

CHRISTIANITY IN THE 4TH CENTURY

INTRODUCTION

First, a disclaimer. There is so much to be covered, and it's all so interesting, that...we will see what we will see. But today I hope to cover:

- ◆ The beginnings of the Monastic movement
- ◆ The Conversions of Armenia and Georgia and the mission to the Germans
- ◆ The Last Great Persecution of the Church in the West
- ◆ The Conversion of Constantine
- ◆ And the Great Christological Debates culminating in the Council of Nicea

I. ST. ANTHONY AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MONASTIC MOVEMENT

So, let's begin by looking at the beginnings of the Monastic movement, or more properly, the man usually called the **Father of the asceticism** which in time, gave birth to monasticism. **Antony of Egypt (c. 251–356)**. Though, to be fair, we need first to underline the fact that asceticism (*defined as "practicing strict self-denial as a measure of personal and especially spiritual discipline"*), was being practiced already in Syria in the 2nd Century. The Assyrian Teacher Tatian taught it in Edessa. He spawned an heretical movement called the **Encratites** calling for severe self-denial; subsequently, both his writing and the movement he started was denounced by **Irenaeus of Lyons** later the same century as heresy. But the kind of thing recommended was, it must be admitted, relatively widespread in Syria and the East, and much admired. It had an influence on what was to come that was accepted as legitimate. These **Syrian solitary recluses** would chain themselves to rocks; they bent their bodies under iron weights; they walled themselves up in caves...and one ascetic, a certain Aones, lived like a wild beast in the caves near Edessa by the well where Jacob met Rachel and only allowed himself to eat uncooked grass. (Moffatt, page 76). This lifestyle and religious practice seemed to be based on several different ideas. Some of it came from gnosticism, the Greek idea that the body and the material world is evil. But some roots come from the words of the New Testament. The example of John the Baptist living in the wilderness; *Jesus' warning about looking at a woman lustfully*; His exhortation to deny ourselves, take up our cross and follow him; and his instructions to the 70 not to take a bag for their journey; Jesus' presumption that his disciples would fast, and Paul's struggle with the flesh in Romans 6 and 7, as well as his recommendation to remain celibate if possible, all undoubtedly contributed to the ascetic and monastic call. When Antony came along and retreated to the desert of Egypt, there were other factors mingled in. The Decian Persecution of mid-2nd century had placed great personal and economic stress on the Coptic (or native, rural Egyptian) communities. In Egypt, in Alexandria, there were Pogroms against Christians in 248, that, as with the Jews in Russia, could always spring up again. Men wondered whether they should flee the persecutions and attempt a precarious livelihood in the desert; and some who did, stayed there and provided an example to others.

In the year **270 A.D.**, a **19 year old farmer named Antony** who had just inherited a large sum of money, wondered what he should do with it. In church one Sunday in his Coptic village church he heard a sermon on a text in Matthew, and concluded God was speaking to him: *"... If you wish to be perfect, go, sell your possessions, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me."* Hearing that, and taking the meaning literally, Antony soon obeyed. He placed his younger sister (thanks bro!) under the care of the Virgins of the Church, gave his money and property away, and retreated to the very edge of the desert living in a tomb in the mountains to the west of Alexandria. He stayed there for years until so many misfits and grumblers gathered round to join

him, that he withdrew from them to an even more solitary place in the Arabian Mountains on the East side of the Nile, and there he stayed for another 18 years until the outbreak of the Great Persecution (about which more in a minute), in 303 A.D. Antony's desire was to put into practice what Jesus did when he withdrew into a solitary place to pray. But his retreat, according to Eusebius, was also a protest against the actions of the rich, whom, he complained, "grind the faces of the poor" (Frend, 422). Antony was not quite an ascetic in the mold of the Syrians. His desire was to live purely, to pray, to conquer the flesh, and to live on as little as necessary, sometimes fasting for several days, sometimes eating only a meal a day. But he did not punish himself by chaining himself to rocks, or by eating grass. His titanic efforts to conquer the flesh and its desires, however, were recorded by Athanasius who wrote a history of him. At the beginning, he felt sorry for himself, regretting having given everything away. So he would redouble his discipline to bring his thoughts in line.

According to Athanasius, the devil fought St. Anthony by afflicting him with boredom, laziness, and the phantoms of women, which he overcame by the power of prayer. After that, he moved to a tomb, where he resided and closed the door on himself, depending on some local villagers who brought him food. At one point his friends from the local village came to visit him and found him unconscious and carried him to a church.

