

LITURGICAL LEGISLATIONS OF THE COUNCIL OF NICAEEA: BACKGROUND AND RECEPTION

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Abstract

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD), primarily known for resolving the Arian controversy and formulating the Christological faith of the early Church, also enacted significant liturgical legislations that shaped Christian worship. These decrees addressed doctrinal and practical concerns, reinforcing the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*—how the Church worships reflects what it believes. Key liturgical decisions included the standardization of Easter's date, separating it from the Jewish Passover to emphasize Christ's Resurrection, and prohibiting kneeling on Sundays and during Easter season (Canon 20) to reflect the joy of resurrection, the key Christological mystery. The council also regulated ecclesiastical order, clarifying the roles of bishops, priests, and deacons (Canons 6, 18), and established pastoral guidelines for Eucharistic discipline (Canon 13) and the readmission of lapsed believers (Canon 14). The reception of these legislations varied across Christian traditions, with the Byzantine Church adhering closely, while the Latin West and Eastern churches adapted them within local practices. The Easter date controversy persists today despite Nicaea's efforts, highlighting

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ongoing ecumenical challenges. The council's liturgical reforms remain relevant, demonstrating the enduring link between orthodox faith and worship. Nicaea's legacy underscores that liturgy is not merely ritual but a vital expression of the Church's faith and theological identity.

Key Words: Council of Nicaea I; Pre-Nicene Liturgy; Liturgical legislations of Nicaea; Paschal controversy; Quartodecimanism; Easter date; Kneeling Regulation of Nicaea; Nicene Creed.

Sacred Liturgy is at the very core of the life and tradition of the Church. When we celebrate 1700th year of the Church's first General Council, met in Nicaea (325 AD), a landmark event in the history of Christianity, convened by Emperor Constantine to address theological and disciplinary issues, particularly the Arian controversy, it is undoubtedly an apt time and place to think about its liturgical legislations. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy go together in the Church.

Liturgy is the public worship of the Church, where the mysteries of faith are celebrated and transmitted. Church's faith finds its most profound expression in its liturgical acts. The early Church understood that how Christians worship reflects what they believe ("lex orandi, lex credendi" – "the law of prayer [is the] law of faith"). The Council of Nicaea, in addressing theological and disciplinary matters, recognized that liturgical practices must align with the orthodox faith to prevent doctrinal confusion and schism. The Christological faith of the Church expressed in the council is at the centre of the liturgy of the Church. Surely, the liturgical legislations of the Council of Nicaea shaped Christian worship, ecclesiastical order, and the liturgical calendar. The following discussion explores the historical background, key liturgical decrees, theological implications, and later reception of Nicaea's liturgical legislations.

1. Historical Background of the Council of Nicaea and Its Liturgical Legislations

Pre-Nicaean Christianity was very dynamic and fluid, with variety in its forms of Christian faith-life and its expressions. "Christian faith becomes concrete only when a specific Apostolic Christ-experience is coupled with a specific life-situation of a community. The first expression of this concrete faith might have been more spontaneous, and this initial stage in the origin and

development of Sacred Liturgy, we call the stage of fluid liturgy.”⁶⁵ So in the Pre-Nicene period, varieties of faith emerged in worship forms, theological thinking and lived forms of faith (spirituality) in different Churches.

1.1. The Relation between Liturgy and Faith

The Council of Nicaea discussed and affirmed the common faith of the Church, especially its Christological faith. At the same time, the Council’s liturgical legislations and its doctrinal and disciplinary decrees reflect the relationship between the Church’s faith and liturgy - liturgy both expresses and shapes the faith of the Church. The Nicene Creed’s expression of Christ as “true God from true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father” was not merely an abstract theological statement – it had profound implications for Christian worship. If Christ is truly divine, the Church’s worship must reflect this reality. Liturgy, as the public expression of faith, had to align with orthodox belief to avoid distortions in the Church’s public prayer. The council recognized that incorrect worship could lead to incorrect belief (*lex orandi, lex credendi*). Thus, Nicaea’s liturgical reforms were not arbitrary but were deeply rooted in its Christological confession. For example, some of its liturgical legislations (on Easter date and prohibition of kneeling during Easter season) are related to the faith of the Church in the resurrection of Christ.

