



Ctírad Václav POSPÍŠIL:
První nikajský koncil (325–2025)
[The First Council of Nicaea (325–2025)]
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A Catholic priest and a professor of theology, C. V. Pospíšil, died at the age of 67 on May 18, 2025, that is, during the year in which the Church celebrated the 1,700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea, the first ecumenical council in its history. The reviewed monograph is Professor Pospíšil's final book, and it can be understood as a sort of farewell to his readers. He must have known all too well that he had fallen ill with a serious disease which left him little hope of remaining with us for very long. Pospíšil wrote standard works on Christology and Trinitarian theology, which in the Czech context now serve as valuable manuals on post-conciliar dogmatic theology. In addition to authoring many other works of his own, he also translated Church documents, especially those published by the International Theological Commission. While being faithful to the Church's magisterium, he was always committed to an honest and systematic reflection.

Knowing that the monograph in question was going to be viewed as his legacy, he intentionally conceived it not only as a scholarly analysis but also as a devotional work. He dedicated it to the memory of Josef Toufar, a priest tortured to death by the communist secret police (Státní bezpečnost or, for short, StB), wording the said dedication as follows: "on the 75th anniversary of his martyrdom, in the hope of his speedy beatification."

The book is divided into two parts: the first half consists of the author's own analysis, the second is a compilation of available documents related to the council, although the complete council proceedings have not been preserved.

The author first introduces readers to the key figures who, in one way or another, were instrumental in the developments that gradually led to the convening of the Council of Nicaea, some of whom were also its direct participants: Constantine the Great, Arius, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Eusebius of Caesarea, Alexander of Alexandria, Athanasius, Eustathius of Antioch, Marcellus of Ancyra, and Hosius of Corduba. From a linguistic perspective, it is noteworthy that Pospíšil consistently uses Greek transcriptions of Greek-language names; for example, instead of the common "Arius," he writes "Areios," and instead of the Czech "Atanáš," he writes "Athanasios."

The account of the biographical events and the positions of the individual figures is very vivid, showing the reader the gradual process that led to the need to convene the council, as well as the intentions of those who fought for an accurate expression of the content of the Christian faith, and, of course, those who acted opportunistically and cowardly. Among the latter, Constantine's "personal" bishop, Eusebius of Nicomedia, stands out in particular; he did not shy away from disgraceful intrigues even before the emperor, for example, the intrigues aimed at Eustathius of Antioch, "when he presented a pregnant prostitute who claimed that the child was Eustathius's offspring" (p. 33). Together with Arius (Areios) himself, Eusebius was the instigator of the Christological controversy that so rocked the Church of that time.

Although Pospíšil's book is primarily concerned with systematic theology, it contains numerous references to the legal aspects at the council. This is also the case with the famous Edict of Milan issued by Constantine, which granted freedom to Christians. However, Pospíšil states the following: "Scholars are quite divided on the legal nature of the document. In terms of its specific historical impact, however, the matter is largely secondary. The commonly used term 'edict' is, strictly speaking, incorrect" (p. 14, note 4), while the author himself suggests alternatives such as "the Milan Proclamation, Declaration, or Decree."

Catholic Christians, familiar with the legal provisions for the celebration of an ecumenical council under the current Code of Canon Law, must be aware that the recent legal provisions are a reflection and summary of the practice of the Catholic Church as it developed over the second

millennium. In the case of the Council of Nicaea, however, one must recognize that the one who summoned it was Emperor Constantine. In fact, this was not the first ecclesiastical assembly he had convened; his involvement in the synod at Arles in 314, which addressed the Donatist schism, is well documented. Constantine was also very closely associated with a bishop from the Christian West, Hosius of Corduba, “as his advisor or almost a minister for ecclesiastical affairs” (p. 40). The author points out that Constantine is venerated as a saint only in the East, while the Christian West also reveres his mother, St. Helena. However, both rulers gradually succumbed to Arianism (p. 17). In addition to the interventions of state authorities and the church hierarchy, the author’s narrative also reveals the *sensus fidelium* of the Christian faithful. According to Arius, “his own parishioners were supposed to have complained about him, because he preached about Jesus Christ as a created being” (p. 18).

Due to the impact of Eusebius of Nicomedia, the Goths stayed Arian for a long time. Wulfila, one of the founders of Christianity among the Goths, was consecrated as bishop by Eusebius in 341. This resulted in his breaking away from orthodoxy as early as the time of the First Council of Constantinople. Other Germanic tribes, particularly the Vandals, also adopted the Arian version of Christianity. At the Council of Nicaea itself, however, the opportunistic Eusebius of Nicomedia, along with the others, signed the orthodox Christological formula “consubstantial with the Father.”

