

Receiving the First Council of Nicaea Today: Ecumenical Learning from Synodal Discernment in the Early Church, 5-10 September 2024

Report of the 22nd Academic Consultation in Warsaw

Members and friends of the *Societas Oecumenica* convened at the Missionary Animation Center, Konstancin-Jeziorna, near Warsaw, to reflect on the ecumenical significance of the Council of Nicaea in history, hermeneutics, church life, and confession; its canonical legacy; and the ways of synodal discernment. The goal of the 22nd Academic Consultation was to provide a platform on which to discuss within academia and among church representatives the significance of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea in various forms and to share reflections on what can be learned from the Nicæan tradition and its multiple receptions and interpretations.



Discourse: The Significance of Councils and Creeds for Common Christian Witness, was delivered by the president of the *Societas Oecumenica*, Dr Johannes Oeldemann (Director of the Johann-Adam-Möhler Institute Paderborn, Germany). During the lecture, Dr Oeldemann introduced the central theme of the consultation and the various sub-themes of the consultation by referring to the multiple ecumenical dialogues held over the decades where the themes of the Council of Nicaea were discussed. Oeldemann concluded with three points essential to learning from Nicaea: the importance of hermeneutics, the significance of reception and the revitalisation of the Council of Nicaea.

The next day, the first plenary session of the consultation focused on *Exploring Nicaea: Recent Patristic Research on the Council of Nicaea*. The goal of the session was twofold: to shed light on the historical background on the one hand and the political context on the other hand by presenting and discussing the latest research results on the developments in the history of dogma. In the morning, the focus was on the background of Nicaea. **Dr Harri Huovinen** highlighted the way to Nicaea, especially in light of the fundamental understanding of the ecclesiastical unity of the patristical predecessors of the Nicene authorities. **Prof. Peter Gemeinhard** focused on the development of the reception of the Nicene Creed immediately after the council was established and opened a view to the discussion that Nicaea was not a place to fix the creed but a place to start a lively and fruitful discussion.

In the afternoon, the focus was on the political aspect, that is, the relationship between the imperial and ecclesiastical powers. **Dr Andrej Jeffic** spoke about the imperial context of the Council and its ecumenical implications. He concluded that “[t]he later reception of Nicaea and complex history of the doctrinal disputes unveils elements of anti-imperial engagement of the Nicene fathers. And this opens an opportunity, an ecumenical one indeed, to found again common ground in the Council”. **Prof. Angela Berlis'** presentation ended the first plenary by highlighting the theme of power from a slightly different viewpoint, reminding us that it was the emperor and his successors who played an eminent role in the reception of the decisions of the Council.

In the afternoon of the 6th of September, the second plenary session, titled *Appealing to Nicaea: Hermeneutical Reflections*, presented a historiographical and hermeneutical approach on what it means to retrieve the past; the dimensions, such as unity and diversity, of the early church that were highlighted or downplayed; the

definitions of the early church that were used temporally or institutionally; and the role that this appeal plays in the self-understanding and style of theologising a tradition and how other traditions respond to this theologisation. **Prof. Jennifer Wasmuth** traced important stages in the history of the reception of the Council in the Lutheran tradition. She emphasised adherence to the unbroken doctrinal decision on the trinitarian faith and Lutheran tradition of associating with the Council of Nicaea and clarified the motives that have led to the Council of Nicaea still being valid in the Lutheran tradition today. **Prof. Andrés Valencia Pérez's** response from a Catholic point of view was read in the meeting. He emphasised the aspects of synodality and the Trinitarian aspects of the Nicene Creed and encouraged the participants to learn together more deeply about several aspects, including full unity in diversity, revelation, authority and ministry. From a Baptist perspective, **Prof. Uwe Swarat** responded to Wasmuth's paper and clarified that they "encourage their adherents to study the Bible in place of the early church's creeds and confessions". Swarat emphasised that creeds should be read while keeping in mind the primacy of the Scripture and not from the interpretation where Scripture excludes other sources of knowledge.

The evening programme at the consultation venue included an ecumenical encounter with the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Roman Catholic archbishop of Warsaw. The participants listened to the greetings of the representatives of the Polish Ecumenical Council and the Roman Catholic archbishop. In addition, to make the local ecumenical landscape known, **Prof. Piotr Kopiec** gave a presentation on *Ecumenism in Contemporary Poland: A Structured Overview of Ecumenical and Interdenominational Relationships*.

