

There are many books by leading Orthodox theologians and scholars on all aspects of the Orthodox Church and this leaflet series provides some basic information in the hope that it might prompt further enquiry.

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All text in these leaflets is mine except where indicated, therefore any errors of fact or in grammar are mine. I should be grateful to have those errors pointed out so that corrections can be made.

Fr.Nikitas - frnikitas@hotmail.com

**“The Orthodox Church.....**has preserved unadulterated the first and most ancient ecclesiastical tradition and teaching, has avoided innovations and personal interpretations of the Holy Scriptures and dogmas of the faith, and is administered according to the ancient synodical system under local bishops in collaboration with the faithful and successive groups of both local and broader episcopal synods, of which the highest is the Ecumenical Synod, that of the Orthodox worldwide. The basic administrative canons, the details of which are regulated according to local needs, have been determined by the seven ecumenical synods. The Church is not managed by regional states in which it resides, although it collaborates in good works when asked to do so.

Within the entire Orthodox Church there is absolute cooperation in goodwill and mutual respect. Perchance minor human problems are addressed successfully through the application of the evangelical spirit.”

*Bartholomew, Patriarch of Constantinople, from “Encountering the Mystery.”*  
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Orthodox Community of Archangel Michael and Holy Piran, Cornwall.  
[www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk](http://www.orthodoxincornwall.org.uk)

In the Archdiocese of Thyateira and Great Britain. Exarchate of Western Europe and Ireland.  
[www.thyateira.org.uk](http://www.thyateira.org.uk)

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Οικουμενικόν Πατριαρχεῖον.  
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Agia Sophia (Holy Wisdom) Constantinople.

Fr.N.03.15

# Introduction to Orthodox Christianity: The Ecumenical Councils



The icon of the Sunday of the Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council (325) depicts Emperor Saint Constantine together with the God-bearing Fathers and Saints of the Church who attended the Council at Nicea and affirmed the unity of the Faith through the Nicene Creed. The Fathers are shown holding the text of the Creed, also referred to as the Symbol of Faith.

The Orthodox Christian Church is often referred to as **The Church of the Councils**.

Regarded as the first council of the Apostolic Church is that which took place around 50 AD and is recorded in the New Testament - chapter 15 of the Book of the Acts of the Apostles - who came together to discuss and resolve a number of issues in this conciliar way.

Councils may be – **Ecumenical and Local**.

**Ecumenical** are when representatives, usually bishops but may include others ordained or lay, from the whole Orthodox world, come together to discuss issues of special importance and which may affect the overall life and witness of the Church. The decisions of these councils are contained in **canons** (rules of administration, discipline and personal conduct) which are binding on all Orthodox.

**Local or Regional** are those which take place within just one of the Orthodox Churches and are often concerned with administration within that particular patriarchate or diocese. Decisions of these councils will have a binding affect within that Church and will be respected by other Orthodox Churches but decisions will not be made contrary to the received and accepted faith, doctrine and worship of the whole Orthodox Christian family of Churches.

Additionally, dioceses, parishes and communities elect boards of lay people to govern the affairs of those groups. At a diocesan level the bishop will preside, in a parish or community the priest will preside. Committees should be made up of people who set an example to others and wish to see Orthodoxy strengthened and grow, with the preservation of unity.

**“For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine, but according to their own desires, because they have itching ears, they will heap up for themselves teachers; and they will turn their ears away from the truth, and be turned aside to fables”. 2 Tim.4:3-4.**

The following passage is taken from the introduction in – *Ancient Epitome of the Sacred Canons of the Eastern Orthodox Church*.

**“The Gospel of Christ was destined to be spread from generation to generation, through selected personalities inspired by the Grace of God and sent forth ‘to teach the nations’. To attain its mission of spreading the Word of God the Church was established, organised and armed with dedicated personalities who felt the divine calling to serve the Church. These devoted persons serve the Church in this extraordinary missionary endeavor as ambassadors and heralds of the message of Christ while also administering the sacred Mysteria for the sanctification of the faithful. As such, the personalities of the Church were organized according to their gifts and their positions, in a brotherly and dedicated spirit, to accomplish the Will of God more effectively, and also to protect the faithful from evil, anti-Christian actions of unbelievers. The Church of Christ from the beginning was confronted with many problems, both of a doctrinal character and also of moral conduct. For the former the Ecumenical Synods pronounced statements of Faith, such as the Nicene Creed and the two natures of Christ; for the latter, the Ecumenical Synods issued and ratified canons pertaining to moral life, discipline and order, in the spirit of the Scriptures and Tradition”.**

The Synods are called Ecumenical because those attending came from the entire Christian world (including Britain). The Seven Ecumenical and regional synods are recognised in accord by all Canonical Churches of Orthodoxy and even though they may not realise it there are many non-Orthodox who today are beneficiaries from the labours of those who met to discuss the many issues arising as the Gospel was being taken from country to country with Christian communities being established in cities, towns and villages.

Year and location\* of the Seven Ecumenical Synods (Councils)

**325 - Nicaea.**

**381 – Constantinople.**

**431 - Ephesus.**

**451 – Chalcedon.**

**553 – Constantinople.**

**681 – Constantinople (Trullo).**

**787 – Nicaea**

Among others matters discussed and issues resolved these Synods condemned the erroneous teachings (heresies) about the person and nature of Christ that had arisen after the Apostolic period in the life of the Church and also issued canons (rules) relating to the administration of the Universal Church, its ministry, and the moral conduct of its members. The statement of faith we know as the Nicene Creed was formulated at the first two synods as was the method of calculating the date of Pascha (Easter). At the third Ecumenical Council the person of the Mother of Christ was formally defined as Theotokos (Birthgiver or Mother of God). After an iconoclastic (image-breaking) period the use of icons (images) was upheld at the seventh synod.

**“In the Church there is neither dictatorship nor individualism, but harmony and unanimity; men remain free but not isolated, for they are united in love, in faith, and in sacramental communion. In the council, this idea of harmony and free unanimity can be seen worked out in practice. In the true council no single member arbitrarily imposes his will upon the rest, but each consults with the others, and in this way they all freely achieve a ‘common mind’. A council is a living embodiment of the essential nature of the Church”.** From *The Orthodox Church* – Timothy Ware – Metropolitan Kallistos of Diokleia.

\*Since 1453 all of the above locations, formerly in Byzantine/Greek lands, are in modern Turkey and been given other names, i.e., Constantinople was renamed Istanbul in 1923.