THE FIRST COUNCIL OF NICAEA (325)

CONTEXTS, DEBATES, AND RECEPTION

EDITED BY

DRAGOȘ MÎRȘANU

AND

DRAGOȘ BAHRIM

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Foreword

In September 2025—the seventeen-hundredth anniversary of the First Ecumenical Council—patristic scholars gathered once again in Iași for the fourth edition of the international symposium *Tradiția patristică în actualitate / The Patristic Tradition Today*, convened this time around the theme "The First Council of Nicaea (325) and Its Patristic Legacy." The choice of theme needs of course little justification. What the symposium set out to do, and what this volume now carries forward, is to revisit the event that first codified Christian orthodoxy on an ecumenical scale, and to ask how that codification went on shaping theological, liturgical, and cultural life for the centuries that followed—down to our own.

Few events in Christian history have proven as consequential as the Council of Nicaea for the subsequent development not only of the Church but of the Mediterranean, European, and, more broadly, Western world. The decision to affirm that the Son is consubstantial (homoousios) with the Father was not a merely technical clarification of vocabulary; it fixed the conceptual grammar within which later generations, from patristic to modern times, would think about God, about personhood, and about the relation between divine and created being. To mark the anniversary of this event by revisiting both its immediate context and its long afterlife is, therefore, an honorable and necessary responsibility, one that the contributors to this volume have taken up with considerable rigor.

The volume brings together a selection of the papers delivered at the symposium and divides them into two parts. Part I, "Nicaea (325): The Event, Its Context, and Theological Debates," stays close to the

council itself: the circumstances surrounding it, its central doctrinal innovation, and the controversies of the fourth century that led up to it and followed from it. Part II, "Legacies of Nicaea: Historical, Theological, and Spiritual Perspectives," follows Nicene theology as it moves through the later life of the Church, from the monastic literature of Late Antiquity, into Byzantine hymnography, and hagiography, up to the doctrinal debates of today. Together the two parts trace one continuous line from the event of 325 to its enduring legacy. The seventeen contributors, based at universities and research institutes in Romania, the United Kingdom, Canada, France, Italy, Austria, and Germany, reflect, in their range of historical, philological, and theological approaches, the breadth of Nicaea's legacy itself.

Richard Price opens the volume with a reassessment of the council itself, delivered fittingly in its seventeenth centenary year. He takes up both the theological substance of Nicaea, above all the Creed's declaration that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, set against the Arian controversy, and the historical circumstances surrounding it: Constantine's own decisive intervention, visible in his letter to Arius and Alexander of Alexandria and in Eusebius' account of the emperor's ceremonial entrance. Price also places Nicaea's "ecumenical" standing within the wider pattern of councils convened by emperors, and follows the Creed's evolution into the longer Nicene-Constantinopolitan version used liturgically today. Constantine, having entered the volume through Price's opening chapter, remains at the center of Petre Guran's contribution, which reads the Constantinian transformation of Christianity somewhat differently: not as a simple fusion of Church and empire but as the institutionalizing of a lasting tension. Christianity, Guran argues, took on a public and political form through episcopal structures and the monumentalizing of worship, while at the same time holding on to the Gospel's own resistance to sacralized power, its insistence on the person over the collective, and its orientation toward the Kingdom of God. Reading Eusebius closely, and attending to terms such as *isapostolos* and *koinos episkopos*, Guran locates the real originality of Constantinian Christianity in this unresolved antinomy.

From the council's political setting the volume moves to its Christological content. Dragoș Andrei Giulea traces what happened to the

various pre-Nicene Christologies once Nicaea had spoken: subordinationist High Christologies, Christologies of the divine form, two–stage Logos Christologies, Logos–sarx Christologies, angelomorphic Christologies. Consubstantiality, he shows, set a bar too high for most of these older idioms, which either dropped out of use or were reread through the new Nicene vocabulary. Petru Molodeț stays with the term homoousios itself, tracing its roots in emanationist theology among both Valentinians and Arians, and returning to Irenaeus of Lyons, whose critique of Valentinian emanationism reworked the notion of consubstantiality by stripping it of anthropomorphic and material overtones—a step, Molodeț argues, that later made its Nicene reception possible.