On Saturday, the 7th of September, the third session of the consultation, titled *Retrieving Nicaea: The Significance of the Nicene Creed in the Life of the Churches*, brought in two sub-sessions, during which six denominational approaches to discussions on the role of the Nicene Creed among various Christian denominations were presented. In the first sub-session, **Prof. Przemysław Kantyka** (Roman Catholic), **Dr Jeremy Morris** (Anglican) and **Dr Miriam Haar** (Lutheran) led the discussions. Kantyka presented basic Catholic views on the Nicene Creed. Morris concluded that the Anglican tradition has continued to emphasise the central role of the Nicene Creed as a statement of Christian belief, whereas Haar highlighted the re-finding of the Nicene Creed in Lutheran services.

The second sub-session included presentations by **Dr Harutyun Harutyunyan** (Oriental Orthodox), **Prof. Joshua Searle** (Baptist) and **Prof. Wojciech Gajewski** (Pentecostal). Harutyunyan focused on the role of the Nicene-Constantinople Creed in the liturgy and celebration of the sacraments and drew attention to the various translation versions used by the church life of the Armenian Apostolic Church. Searle emphasised that “[w]hile not all Baptists formally recite the Nicene Creed during their services, many appreciate its ecumenical significance and its role in fostering understanding and unity within the broader Christian community”. Gajewski stated that most Pentecostals recognise the value of the first four councils, even though the creed is not recited in their services.

In the fourth session, titled *Confessing the Christian Faith in Times of War*, testimony from the middle of the war was delivered and the roles of churches and religions in inhuman living conditions during the war in Europe, particularly in Ukraine, Israel/Palestine and Armenia, was discussed. **Prof. Natalia Shlikhta**, **Fr. John Paul** and **Dr Harutyun Harutyunyan** presented the situations in these armed conflicts. After the presentations, each situation was discussed in smaller groups.

On Sunday, the 8th of September, the participants were invited to attend any of the following church services:

1. Eastern Orthodox: Orthodox Cathedral of the Holy and Equal-to-the-Apostles Mary Magdalene
2. Lutheran: Holy Trinity Church
3. Roman Catholic: St John's Cathedral
4. Methodist: Good Shepherd Church

In the afternoon, the participants attended either of the following excursions:

1. Visiting the Mariavites in Plock
2. Polin Museum visit and guided tour in Warsaw

On Monday, the 9th of September, the fifth session, titled *Resourcing Nicaea: The Canonical Legacy of the Council*, was held. The first sub-session focused on the two most influential canons of the Council of Nicaea. Canon 8, which states that no two bishops should be designated in one city and the Council's decision concerning the date of Easter.

In the first sub-session, **Prof. Dimitrios Keramidas** delved into Orthodox-Catholic relations on the question of authority and the local bishop's role, stating, “[I]t seems that the Catholic Church is available to consider the possibility of giving greater authority to regional ecclesiastical structures ... [I]t [Orthodox] has not recognized the possibility of having several jurisdictions on the same territory, has affirmed, in addressing the issue of diaspora, that it is possible to accept a transitional stage that could help the synodal convergence of communities”.

In his response, **Prof. Leon van den Broeke** focused on the Reformed view on the question. He highlighted that the orthodox Reformed believe that the local church is *ecclesia completa*, whereas other Reformed think that this might be the case but that the local church is not *the ecclesia completa*. As Keramidas' presentation showed, Canon 8 was difficult for episcopal churches. It would be hard to apply for Reformed churches, too. In the case of Reformed churches, if they had bishops, there would have been probably not only one but many of them.

In the second sub-session, the question of the time of Easter and how it has been determined in church political debates were discussed. **Dr Dagmar Heller** focused on the problem between the Julian and Gregorian calendars and the modern ecumenical discussions on the date of Easter, with a wish to set a fixed date for Easter. **Dr Maria Takala-Roszczenko** replied to Heller's paper that presented the Finnish Orthodox perspective and how the Orthodox Church of Finland came to the conclusion that the date of Easter is a practical, non-canonical matter. The church celebrates Easter with Finnish society and thus with Western Christianity. However, in the globalising world, the decision is challenged from the inside.

On Tuesday, the 10th of September, the sixth session, titled *Inheriting Nicaea: The Charism of Synodal Discernment and Its Challenges*, focused on the historical and present viewpoints of synodality. **Dr Andrzej Kuzma** focused on the reception of the concept of synodality in the official theological international dialogue between Orthodox and Catholic churches. In the dialogue, Kuzma stressed that synodality, along with primacy, is an essential church element at all levels of church life (local, regional and universal). He recalled the importance of Eucharistic synodality according to the Orthodox tradition. **Sr. Nathalie Becquart** spoke about the ‘Synod on Synodality’ in the Roman Catholic Church. She described it as an unprecedented 3-year journey together as “an invitation to strengthen the collegial bodies and communion that

already exist in the Church and possibly create new structures of participation to exercise co-responsibility for the fruitfulness of the Church's mission in the world".

