

Nicene anathema: “Those who say: there was a time when He was not, and He was not before He was begotten, and that He was made out of nothing, or who say that He is of another *hypostasis* or another substance, or that the Son of God is created or is susceptible of change or alteration, [them] the Catholic and Apostolic Church anathematizes.”

Easter regulation. The Council also confirmed Pope Victor’s regulation in, favor of the Sunday observance of Easter, though differences would long persist as to the proper Sunday. The text of the conciliar decision is no longer extant, but Nicea seems to have laid down the principle of celebrating a uniform Sunday following the first full moon after the vernal equinox.

Meletian negotiations. The Council tried to heal the schism that Meletius of Lycopolis and 29 bishops had been maintaining against the patriarchs of Alexandria. The Council’s efforts were but partially successful, and the schismatics later joined forces with the Arians.

Disciplinary canons, nucleus of the first universal code of ecclesiastical legislation, were also enacted by Nicea. A brief analysis of these twenty canons follows.

Clerical promotion was more carefully scrutinized. Self-mutilation, such as practiced by Origen would bar a layman from ordination and disqualify a cleric from exercising his functions (canon 1); catechumens ought not to be hastily ordained or consecrated (canon 2); bishops shall be chosen by the other bishops of the province, consecrated by three of them, and installed by the metropolitan (canon 4).

Clerical discipline. Suspicious women were banned from clerical residences (canon 3); no universal law of celibacy, however, was laid down by the Council at the remonstrance of Bishop Paphnutius. Canon 17, inflicted deposition upon clerics guilty of simony and usury, while canon 18 warned deacons to yield precedence to bishops and priests.

Episcopal jurisdiction was more clearly defined. Canon 6 recognized as of ancient tradition the patriarchal rights of the bishops of Rome, Alexandria, and Antioch. All their suffragans were subject to their supervision, “since this is also the custom of the Bishop of Rome.” The bishop of Jerusalem, if as yet denied patriarchal status, was awarded special honor (canon 7). Those excommunicated by one bishop are not to be absolved by another; provincial councils will examine the justice of censures (canon 5). Clerics must not pass from one diocese to another, under pain of deposition or suspension (canons 15, 16).

Penitential discipline. Novatianist clerics may retain their status or return to the Church after a written profession of faith and reception of penance (canon 8). But clerics hastily and rashly promoted, or those who lapsed in persecution are to be deposed (canons 9, 10). Recent apostates under Licinius shall, according to the degree of their guilt, do penance for twelve or

thirteen years (canons 11, 12). Viaticum ought never be denied to the dying, though in case they recover, they must complete their public penance (canon 13). Lapsed catechumens shall perform three years’ penance (canon 14). Paulianists-followers of Paul of Samosata-must be rebaptized on conversion, since their Trinitarian formula is defective (canon 19). Whereas kneeling is a sign of penance, the faithful shall stand at Mass on Sundays and during Paschal Time, days of rejoicing (canon 20).

3) RESULTS OF THE COUNCIL

Arian insincerity. Of the estimated twenty-two Arians in the Nicene Council, only Theonas of Marmarica and Secundus of Ptolemais had dared dissent in the assembly itself, though Eusebius of Nicomedia and others soon repudiated their signatures. In the fall of 325 the emperor declared them deposed, and they were exiled to Gaul until 328 when the politic Eusebius obtained their recall. Meanwhile other Arians protested that force had been used to secure their compliance at Nicea. All these meditated revenge.

Semi-Arian hesitation. The uncompromising *homoousios* of Nicea had not been relished by Eusebius of Caesarea and other cautious prelates. It has been noted that the Paulianist sense of the term still disturbed many. Another source of difficulty arose from translation of Tertullian’s Trinitarian formula, una *substantialis tres personae*. For unfortunately the Greek *hypostasis*, etymologically the same as *substantiate* stand under or support-and equated with it in the Nicene anathema, was taken by some to signify “Person,” a meaning that eventually prevailed. Conscientious Catholics could easily be alarmed by expressions lacking in precision, while malicious dialecticians could exploit the confusion. Finally, suspicions were entertained of the orthodoxy of one of the Catholic champions, Marcellus of Ancyra; indeed, whatever his personal good faith, his views on the Incarnation were justly questioned.

Catholic victory, therefore, would be delayed. General acceptance of the Nicene definition would be opposed by the intrigues of heretics, by the scruples of the well-meaning, the rivalries of personalities, the linguistic and cultural differences of Latin West and Byzantine East, and perhaps most of all by imperial meddling, the willful obstinacy and crass stupidity of caesars who insisted on playing pope.