1.2. Pre-Nicene Liturgical Diversity

When we study the history of liturgical development in the Church in the beginning we see a diversification process, a movement towards outside (centrifugal) in the first three centuries, might be up to the Council of Nicaea, and then a unification movement focussing on the regional centres (like Jerusalem, Alexandria, Rome, Edessa etc.), a movement towards inside/centre (centripetal) for the next few centuries, and a consolidation of it at the end. The Pre-Nicene period, spanning the first three centuries of Christianity, was marked by the absence of clear centralized liturgical norms, allowing local communities to develop distinct practices that reflected their unique cultural contexts as Maxwell E. Johnson says “contrary to the assumptions often held by earlier scholars, contemporary liturgical scholarship increasingly realizes

⁶⁵ Varghese Pathikulangara, *Chaldeo-Indian Liturgy I: Introduction* (Kottayam: OIRSI, 1982), 42.

and emphasizes that Christian worship was diverse even in its biblical-apostolic origins, multilinear rather than mono-linear in its development, and closely related to the several cultural, linguistic, geographical, and theological expressions and orientations of distinct churches through-out the early centuries of Christianity. Apart from some rather broad (but significant) commonalities discerned throughout various churches in antiquity, the traditions of worship during the first three centuries were rather diverse in content and interpretation, depending on where individual practices are to be located.”⁶⁶

Early Christian liturgical practices were deeply rooted in Jewish traditions, particularly synagogue worship, which included psalmody, scriptural readings, and prayers of intercession. The Eucharistic celebration evolved from Jewish meal prayers and the Passover meal, incorporating thanksgiving and eschatological hope. Texts like the *Didache* provide insights into the simplicity and communal focus of early Christian prayers, reflecting the Jewish heritage while adapting to the theological and cultural contexts of the growing Christian community.⁶⁷

As Christianity spread across diverse regions, liturgical practices began to diverge. In the East, particularly in Syria and Egypt, liturgical practices were influenced by local customs and theological emphases, as seen in the Egyptian Church Order, which provided

⁶⁶ Maxwell E. Johnson, “The Apostolic Tradition,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 32-33. For an elaborate discussion, see, Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford: OUP, 2002); *ibid.*, *Early Christian Worship: A Basic Introduction to Ideas and Practice*, 2nd Edition (London: SPCK, 2010); Anton Baumstark, *Comparative Liturgy*, revised by Bernard Botte, translated by F.L. Cross (London: A.R. Mowbray & Co. Limited, 1958); Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945); Josef Jungmann, *The Early Liturgy to the Time of Gregory the Great*, trans. Francis A. Brunner (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1959).

⁶⁷ If we take an example of the development of Eucharistic prayers (Anaphora/Canon) free oral praises and prayers, modelled after the Jewish meal blessing (*berakah*) prayers, were the norm in the beginning. The *Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* or *Didache* gives both such a prayer and then says “But allow the prophets to give thanks as they wish” (10.7). See, Clayton N. Jefford, tr., *Didache: The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles* (Salem, OR: Polebridge Press, 2013), 38. Freely expressed prayers slowly paved way for structured and prepared prayers, and then to fixed formulas in the later centuries.

structured instructions for worship. In contrast, the Roman Rite in the West developed a concise and austere style, reflecting the pragmatic and disciplined character of Roman culture. The Apostolic Tradition highlights the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist in Roman liturgy, emphasizing communal participation and theological concerns. Smaller ecclesiastical centres also developed unique rites, distinct from major metropolitan centres like Rome or Alexandria, showcasing the localized character of early Christian worship.

Theological debates surrounding Christology and the nature of the Trinity also influenced the content and structure of liturgical prayers. The Trisagion ("Holy, Holy, Holy") became a prominent feature of Eastern liturgy, emphasizing the holiness and transcendence of God. The development of the Eucharistic prayer, particularly the epiclesis (invocation of the Holy Spirit), illustrates theological diversity: the East emphasized sanctification of the Eucharistic elements. At the same time, the West focused on the words of institution and the sacrificial nature of the Eucharist.

Before the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), early Christian communities exhibited a rich diversity in liturgical practices, reflecting regional traditions, theological interpretations, and cultural influences. One of the most significant differences among these communities was the date of Easter observance, particularly the Quartodeciman practice, which celebrated Easter on the 14th of Nisan (the Jewish Passover) rather than the following Sunday. This variation led to debates and tensions within the early Church, culminating in formal discussions at Nicaea. Understanding these liturgical differences provides insight into the development of Christian worship and the gradual standardization of practices in the early centuries of the faith.