After he recovered, he made a second effort and went back into the desert to a farther mountain. There he lived strictly enclosed in an old abandoned Roman fort for some twenty years. According to Athanasius, the devil again resumed his war against Saint Anthony, only this time the phantoms were in the form of wild beasts, wolves, lions, snakes and scorpions. They appeared, so the story goes, as if they were about to attack him or cut him into pieces. But Antony would laugh at them scornfully and say, "If any of you have any authority over me, only one would have been sufficient to fight me." At his saying this, they disappeared as though in smoke, and God gave him the victory over the devil. At this point Anthony did not allow anyone to enter his cell; whoever came to him stood outside and listened to his advice. He began to have a reputation as a miracle worker. Many curious came to visit him, others to hear his teachings. He saw that these visits kept him away from his worship. As a result, he went further into the desert. He traveled to the inner wilderness for three days, until he found a spring of water and some palm trees, choosing to settle there. On this spot still stands the monastery of Saint Anthony the Great today. But so many began to come to join him, that he relented and formed them into a community of solitaries. Soon this became a mass movement. Thousands upon thousands fled to the desert for prayer, so that some areas of the desert became more populated than cities.

The Church had grown; many of the bishops had great prestige; somewhere after Constantine, the Edict of Toleration in 313, adoption of Christianity by the Empire, bishops began to be called priests, and these solitary Christian men and women hated it. They called themselves "**Anchorites**", meaning, "fugitives", (Gonzales, pages 137-40) or those who "withdraw", fleeing the pomp and prestige of the churches for a life of contemplation, prayer and humility. The worst fate they could imagine was to be ordained a priest or bishop.

What did a they do? For his own followers, Antony developed a simple rule: "**Pray and work**". Anthony himself cultivated a garden and wove mats of rushes. His disciples weaved baskets and mats that they traded for bread and oil. As they weaved they recited psalms and prayed or memorized portions of Scripture. They taught each other by heart entire books of the Bible, particularly the Psalms and the books of the New Testament. He and his disciples were regularly sought out for words of enlightenment and in time, these statements were collected into a book: Sayings of the Desert Fathers. He died in **356 A.D. at age 105**, instructing his two companions to keep the place of his burial secret. But we're not done with him, we'll hear more about him in a minute when we talk about Athanasius of Alexandria.

II. PACHOMIUS

The other name associated with the beginnings of Monasticism was that of Pachomius, another Egyptian, who lived from 286 to 348, and was the father of Cenobite monasticism, or monasticism with community life. Whereas the anchorites would have a minimum of community life, cenobite monasticism was a conscious structuring of community life punctuated by prayers, worship, work, and mutual service.

A word about Pachomius. This young Egyptian who was born into a non-Christian home, was drafted, much to his dismay, into the Army. And one day, feeling quite sorry for himself, some Christians came by to console and pray with him. He was so impressed by their kindness that he committed his life to Christ and swore to serve him. When later, he was unexpectedly released, he, like so many of his contemporaries, made his way to the desert to be trained by anchorites. But after 7 years of training and prayer, having been joined by his younger brother, he received a vision of God telling him to serve humanity. He protested that he had committed himself to serve God. God gave him a second vision telling him to serve his fellow man. So, he and his brother constructed a large enclosure and began to recruit members for their community. His sister founded a similar community for women. There were numerous buildings: the church, the common dining hall, storehouses, work places for cobblers, bakers, weavers, etc., there were buildings for door keepers, and cells: one for every two monks. The name they adopted, “**monks**” comes from the Greek, *monachos*, meaning “**solitary**”. But together these monks, while they kneaded bread or cobbled shoes, sang psalms, recited passages of scripture, prayed aloud or in silence, meditated on a biblical text, and twice a day said prayers in common. In the morning the entire community gathered to pray, sing psalms, and hear the reading of Scripture. In the evening they had a similar service. At the table there was bread, fruit, vegetables, and fish, but never meat. What the monks produced was sold in nearby markets to buy food, and also, in order to have something to give the poor and any sojourners who came by.

Every monk had to obey his superior. But insofar as each was to serve the other, even the superiors were called to serve the others below them, often in very menial tasks.

Pachomius established nine such monasteries in his lifetime. The Abbot ruled over all the monasteries. Twice a year, all the Pachomian monks would meet together from the various monasteries for worship and prayer. Pachomius established the rule that the monks would swear obedience to the successor whom the Abbot would name just before he died.

To enter the monastery, a suppliant would appear at the gate of the enclosure begging to be let in. They would be left there for several days and nights until such time as the gate keepers would be convinced that the request was sincere, and that the applicant had the resolve to keep the rules which they would subsequently be taught. Interestingly, these monasteries were held in such esteem by the surrounding populations, that pagans would often seek entry. They would begin by instruction in the basics of the Gospel and faith.

