the Word became flesh and made its home among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth." (John 1: 1, 14)

The Council of Nicaea validated and confirmed the faith of the Christian people without whom its clarity and integrity would not have been preserved.

The Arian Controversy: the Sensus Fidei Fidelium

Pope Paul VI affirmed that the Second Vatican Council owed a great deal to the ecclesiology of John Henry Cardinal Newman noting in particular his theology of the laity. The Council,

in Paul's estimation, was 'Newman's Hour.' (8) Certainly, Newman's understanding of the laity's inerrant *Sense of the Faith* is strongly echoed at the Second Vatican Council in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church:

"The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One, cannot err in matters of belief.

They manifest this special property by means of the whole people's supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals." - *Lumen Gentium* # 12. a, b.

In his 1859 treatise, "On Consulting the Laity in Matters of Faith," Newman graphically illustrated the role of the laity in preserving the integrity of the Faith during the Arian schism. Newman went so far as to insist at the Nicene Creed owed its existence to the faith of the laity who withstood the power, manipulation and propaganda of the Arian majority among the bishops.

"The episcopate, whose action was so prompt and concordant at Nicaea on the rise of Arianism, did not, as a class or order of men, play a good part in the troubles consequent upon the Council, and the laity did. The Catholic people, in the length and breadth of Christendom, were the obstinate champions of Catholic truth, and the bishops were not.

Speaking of the laity, I speak inclusively of their parish priest (so to call them), at least in many places; but on the whole, taking a wide view of history, we are obliged to say that the governing body of the Church came short, and the governed were pre-eminent in faith, zeal, courage and constancy." – Arians in the Fourth Century. (9)

The Creed of Nicaea which was completed and affirmed at the Council of Constantinople in 381 CE marked the turning point in Christianity's understanding of the Trinitarian God and Jesus Christ both divine and human.

Some concluding thoughts from Pope Francis

Pope Francis is very much in tune with the theology and the history of *synods* in the Church. He is also convinced that the way forward for the Church health and equilibrium is for representatives of the whole Catholic community to gather in Synod. It is in that context that the *Sensus Fidei Fidelium* engages most effectively and authentically. He made this perfectly clear in his address to the Italian Bishops Conference in Florence, November 10, 2010:

"Although it is not for me to say how to accomplish this dream today, allow me to leave you just one indication for the coming years: in every community, in every parish and institution, in every diocese and circumscription, in every region, try to launch, in a synodal fashion, a deep reflection on the *Evangelii Gaudium*, to draw from it practical parameters and to launch its dispositions, especially on the three or four priorities that you will identify in this meeting... .. Closeness to the people and prayer are the key to living a popular, humble, generous and happy Christian humanism. If we lose this contact with the

faithful People of God, we lose humanity and we go nowhere. I read recently of a bishop who told that he was on the subway at rush hour and there were so many people that he did not know where to put his hand to brace himself. Being pushed right and left, he leaned against people in order not to fall. And thus he thought that, other than prayer, *what keeps a bishop on his feet is his people.*” (10)

Catholics are encouraged and commissioned to recreate an open, adult, synodal Church and to do so with commitment, passion, energy and confidence. Holding regular local synods is reasonable and achievable. It is not only native to the Church’s identity, self-understanding and memory, it is essential to its survival, just as it was at Nicaea.

Endnotes

- 1) Janet Thomas “The Effects of the Diocletian Persecution on Early Christianity,” *Pagans, Christians and Jews in the Roman Empire. Criticisms of Early Christianity*, May 2912. Online source (Linked [HERE](#)); *Edict of Diocletian* Eusebius quotes (Linked [HERE](#))
- 2) “The Battle of the Milvian Bridge,” *History Today online* (Linked [HERE](#)) Edict of Milan, W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984) 484-505.
- 3) The Edict of Milan, 313: Lactantius, *De Mort. Pers.*, ch. 48. opera, *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European history*, (Philadelphia, University of Pennsylvania Press [1897?-1907?]), Vol 4:, 1, pp. 28-30.
- 4) David Timbs, *The Jesus Movement Part VII: The Third Century*, 6-7. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 5) D.K. Jordan, *Major Christian Heresies*. Christian Documents Index online. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 6) Fragments of Philostorgios, *Epitome* (Linked [HERE](#)); See also Christopher Hall, “How Arianism almost Won,” *Christian History Magazine* (online), 2002 (Linked [HERE](#)); See also, “Poisonous songs of Arius,” *Mystagogy* (Linked [HERE](#))
- 7) *Church History* 1. VI: See a description in 1.6 of many bishops who constituted the membership of the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 8) Paul VI’s Address to Newman Scholars, “Cardinal Newman’s thought and example relevant today,” *The Newman Rambler* 1975. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 9) John Henry Newman, “On Consulting the Laity on Matters of Doctrine,” *Newman Reader. Rambler*, 1859.(Linked [HERE](#)); See also, David Timbs, “The Reinvention of the Fisherman,” *OMG. A Journal of Religion and Culture*, 2014. (Linked [HERE](#))
- 10) MEETING WITH THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE FIFTH CONVENTION OF THE ITALIAN CHURCH. ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER , *Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, Florence, Tuesday, 10 November 2015* (Linked [HERE](#))

For when there’s more time:

- History of Christianity’s first one thousand Years (303 minutes, Linked [HERE](#))
- See short pieces on *Donatism* and *Arianism* in the online series, *Early Church History 101* (Linked [HERE](#))

- The Greek, Latin and English texts of the Nicene Creed 325 CE agreed and confirmed at Council of Constantinople in 381 CE (Linked [HERE](#))
- David Timbs, “From Plato to the Periphery,” *OMG. A Journal of Religion and Culture*, October 2015. (Linked [HERE](#))
- John Thavis, “We priests tend to clericalize the laity. We do not realize it, but it is as if we infect them with our own disease. And the laity — not all, but many — ask us on their knees to clericalize them, because it is more comfortable to be an altar server than the protagonist of a lay path. We cannot fall into that trap — it is a sinful complicity.” “Pope Francis on the risk of a ‘babysitter’ Church,” *The Blog*, April 17, 2013. (Linked [HERE](#))
- *The Newman Rambler. Faith, Culture and the Academy*, 11 (Winter, 2014) 1. (Linked [HERE](#))

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