

In the first eight hundred years of Christianity, before the schism between East and West divided the Church into what we know as the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches, representatives of the whole, undivided Church met in a series of councils. These councils were convened to clarify points of Christian doctrine, especially in light of various heresies that arose and troubled the Church.

As the Orthodox scholar, Father Thomas Hopko, notes:

As the Church progressed through history it was faced with many difficult decisions. The Church always settled difficulties and made decisions by reaching a consensus of opinion among all the believers inspired by God who were led by their appointed leaders, first the apostles and then the bishops.

The first church council in history is the one we read about in Acts 15, when the apostles, including Peter, and Paul, together with James “the brother of the Lord” (Galatians 1:19), met in Jerusalem to decide the conditions under which the gentiles, that is, non-Jews, could enter the Christian Church. From that time on, all through history, councils were held on every level of church life to make important decisions.

The first of what we know as the Seven Ecumenical Councils met in AD 325. It was convened by the Emperor Constantine, who provided that bishops from everywhere in the Roman Empire would meet in Nicaea at imperial expense. The major dispute was over the teaching of Arius, who denied that Jesus was fully God; but there were other doctrinal issues also. When the Council, numbering 318 bishops, met in Nicaea, they rejected Arianism and affirmed that the Son is of the same substance as the Father and, therefore, fully God. The Council expressed their affirmation in what has become known as the Nicene Creed, which we recite during the Holy Eucharist.

Between AD 325 and AD 787, there were seven councils, involving bishops from the entire Christian Church, which clarified the Church’s teaching and resolved important doctrinal issues.

Each of these Councils also resolved numerous lesser matters of Church discipline. These Seven Ecumenical Councils are:

**Nicaea I – AD 325:** This Council formulated the first part of the Nicene Creed, defining the full divinity of the Son of God.

**Constantinople I – AD 381:** This Council formulated the second part of the Nicene Creed, defining the full divinity of the Holy Spirit.

**Ephesus – AD 431:** This Council defined Christ as the Incarnate Word of God and Mary as Theotokos (God Bearer). It also repudiated the heresies known as Nestorianism and Pelagianism.

**Chalcedon – AD 451:** This Council affirmed Christ as perfect God and perfect Man. It defined the concept of “Hypostatic Union,” that Christ has two natures, human and divine, in One Person.

**Constantinople II – AD 553:** This Council reconfirmed the doctrines of the Trinity and expanded the work of previous Councils regarding the Person and Work of Christ.

**Constantinople III – AD 680:** This Council affirmed the true humanity of Jesus by insisting upon the reality of His human will and action. It denounced the heresy of Monothelitism, which wrongly asserted that Christ had two natures but only one will.

**Nicaea II – AD 787:** This Council affirmed the propriety of icons as genuine expressions of the Christian Faith.

These Councils were ecumenical and catholic because they represented all Christians everywhere, and because they sought to clarify the Church’s teaching in light of Holy Scripture and the teaching of the Apostles which had been handed down from the earliest days of the Church.

The *Declaration of Common Faith and Purpose*, of Forward in Faith North America, contains this affirmation: “I believe all Seven Councils are ecumenical and catholic on the basis of the received Tradition of the ancient Undivided Church of East and West.”

Since the adoption of this *Declaration*, some people

have pointed to other Anglican luminaries in history as well as contemporary Anglican affirmations of faith that embrace only the first four Ecumenical Councils and suggested that Forward in Faith’s affirmation of all Seven Ecumenical Councils poses a problem. They have also suggested that affirmation of the Seventh Council (Nicaea II) and its teaching with regard to icons and relics is in conflict with classical Anglican formularies such as the *Articles of Religion* (“The Thirty-Nine Articles”). So how should Anglicans view the Seven Ecumenical Councils?