In the concluding panel discussion, titled *Synodal Discernment and Its Challenges*, the consultation participants were invited to reflect on what they had heard during the Academic Consultation and to bring their own views from their differing contexts to discussion. The panellists were **Dr Sara Gehlin**, **Sr. Ingeborg-Marei Kvam** and **Denis Melkov**.

The central themes of the consultations were discussed in small groups during the short paper and poster presentations. Almost 30 junior and senior scholars from all over Europe engaged in conversations, reflecting on the Council of Nicaea and ecumenism.

Mika Vähäkangas	On the Uses of an Imperial(ist) Creed Today: Nicaea 1700 Years After
Jonas Eklund	From Nicene Faith to Christian Love: The Contribution of Dumitru Staniloae
Notker Baumann	Eusebius of Caesarea: A panegyric-apologetic view
Vera La Mela	Liberating kenosis? Unity in the early writings of Chiara Lubich
Tim Noble	Retrieving Hope in Another Land: The Council of Nicaea and its Reception in Liberation Theology
Ivana Noble	The Nicene Creed as Common and Trustworthy: Theological and Critical Anthropological Readings in a Conversation
Denis Melkov	Nicaea - Moscow – Vatican: Through Conciliar Movement to the Christian Unity
Lukas Metz	Rethinking Trinitarian Hermeneutics Today
David Kulke	Spiritual Ecumenism Beyond Prayer: Rediscovering Paul Couturier's Original Vision for Ecumenism Today
Josfin Raj Stephen Balaraj	State of Research on the International Roman Catholic – Classical Pentecostal Dialogue: Categorizing Research Approaches and Trends
Aleksei Volchkov	Praying in the Nicaean way: How the Council regulated (tried to regulate) Orthodox prayer
Christina Dietl	A Pastoral-Liturgical Study on the Cheirothesíes (Minor Orders) in Eastern Orthodoxy
Robert Svatoň	Discerning ecumenical challenges in the light of the Synodal Process of the Roman Catholic Church: Czech perspectives
Sara Gehlin	A 1600th Anniversary: Appealing to Nicaea in Stockholm 1925
Nicolas Cochand	GROUPE DES DOMBES: „De toutes les nations...“. Pour la catholicité des l'Églises

Paulien Wagener	Ecumenism from the Margins? Oriental Orthodox Engagement in the Early Ecumenical Movement
Peter Jandjsek	The Roman Catholic Synod on Synodality and Promoting the Habit of Discernment
Susana Vilas Boas	Which Creed for Christianity today? Ecumenical and socio-pastoral challenges for our times
Heta Hurskainen	Finnish Lutheran Perspectives on Salvation and Justification in dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church
Mihai Iordache	Morality in the Thinking of a Nicene Father, St Anthony the Great
Margriet Gosker	Is there a connection between Nicaea, Eusebius and Anti-Judaism?
Natacha-Ingrid Tinteroff	Anglicans and "the Nicene Faith": which meaning for Nicaea's Creed in the ecumenical work of the Anglican Churches today?
Peter-Ben Smit	Believing in the Church as a Resource for Ecumenical Rapprochement: A Prefigurative Perspective
Gerard Whelan	Bernard Lonergan, the Council of Nicea, and Theological Method Today: An Ecumenical Reflection
Nicu Dumitrascu	St Paphnutius of Thebes and his presence at the Council of Nicaea (325): faith and confession
Misza Czerniak	Synodality of the Whole: The Church and the Voices From Its Margins
Agnes Slunitschek	Unity revisited. How practical forms and societal developments contribute to realizing the unity of the Church
Paweł Surowiec	The Council of Nicaea and 'Arians of the Fourth Century' through the lens of J.H. Newman's theology: Implications for Contemporary Trinitarian Thought and Ecumenism

During the assembly, the members of the *Societas Oecumenica* decided to organize the 23rd Academic Consultation in Utrecht (Netherlands) at the end of August 2026. The theme of the next consultation will be decided by the new standing committee, which will choose from the three most popular options for the theme collected during the consultation in Warsaw:

1. Churches and polarisation (also within denominations)
2. Churches, authority and power: The question of power/authority within the Churches and in relation of the Churches towards the world
3. Changing ecumenical landscape or changing ecclesial landscape: New approaches to ecumenism

In Warsaw, a new standing committee was elected:
Prof. Simone Sinn (University of Münster, Germany) – president;
Dr Robert Svatoň (Palacky University, Czech Republic) – secretary;
Dr Heta Hurskainen (University of Eastern Finland, Finland), Prof. Peter-Ben Smit (Utrecht University/ Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands), Prof. Dimitrios Keramidas (Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas, Italy);
Dr Agnes Slunitschek (Universität Würzburg) will continue to serve the *Societas Oecumenica* as a treasurer.

Dr Heta Hurskainen

Former Secretary of the Societas Oecumenica