One other interesting insight: their rejection of pomp and of ordination created a problem for them. Ignatius, as we have seen in the first century already, had insisted that communion was only valid performed by an ordained pastor or one he designated. This was now true the Christian world over. So what did the monks do? They attended a local church on Saturday, and then on Sunday, they would receive communion from a visiting pastor.

This monastic, cenobite model spread through the Christian world like wildfire. Soon, as we shall see, it was being introduced by Martin of Tours in Gaul in one of the most astonishing tales of evangelism in history.

III. CONVERSION OF ARMENIA AND GEORGIA

ARMENIA

Here's the story of the conversion of Armenia and Georgia. First Armenia. We've often been told that it was the first Christian nation. As we saw last week, there were two others including Edessa, north of Syria and Adiabene (a part of Iraq), around 200 A.D. which preceded it. Perhaps because it was larger and more powerful and still exists today as a Christian nation, it retains, nevertheless a right to special status.

The man who was responsible for the conversion of Armenia was named **Gregory the Illuminator or Enlightener. He was born in 257.** Gregory's father was a **Parthian**, one of the precursor people of the Persians we know today. The Parthians were the main opponents of the Romans; their empire covering much of eastern Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Afganistan. Parthia was never conquered by Rome. Sometimes Armenia was allied with Rome, sometimes with the Parthians. Anyway, Saint Gregory's father was not as saintly as his son, was involved in court intrigues, and for political reasons assassinated the King of Armenia. So Gregory's mother took little Gregory and fled for her life to Cappodocia on the Southern coast of Turkey. There Gregory was raised by a teacher in the Christian faith. In 287 A.D., the grandson of the murdered King of Armenia, **Tiridates III tracked** Gregory down, brought him back to Armenia, and **threw him into a pit**, where, the story goes, he remained for 10 years. This was near Mt Ararat.

He had lots of time to pray, and soon became widely known for his holiness. Well the king was found to be in distress of some kind, so, in 297, Gregory was taken out of the pit, restored and invited to minister to the same king who had thrown him into the pit. He must have done a good job, because Tiridates III converted to Christianity and was baptized along with his whole court. The country officially adopted Christianity in 301. **Gregory died in 331. He is the patron saint of Armenia.**

GEORGIA

The story of the conversion of Georgia involves a Christian woman, but this one, not of noble birth, but a household slave. It is a reminder of how God has often used prayer and healing, signs and wonders, to convert people to Him and does so still today. It is also exemplary of how whole nations converted, through their rulers.

This is what happened. Georgia at the time was also known as **Iberia**. A certain young woman who was a Christian, was captured and brought to Iberian or Georgia as a slave. Her name was **Nina, or Nino**. She was deeply committed to Christ, and, unlike the women around her, never drank. Her virtue was exemplary. She prayed ceaselessly. Fasted often. Georgians who knew her began to take note. Women in particular wanted to know about her faith. They were curious. So she told them about Christ. Then one day, one of these women's children got sick.

“It is said to be a custom among them that if a child falls ill, it is carried round by its mother to each individual household, so that if anyone knows of some trustworthy remedy, he may administer it to the sufferer. Accordingly, when (this mother) had carried her ailing child to everyone, as the custom was, but without finding any cure in all the homes she had visited, she came at last to the captive--Nina--so that she too might declare anything she knew. Nina affirmed that she knew of no human remedy, but assured the mother that her God Christ, whom she worshiped could grant the child (healing). Placing the infant on her hair cloak and offering up a prayer to the Lord, Nina then gave

the child to its mother perfectly restored” (St. Nina).

This healing reached the ears of the queen who, herself was desperately ill. She asked for the captive woman to be brought to her, but Nina declined to go, apparently, because she didn't feel it was fitting. So the queen had herself carried to her room. Nina prayed, and, the queen was healed. She told the Queen that it was Christ who had healed her, and that she should begin to pray to Him, thanking him for what he had done as King of Kings. The Queen shared what had happened to her husband. He wanted to reward Nina with princely gifts, but, was told Nina would accept none of this, that the only thing she wanted was that the King and Queen worship Christ as Lord. Well, the king promptly forgot about it.

Some time later while he was hunting in the forest, day light was clouded over in some kind of dense fog, the King became separated from his retainers and he began to panic. He didn't know what to do. Then he remembered his wife's healing and began to wonder if Christ might be able to help him. He told himself that if he did, he'd worship him alone as Lord.

No sooner had he thought this than the dark fog disappeared, his panic subsided, and he made his way safely home. He talked to his wife about it, summoned Nina to his palace, and began taking instruction in the Christian faith. He had a church built and as monarch, adopted Christianity as the official religion. Georgia, of course, is Christian to this day. And it might be added, both Armenia and Georgia have withstood horrendous attempts by Muslim conquerors in centuries to come such as Tamerlane to force them to accept Islam.

