

In the name of the Father and of the Son of the Holy Spirit one God.

In this morning's Epistle, we hear St. Paul warning the Elders of the church of Ephesus. "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them." Thus, he warns them to be alert for these evil men.

Throughout the history of the church there have been many men who have tried to draw the followers of Jesus away from the teachings handed down through the apostles. In opposition to these heretics, the Church has always called councils of the bishops together to determine what was the correct teaching handed to them from the apostles.

One of the first movements to internally attack the church was called Gnosticism. Although there were several forms of Gnosticism having different beliefs, they did share several common beliefs. They all claimed to possess secret knowledge passed down from Christ. They were elitist, and that most Christians were too spiritually immature to understand their complex doctrines.

About the year 139 a man named Marcion came to Rome with his own gnostic beliefs. He believed in two divine beings. One was the wrath filled God of the Old Testament who had created the world. The other, considered the true God, sent Jesus Christ to liberate his followers from the power of the creator God. He considered matter to be inferior. He taught that Christ only seemed to have a human body. The Church of Rome condemned him in the year 144.

During this same time, another heresy began to develop. A man named Montanus declared that he was a prophet. He declared that he was the Comforter which Christ had promised. He taught that the second coming of Christ would soon occur and that Christ's Kingdom would be established in Asia Minor.

Another man named Theodotus, in about the year 190, began teaching in Rome that Jesus was only a righteous man, on whom the Spirit of God had descended at His baptism, not God in the flesh as taught by the Church. He developed the idea that Jesus was not God incarnate, but was an extremely righteous man whom God adopted as His Son. This was condemned at a Council in Antioch in 269.

About the year 200 another man named Noetus, began teaching that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are only different manifestations of God. That they were only different roles or modes through which God manifests himself to humanity. This false teaching still exists today in those churches, which redefine God as "Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier".

Today, we commemorate The Fathers of the First Council of Nicaea held in the year 325. In about the year 318, a priest named Arius, began to teach that Christ was not God incarnate, but a lesser godlike being; sort of a glorified angel, but not God incarnate.

Arius reasoned that since there is only one God and that God was one, the Son had to be something else. He argued that since the Son was begotten, he had to have a beginning. Thus, there was a time when the Son did not exist. Since God had no beginning, but the Son had a beginning when he was begotten of the Father, Arius reasoned that the Son could not be fully God but is "a creature and a work of God."

This new teaching led to major controversy within the Church because it challenged the central teaching of the Christian faith as inherited from the Apostolic Church. Since Arius was from North Africa, the Bishop of Alexandria called a council of his bishops and they condemned Arius in the year 320. Arius then fled to Palestine and continued to teach his new ideas. He managed to convince the Bishop of Antioch that he was correct. The Bishop of Antioch then rejected Arius' condemnation by the Council of the Bishop of Alexandria.

This led to more conflict. Emperor Constantine, seeing that this conflict within the Christian church was causing great strife in his empire, so he tried to bring about a resolution. In the year 325 Emperor Constantine called all the bishops in the Empire to a Council in the city of Nicaea. The Emperor attended the meetings and acted as a facilitator. He did not force his will upon the Council.

It is said that 318 bishops attended this Council. After much debate, they agreed to adopt a baptismal creed which was in use in Syria and Palestine as the basis for a Universal Creed, as a confession of faith for all Christians. This became the basis for the creed which we say at each Divine Liturgy.

Another issue which was causing great conflict in the Christian church was that as to when we should celebrate the feast of the Resurrection of Christ or Pascha. This debate had carried on for almost 200 years. It was decided that all

Christians must commemorate Pascha on the Sunday following the Jewish Passover which is the first Sunday after the first full moon following the spring equinox. This did not resolve the issue since different parts of the empire had different dates for the spring equinox. This became an even bigger difference when Pope Gregory adopted his new calendar, which allowed for Pascha to be celebrated before the Jewish Passover.

There were 20 canons from the council, one of them is still causing confusion today. It was:

“Seeing that certain people kneel on Sunday and during the Pentecost season, so that there might be the same practice in all the communities, it has been decided by the holy council that prayers should be addressed to the Lord standing up.”

In other words, we are not to kneel on Sunday nor during the days between Pascha and Pentecost. This practice can be traced back to the Apostles.

Next Sunday is Pentecost. We are allowed to begin praying on our knees again at Vespers on that day. We will be having Vespers with the Kneeling Prayers starting at 1:00 p.m., although to be correct, we should have the service with the Kneeling Prayers in the evening. The Metropolitan wants us to have them earlier so that more people will pray the prayers together.

The debate over the teachings of Arius did not end with the Council. Arianism eventually died out, but had a new birth in the teachings of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

Two new heresies then attacked the Church. The first was Apollinarism. Apollinarius taught that the divine logos took the place of the human soul in Jesus Christ, thereby denying his full humanity.

The second was the "Pneumatomaci" from the Greek word for "spirit-fighters," and were also called Macedonians, after Bishop Macedonius of Constantinople who denied the divinity of the Holy Spirit. They believed that the Holy Spirit was a creation of the Son of God and was a servant of the Father and the Son.

In the year 381 A.D., the Emperor called a second council of all the bishops. It was to be held in Constantinople. The Council added to the Creed agreed upon at the Council of Nicea the following: “And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver

of Life, Who proceedeth from the Father, Who with the Father and the Son is equally worshipped and glorified, Who spake by the Prophets.

In the year 428 a priest named Nestorius became the Bishop of Constantinople. He soon began to teach that it was wrong to call the Virgin Mary the "Theotokos". Nestorius argued that God cannot have a mother. He so emphasized the distinction between the human and divine natures in Christ that he seemed to deny any real union of the two natures in one person. Nestorius taught that in Christ a divine person dwelt in a human person. For that reason, he rejected the title "Theotokos" which means "God Bearer" and instead preferred the title "Christokos" or "Christ Bearer". He considered the child of Mary, to be "a Man, an instrument of divinity." The teachings of Nestorius were condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council held in Ephesus in the year 431.

Nestorian like ideas emerged in a new way during the Protestant Reformation. The teachings of Calvin and others were very close to those of Nestorius. The followers of Nestorius, known as the Assyrian Church of the East, lived mainly in Mesopotamia which is today Iraq. The Assyrian Church of the East still exists and follows the teachings of Nestorius.

Since this time there have been other men that taught differently than the Faith of our fathers. One of the most damaging was Mohammed. According to St. John of Damascus, Mohammed had met an Arian monk and from their conversations developed a new Christian heresy which became known as Islam.

Why did I bring up all these different heresies, which have over the centuries attacked the truth? First; it was to show you that what Paul wrote was true: "wolves will come in among you and from among your own selves will arise speaking perverse things to draw away the disciples". And Second; it was to help make you aware that some of these heresies are still around today.

We must not be enticed by strange teachings trying to draw us away from the true faith. And to be aware that just because a Bishop or a priest teaches these things, they may not be the Faith of our Fathers. We must take the time to read the Holy Scriptures, the lives of the Saints and the writings of the Church Fathers so that when we hear what seems to be a strange teaching we are not easily drawn to it.