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Arian Doctrinal Crisis

A. Arian Origins

1) THEOLOGICAL SOURCE

Rival schools. During the third century Alexandria and Antioch developed divergent catechetical-exegetical schools. The Alexandrian academy, tending toward Platonic idealism, stressed the allegorical sense of Scripture. Its great doctor, Origen, at least gave the impression of subordinationism: the Son is somehow a lesser partner in the Trinity. Even more serious in this instance was the somewhat rationalizing tendency of the Antiochian school with its emphasis on the rigidly literal sense of Scripture. For its leaders, Paul and Lucian of Samosata, seem to have denied any true divinity to Christ. Both environments, then, were susceptible to doctrinal error.

Paul of Samosata, patriarch of Antioch from 260 to 270, had taught, it will be recalled, that there is but one divine person with three quasifaculties. Jesus, he said, was but a superior creature, though the Logos might be termed homobusion: consubstantial to the Father in the sense that he was personally identified with him. Paul’s teaching, together with his use of *homodousios* in the sense of a merely logical distinction among the divine persons had been condemned by the Council of Antioch about 269. But a few years earlier Pope St. Denis of Rome had criticized St. Denis of Alexandria for not saying that the Son was “of the Father’s substance,” in the sense of essential, not personal, identity.

Lucian of Sarnosata, a priest of Paul’s diocese, had been influenced by his bishop’s views. He was excommunicated with him and founded an exegetical school which edited a corrected copy of the Septuagint. His theological works are largely lost, but he is reported to have preserved much of Paul’s teaching in his extant writings, his famous Creed noted hereafter, he is guilty chiefly of ambiguous expressions. Apparently he was in good faith, for in 302 Patriarch Tyrannius readmitted him to communion at Antioch. Finally his martyrdom during Maximin’s persecution cast the halo of sanctity over Arianism’s unwitting founder.

Arius the Libyan (256-337), along with Eusebius, the future bishop of Nicomedia, formed part of the “co-Lucianist” school. He was a man of ascetical appearance, considerable learning, and trenchant dialectical skill. Though his superficial manner was charming, he is also described as proud, ambitious, and stubborn. While in the ranks of the minor clergy he was involved in the Meletian Schism and several times censured before his ordination to the priesthood. He was named pastor of Baucalis by Patriarch Alexander of Alexandria about 313.

Arianism. Arius’s own plaintive defense of his teaching to

Eusebius of Nicomedia cannot conceal his basic denial of the Son's divinity: "The Son is not begotten, nor part of the Unbegotten in any way; not drawn from a pre-existing subject, but by the will and design (of the Father) begins to be before times and ages, perfect God, unique Son, unchangeable; before being begotten, created, decreed, or founded, he did not exist, for he was not unbegotten - see for what they are persecuting us." In vain, however, does Arius lavish perfections on the Son, if he denies him divine eternal existence. Proceeding from a "monarchian" presupposition, Arius insisted that because there is but one God, He cannot communicate His being, since this would imply that He is divisible. Hence the Word must be outside of God and created. Though Arius made the Word an instrument of divine creation, intermediate between God and the world, he conceded him merely an adopted divine filiation: he is perfect only in a relative sense. Catholics who maintained the divinity of all three Persons of the Trinity were accused of Modalism or Tritheism by the Arians.

2) HISTORIC MANIFESTATION

Initial proposition. About 319, according to Socrates (*History*, I, 5), Arius took issue with Patriarch Alexander about Trinitarian theology: "Bishop Alexander of Alexandria one day spoke in the presence of his priests and clergy of the mystery of the Trinity, and insisted especially on the unity in the Trinity, and philosophizing on this grave subject, believed that he was gaining boner by his argument. But Arius, eager for debate, professed to find Sabellianism in the bishop's doctrine. He opposed it strongly, asserting that if the Father had begotten the Son, he who was begotten had a beginning of his being and therefore there was a time when he could not have been; and that it also followed that the Son derived his beginning from nothing." During this seemingly academic discussion Arianism or Collucianist subordinationism made its debut.

Spread of doctrine. Arius thereupon propounded his own theories openly in his parochial church. The patriarch admonished him and arranged debates with defenders of orthodoxy. These only gave Arius an opportunity to display his dialectical skill and to build up a party. St. Athanasius, deacon and secretary to Bishop Alexander, is reported to have induced the hesitant patriarch at length to take disciplinary action.

3) LOCAL CONDEMNATION

The Council of Alexandria, formerly assigned to 320-21, may have convened as late as the spring of 323. Arius was cited to give an account of his teachings. After two lengthy sessions the council of nearly a hundred suffragan bishops agreed to condemn them. Anathema was pronounced on Arius, Bishops Secundus of Ptolemais and Theonas of Marmarica, six priests and six deacons; later the same penalty was imposed on two more priests and four deacons. Patriarch Alexander reported in an encyclical the following condemned propositions ascribed to Arius: "(1) God was not always Father; there was a time when He was not Father.