2. Liturgical Legislations of the Council of Nicaea

The liturgical legislation of the Council of Nicaea must be understood within different contexts, like the pursuit of doctrinal unity against heresies, the increasing regional diversity in worship practices, the emerging need for liturgical uniformity without suppressing legitimate local traditions, etc. While some canons, such as those regulating the Easter date or the Viaticum for the dying (Canon 13), directly shaped liturgical practice, others—like clerical discipline (Canon 18) or penitential rules—indirectly influenced worship by reinforcing ecclesiastical order. The council's decisions reflect a careful balance between centralizing authority for unity's

sake and permitting pastoral flexibility where uniformity was not essential. Its doctrinal proclamations, particularly the Nicene Creed, carried liturgical implications by standardizing the faith confessed during baptism and Eucharist. Thus, Nicaea's legacy lies not in rigid rubrics but in establishing principles guiding liturgical cohesion and contextual adaptation in early Christianity.

2.1. The Fixation of Easter Date

The Holy Pascha (Easter) celebration is the oldest yearly feast of Christians.⁶⁸ This celebration is typologically and theologically related to three events: Jewish Passover, Christ's death, and his resurrection, at the centre of which comes "Christ the Paschal Lamb." As Paul F. Bradshaw says, "the original focus of the celebration was not on the resurrection of Christ but rather on "Christ, the Passover lamb, sacrificed for us."⁶⁹ Differences in the date of celebration, on the exact date of Jewish Passover (Nisan 14) or the Sunday following it, are understood from this context. The resolution of the Quartodeciman controversy and the establishment of a unified method in the Council of Nicaea established the unity of the Church.

2.1.1. Quartodeciman Controversy

One of the most notable liturgical disputes in the pre-Nicene period was the Quartodeciman controversy or Paschal controversy, which centred on the date of Easter.⁷⁰ The term Quartodeciman (Latin for "fourteenth") refers to Christians who celebrated Easter on the 14th of Nisan, coinciding with the Jewish Passover, regardless of the day of the week. We shall understand this practice from the background of the diversity of liturgical practices in the early centuries and the differences in the theological understanding of Christian Pasch/Easter in Asia Minor. Melito of Sardis' *Peri Pascha* is one of the early sources of understanding this practice.⁷¹ As Talley

⁶⁸ See the discussion in: Karl Gerlach, *The Antenicene Pascha: A Rhetorical History* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 32-39; Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 3-5.

⁶⁹ Paul F. Bradshaw, "The Origins of Easter," in *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times*, ed. Paul F. Bradshaw and Lawrence A. Hoffman (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999), 82.

⁷⁰ For a detailed discussion, see, Daniel P. McCarthy, "The Council of Nicaea and the Celebration of the Christian Pasch," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Council of Nicaea*, edited by Young Richard Kim (Cambridge: CUP, 2021), 177-201.

⁷¹ Méliton de Sardes, *Sur la Pâque et Fragments: Introduction, texte, critique, traduction et notes*, edited by Othmar Perler, Sources Chrétiennes 123 (Paris: Les Editions du Cerf, 1966); Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha with Fragments of Melito and other*

says, “here, Passover, surely kept in the night from 14 to 15 Nisan, is the memorial of the death of Jesus. In other second-century documents from Asia Minor, it becomes clear that this death is not seen as merely one incident in an extended Holy Week scenario. Rather, the content of the celebration is the entire work of redemption: the incarnation, the passion, the resurrection and glorification, all focused upon the Cross as locus of Christ's triumph.”⁷²

In his *Ecclesiastical History* (Book 5, Chapters 23-25), Eusebius narrates this controversy.⁷³ The Churches of Asia followed the Quartodeciman tradition, observing the 14th day of Nisan regardless of the day of the week. At the same time, the rest of the Christian world celebrated Easter exclusively on Sunday.⁷⁴ This disagreement led to widespread debates and synods among bishops, including those in Palestine, Rome, Pontus, Gaul, Osroene, and Corinth, who upheld the Sunday tradition as aligning with apostolic teachings. Synodal letter from the bishops of Palestine emphasized unity in the Church while adhering to the Sunday celebration.⁷⁵

Polycrates, Bishop of Ephesus, defended the Quartodeciman practice, citing apostolic tradition and the example of figures like John the Apostle and Polycarp. He argued that this tradition was rooted in the Gospel and the rule of faith, expressing his commitment to preserving it despite opposition. Victor, Bishop of Rome (189–199 AD), attempted to excommunicate the churches of Asia for their adherence to the Quartodeciman tradition, but this action faced widespread disapproval.⁷⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons mediated the conflict, urging Victor to prioritize peace and unity, pointing out that differences in fasting practices had existed since the Apostles without disrupting fellowship. When they met, Irenaeus recounted

Material Related to the Quartodecimans, translated by Alistair Stewart-Sykes (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001); Alistair Stewart-Sykes, *The Lamb's High Feast: Melito, Peri Pascha, and the Quartodeciman paschal liturgy at Sardis* (Leiden: Brill, 1998).