First, it should be noted that the FIFNA *Declaration* does not call for subscription to every canon and anathema from all Seven Councils, it merely calls on its members to acknowledge that “all Seven Councils are ecumenical and catholic on the basis of the received Tradition of the ancient Undivided Church of East and West.” This is simply an accurate historical statement. The churches of the East and West have always acknowledged all Seven Councils to be “ecumenical and catholic,” that is, to have been participated in and accepted by representatives of the universal Church as it existed at that time. With regard to the Seventh Council, it was convened under the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople, two Roman legates representing the Pope, and representatives of the Patriarchs of Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Whatever else may be said about the Seventh Council, it was definitely ecumenical and catholic.

Specifically, with regard to relics, the Seventh Council affirmed the following:

Let relics of the Holy Martyrs be placed in such churches as have been consecrated without them, and this with the accustomed prayers. But whoever shall consecrate a church without these shall be deposed as a transgressor of the traditions of the Church.

This canon must be understood within its historical context. In this period, those who were establishing churches without relics were usually either schismatics or heretics. Having access to obtain the relic of a saint and including it in the construction of a new church indicated that the congregation was in

communion with the wider Church and under the authority of a bishop who stood in apostolic succession. The presence of a saint’s relic in the church was like a “Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval” and indicated that the congregation was a valid part of the orthodox and catholic Church.

With regard to the use of icons, the Council issued the following anathema against those who opposed their use:

We salute the venerable images. We place under anathema those who do not do this. Anathema to them who presume to apply to the venerable images the things said in Holy Scripture about idols. Anathema to those who do not salute the holy and venerable images. Anathema to those who call the sacred images idols. Anathema to those who say that Christians resort to the sacred images as to gods. Anathema to those who say that any other delivered us from idols except Christ our God. Anathema to those who dare to say that at any time the Catholic Church received idols.

Those who see the teaching of the Seventh Council on these subjects as problematic point to Article XXII of the *Articles of Religion*, which states:

The Romish Doctrine concerning Purgatory, Pardons, Worshipping and Adoration, as well of Images as of Relics, and also Invocation of Saints, is a fond thing, vainly invented, and grounded upon no warranty of Scripture, but rather repugnant to the Word of God.

On the basis of this Article, these same critics assert that the Seventh Council and the Anglican Reformation cannot coexist. But is that truly the case?

First, a little background: In the centuries prior to the Reformation, there was a use of images (mostly statues in the West, not icons) along with saints’ relics that, especially among poor and illiterate people, was the cause of superstition to the extent that it could be said to be idolatrous. Statues and relics that were intended to remind the faithful of their connection to great Christians of ages past were instead treated as though they were magic. The response of some in

the Reformation was to destroy these images and relics.

The superstition that had arisen regarding images and relics is what Article XXII is referring to when it speaks of “the Romish Doctrine....” But, “the Romish Doctrine” or idolatrous misuse of images and relics is not what the Seventh Council is endorsing in its canon. In fact, the Seventh Council is saying that images or icons should not be viewed or treated as idols. This canon applies as much to those who would be tempted to regard icons as idols as it does to those who would regard their proper use as idolatrous.

Consider the words of St. John of Damascus (A.D. 675-749):

Concerning the charge of idolatry: Icons are not idols but symbols; therefore when an Orthodox venerates an icon, he is not guilty of idolatry. He is not worshiping the symbol, but merely venerating it. Such veneration is not directed toward wood, or paint or stone, but towards the person depicted. Therefore relative honor is shown to material objects, but worship is due to God alone.

St. John of Damascus then goes on to make a comparison between icons and crosses, which we and all Christians revere:

We do not make obeisance to the nature of wood, but we revere and do obeisance to Him who was crucified on the Cross... When the two beams of the Cross are joined together I adore the figure because of Christ who was crucified on the Cross, but if the beams are separated, I throw them away and burn them.

A proper understanding of the historic use of icons and the Seventh Council’s teaching concerning their use reveals no conflict with the *Articles of Religion*.