IV. THE LAST ROMAN PERSECUTION

But let us return to Christianity in the Greco-Roman Empire, for it is there that momentous events were about to occur that would affect Christianity in the world forever. For the remainder of the class, I'd like to review them. They may be subsumed under three chapters:

- ◆ Persecution
- ◆ The Conversion of Constantine; and
- ◆ the Great Church Councils of the 4th Century together with the names of the theologians who made them famous.

PERSECUTION

The church by the beginning of the 4th century had been enjoying peace and prosperity. Many had forgotten there was a problem at all. Even the borders of the Empire were relatively secure. The emperor, Diocletian's wife and daughter were both Christians. But there were problems in the army. In 295, a number of Christians were condemned to death for refusing to enlist. Others were executed for trying to leave. The Church's attitude was ambivalent. Should Christians use the sword and fight or not? To be sure he didn't have a fifth column abandoning the fight, Galerius, the commander of the army of the Danube where Goths were raiding, and an emperor in waiting, convinced the emperor Diocletian to kick out all Christians from the armed forces. This was between 298-302 A.D. Galerius didn't like Christians, and his next step was to convince Diocletian to kick Christians out of all administrative post in the empire—and Christians occupied a lot of them. Then he talked him into destroying all churches and burning all Christian books. Christians, however, often refused to turn over their scriptures. Many were tortured and put to death. Then a fire broke out in the imperial palace. Was it Galerius who set it? We can't know, though that was the rumor floating around. If there was a purpose in it, it was to pin the blame on Christians taking revenge for the burning of their churches and books. Diocletian grew paranoid. He became convinced that Christians were conspiring against him.

He declared that all Christian leaders should offer sacrifices to the gods or suffer torture and death. After so many years of peace, many abandoned the faith. Others escaped over the border into Persia. Others were tortured and died. Many went into hiding. The only area where there was relative peace was in Gaul, Spain, and England where they were protected by Constantine's (we'll hear more about him in a minute) father, the military governor of that area.

At this point, Diocletian abdicated and **Galerius** took over what part of the empire he could. Civil war broke out on all sides. In the East, in Egypt, Carthage, and Italy, Galerius inflicted terrible suffering on the Church: Christians were maimed and sent to work in stone quarries. There they organized Churches which only enraged the authorities more who had them deported or killed. This persecution under **Diocletian and Galerius** was undoubtedly the worst and most widespread persecution thus far, lasting some 13 years. **Finally in 311**, some relief came. Galerius became sick with a painful disease, and quite possibly thinking it was God getting back at him for the death of so many Christians, reversed his policy and issued an edict of toleration. He wrote:

“Moved by our mercy to be benevolent towards all, it has seemed just to us to extend to Christians our pardon, and allow them to be Christians once again, and once again gather in their assemblies, as long as they do not interfere with public order. ..In return for our tolerance, Christians will be required to pray to their god for us, for the public good, and for themselves, so that the state may enjoy prosperity and they may live in peace.”

He died 5 days later. That left the Church with a precarious and un-enforced peace, many many churches destroyed, man Christians still in jail or hard labor, and four warring emperors ruling over four different parts of the the empire. Three of these men recognized each other, but the last, **Maxentius** who ruled in Rome, they considered a usurper. What happened next changed the world forever.

V. CONSTANTINE (27 February 272 – 22 May 337)

The emperor/general who ruled over Gaul and Britain, **Constantine**, gathered his armies for a surprise attack on Maxentius. He crossed the Alps and marched on Rome, taking unprepared strongholds as he came. He gathered his armies to fight Maxentius outside the walls of Rome. Maxentius, who would have been well advised to stay within the walls of Rome, consulted his augurs who told him to go out and fight. Which he prepared to do the next day. There are at least four versions of what happened next. Here is one: that night, Constantine had a dream. It was a Chi Rho, the first to letters of Christ's name in Greek; X R. A voice instructed him to paint this sign on his men's shields. Eusebius tells another tale, that he said, he heard directly from the emperor himself, that as he was marching to battle the next day, he saw a cross over the sun in the sky with the words beneath: “In this sign conquer”.

