

December 10, 2006

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the popularity of *The Da Vinci Code* has recently made the Council of Nicaea familiar to a greater number of people, it has also caused that ancient council to be more generally misunderstood. Indeed, many folks nowadays seem to have accepted at face value the notion that the bishops at Nicaea in 325 actually debated and "voted on" the divinity of Jesus and that the "ayes" carried the day by only a slim majority. Until that point, *The Da Vinci Code* would have us believe, the Church did not believe in the divinity of Christ, or it was at least a disputed question. Nicaea, we are told, settled the matter, giving Christianity a new direction in history.

In fact, nothing of the sort happened at Nicaea. There was no debate about--or vote on--the divinity of Christ at that council, because the conciliar Fathers recognized that the divinity of Christ was already established in the common teaching of the Church and recorded in the pages of the New Testament.

What the Fathers of Nicaea voted on was not the divinity of Christ but the teaching of the priest Arius, who had recently promulgated the idea that God's Son, who assumed our humanity in Jesus, had not been God's Son from all eternity. There was God the Father before there was the Son, said Arius; the Father and the Son were two separate beings, the One prior to the Other.

The question before the council was whether or not this novel teaching of Arius was compatible with what the Apostles taught in their preaching and their Gospels and Epistles found in the New Testament. Jesus was not the matter of debate at Nicaea. Arius was.

The bishops at Nicaea looked carefully at what Arius had published and then asked themselves a simple question, "Are these ideas of Arius compatible with what we find in the tradition and writings of the Apostles?" And they answered, after some animated deliberation, "Well, actually, no. In fact, heck no, we'll be darned if they are."

The reasoning at Nicaea went like this: In Jesus of Nazareth we recognize God's Son. This is why we address God as Father, just as Jesus taught us.

If, as Arius said, there was a time when God did not have a Son--some point after which God *became* the Father--one of two things had to happen. Either God was essentially, inwardly changed (which Nicaea recognized to be impossible), or the Father created the Son. If it was the latter case, then the Son is a created being, of a nature different from God, a being outside of God, a creature not essentially different from the rest of creation.

Now this was a very serious inference, the Nicene Fathers continued to reflect, because a great deal was at stake. If this Son is just another creature different from and outside of God, a creature pretty much like ourselves, then we human beings are still in our sins, because the death and resurrection of Jesus could not have saved us. According to the New Testament, after all, our redemption was "expiated," was "purchased," by the blood of Jesus (Romans 3:25; 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:14,20; 1Peter 1:19; Revelation 5:9). Now, if our redemption was something purchased, surely no one but God could pay the price. The very name Jesus means "the Lord saves." The Nicene Fathers perceived, then, that the teaching of Arius touched on the matter of our redemption. This is why they made sure to say that God's Son "became man for us men and for our salvation."

God and Jesus, therefore, are distinct (since the Father sent the Son), but they are not separable. Since there was never God the Father without His Son, then the Son must be as eternal as the Father. Otherwise, the Son would essentially be a creature, someone who had not existed before God made him. That, said Nicaea, is what the Apostles taught, and that was the reason the priest Arius was dead wrong.

To express their condemnation of Arius on this point, the Fathers at Nicaea formulated a new expression, saying that the Father and the Son are not two different beings. They are not separable. They are "of the same being"--*homoousios* in the Greek language that they used at the council. There can be no God the Father, they declared, without God the Son; otherwise the Father is not really the Father.

It is important to observe that the use of the word *homoousios* did not "clarify" anything about God. It added no new light or intelligibility to what was already revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. The purpose of dogmatic definitions is not to throw further light on what is, after all, the fullness of revealed truth. The purpose of dogmatic definitions is, rather, to confound heretics. Dogma serves to "focus" revelation in the sense of

declaring what is "not in line" with revelation. Of itself, however, a dogma adds nothing new. Hence, it is wrong to imagine that Nicaea's declaration clarified revealed truth. It did not. Nicaea told us absolutely nothing beyond what the Apostles had declared. Indeed, the Nicene Fathers went to some lengths to insist on this point.

After all, what is this "being"--this *ousia*--of God, this "divinity" common to the Father and the Son? Or, to phrase the question differently, in what sense is the Son "begotten" of the Father? The Fathers of Nicaea had no more idea on this matter than we do. Nor did the Apostles. No amount of thinking can "clarify" these things. This is why the conciliar declaration against Arius was an apophatic or negative assertion. The council could not elucidate the "being" of God or the "generation" of the Son, beyond what Jesus Himself had declared, "I and the Father are one."

The council Fathers could, however, condemn that devilish Arius as a heretic, and this they gladly did with that smack of gusto called an "anathema."

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**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
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