Two chapters then turn to the vocabulary and the personalities on the Arian side of the debate. Gheorghe Ovidiu Sferlea studies what he calls "theological exclusivism": the shared insistence, running from Arius through Eusebius of Caesarea, Eusebius of Nicomedia, Asterius the Sophist, Aetius, and Eunomius of Cyzicus, that only the Father possesses divinity in the full sense, and the corresponding, near-unanimous refusal among these authors to grant the Son eternity. Basil of Ancyra stands out as an exception, though Sferlea notes that even his legacy remained mixed. Eugen Maftei then separates two names that scholarship often bundles together, Athanasius of Alexandria and Marcellus of Ancyra, showing that although both opposed Arius, their teachings on the Word of God diverge, and at times conflict outright. Alexandru Mihăilă approaches the same period through exegesis rather than polemics, following the figure of Divine Wisdom from Proverbs 8:22–31 through the Wisdom of Solomon, Ben Sira, the New Testament, Philo, and Middle Platonism, and showing how the Arian controversy narrowed what had been a genuinely plural exegetical tradition down to one reading centered on the incarnate Son. Alin Lupu closes Part I with the Council of Antioch of 341, reading its Dedication Creed and the later formula sent to Constans as attempts to steer a course between Nicene theology and what its authors saw as the twin extremes of Arian radicalism and Marcellian modalism—a chapter that carries the controversy well past 325 and sets up the volume's turn, in Part II, toward Nicaea's longer reception.

Part II opens with Thomas Cattoi's study of the Philokalic tradition, moving from Evagrius Ponticus, who was still writing within a largely pre-Nicene, subordinationist idiom decades after the council even as the Cappadocians were extending homoousios to the Holy Spirit, to Maximus the Confessor, in whom the Nicene teaching finally becomes fully his own, worked out through the idea of deification. Paul Siladi shifts from doctrine to lived practice, looking at the *Apophthegmata Patrum*, where an unshaken orthodoxy sits alongside a surprisingly wide range of responses to pagans, heretics, and persecutors—responses that Siladi reads not as inconsistency but as discernment, *diakrisis*, applied case by case.

Andra Stoiculescu turns next to the three Cappadocian Fathers, showing how Basil of Caesarea, Gregory of Nyssa, and Gregory of Nazianzus carried Nicaea's theology forward to Constantinople through three overlapping efforts: sharpening the technical vocabulary, working the councils and correspondence of their day, and building a literary tradition that presented the Creed as something handed down from their own spiritual forebears. Dragoș Boicu then leaves theology proper for liturgy, tracing how the *Pentecostarion* and the *Menaia* turned Arius into something more than a historical figure, a stock image of the heretic to be denounced, sometimes fiercely, in hymn after hymn across the centuries. Andrei Fînaru contributes something rather different: the first edition of a hitherto unpublished encomium by Saint Andrew of Crete in honor of Saint Athanasius of Alexandria (CPG 8203), based on the two surviving seventeenth-century manuscripts, adding a piece to the still-incomplete edition of Andrew's homiletic output.

The last three chapters carry Nicaea's legacy further still, into late Byzantium, the Romanian lands, and the present. Cristian I. Dumitru looks at a theological quarrel between Joseph Bryennios and Maximos Chrysoberges in Venetian Crete around 1400, in which both men drew on Church history and the acts of the Photian council of 879–880 to argue their respective cases on the Filioque, less as abstract theologians than as pastors addressing an Orthodox population living under Latin rule; Dumitru traces this habit of using archival and conciliar evidence back through Philip of Pera and Demetrios

Kydones to Neilos Kabasilas and Bryennios, and forward to Mark of Ephesus. Gina Luminița Scarlat then turns to Symeon of Thessalonica, whose three commentaries on the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed round out the patristic tradition of interpreting that text and, as Scarlat shows, still have something to say today. Eduard Rusu follows an unexpected thread: the curse sworn in the name of the 318 Fathers of Nicaea, which passed from the Byzantine imperial chancery into papal and other European usage on one path, and, on another, reached the chanceries of Moldavia and Wallachia directly from Byzantium by way of South-Slavic culture—a small but telling sign of how far the council's memory traveled. The volume ends where the questions raised at Nicaea remain very much open: Ioan Moga's essay on neo-Arian tendencies in contemporary Christology, which finds in interreligious and philosophically inflected accounts of Christ, including Wolfgang Treitler's "Jesulogy" and Reinhold Bernhardt's representational Christology, a softening of Christ's full divinity not unlike ancient subordinationism. Moga's conclusion, that Nicene Christology remains indispensable but needs restating with real patristic rigor, is as good a place as any to end this survey.