⁷² Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year*, 6.

⁷³ See, Eusebius Pamphili, *Ecclesiastical History*, Books 1-5, translated by Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church, A New Translation*, 19 (Washington, D.C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 1953), 333-339; *Eusebius' Ecclesiastical History*, translated by C.F. Cruse (Peabody, MS: Hendrickson Publishers, 1998), 181-184.

⁷⁴ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.23.

⁷⁵ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.25.

⁷⁶ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.

the example of Polycarp and Anicetus, who maintained mutual respect despite differing views.⁷⁷

2.1.2. The Legislation of the Council of Nicaea

As we understand from the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius, even before the Council of Nicaea, there were attempts by bishops from Palestine to solve the problem.⁷⁸ The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) sought to unify Easter observance by decreeing that it should be celebrated as in other Churches, on the first Sunday after the first full moon following the vernal equinox, independent of the Jewish calendar:

We also send you the good news of the settlement concerning the holy pasch [ἁγίου πάσχα], namely that in answer to your prayers, this question also has been resolved. All the brethren in the East who have hitherto followed the Jewish practice will henceforth observe the custom of the Romans and of yourselves and of all of us who from ancient times have kept Easter [πάσχα] together with you. Rejoicing then in these successes and the common peace and harmony and in the cutting off all heresy, welcome our fellow minister, your bishop Alexander, with all the greater honour and love. He has made us happy by his presence, and despite his advanced age, has undertaken such great labour in order that you too may enjoy peace.⁷⁹

This decision aimed at uniformity and a more precise distinction from the Jewish Passover.

2.1.3. Theological significance: Emphasizing Christ's Resurrection over the Jewish Passover

Christ's resurrection is considered the central mystery of faith in the Church. It can also be seen from the Christological faith, which the Council of Nicaea affirmed. By fixing the day of Pascha, the Church moves away from the Jewish Passover to Christ's Passover from death to resurrection, the meaning of Christian Pascha. Paul wrote to the Church of Corinth: "For our paschal lamb, Christ, has been sacrificed. Therefore, let us celebrate the festival, not with the old yeast, the yeast of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth" (1 Cor 5:7b-8). Though this did not explicitly mention the yearly celebration of the resurrection of Christ, it

⁷⁷ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.24.

⁷⁸ *Ecclesiastical History* 5.25.

⁷⁹ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol.1, edited by Norman Tanner (London: Sheed & Ward, 1990), 19.

revealed the early Christian understanding of Christian Pascha - Christ's death and resurrection over Jewish Passover.⁸⁰ The mystery of resurrection celebrated at the feast of Easter is at the centre of the Church's Christological faith.

2.2. Regulation on Kneeling in the Season of Easter

This is purely a liturgical legislation (Canon 20) related to the posture of the faithful in the liturgy, especially on Sunday Eucharistic liturgy in the Easter Season. This shall be understood from its theological and historical context. In the early Church, standing was the normative posture for prayer (Eucharistic Liturgy), especially on Sundays and throughout the Easter season (50 days from Easter up to Pentecost Sunday). Sunday, the "Lord's Day" (*kyriake*) is considered a "mini Easter," commemorating Jesus' victory over death. Standing posture symbolizes the spiritual resurrection and the joyful freedom from sin and death. This also symbolizes the eschatological hope to participate in the heavenly liturgy (Rev 7:9). Kneeling, a sign of penance or submission, was seen as inappropriate for the "day of joy." Early Christian Writings like *The Didascalia Apostolorum* (2.7, 57), *Apostolic Tradition* (18.2), *Testamentum Domini* (2.4), etc., and writers such as Tertullian⁸¹ and Origen⁸² emphasized standing as the proper posture for Sunday prayer, associating kneeling with fasting and repentance. As Jungmann says, "standing was the ordinary posture of prayer even among ancient peoples, standing with uplifted hands and eyes fixed in the direction of the rising sun [East]."⁸³ There were variations in kneeling practice in different churches. Even some heretical groups like Montanists imposed kneeling as a form of rigorous asceticism. So the canon 20 says: "Since there are some who kneel on Sunday and during the season of Pentecost, this holy synod decrees that, so that the same observances may be maintained in every diocese, one should offer one's prayers to the Lord standing."⁸⁴ The Council established a liturgical unity in the Church by advocating this general norm. Some suggest that standing also countered Arian tendencies to

⁸⁰ See the discussion in: Karl Gerlach, *The Antenicene Pascha: A Rhetorical History* (Leuven: Peeters, 1998), 32-39; Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1986), 3-5.