Whatever the case, at the **Battle of the Milvian Bridge** that day, Constantine's army won a decisive victory. Maxentius, in the midst of the fighting, was thrown by his horse into the Tiber River while attempting a retreat, and was drowned. And Constantine became sole emperor of the western half of the Empire. **The date was October 28, 312 A.D.**

Was Constantine a Christian at this date? Probably not. He continued to worship the **Unconquered Sun** for some time after this date. But he also began calling himself the bishop of bishops began responding to requests by the Church involving internal disputes, taking a more and more important role in the Church's affairs. What is important at this *early* date, however, is that, together with one of his two remaining co-emperors, Licinius, whom he met at Milan, an Edict of Toleration, called, the **Edict of Milan**, was issued, which gave complete freedom to the Church to worship as it pleased, restore buildings to them, release their prisoners from jail, return their books and any other objects belonging to them at no cost. The date was **313 A.D.** I can't find a month and day. Under one of Constantine's rivals in the east, Maximinus, persecution of the Church continued apace. But in time,

Maximinus died, Constantine moved against Licinius, defeated him, and by the **year 324** he was the **sole ruler of the Empire**. By that time his policies with regard to the Church were becoming more and more favorable to such an extent that he donated a palace in Rome to the Church, and began to dream of re-building the Glory of the Roman Empire upon the foundation of the Christian Faith. The old Roman Senate was not happy about this, so Constantine simply moved his capitol eastward, and built a new city, a new Rome, destined to become of the greatest in the empire and for a thousand years the capitol of Byzantium: **Constantinople**, the city that we call Istanbul, Turkey today. Constantine robbed pagan sanctuaries of their gods and set them up as ornaments in his new city, in this way, willingly or not, stripping away some of the power and prestige of Pagan religion in the Empire. These venerated gods had just become ornamentation. And if his whole life he continued to exercise his functions as chief priest of the Pagan religion and as an adept of the Unconquered Sun, he could do so, because, astutely, he never accepted baptism or instruction in the Christian Faith, that is, never declared himself a true follower of Christ, until his deathbed, so that he could continue to offer sacrifices to the gods as someone who was favorable to Christianity, but not yet quite a Christian, and therefore not really under the authority of the Church. He obviously wanted God to bless him and help him win his battles and build his capitol; and obviously believed the Christian God was powerful and feared him, but it is unclear that he ever truly gave his life to Christ.

Change in the Church:

What he did, however was to make the state a principle player in the Church's internal affairs, and though Christianity would not be adopted as the official or sole religion of the Empire for some time after Constantine's death, it cannot be disputed that the church with Constantine entered an era of unprecedented change with enormous consequences for its life and piety. Masses of people began to flock into the church; bishops began to don more elaborate vestments and ministers began to be called priests; worship migrated to larger and more elaborate structures called basilicas; incense, which was used as a sign of respect for the emperor, began appearing in Christian churches; gestures of respect usually made before the emperor, began to be a part of worship; whereas churches would on special occasions hold worship services in cemeteries where martyrs were buried, churches began to be built on these sites, or bones or objects of martyrs brought into churches and housed in special boxes. Constantine's mother made a pilgrimage to the Holy Land and found "the true cross" which was said to have miraculous powers. She had a church built there. And despite pastors preaching that doing a pilgrimage to the Holy Land was not necessary to being a good Christian, people began to make the trip out of religious zeal...perhaps hoping to find some relic of an apostle, etc.

In this way, Constantine's favor began to change the church. Perhaps most importantly, he issued in a period of Ecclesiastical history, sometimes referred to as the **Constantinian Era**, which saw a rise in the prestige and **implication of the Church in State affairs**. Thus began something like 1600 years of collaboration between the Church and State in the West, and in the East wherever Byzantium held sway.

Was this good? A very difficult question. Some feel the Church's freedom and integrity was compromised. That corruption and prestige slowly sucked strength from the Church, that masses of people converting without fear of persecution and without proper instruction made the Church into something different than the Apostles had ever envisaged. That the temptations of power and wealth eroded the very virtue and service which were such flaming lights during the previous three centuries. As we have seen, the massive monastic reaction of retreat into the desert, poverty, service, and prayer seemed to reflect this judgment by many against the Church already in the time of Constantine.

In Sassanian Persia, during the 40 years from the time of the death of Constantine in 339 until 379, Shapur II, king of Persia, had some **190,000 Christians put to death**, partially, at least, because he believed they were a fifth column in his own land: Christians who, if given the chance, would be loyal

to Rome(page Moffatt,145).

But it is **sobering nonetheless to consider this fact**: that wherever nations did not officially adopt the faith, the Church, sometimes quickly, sometimes over hundreds, even thousands of years was slowly crushed by persecution until it finally all but disappeared in Asia, North Africa, Nubia, and the Middle East. For whatever else we can say about this event and its consequences for the Church, one thing shines above all the rest: as a consequence of Constantine's Conversion, the Edict of Milan, and the later adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rome, the **Church Survived and prospered**. And it brought along with it the Scriptures as its most precious possession. The missionary efforts and the growth of the Church in the developing world today, are a direct result of that survival of the Church and the Word. And for that we can bless God and thank him for his Sovereign Love.