The seventeen chapters gathered here move from the council itself to its long afterlife in monastic spirituality, conciliar diplomacy, liturgical memory, hagiography, historiography, chancery practice, and present-day theology. We offer this volume on the occasion of Nicaea's seventeen-hundredth anniversary in the hope that it bears witness to the continuing vitality of the patristic tradition and to its capacity to address the theological questions of our own time.

This volume owes a great deal to everyone who took part in the symposium: the plenary speakers, the panelists, and those who joined the round table discussion[1]. We are especially grateful to those among them who kindly made the texts of their papers available for publication here.

[1] The participants in the *Nicaea I, 325-2025: Recent Developments and Ongoing Challenges* round table were (in alphabetical order): Thomas Cattoi, Dragoș Andrei Giulea, Dragoș Mîrșanu (moderator), Gheorghe Ovidiu Sferlea.

We also wish to record our particular gratitude to His Eminence Teofan, Archbishop of Iași and Metropolitan of Moldavia and Bucovina, whose support has been foremost among those sustaining the research and publishing work carried out under the St. Maximus the Confessor Centre for Patristic Studies. Our thanks go equally to Mr. Cătălin Jeckel, cultural advisor of the Archdiocese of Iași, for his steady support and encouragement throughout.

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Dragoș Mîrșanu
Dragoș Bahrim

St. Maximus the Confessor
Centre for Patristic Studies
of the Archdiocese of Iași

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Transformation or Retrieval? Nicaea, Deification, and the Philokalia

Thomas Cattoi

Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Rome, Italy

Abstract: *The trajectory of Philokalic theology from its Evagrian inception to the full flourishing of Palamite hesychasm encompasses a variety of speculative positions and tendencies, reflecting the broader theological preoccupations of the authors included in the collection. In particular, the writings of the earlier Philokalic authors reveal the shifting Trinitarian and Christological priorities of the first centuries of monastic spirituality. For instance, in the fourth century, Evagrios Pontikos and his disciples, writing decades after the council of Nicaea, develop a theology of the spiritual life that retains significant pre-Nicene, subordinationist elements, at a time when the Cappadocian Fathers, having fully assimilated Nicaea's Christological vision, were already moving towards the application of the homoousios teaching to the Holy Spirit. Later, the spiritual theology of authors such as Maximos the Confessor attest the full appropriation of the Nicene teaching, though in a context where the understanding of individual transformation is still influenced by the Evagrian trajectory towards communion with the divine.*

In this paper, a joint reading of passages from Evagrios' and Maximos the Confessor's Philokalic corpus will show that the final appropriation of the Nicene homoousios teaching in the context of monastic practice was made possible by the emergence of the notion of deification exemplified by the writings of Maximos the Confessor.

Keywords: *Nicene theology, Philokalia, Evagrius Ponticus, Maximus the Confessor*

This year 2025 was marked by countless events all over the world marking the anniversary of the council of Nicaea and its proclamation of the consubstantiality (*homoousia*) between Father and Son as the very core of the Christian faith. On June 4–7 2025, the International Orthodox Theological Association and the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas in Rome – known as the Angelicum – sponsored a major symposium on the significance and the ongoing relevance

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of the Nicene definition.[1] During the audience that Pope Leo XIV – then recently elected – granted to the conference participants, the Pontiff underscored that "the Council of Nicaea is not merely an event of the past but a compass that must continue to guide us towards the full visible unity of all Christians."[2] In addition, the bishop of Rome reminded his audience that the Eastern Churches commemorate the celebration of the first ecumenical council in their liturgical calendar, and that Nicaea "is not simply one Council among others or the first in a series, but the Council *par excellence*..." Thus, Pope Leo concluded, the First Ecumenical Council remains "foundational" for the common journey that Catholics and Orthodox are undertaking together since the Second Vatican Council.