⁸¹ *De oratione* 23.

⁸² *De oratione* 31.2-3.

⁸³ Joseph A. Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, vol. 1, translated by Francis A. Brunner (New York: Benziger Brother, 1951), 239.

⁸⁴ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:16.

overemphasize Christ's humanity (and thus a posture of submission), reinforcing His divinity.

2.3. Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction and Liturgical Authority

Local bishops were the presidents and custodians of the public worship (liturgy) in the early centuries of the Church. Early Christian writings, such as the letters of Ignatius of Antioch, *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus, *Didascalia Apostolorum*, etc., emphasize the bishop's role in safeguarding orthodox teaching and regulating worship. For example, Ignatius stressed that no Eucharist could be valid without the bishop's approval,⁸⁵ highlighting the close connection between ecclesiastical authority and liturgical practice. The *Apostolic Tradition* presents the bishop as the primary celebrant of the Eucharist, one who ordains the clergy, and overseer of baptisms.⁸⁶ The *Didascalia* further expanded the role of the bishop to include liturgical instruction and pastoral adaptability.⁸⁷ The Council of Nicaea tries to limit partially this elaborate authority of deciding in liturgical matters.

Canon 6 of the Council of Nicaea reiterates the jurisdiction and authority of bishops (and their synods) of the principal sees (later we call Patriarchs), Alexandria, Antioch and Rome. They have the jurisdiction and authority over the surrounding local churches or dioceses:

The ancient customs of Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis shall be maintained, according to which the bishop of Alexandria has authority over all these places since a similar custom exists with reference to the bishop of Rome. Similarly, in Antioch and the other provinces, the prerogatives of the churches are to be preserved. The following principle is evident: if anyone is made bishop without the consent of the metropolitan, this great synod determines that such a one shall not be a bishop. If, however, two or three by reason of personal rivalry dissent from the common vote of all, provided it is reasonable and in accordance with the Church's canon, the vote of the majority shall prevail."⁸⁸

Though Canon 6 does not directly say anything about liturgical authority, it is implied in this legislation.

⁸⁵ *The Letter to the Smyrnaeans* 8.2.

⁸⁶ See, *Apostolic Tradition* 4, 7-9, 16-21.

⁸⁷ Cf. *Didascalia Apostolorum* 6, 9, 21, 23.

⁸⁸ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:8-9.

2.4. Eucharistic Discipline for the Dying

Canon 13 of the Council of Nicaea addresses a pastoral and liturgical issue concerning the administration of the Eucharist to the dying, particularly those who were in danger of death but had incurred a canonical penalty or were under penance. It says:

Concerning the departing, the ancient canon law is still to be maintained, namely that those who are departing are not to be deprived of their last, most necessary Viaticum. But if one whose life has been despaired of has been admitted to communion and has shared in the offering and is found to be numbered again among the living, he shall be among those who take part in prayer only [here a variant reading in *Les canons des conciles oecumeniques* adds "until the term fixed by this great ecumenical synod has been completed"]. But as a general rule, in the case of anyone whatsoever who is departing and seeks to share in the eucharist, the bishop, upon examining the matter, shall give him a share in the offering.⁸⁹

In a sense, this canon prioritizes salvation over canonical penalties, showing the Church's belief in God's mercy at the moment of death. It reflects the early Church's pastoral wisdom – upholding penitential discipline while ensuring no one was denied the Eucharist at death. It set a precedent for later Christian practice, balancing mercy and order in sacramental care for the dying.

2.5. Re-admittance of Lapsed Believers to Liturgical Life

Canon 14 deals with the re-admittance of lapsed believers – those who had renounced their faith under persecution but later sought reconciliation with the Church. Before Nicaea, the Church endured severe persecutions, especially in the Roman Empire, most notably under Emperor Diocletian (303–313 AD). Many Christians, under threat of torture, imprisonment, or death, renounced their faith by offering sacrifices to pagan gods or signing certificates of apostasy (*libelli*). These individuals were called *lapsi* ("the fallen"). After the persecutions ended (with Constantine's Edict of Milan in 313 AD), the question arose: How should the Church treat those who had apostatized but sought forgiveness? Different regions developed varying practices, leading to disputes over penance and reinstatement. The Council set a standard norm for the *lapsi*: "Concerning catechumens who have lapsed, this holy and great synod decrees that, after they have spent three years as hearers only,

⁸⁹ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:12.

they shall be allowed to pray with the catechumens.”⁹⁰ This canon shall be understood in relation to the rigorists in the Church, under the influence of Donatists (and Novatianists), particularly in North Africa, who argued that the lapsed could never be fully readmitted to communion, as their sin was unforgivable. On the contrary, moderates, including many bishops, believed in the possibility of repentance and reconciliation after a period of penance. The Council of Nicaea, through this canon, sought to standardize this process to prevent schisms and ensure pastoral mercy while maintaining discipline.