The author is also struck by the servile attitude of Eusebius of Caesarea toward Emperor Constantine: “For someone who has experienced communist totalitarianism and knows something about the appalling cult of personality surrounding J. V. Stalin, reading *Laus Constantini* is nauseating. If someone were to take Eusebius’s statements and replace the name Constantine with that of the great leader and ‘father’ of all the workers of the world in the Stalinist Soviet Union, it would perfectly fit into the state propaganda of the time, and this ‘theologian’ would likely have received a high honour. The sacralization of the cult of the emperor reeks of idolatrous worship of deified emperors who for centuries persecuted and murdered Christians. Eusebius cleverly coated this repulsive element of state paganism with a pseudo-Christian veneer” (p. 27, note 35).

Hosius of Corduba, on the other hand, was a man of principle. Although he enjoyed Constantine’s favour, he stood up to his successor and “experienced firsthand the insidiousness of the Caesaropapist concept” (p. 38). The account of the 318 “God-bearing” fathers who were present at the Council of Nicaea comes from Hilary of Poitiers. This

number is symbolic; indeed, when Abraham delivered Lot from captivity, he had precisely that many companions. In reality, the number of bishops at the council was lower; there were perhaps 250, maybe a few more. The council was presided over by Hosius of Corduba or Eustathius of Antioch. However, it could also have been Emperor Constantine himself. His role here consisted of persuading the participants “with promises, benefits, gifts, or, if necessary, the threats of deposition and exile” (p. 41).

At that time, the concept of an ecumenical council as the highest doctrinal authority did not yet exist; it developed later and only truly manifested itself at the Council of Chalcedon. From the perspective of church discipline and law, it is interesting that the Nicene Creed itself was complemented by anathemas. However, its original text ends only with the reference to the Holy Spirit; the full text, as it is known to believers today, was completed as late as 381, that is, when the First Council of Constantinople was held, which finalised the entire text of the creed. With regard to the council’s disciplinary canons, the author notes that they are accepted as authentic by contemporary scholars. Catholics today may be puzzled by the practice of rebaptising those who come into the universal Church from faith groups with different doctrines. The author notes, however, that such practice is partially preserved to this day: “In Russian Orthodoxy, the faithful from other denominations are not encouraged to be rebaptised; in the Greek Church, some of us may encounter a call to be baptised in the true Church, that is, the Greek one, even today” (p. 45).

Behind the first of the twenty Nicene canons lies Origen, who allegedly castrated himself to ward off temptation. The author assumes: “Some of his followers apparently followed his example. Even today, one can find such people in the East” (p. 76, note 143). The third canon speaks of women living with clergy, though it does not refer to legitimate wives: “The intention of the council fathers was not to implicitly introduce celibacy, but only to prevent situations that might cause scandal” (p. 77, note 144). The synodality in the Church, so highly extolled today, is nothing new. The fifth canon, in fact, stipulates the obligation to convene a provincial synod twice a year. Surprisingly, the sixth canon emphasises the almost primal status of the Church in Alexandria over all other Eastern Churches; however, the author notes that Alexandria’s later turn to Monophysitism removed this prerogative. The thirteenth canon, dealing with viaticum in the face of death, is pastorally sensitive: “The Council of Nicaea is relatively lenient on this matter. It is known that the synod held in the city of Elvira in 303 discusses several different sins. For certain serious offenses,

however, even those who have begun to repent are not permitted to receive the Eucharist on their deathbed” (p. 82, note 153).

The nineteenth canon deals with deaconesses, about whom he clearly states that “no hands were laid on them”; thus, this was not the ordination of women, as many circles in the Catholic Church are seeking today: “Clear confirmation of the view that deaconesses received not sacramental ordination, but only a kind of pastoral commission, and were therefore called ‘deaconesses’ only in a figurative sense. Their sacramental status was therefore by no means comparable to that of legitimately ordained deacons” (pp. 84–85, note 158).

The author concludes by sharing a personal testimony with his readers: “Christians have neither the power nor the means to remedy all the ills of our world. Their mission in society consists primarily in guiding people towards the living God and in transmitting the message of a sacred and, indeed, divine humanity, as the fruit borne by the branch called Jesus of Nazareth, the God-Man, our Lord and brother. Without a shred of doubt, this message truly has a bearing on each and every one of us. If anyone does not sense this at this very moment, let them wait, for the time will most certainly come when they will come to experience it firsthand. This is precisely the profoundly practical importance and dimension of that seemingly purely theoretical controversy between adherents and deniers of Christ’s divinity: to show the way to the living God and spread the message of sacred humanity” (p. 113).

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