(2) The Logos of God has not always been; He was created from nothing; God the self-existent created from nothing him who is not self-existent. (3) Consequently there was a time when He was not; for (4) the Son is a creature, fashioned and made. (5) He is not of the same substance as the Father; He is not truly and according to His nature the Word and Wisdom of God, but one of the works and creatures of God. Only by an abuse is He called Logos; He was created by the true Logos and inner Wisdom of God. (6) Thus it is that by nature He is subject to change. (7) He is a stranger to the divine substance and differs from it; He does not know God perfectly; He does not even know His own nature perfectly. (8) He was created for us so that God might create us by Him as His instrument; and He would not have existed had He not been called into existence by God through love for us."

Arian disorders continued. At the invitation of both Eusebius his Collucianist classmate of Nicomedia, and the historian of Caesarea, Arius rallied supporters by meetings in both cities. Emboldened to return to Alexandria, he spread his teachings by the *Thalia*, popular ditties set to music. Things had reached the riot stage when Constantine intervened. At his request, Hosius of Cordova visited Alexandria in 324. While he healed minor rifts, he could report no progress in the Arian dispute. The same year a council at Antioch, assembled to elect St. Eustathius bishop, sustained Alexander and denounced Arius. Probably on the recommendation of these bishops the emperor announced a general council and placed the public post at the hierarchy's disposal.

B. Nicene Condemnation

1) CONCILIAR DELIBERATION

The Council of Nicea (325) is the first ecumenical council of the Church according to the common reckoning, although the Apostolic Council of Jerusalem (50) might have some claim to that title. Although Pope St. Sylvester "failed to attend because of his advanced age, his priests were there and filled his place" (Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, III, 7). The Roman priests Vitus and Vincent assisted Bishop Hosius of Cordova who acted as chief legate. The council was attended by 318 bishops according to St. Athanasius; Bishops Hosius and Caecilian of Carthage were the chief Western prelates in a predominantly oriental assembly.

Convocation. Episcopal deliberations commenced on May 20, though the emperor made a state entry on June 14. Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea delivered a brief and laudatory address of welcome, to which Constantine replied by a moderate discourse in favor of harmony, pledging his support to the conciliar deliberations. Though he continued to attend and interpose in favor of unity, Constantine left the work of the council to the clergy.

Arian repudiation. Only some twelve to twenty-two of the bishops were Arian partisans. Arius himself presented his views so bluntly that thereafter there remained little argument about his errors. The principal discussion rather concerned the precise theological term to be used for enunciating the Catholic dogma.

The watered down Arian formula of Eusebius of Nicomedia was rejected. So also was the vague but orthodox version of Eusebius of Caesarea, though the Creed of his church may have furnished the general framework for the subsequent Nicene Creed. The crucial and controversial word eventually adopted was *homobusios*: the Son is "consubstantial" to the Father. Most of the Orientals had qualms about this expression because of its Paulianist connotation condemned at Antioch. But the Latins had no such misgivings, for Pope St. Denis had used the term in an orthodox sense. "The word was Roman: had not Pope Denis rebuked Denis of Alexandria for making use of it? The word had been chosen to express the divine unity, the substantial unity: it proved most apt to complete the formula, *ek tes tou Patros ousias*, by placing the stress on the coeternity of the Son. Alexander of Alexandria could not gainsay it; it is not likely that he proposed it. Hosius alone was in a position to propose and guarantee it; the acceptance of the word by the Council of Nicea is a sign of Hosius's authority and more precisely of the Church of Rome whose spokesman he was." Eustathius of Antioch and Marcellus of Ancyra seconded the proposed formula, which passed into the Creed by the votes of all bishops except two, Theonas and Secundus. But soon after the Council, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Theognis of Nicea, and Maris of Chalcedon repudiated their signatures, while other bishops, including Eusebius of Caesarea, qualified their acceptance. Arius of course refused to accept a term which, on his part, St. Athanasius endorsed and ever after defended.

Closing of the council coincided with the twentieth anniversary of Constantine's reign, possibly July 25. The emperor provided the bishops with a banquet, endorsed the conciliar decrees, and exiled dissenters. The 228 extant signatures are headed by Hosius, Vitus, and Vincent for the pope; then only follow Alexander of Alexandria, Macarius of Jerusalem, Eustathius of Antioch and their suffragans (Mansi, II, 692). Though there is no explicit record of St. Sylvester's own ratification, in 340 his successor Pope Julius implies it in asserting that the decrees "are not to be reversed" (St. Athanasius, *Apology*, 21, 35). Doctrinally the case against the Arians was complete, but theological subtleties and political intrigues would prolong the controversy.

2) CONCILIAR DECREE

Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker of all things visible and invisible; and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is of the substance of the Father (*ek tes ousias tou Patros*), God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten not made, of the same substance with the Father (*homo-dusion to Patri*), through whom all things were made both in heaven 'and on earth; who for us men and for our salvation descended, became incarnate, and was made man, suffered and rose again the third day, ascended into heaven, and will come to judge the living and the dead; and in the Holy Ghost."