2.6. The role of deacons in the liturgy

The diaconate was well-established before Nicaea, drawing its origins to the Apostolic period (Acts 6:1-6), where seven were chosen to serve tables, allowing the Apostles to focus on prayer and preaching. By the 4th century, deacons had evolved into key liturgical ministers. The Council of Nicaea affirmed their position as subordinate to bishops (and priests) but essential for the proper functioning of the liturgy. Canon 18 says:

It has come to the attention of this holy and great synod that in some places and cities deacons give communion to presbyters, although neither canon nor custom allows this, namely that those who have no authority to offer should provide the body of Christ to those who do offer. Moreover, it has become known that some deacons now receive the Eucharist before the bishops. All these practices must be suppressed. Deacons must remain within their limits, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and subordinate to the presbyters. Let them receive the Eucharist according to their order after the presbyters from the hands of the bishop or the presbyter. Nor shall permission be given for the deacons to sit among the presbyters, for such an arrangement is contrary to the canon and to rank. If anyone refuses to comply even after these decrees, he will be suspended from the diaconate.⁹¹

The Council addressed concerns about deacons of that time overstepping their authority. Originally, deacons served as the bishop's closest assistants and were limited in number. Because of this, according to Angelo di Berardino, some began to go beyond their role, considering themselves superior to priests and treating

⁹⁰ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:13.

⁹¹ *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils* 1:14-14.

them with disrespect.⁹² The council of Arles (314 AD) even observed that the deacons were “offering [the Eucharist?] in many places.”⁹³ To correct this, early Church laws (like Nicaea’s Canon 18) explicitly stated that deacons were below priests in rank and must acknowledge their authority. Canon 18 of Nicaea forbade deacons from offering the Eucharist (a priestly function) or assuming honours equal to presbyters. This reinforced the distinction between the diaconal and sacerdotal roles, ensuring deacons remained servants rather than celebrants.

2.7. Nicene Creed

The Nicene Creed, not part of any legislation related to liturgy in the Council of Nicaea, symbolizes the unity of faith in the Church. Different Churches used different formulae of faith (Symbol of Faith) in the early centuries, especially in their baptismal liturgies. For example, the formula of faith used in the Latin baptismal liturgical tradition was later, by the 5th century, known as the Apostles’ Creed. Those who drafted the Nicene Creed were likely influenced by various regional baptismal creeds in circulation then.⁹⁴ A more expanded form of the Nicene Creed, maybe we call it the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed, is the one adopted in the liturgy in later years, especially in baptismal and Eucharistic liturgies in the East.

3. Reception of the Legislations

The reception of the canons and the Creed of the Council of Nicaea was diverse in various churches and happened very slowly. Though Arius was condemned, the Christological doctrine rallying around the Greek word *homoousios* (‘consubstantial,’ i.e. of the same essence with the Father), “was as yet fluid, because essence and hypostasis were still used synonymously.”⁹⁵ In subsequent times, different ecumenical councils and fathers of the Church further clarified and explained the Christological doctrine of Nicaea. The Churches in the Roman Empire (where the Council convened), the reception was fast, but outside of it was slow. For example, the

⁹² Angelo di Berardino, *Istituzioni della Chiesa antica* (Rome: Marcianum, 2019), 191.

⁹³ J. Stevenson, ed., *A New Eusebius: Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church to A.D. 337* (London: SPCK, 1957), 324.

⁹⁴ J. Neil Alexander, “Creeds in Liturgy,” in *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, edited by Paul F. Bradshaw (London: SCM Press, 2005), 138.

⁹⁵ E.G. Farrugia, “Nicaea I,” in *Encyclopedic Dictionary of the Christian East*, edited by Edward G. Farrugia (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 2015), 1340.