And it must be added that in this early period—the 4th Century, the beginning of the Constantinian Era—the Church was also blessed with some of her greatest theologians and her greatest theological debates. The answers that evolved during this time of peace and blessing, answers that came from Church councils and from the pens of theologians have been a foundation upon which the Church has stood for centuries, and still stands today. It was a necessary theological shield protecting her and enabling her to withstand wave upon wave of destruction thrown against her by Barbarians to the North and Saracens to the South and East. The Church in the centuries to come was to survive onslaughts we can only imagine. And if she did, one of the reasons is that she had settled theological questions in Church Councils which provided her with an **internal vitality** and strength that stood its ground and prospered against the worst the enemy could throw at her. A life that flows from a proper understanding of the Gospel itself anointed by the Holy Spirit. It is to those Councils and Debates which we'll now turn.

VI. ARIUS

As we saw last week and to some extent the week before, one of the biggest issues facing the Church on the theological front, was that of **Christology**, or how to understand the nature of Christ Jesus and consequently, God Himself. Tertullian wrestled with Calixtus of Rome on this issue in the 3rd Century. Ignatius and the Apostles were already defending Jesus' coming in the flesh against Gnostic attacks in the first century. Irenaeus fought with Marcion over it in the 2nd. But the debate was never officially resolved because there existed no supreme head of the church or supreme authority that could be appealed to and which could subsequently resolve it. Suddenly, however, there was a new situation: the all powerful Emperor who controlled the entire Roman world for the first time in decades and who was moving his capitol closer to the midlands of Christianity, was favorable toward Christianity. Not only that, but Constantine had a vested interest in the unity in the church. He saw Christianity as the new cement of the Empire. The temptation became too much to pass up: why not involve him? Why not appeal to his authority? Why not present the problems to him and ask for his help in resolving the tensions which were becoming increasingly exacerbated in the Church, even to the extent of **riots and street battles in Syria and Egypt**? Constantine, who insisted upon unity, but who had no theological abilities and as we have seen, was probably not even a Christian, chose a solution which was to become a model for the church for centuries to come: he called a Council of the church, inviting bishops from around the world to attend and to vote on a theological resolution to the problem. That council met in the **Greek city of Nicea in 325 A.D.** , a city called Iznik today, in northern Turkey near the sea of Marmara and the Bosphorus. We call that council, the **Council of Nicea**, and though many canons were adopted by the bishops who attended it, it is most widely known for its statement of faith concerning Jesus that we call today the **Nicene Creed**. Before we get to it however, let's talk about the debate in the Church itself that both preceded the Council, and continued afterwards.

THE DEBATE: The problem was this: how do you reconcile a Christ whose body and nature suffered like ours with a Father whose essence is eternal and incorruptible? Was our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, in his being, different in essence from God the Father and Creator? Was he perhaps, **created at some time by the Father for the purpose of our Salvation? Born of the Father and adopted as a Son? Or did he always exist, sharing the Father's very essence?** Is our Lord Jesus, a **created** Lord? or is he on an equal footing with the Father? In which case, is there one God or are there Two? Do the Father and the Son share the same divine essence, or are they somehow different in essence or substance?

A piece of background that is important to know here is that many Christians in the Greek speaking world had come to think of God the Father and Creator in very Greek philosophical terms: that is, as immutable, impassible, unchanging, and very unlike us humans, so different in fact, that when the Scriptures say God spoke or walked with Adam in the Garden, it was taken in an allegorical way—indeed everything even vaguely anthropomorphic was taken allegorically, since God was far beyond speech or feelings. Those who taught this were the Greek Egyptians **Justin Martyr, Clement, and Origen**. But the beauty of the Gospel is that we can actually have a relationship with God in which he talks to us and loves us. So how do you reconcile this with a Platonic, immutable unfeeling God? To resolve the problem, Justin, Clement, Origen and others elaborated on the notion of the Logos in the Prologue of John, the Logos being the Word or Reason of God who is capable of direct communication with us. That Logos or Word, they taught, was the bridge between the immutable, impassible, unfeeling God, and us, and was of course, Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ had feelings, suffered, spoke to us and communicated with us and was himself a bridge back to the Father who neither felt, nor suffered, nor spoke, but was supreme over all. But this brought up a question: **was this Logos co-eternal with the Supreme Being, or a late comer? Someone who was created?**

As is often the case in disputes of this kind, there were eloquent leaders who led the charge on both sides of the debate. The two principle protagonists in this controversy were both Alexandrian clerics, both members of the Church in Egypt. Their names were **Arius and Athanasius**, though, as we shall see, there were other powerfully eloquent theologians who sided with the Orthodox cause and whose names are worth mentioning, and still others like **Eusebius** the church historian and bishop of Caesarea himself, who were simply confused by the debate and took different sides at different times. But for now lets talk about Arius and Athanasius.