How should we regard the Council’s injunction that relics must be in every church? The answer lies in another of the *Articles of Religion*, Article XXI:

[Councils] may err, and sometimes have erred, even in things pertaining unto God. Wherefore things ordained by them as

necessary to salvation have neither strength nor authority, unless it may be declared that they be taken out of holy Scripture.

The Seventh Council’s teaching regarding the use of icons and relics should not present a problem, as long as they are not being made into idols—which the Seventh Council regards as being just as wrong as the *Articles of Religion* do. But when the Council goes on to say: “But whoever shall consecrate a church without these shall be deposed as a transgressor of the traditions of the Church,” we can understand this as being a measure of Church discipline that was peculiar to its time and regard (or disregard) it accordingly.

This is a different matter than saying we reject the Seventh Council. Rather we affirm the Seventh Council, but we read its conclusions in light of Holy Scripture and other theological developments that refine our understanding—such as the *Articles of Religion*. This is the constructive way to do theology. It is syncretical rather than polemical. We read Scripture in light of other Scripture—and in light of the consensus of the faithful as to its meaning. We read theology, not taking one Church Father, Council, theologian, or theological movement in isolation, but in light of Holy Scripture and the same catholic consensus down through the ages.

The Seventh Council also forbade clergy from serving more than one parish simultaneously; it forbade women from serving as housekeepers in a bishop’s residence or monastery; and it forbade the establishment of “double monasteries”—monasteries of both men and women. Do we follow these injunctions today? And if we do not, does it mean that we are rejecting the Seventh Council? The fact is that a number of the Seven Councils issued canons containing details that we do not follow today, but instead, we read them in their historical context and temper our judgments in light of the other sources that contribute to our theological understanding. It does not mean that we are rejecting the Councils.

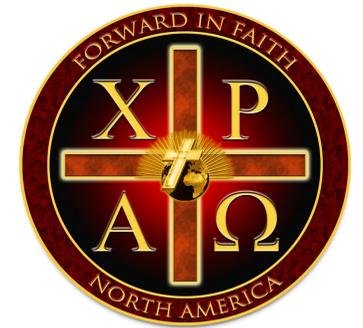
Regarding the authority of the Seven Councils, consider this statement as to how the Councils are viewed by the Eastern Orthodox:

The canons of the Ecumenical Councils are regarded within the Orthodox Church as universally authoritative, though not in a strictly constructionist sense. Their canons have often been repealed or revised by the decisions of local synods or even of later Ecumenical Councils. Nevertheless, their legislation is central to the Orthodox canonical tradition, and appeals to such canons are more frequently made than to any other source of canonical legislation. ([http://orthodoxwiki.org/Ecumenical\\_Councils](http://orthodoxwiki.org/Ecumenical_Councils))

This statement as to how the canons of the Councils may be repealed or modified in light of subsequent theological understandings provides a very helpful guide as to how the Councils may be viewed by Forward in Faith and other traditionalist Anglicans. We read the Councils in their historical context and understand their decisions to be the ecumenically and universally “received Tradition of the ancient Undivided Church of East and West” (Forward in Faith, *Declaration of Common Faith and Purpose*). We also understand that, as Article XXXIV teaches, “It is not necessary that Traditions and Ceremonies be in all places one, or utterly like; for at all times they have been divers, and may be changed according to the diversity of countries, times, and men’s manners, so that nothing be ordained against God’s Word.”

So can an affirmation that the Seven Ecumenical Councils are “ecumenical and catholic” coexist with an affirmation of the *Articles of Religion*? Yes, as we read and apply them both in the light of Scripture. Christians have disagreed and continue to disagree over matters of tradition such as the use of icons, and we will only resolve these differences if we submit ourselves to Holy Scripture as we work prayerfully toward a common theological understanding and seek the unity of the Church for which our Lord prayed (John 17).

## The Seven Ecumenical Councils



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