Churches in the Sasanian Empire (Persia) officially accepted the canons of the Council of Nicaea in the historical Synod of Isaac held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon in 410.⁹⁶

The liturgical legislations were also received slowly in different Churches, both in the East and the West. The Byzantine Churches, which followed the Greek liturgy as the direct heir of the Eastern Roman Empire, closely followed Nicaea's decrees. Adopting a unified Easter computation was largely successful, though debates occasionally resurfaced. The prohibition of kneeling on Sundays (known as the *apochisis*) became a distinctive feature of Byzantine worship, still observed in Eastern Orthodoxy today. However, later Byzantine liturgical developments, such as the elaborate rites of the Hagia Sophia, went beyond Nicaea's simple directives. The council's emphasis on standing prayer was preserved in the Divine Liturgy, but additional prostrations were incorporated during Lent, showing a balance between Nicaea's rules and evolving ascetic practices.

The Western Church, particularly Rome, accepted Nicaea's Easter computation after initial resistance from Celtic and Gallic churches. By the time of the Synod of Whitby (664), the Roman method prevailed in the West. The kneeling prohibition (Canon 20) was less strictly observed in Latin Christianity. While early medieval liturgies maintained standing for prayer, kneeling became more common, especially in private devotion and penitential rites. The Roman Mass retained standing for the Gospel and Eucharistic prayer but adopted genuflections, particularly after the Eucharistic adoration controversies of the Middle Ages.

The Syriac tradition, including the Church of the East and the Syriac Orthodox Church, had a complex relationship with Nicaea's decrees. While they accepted the Nicene Creed, their liturgical practices often followed older Semitic customs. The prohibition of kneeling on Sundays was acknowledged but interpreted flexibly, with Syriac liturgies retaining deep bows (*metanoia*) as a sign of reverence. The Easter date controversy persisted longer in Syriac Christianity, with some communities (like the Assyrian Church of the East) occasionally diverging from the Alexandrian computation endorsed by Nicaea.

⁹⁶ Ephrem Aboud Ishac, "The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325 in Syriac Synodal Politics," *Annales Historiae Conciliorum* 53.1 (2023), 78.

While affirming Nicaea theologically, the Coptic Orthodox Church of Alexandria maintained certain distinct liturgical customs. The council's Easter ruling was accepted, but Coptic Christianity developed its computus, leading to occasional discrepancies with Byzantine and Latin dates. Standing for prayer remained central in Coptic liturgy, but kneeling was not entirely abolished, reflecting a synthesis of Nicaea's rules and local monastic influences. The Coptic tradition also preserved early Christian elements, such as the *agpeya* (canonical hours), which were not directly addressed at Nicaea but coexisted with its decrees.

Adoption of the Nicæan Creed in the liturgy happened very slowly in the subsequent centuries. The practice of including the Creed in the Eucharistic liturgy began in Antioch toward the end of the fifth century. It was introduced "before the Eucharistic prayer in the Byzantine tradition in the early sixth century."⁹⁷ While not designed initially as a baptismal profession of faith, Cyril of Jerusalem (around 350) used a form of this Creed in teaching catechumens. In the Western Church, the Niceno-Constantinopolitan creed was adopted in the liturgy after the Third Council of Toledo in 589, to remind the orthodox faith to converts from the Arianism, recited just before the communion rite.⁹⁸ In other parts of the Western Church, it was widely adopted during Charlemagne in the 8th century.⁹⁹

The liturgical legislations of the Council of Nicaea had a lasting but varied impact across Christian traditions. The Byzantine Church adhered closely to its directives, while the Latin West adapted them to evolving devotional practices. The Syriac and Coptic churches integrated Nicaea's rulings within their ancient liturgical frameworks, sometimes blending them with local customs. Despite these differences, Nicaea's influence endured as a unifying reference point for Christian worship, demonstrating both the council's authority and the diversity of its reception in global Christianity.

⁹⁷ John F. Baldovin, "The Empire Baptized," in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, edited by Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker (Oxford: OUP, 2006), 97.

⁹⁸ Jungmann, *The Mass of the Roman Rite*, 297-298.

⁹⁹ Mark D. Chapman, "Why Do We still Recite the Nicene Creed in the Eucharist?" *Anglican Theological Review* 87.2 (2005), 210

4. Ecumenical Relevance Today

Some liturgical legislations of the Council of Nicaea are still relevant today. Though the Council had settled Sunday as the day of Pascha/Easter, even today, Christians are not united on the date of its celebration because of different calendars. Many throughout the centuries tried to solve this problem amicably but failed. The Gregorian reform of the calendar (1582) further complicated this issue.

