

Time to reunite all Catholics with a new Nicaea

Mark Etling | Mar. 31, 2013

Perspective

When the Roman Emperor Constantine convened the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D., both the church and the empire were in a state of flux. A little more than a decade earlier, Constantine had legalized Christianity, because he recognized the growing social and financial power of Christians within the empire. But controversy, turmoil and violence raged over some unsettled theological issues. Chief among them was the question of the relationship of God the Father and the Son. How could Christianity make the claim that God is one, and at the same time affirm the divinity of the Son? For that matter, how could Christianity affirm that Jesus, a human being, was also the divine Son of God?

The 300 or so bishops who gathered at Nicaea followed a creative and precedent-setting path in resolving the issues before it.

First, the perceived need for unity among the many diverse Christian communities in the empire led them to create creedal formulas that excluded dissent -- and dissenters. The bishops wanted to create unity in the church -- and help maintain it in the empire -- by clearly establishing in the creed who was "in" the church and who was "out." The council chose an "either-or" path to determine who could rightly call themselves Christian. Their message was clear: Believe this way, or you're out.

Second, the ambiguity of certain biblical assertions about the relationship of the Father and the Son motivated the council fathers to creatively incorporate philosophical terms and categories into the creed. The most well-known of these is the word *homoousious*, "one in being" or "consubstantial," which the bishops used to describe the relationship between the Father and the Son.

Third, the very fact that the bishops gathered together established the general council as a model for resolving major doctrinal issues in the Roman church.

Now, almost 17 centuries later, we stand at another crossroads. Catholics are deeply divided over issues of theology, authority, scriptural interpretation, tradition and canon law. Developments in archeology, biblical exegesis, historical research, psychology and other disciplines make me wonder whether the Nicene Creed remains sufficiently elastic to embody the truths of Christianity as they -- and the Christians who recite it -- have evolved.

At this moment in Christian history -- initiated by the wise and courageous retirement of Pope Benedict XVI -- we need a "new Nicaea," a new attempt to unify the people of God courageously and creatively through the vehicle of a general council.

The major difference between the new Nicaea and the first one, however, is that this time around the church can build unity through a "both-and" inclusive approach rather than an "either-or" exclusivist stance.

My list of agenda items for the new Nicaea is clearly overly ambitious. But the opportunity this agenda presents to unify and energize the church is equally enormous. It includes:

- A more up-to-date affirmation about God. Our new and rapidly changing understanding of the universe, our ever-deepening awareness of the beliefs about God in other religious traditions, the deeply troubling questions about God's willingness and ability to prevent both moral and natural evils -- all challenge the church to focus more on God as mystery, unknown and unknowable, and less on God as the eternally motionless, all-knowing and all-powerful Supreme Being of fourth-century Neo-Platonism.
- A broader understanding of Jesus. Modern biblical scholarship has revealed much about the life and ministry of Jesus -- as a Jew, as a social rebel, as the leader of the reign of God movement -- that should have its place alongside the traditional affirmations about begetting, consubstantiality and incarnation.
- A broader understanding of salvation. Nicene orthodoxy focused on the death and resurrection of Jesus as the defining soteriological events. Implicit in this assertion was the belief that humanity needed to be, and was, saved from sin through the cross and Resurrection. But recent scholarship has shown us that salvation from sin through death and Resurrection was not the only soteriological paradigm among the earliest Christians. Likewise, contemporary existentialist philosophy and clinical psychology have led to the development of a model of personal wholeness that focuses on self-knowledge through therapy and introspection as the key to mental health and wellness. Based on these advances, a broadening of our understanding of salvation to include the teachings of Jesus on the necessity of overcoming ignorance of self should be included to expand our understanding of salvation.
- A broadened understanding of revelation. The early church determined that God's revelation in Christ came to a close with the death of the last apostle. In order to counter the threat of the Gnostics, the early church affirmed that the authentic teachings of Jesus were received and understood only by the apostles, and that these truths continue to be accurately and authoritatively communicated only by their successors, the bishops. Without denying apostolic succession, the church should affirm that God's will continues to be revealed today to any and all who sincerely seek God.
- A broader understanding of authority and ministry. Recently discovered early Christian writings such as the Gospel of Mary have indicated that women had prominent leadership roles in the early church -- roles that were suppressed over time. The new Nicaea could take another look at how and by whom authority in the church is exercised, and at who may be ordained for liturgical ministry in the church.
- An expanded canon of Scripture. Without altering the current canon, the church should undertake a careful review of those writings deemed heretical by the early church -- for reasons that may have made sense at that time -- and expand the canon of the Christian Scriptures to include writings that are consistent with the renewed understandings of God, Jesus, salvation, revelation and authority described above.
- A new creed. Given all the above, isn't it time for the church to formulate a new Nicene Creed -- a creed for the 21st century that articulates the core beliefs of Christianity as we have come to understand and affirm them since the Nicene Creed was completed in 381? In fact, the new Nicene Creed wouldn't be "new" at all -- it would embody the deeper, fuller understanding of the Christian mysteries that 17 centuries of research, reflection and life experience under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit have given us.

A new Council of Nicaea is a golden opportunity for the church to make its core teachings more relevant and transformative by making them less exclusive and more inclusive. This is our moment -- our chance to build a bigger banquet table for the Lord.

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