

Sunday Sermon – 2015-05-24 – Sunday of the 1st & 2nd Ecumenical Councils

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In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Amen.

For almost 300 years, there was wave after wave of persecution against the followers of Jesus Christ. February 23, 303, saw the celebration of the Terminalia in the Roman Empire – the day pagans boasted they would put an end to Christianity. During this festival, because of the encouragement of Galerius Caesar, the emperor Diocletian issued an edict ordering the destruction of the newly built Christian church in Nicomedia. The city prefect went to the church with many officers and assistants and forced open the doors, removed all of the sacred books and burned them, confiscated the treasury, then leveled the building itself, all while Diocletian and Galerius observed. Following this, a general edict was issued for the entire empire, commanding the destruction of all Christian churches and texts, along with naming all Christians as outlaws.

In Nicomedia, all Christians were being rounded up and imprisoned and Galerius privately ordered the imperial palace to be set on fire and accused the Christians of the crime so as to persecute them with greater severity. Executions began immediately and no distinction was made for age or gender – all Christians were being slain equally in various torturous ways. Houses were set on fire, whole families were burned alive and others had stones placed around their necks, tied together and forced into the sea. Although the entire empire received the edict, the most action was seen in the East. The Christian city of Phrygia was set ablaze and the entire population perished.

The other two members of the Tetrarchy, Constantius I and Maximianus Caesar, were less draconian about the attempt to return the empire to the golden days of paganism. They were still involved in issuing and carrying out edicts against Christians, but only this first edict was enforced in the West, where Christians were stripped of their belongings and treated as criminals.

During the summer of 303, rebellions began to break out in Melitene and Syria, and Diocletian issued a second edict. This one ordered the arrest and imprisonment of all bishops and priests. Technically, it wasn't necessary, since the first edict still covered the clergy, but Diocletian may have issued it because the extermination of the religion wasn't happening quickly enough. The second edict was so successful that the prisons were overflowing with clergy, and the other prisoners had to be released to make

room. In November, Diocletian was approaching his 20th regnal year and apparently needed some goodwill. He issued the third edict, this one declaring a general amnesty for any imprisoned Christian clergy who would make a sacrifice to the Roman gods. This worked to clear out some of the prisons, but there were still problems. This led to the fourth edict, possibly in January or February 304, where all Christian prisoners were called to the public square for a mass sacrifice to the gods. Those who refused were executed. The Balkans rolled out the edict in March, Thessalonica in April and Palestine soon after. This last edict wasn't enforced at all in the West under Maximianus or Constantius.

In May of 305, Diocletian and Maximianus retired, promoting Galerius and Constantius from caesar to augustus and Severus II and Maximinus II were elevated to co-caesar. Galerius and Maximinus continued the persecutions with great enthusiasm in the East, but in the West there was discontent in the Court. Maxentius, son of Maximianus and Constantine I, son of Constantius I, were both angry about being passed over for the position of caesar. Constantius was on campaign in Britain against the Picts in 305-306 and went to Eboracum for the winter after his success in January. In July of 306, Constantius died and named Constantine as his successor, to the dismay of Galerius. Constantine immediately ended the persecutions in the West and returned all seizures to their owners in his part of the empire. By doing so, Constantine portrayed himself as the liberator of Christians. Maxentius was at work doing the same – he seized power in Rome in October 306 and issued a tolerance of Christianity in his sphere of influence.

Galerius made two attempts at overthrowing Maxentius, both of which failed. During the first campaign, Severus was captured and executed. Galerius still continued with persecutions in the East until he was on his deathbed in 311, where he finally issued a proclamation to give Christians the right to exist freely and to have peaceful assembly. Even so, Maximinus was not to be deterred. Months later, he renewed persecutions in his part of the empire and continued for two more years, until co-augusti, Licinius and Constantine, met in Milan in February 313, and issued the terms of universal peace, known as the Edict of Milan. When Maximinus was defeated by Licinius in April 313 and finally died in August, it ended 10 years of the most brutal and widespread actions against Christians during the entire period of the Roman Empire.