There have been many attempts in the recent past to settle the issue. For example, in March 1997, a consultation sponsored by the World Council of Churches (WCC) and the Middle East Council of Churches, meeting in Aleppo, Syria, issued a statement, "Toward a Common Date for Easter."¹⁰⁰ However, the proposed reform has not yet been put into practice. Its success would have depended mainly on the Eastern Orthodox Church's cooperation, as the change would have immediately affected their Easter date. For Western churches, however, the new system would have remained the same with their current calculations until 2019 (assuming an implementation starting in 2001, and disregarding the earlier complication in 1998 if calculations had begun in 1997). Despite positive responses from Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and Lutheran leaders over time, the reform has still not been officially adopted.

Another example was the attempt of the Catholic Church, especially by Pope Francis, to settle the Easter date. In his Bull of Indiction (9 May 2024) of the ordinary Jubilee of the Year 2025, *Spes non Confundit*, he says:

The Council of Nicaea also discussed the date of Easter. To this day, different approaches to this question prevent celebrating the fundamental event of our faith on the same day. Providentially, a common celebration will take place in the year 2025. May this serve as an appeal to all Christians, East and West, to take a decisive step forward towards unity around a common date for Easter. We do well to remind ourselves that many people, unaware of the controversies of the past, fail to understand how divisions in this regard can continue to exist.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.oikoumene.org/resources/documents/towards-a-common-date-for-easter>.

¹⁰¹ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/bulls/documents/20240509_pes-non-confundit_bolla-giubileo2025.html

Again in an address (19 September 2024) to the delegation of the group "Pasqua Together 2005" he said: "On more than one occasion, I have been asked to seek a solution to this issue, so that the common celebration of the Day of the Resurrection may no longer be an exception, but rather become the norm. I therefore encourage those who are committed to this journey to persevere, and to make every effort in the search for a shared agreement, avoiding anything that may instead lead to further divisions among our brothers and sisters."¹⁰² It is not completely settled even after 1700 years.

Conclusion

The Council of Nicaea (325 AD) was a defining moment in Christian history, not only for its decisive Christological affirmations but also for its lasting impact on the Church's liturgical life. While its primary purpose was to counter Arianism and define the orthodox faith in the *homoousios* (consubstantiality) of Christ, its liturgical legislations—particularly on Easter observance, Sunday worship postures, and ecclesiastical order—demonstrate how doctrine and worship are inextricably linked. The council's decrees were not merely administrative but theological, ensuring that the Church's public prayer reflected its faith in Christ's divinity and resurrection.

Nicaea's insistence on a unified Easter date (Canon 1) was more than a practical measure—it was a theological statement. By decoupling Easter from the Jewish Passover and fixing it on a Sunday, the council emphasized that Christ's Resurrection, not the Exodus, was the defining event of salvation. This shift reinforced the belief in Christ as the true Paschal Lamb, whose victory over death transcended the Old Covenant. Similarly, the prohibition of kneeling on Sundays and during Pentecost (Canon 20) was a liturgical proclamation of the Resurrection's triumph, aligning bodily posture with the joy of redemption. These legislations illustrate the principle of *lex orandi, lex credendi*: how the Church worships shapes and expresses what it believes. Nicaea's canons also strengthened the bishop's role in safeguarding liturgical orthodoxy (Canons 6, 18), ensuring that worship remained a unifying force rather than a source of division. By regulating the authority of metropolitan bishops and clarifying the diaconate's subordinate role, the council preserved the integrity of the Eucharist and other sacraments. These measures were not about rigid uniformity but about maintaining a balance

¹⁰² <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2024/september/documents/20240919-pasqua-together.html>

between unity and legitimate diversity, allowing local traditions to flourish within the bounds of orthodox faith.

The reception of Nicaea's liturgical decrees gradually varied across Christian traditions. While the Byzantine Church closely adhered to its directives, the Latin West adapted them to evolving devotional practices. Eastern churches, such as the Coptic and Syrian traditions, integrated them into their ancient rites. Even today, despite modern ecumenical efforts, the unresolved issue of a common Easter date highlights the enduring challenge of balancing unity with diversity. Pope Francis's recent appeals for a shared celebration underscore Nicaea's unfinished work, reminding Christians that liturgical unity remains a vital witness to the Gospel.

Seventeen centuries later, the Council of Nicaea's liturgical legislations continue to shape Christian worship. Its decisions were not merely historical footnotes but enduring testimonies to the inseparable bond between right belief and worship. As the Church navigates contemporary challenges—whether ecumenical dialogue or liturgical renewal—Nicaea's legacy serves as a reminder that authentic liturgy must always proclaim, celebrate, and safeguard the faith once delivered to the saints. In this way, the council's work remains a monument of the past and a living guide for the Church's worship and mission today.