The danger these celebrations pose for professional theologians and churchmen is that they function within a sort of academic or ecclesial eco-chamber. In such context, one may easily forget that many, if not perhaps most ordinary Christians throughout the world are largely unaware of this anniversary, and would be hard put to articulate why the promulgation of its teaching ought to be given such prominence, or what this *homoousia* truly signifies for the life of faith. In addition, we find ourselves in a situation where many contemporary societies – especially in the West – tend to regard the very notion of dogma with suspicion or outright hostility: on one hand, there is a growing consensus that a spirituality without a clear structure or definite metaphysical commitments is acceptable and wholesome, whereas a religious tradition centered on dogmas is necessarily stifling and oppressive.[3] Theologians, therefore, find themselves faced by two

[1] See Dicastery for Promoting Christian Unity, *Ecumenical Conference on Nicaea at the Angelicum*, available at https://www.christianunity.va/content/unitacristiani/en/news/2025/2025-06-10-ecumenical-conference-on-nicaea-at-the-angelicum.html (last accessed on April 8th, 2026).

[2] See Pope Leo XIV, *Address of the Holy Father to Participants in the Symposium "Nicaea and the Church of the Third Millennium: Towards Catholic-Orthodox Unity" held at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, Clementine Hall, June 7th, 2025, available at https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/speeches/2025/june/documents/20250607-simposio-nicea.html (last accessed on April 8th, 2026).

[3] See for instance Rachel Muers and Mike Higton, *Modern Theology: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2012), 299–321; 343–65.

related challenges: first, they must explain how and why the teaching of Nicaea is relevant to ordinary Christians, and secondly, they must show why its dogmatic formulation was an appropriate and necessary move – something whose implications cannot just be disregarded because we are coming to embrace a post-metaphysical Christianity.

This paper will initially focus on the first of these two questions, exploring the history of the gradual reception of the Nicene teaching in the Philokalic corpus, from the initial ascetic vision of Evagrios Pontikos (345–499) to the more vigorously Christocentric synthesis developed by Maximos the Confessor (580–662).[4] I will argue that spiritual theology's gradual and significantly delayed acquisition of the teaching of *homoousia* – a process filtered by the reception of Chalcedon, culminating in Maximos' teaching on *theōsis* – frames an ascetic project that preserves and affirms the enduring ontological identity of human subject, laying the foundations for the kind of comprehensive and internally cogent vision that a spiritual practice informed by a pre-Nicene Christology was ultimately unable to sustain.[5] The soteriological inadequacy of subordinationist Christology, which – one might surmise – ostensibly brings Christ 'closer' to the human condition, is due to an underlying set of anthropological assumptions that fail to secure human subjectivity's enduring character; instead, a Christology resting on the teaching of Nicaea invests the incarnate Savior with the fullness of divinity, but in this way is also able to affirm the irreducible character of our own individual identity. In light of this discussion, the paper will then turn to the question of the contemporary significance of *homoousia* – and indeed the contemporary significance of *all* doctrinal definitions. In other words, assessing Nicaea's gradual reception into the Philokalic corpus not only helps us gain a deeper appreciation of the soteriological significance of consubstantiality, but also ensures

[4] This article will reference the English edition of the *Philokalia*; see G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, trans. and ed., *The Philokalia: The Complete Text* (London: Faber and Faber, Vol. 1–4, 1979–1992: Vol. 5, 2023). Maximos' writings make up a large section in Vol. 2 of the English *Philokalia*.

[5] See Jean-Claude Larchet, *La divinisation de l'homme selon Saint Maxime le Confesseur* (Paris: Ed. du Cerf, 1996), Ch. 3, "Les fondements antropologiques de la divinization," esp. 131–51; also Ch 17, "The Mode of Deification," in *Oxford Handbook of Maximos the Confessor*, ed. Pauline Allen and Bronwen Neil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 341–59.

we can more confidently affirm the enduring value of dogmatic formulations for church life. 'Church' in this case does not mean a specific ecclesial communities, but all Christian churches that follow the apostolic tradition.

