

The first ecumenical council, known as the Council of Nicaea, is still accepted as authoritative by the Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church, and many Protestant denominations. The common beliefs still offer a strong element of unity in an otherwise fractured Christianity 1,700 years later.

During the council, the bishops established the initial formulation of the Nicene Creed, which is the profession of faith still recited at the Catholic Mass, Orthodox liturgies, and some Protestant services. It also rejected heretical Arian claims that Christ was a created being who lacked an eternal divine nature and rather confirmed that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father.

The council was called by Emperor Constantine — a convert to Christianity — less than 15 years after the empire halted the persecution of Christians and granted them the freedom to worship. It came just 20 years after the reign of Emperor Diocletian, who brutally persecuted Christians for their rejection of paganism.

“That council represents a fundamental stage in the development of the creed shared by all the Churches and ecclesial communities,” Pope Leo XIV said two weeks ago, acknowledging the 1,700th anniversary.

“While we are on the path towards the reestablishment of full communion among all Christians, we recognize that this unity can only be unity in faith,” the pontiff said.

#### The Arian heresy

The primary purpose of the council was to settle a major question about Christ’s divine nature and address Arianism, which was a heresy promoted by the priest Arius asserting that Jesus Christ was a created being and not eTrending

Pope Leo XIV: ‘The gravest form of poverty is not to know God’

The language adopted at Nicaea expressly contradicted Arius, affirming Christ is “true God from true God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father.” It condemned Arius’ view as heresy. The vote was nearly unanimous with more than 300 bishops voting in favor of this text and only two siding with Arius.

St. Athanasius, one of the most outspoken opponents of Arianism at the council and in its aftermath, wrote in his First Discourse Against the Arians in the mid-fourth century that “the Scriptures declare the Son’s eternity.”

#### Unifying the Church in the fourth century

Prior to the Council of Nicaea, bishops in the Church held many synods and councils to settle disputes that arose within Christianity.

This includes the Council of Jerusalem, which was an apostolic council detailed in Acts 15, and many local councils that did not represent the entire Church. Regional councils “have a kind of binding authority — but they’re not global,” according to Thomas Clemmons, a professor of Church history at The Catholic University of America.

When the Roman Empire halted its Christian persecution and Emperor Constantine converted to the faith, this allowed “the opportunity to have a more broad, ecumenical council,” Clemmons told CNA. Constantine embraced Christianity more than a decade before the council, though he was not actually baptized until moments before his death in A.D. 337.

Constantine saw a need for “a certain sense of unity,” he said, at a time with theological disputes, debates about the date of Easter, conflicts about episcopal jurisdictions, and canon law questions.

“His role was to unify and to have [those] other issues worked out,” Clemmons said.

The pursuit of unity helped produce the Nicene Creed, which Clemmons said “helps to clarify what more familiar scriptural language doesn’t.”

Neither the council nor the creed was universally adopted immediately. Clemmons noted that it was more quickly adopted in the East but took longer in the West. There were several attempts to overturn the council, but Clemmons said “it’s later tradition that will affirm it.”

“I don’t know if the significance of it was understood [at the time],” he said.

The dispute between Arians and defenders of Nicaea were tense for the next half century, with some emperors backing the creed and others backing Arianism. Ultimately, Clemmons said, the creed “convinces people over many decades but without the imperial enforcement you would expect.”

It was not until 380 when Emperor Theodosius declared that Nicene Christianity was the official religion of the Roman Empire. One year later, at the First Council of Constantinople, the Church reaffirmed the Council of Nicaea and updated the Nicene Creed by adding text about the Holy Spirit and the Church.