ARIUS

Not a lot is known about Arius except that he was a highly popular preacher in Alexandria, a presbyter or elder or priest educated in Antioch who became embroiled in a debate with his Bishop Alexander of Alexandria. Arius' teaching about Jesus can be summed up in these words: **“There was when He was not.”** He taught that the **Word or Logos or Son of God** was not co-eternal with the Father, but that **He was created** at some point. He was created before anything else was created, very early on, before the world was made or the angels, but he was created nonetheless. For Arius the Logos did not partake of the same *eternal-divine* nature (*homousias*) as God. He argued that to speak of a Logos and the Father who were both divine, was to deny monotheism and ask for belief in two gods rather than one. Bishop Alexander became concerned about his teaching, called a council of the bishops of Alexandria; they discussed Arius' teaching, condemned it and removed him from office. But Arius had allies. He appealed to bishops he'd gone to school with in Antioch to write letters, and preached his position to the people of Alexandria, and soon there were demonstrations on his behalf in the streets of the city. The controversy became so great that it threatened to divide the entire Eastern Church, and of course, Constantine saw it as a threat to the unity of the Empire. So he called a Council of bishops to decide the matter, and promised to support whatever decision was made.

VII. THE COUNCIL OF NICEA

In the year 325, some 300 bishops met at the first universal or Ecumenical Council of the Church to discuss the matter. It was a moving event. Bishops had come from everywhere in the Empire and beyond, from Persian, for example. Many bore in their bodies the marks of torture. Many had read the writings of colleagues and heard of their reputations. Now they were seeing each other face to face. They had many matters to resolve including, how to accept back the lapsed into the church, how to choose bishops and presbyters, etc. Most felt that the Arian Controversy would be easily resolved with discussion and understanding. But when **Eusebius of Nicomedia**, not to be confused with the church historian of the same name, stood to read the position championed by Arius (who was not present, not being a bishop), and it became clear that he and Arius believed the Son had been created and was not co-eternal with the Father, the assembly was outraged. They began to shout him down. His speech was torn from his hands and ripped to shreds. The debate, you see, had been seen by the Latin West as largely a Greek's obsession with Greek words. They had assumed that everyone believed as Tertullian of Carthage had taught that God was a Triune God, one substance in three persons. When they discovered that Arius and the party who represented him believed the Christ was created and did not share the same substance with the Father they were beside themselves. The Church had always worshiped the Christ. How could you worship one who was not God? Were the Scriptures not clear as to his Divinity? They decided, however, that a simple scriptural answer to the question was insufficient, that a Creed that set out their faith in the simplest and strongest form was best. And so, they adopted what today is known as the **Nicene Creed**. Nearly every bishop present, except a handful such as **Eusebius of Nicomedia**, signed it. Bishops who could not agree to it were anathematized. Constantine added his authority to it by banishing bishops who did not agree to it from their sees. This was of great consequence for the future. But the Nicene Creed remains today the most widely adopted Creed in the World being adhered to by the Russian Orthodox, the Catholic Church, Protestant Churches, the Greek Orthodox, the Syriac and Assyrian Churches, the Coptic Church, The Armenian Orthodox Church, Pentecostal Churches, and so on and so forth.

The solution of course in the Creed was to show that the Son was of the same substance (homousios) as the Father, had never been created but always existed, and was in no way less divine than the Father.

End of story? Hardly. We will always have an enemy. And though the nature of conflicts change, our enemy never ceases to assault us. And in this case, he did it, through the newfound powers implicit in the allegiances between the state and the Church.

VIII. REVERSAL, GREAT LEADERS OF THE CHURCH, AND THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE

What happened? The deposed bishop of Nicomedia who had found his speech torn from his hand by the overwhelmingly orthodox council was distantly related to the Emperor and lived in Constantine's summer place of residence. He had himself reintroduced to the emperor, became friends, and won him over. Soon, the tables were turned and both he and Arius were re-instated by State Authority. Then the successor of Bishop Alexander of Alexandria, Bishop Athanasius a fierce opponent of Arius, found himself forced out of Alexandria by Imperial decree, and soon Orthodox bishops across the empire were fleeing for their lives. When he died, Constantine was baptized by Eusebius of Nicomedia as an Arian. The sons of Constantine, with one exception, favored Arianism. And everywhere bishops were being forced to sign Arian statements of faith or resign. How Christendom returned to Orthodoxy and the Nicene Creed and returned to Orthodoxy at the **Council of Constantinople in 381**, is a story involving a momentary return of the Empire to Paganism under the Emperor Julian the Apostate, and the writings, sufferings, and perseverance of some of the greatest Trinitarian theologians of all time:

THEOLOGIAN AND CHRISTIAN STATESMEN OF THE 4TH CENTURY

- ◆ **Athanasius of Alexandria:** (293- bishop: 328-73) He fought for Trinitarian theology. By the power of his writing concerning the **Incarnation**, he won the Church back for Orthodoxy. He was called the **black dwarf**, because he was Coptic, that is, native Egyptian, swarthy in color, and very short. He wrote some of the greatest words concerning the incarnation ever written.
- ◆ **Hilary of Poitiers in Gaul (295-368):** Argued eloquently for the full deity of Jesus.

The Cappadocian Fathers:

- ◆ **Gregory of Nazianzus**(c. 329– 390) Bishop of Constantinople, called the Theologian of the Trinity, and an accomplished speaker and writer.
- ◆ **Basil (the Great) of Caesarea: (330-379)** the Father of Eastern Communal monasticism, and an untiring advocate of Trinitarian theology.
- ◆ **Gregory of Nyssa (335-395):** the brother of Basil, he wrote extensively on the Trinity and why three members of the Trinity could be one God rather than three gods.

Had we time we'd have talked of others famous in this century. We'll just mention their names:

- ◆ **Martin of Tours, 316-397** a disciple of Hilary, who evangelized much of Gaul, planting dozens of churches and monasteries and was known for miracles of healing. He is the man who, while still a young soldier and not yet baptized, out of love for Christ and pity for a beggar on a cold day, took his military cloak and cut it in two to clothe the beggar. Later he left the army and devoted himself to evangelizing Gaul and presiding as Bishop of Tours. During the Medieval Ages, Frankish Kings would carry St. Martin's cloak, which is called cappa in Latin into battle as a holy relic. The priest who cared for the cloak was called a cappellanu, and ultimately all priests who served the military were called **cappellan**, wearing a small strip of cloth on a shoulder in memory of Martin's cloak. The French translation of cappellan is **chapelains**, from which is derived the English word, **chaplain**.
- ◆ **Jerome (340-420)** translated the Bible into Latin. This became known as the Latin Vulgate. He took care to translate directly from the Hebrew and the Greek. But remember, this care to translate directly from the original had been around a long time. Origen was already doing this in the previous century, that is, translating his the Hebrew scriptures directly from Hebrew into Greek. Now Jerome took it and did it for Latin speaking people in the West.
- ◆ **John Chrysostom (347-407):** “The golden tongued”, one of the greatest preachers of all time, and an Archbishop of Constantinople.
- ◆ **Ambrose of Milan (340-397):** Directly contributed to the conversion of St. Augustine. He was made bishop of Milan by public acclamation at a civic meeting he was attending, without ever having sought the post. His sermons were superlative. He had immense authority and personally called the emperor of his day, Theodosian, on the carpet for the slaughter of Greeks, demanding repentance of him.

THE NICENE CREED
COUNCIL OF NICEA 325

- ◆ We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible
- ◆ And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the only-begotten of the Father, that is, from the substance of the Father, God of God, light of light, true God of true God, begotten, not made, of one substance [homoousios] with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth, who for us humans and for our salvation descended and became incarnate, becoming human, suffered and rose again on the third day, ascended to the heavens, and will come to judge the living and the dead.
- ◆ And in the Holy Spirit.
- ◆ But those who say that there was when He was not, and that before being begotten He was not, or that He came from that which is not, or that the Son of God is of a different substance [hypostasis] or essence [ousia], or that He is created, or mutable, these the catholic church anathematizes.

THE COUNCIL OF CONSTANTINOPLE
NICENE CREED RE-AFFIRMED AND ENLARGED
381 A.D.

- ◆ We believe in one God, the Father Almighty, Maker *of heaven and earth, and* of all things visible and invisible.
- ◆ And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the *only-begotten* Son of God, begotten of the Father *before all worlds* (æons), Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, being of one substance with the Father;
- ◆ by whom all things were made;
- ◆ who for us men, and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate *by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary*, and was made man;
- ◆ *he was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and suffered, and was buried, and the third day he rose again, according to the Scriptures, and ascended into heaven, and sitteth on the right hand of the Father;*
- ◆ from thence he shall come again, *with glory*, to judge the quick and the dead;
- ◆ *whose kingdom shall have no end.*
- ◆ And in the Holy Ghost, *the Lord and Giver of life, who proceedeth from the Father, who with the Father and the Son together is worshiped and glorified, who spake by the prophets.*
- ◆ *In one holy catholic and apostolic Church; we acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins; we look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.*