Let us turn then to the writings of Evagrios and his school, which take up most of the first volume in the English *Philokalia*. Readers of these texts otherwise conversant with church history will quite likely be startled at the realization that Evagrios lived one or two generations after the council of Nicaea. In fact, we know that in 381, the author of the *Outline Teaching on Asceticism and Stillness* and of the *Texts on Discrimination* accompanied Gregory of Nazianzos to the Second Council of Constantinople.[6] This indicates that Evagrios must have at least been conversant with the theological controversies of the time, and cannot have ignored the vexed history of Nicene Christology and its reception.[7] Yet, the tradition recounts that a personal scandal forced Evagrios to leave the high ecclesiastical circles of the imperial capital under a shadow, and that around the year 383 he actually left the city to move to the Holy land. Eventually, Evagrios chose to settle in the desertic regions of Northern Egypt, which had already been a thriving center of monastic activity for a few decades. Evagrios spent around sixteen years in exile, dying around the turn of the century; it was during this last period of his life that he composed most of his extant writings, addressed to his fellow ascetics of the desert; and it is from these texts that were chosen the excerpts now included in the different compilers of the *Philokalia* – the Greek, as well as the Slavonic and the Romanian version.[8]

In light of what we know of his biography, one could surmise that Evagrios' writings should be punctuated by references to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan creed, or to the more recent controversies

[6] For a brief overview of Evagrius's life, see Augustine Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus: Beyond Heresy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 9–28.

[7] On the Trinity in Evagrius, see again Casiday, *Reconstructing the Theology of Evagrius Ponticus*, 205–43.

[8] See John A. McGuckin, Ch. 3 "The Making of the Philokalia: A Tale of Monks and Manuscripts," in *The Philokalia: A Classic Text of Orthodox Spirituality*, ed. Brock Bingaman and Bradley Nassif (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36–49.

around the divinity of the Holy Spirit. The reality, however, is quite different: mentions of the Trinity are few and far between, occasionally surfacing just in passing, as in the *Prologue* to *On Prayer: One Hundred and Fifty-Three Texts*.[9] References to Christ, for their part, are very frequent, but even when he talks about Christ's salvific mission, Evagrios never alludes to conciliar doctrine. In the pages of the Philokalia, the issue of consubstantiality – the crux of Nicaea's teaching – is never directly addressed; instead, what one finds is a collection of short reflections woven around excerpt from Scripture. In general, references to Christ's mission in the gospels are not used to support particular speculative positions or to critique others, but are turned into starting points for parenetic exhortation. Thus, one can legitimately say that Christological metaphysics is swept under the carpet of ascetic practice; the patterns of this carpet do not necessarily reflect the preoccupation of the council fathers.[10]

Where does Evagrios borrow his images and themes? In the *Philokalia*, we find a variety of sources; one is the already established monastic tradition of the Egyptian Fathers; another one is Origenist metaphysics, a tradition whose cosmology and soteriology had long been expunged from Alexandria, but clearly lingered amidst the desert dunes and the oases of the interior.[11] It seems that in this last phase of his life, Evagrios intentionally chose to leave behind the kind of 'urban,' 'institutional' theology to which he had been exposed in Constantinople; instead he intentionally chose to let his theology be reshaped by the vision of the Egyptian hermits and the older, pre-Nicene theology they had inherited from Origen and his followers. Origen had died almost a century and a half before Evagrios reached Egypt, but the vision of the Alexandrian master somehow seemed to be more 'present' to Evagrios' imagination than the legacy of Athanasios or his defense of *homoousia*.[12]

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[9] See Evagrios, *153 Texts on Prayer*, in *Philokalia* Vol. 1, 55–57.

[10] An extensive reflection on Evagrios' Christology can be found in Julia Konstantinovsky, *Evagrios: The Making of a Gnostic* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 109–53.

[11] See again Konstantinovsky, *Evagrios*, 77–89.

[12] See William Harmless, *Desert Christians: An Introduction to the Literature of Early Monasticism*, Ch. 3 "Evagrius Ponticus: Mystical Theology," 345–72.