Earlier this week (May 21) our church celebrated the memory of the Roman Emperor Constantine and his mother Helen. Today our church celebrates the first two

Ecumenical Councils. The best account we have of the First Ecumenical Council is by Eusebius of Caesarea who was a bishop and an historian during the time of Constantine the Great. He tells us that many of the bishops who came to that first council were lame and blind from the tortures they had undergone during the time of persecution. The Emperor Constantine, without guards or fanfare, entered the great hall where all the bishops, priests, deacons and lay people sat, and before taking his place at the throne, he told them to be seated.

Constantine the Great came in with a minimum of pomp, and in his brief address he did no more than welcome the bishops, exhort them to peaceful conference, and admit that the spectacle of "sedition" (meaning division) within the Church caused him more anxiety than any battle. Though he called the council and provided for the travel expenses for everyone who came from across the empire, he did not vote or participate beyond that.

Afterwards, we can see that though he understood and supported the Orthodox view, which dominated the council, he was greatly influenced politically by those who supported Arius. Until the Second Ecumenical Council in Constantinople, it often looked as though Arianism would win out over Orthodoxy as the dominant view in the Byzantine Empire. Arius, through his lies and political connections, was able to have Orthodox bishops deposed by the emperor and even had the emperor himself reinstate him. Arius died on the way to his reinstatement, by some accounts in great pain, and Constantine himself died soon thereafter.

Constantine's sons favored the Arian party and also continued the policy of deposing Orthodox bishops "who wouldn't compromise". Julian the Apostate went so far as to try to bring back paganism and persecuted both Orthodox and Arian alike. For a time, all seemed lost for those who stood for the truth of Orthodoxy Christianity.

The Second Ecumenical Council held in Constantinople in 381 AD, was called by the Emperor Theodosios. It sealed and confirmed the proceedings of the First Council and added to them the rest of the Creed regarding the Holy Spirit, the Church, Baptism and Eternal Life. From this time on, Arianism began a steep decline. Other heresies popped up from time to time and were addressed at subsequent councils, both ecumenical and local. From this time forward however, the Creed as we know it became the statement of faith of all Christendom.

Can you imagine being one of those who had suffered for your faith during the time of persecution, coming to that first gathering of the universal church, seeing the faith you were willing to die for be declared...only to then see it undermined by the state? *“Why God? Why did I suffer for You only to have that heretic Arius and his followers win out?”* Many of these faithful actually died thinking that Arius had won and that true believing Orthodox were again to be persecuted for their faith. This second persecution was worse, at least spiritually speaking, than the first.

Aren't there times like this in each of our lives? Aren't there times when we take a stand for what we know to be right and end up suffering for it or thinking that it is a hopeless cause? Should we give in? Imagine if Sts. Basil, Athanasios, Gregory, Chrysostom, etc. gave in where we would be today?

God wants us to stand with correct knowledge, with strong courage and commitment for Him. Our posted Sunday service times are: Orthros at 9 AM and Divine Liturgy at 10 AM. Many visitors see our start time posted and show up at either 9 or 10 AM...then wonder where the rest of the congregation is. Nearly 2000 years after Christ and more than 1600 since these first two great councils of the church, we are still standing on the same firm theological foundation. Wouldn't it be great to see most of our people putting feet to that faith by actually showing up on time for our services?

Will this faith still be here for the next generation, the one after that or in another thousand years? It will...if you take up your spiritual torch, educate yourself, your children and others, and make sure that that torch gets passed on. It is the Holy Spirit working in and through the Church, working in and through you and me that gives us the wisdom to know and the courage to stand for the truth of God. You need to begin by asking the Holy Spirit to come into your life, to illumine your mind and your soul, and to work the miracle of passing on the faith of Jesus Christ, of the Apostles, of our pious fathers and mothers to successive generations.

We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses (pointing to icons of saints around the nave). Let us not disappoint them...and most especially, let us not disappoint those who suffered so much for our sake and for their faith in God.

To God be the glory, now and forever, and to the ages of ages, Amen.