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Nicaea between Rome and Constantinople

"Christian unity is not a luxury, but the final prayer of our Lord Jesus Christ and the essential condition of the Church's mission" (Patriarch Bartholomew)

Indeed, we are not gathered here merely to recall the past or to reflect solely on history; we are here to bear living witness to the same faith expressed by the Fathers of Nicaea. We return to this source of Christian faith in order to move forward. We refresh ourselves in these inspired, still waters to strengthen us for the tasks before us... At Nicaea, history bore eternal witness to the fact that Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is true God from true God, consubstantial with the Father, homoousios to Patri. Encapsulated in the Nicene Creed, these expressions distill and present to all the faith of the apostles." These words of Patriarch Bartholomew, spoken near the archaeological excavations of the ancient Basilica of Saint Neophytos in Iznik, last November 28, 2025, welcomed Pope Leo XIV, who made his first apostolic journey to Turkey, the land where the first eight ecumenical councils were held.

Bartholomew also emphasized how "the Nicene Creed acts as a seed for our entire Christian existence. It is a symbol not of an indispensable minimum, but of the whole. With the fervor

of the Nicene faith burning in our hearts, let us run the race of Christian unity that lies before us."

Regarding the content of my talk, "Nicaea between Rome and Constantinople," new elements have emerged in recent days, giving renewed meaning to the title assigned to me. Therefore, I apologize to the audience if I present something that does not meet expectations. However, I believe it is more necessary and crucial than ever to reread it together, since "The Council of Nicaea is not just an event of the past, but a compass that must continue to guide us toward the full visible unity of Christians."¹», the Joint Declaration signed by Leo and Bartholomew on the eve of the feast of St. Andrew, the First-Called.

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The signing of the Joint Declaration by Pope Leo and Bartholomew at the seat of the Ecumenical Patriarchate, following the example of their predecessors, "and in response to the will of God," testifies to the desire to "walk with firm determination on the path of dialogue, in love and truth (cf. Eph 4:15), toward the desired restoration of full communion between our sister Churches."

As clearly emerges from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, but which still struggles to enter the minds and hearts of many, the Declaration specifies that concern for divisions among Christians must concern "all members of our churches," since seeking unity among Christians means "fervently seeking the fulfillment of the prayer that Jesus Christ addressed to the Father 'that they may all be one... so that the world may believe.'"

Peter and Andrew, still together, more determined than ever to follow the Master: the "person of the Son of God, true God from true God, homoousios with the Father, who for us and for our salvation became incarnate and dwelt among us, was crucified, died and was buried, rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven and will come again to judge the living and the dead."

¹ Leo XIV, June 7, 2025, in the Clementine Hall, to the participants in the Symposium "Nicea and the Church of the Third Millennium:Toward Catholic-Orthodox Unity," held at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas.

For Leo and Bartholomew, the Council of Nicaea cannot be merely the commemoration of a historical event, but is an invitation "to be constantly open to the same Holy Spirit who spoke through Nicaea, as we face the many challenges of our time."

Commemorating Nicaea, therefore, means being open to the Spirit who is the advocate of full communion, the latter being impeded – as we read in the Declaration – by "obstacles" that must be recognized, together with acknowledging what unites Christians, that is, "the faith expressed in the Nicene Creed."

Two years after meeting with Patriarch Athenagoras, in 1967, Paul VI commented: "For centuries, our Churches have lived as sisters, celebrating together the Ecumenical Councils that defended the deposit of faith against any alteration. Now, after a long period of division and mutual misunderstanding, the Lord, despite the difficulties that have arisen between us in the past, gives us the opportunity to rediscover ourselves as sister Churches. In the light of Christ, we see how urgent it is to overcome these obstacles in order to bring to fullness and perfection the communion that already exists so strongly between us."

Faith in the Nicene Creed reminds Christians that "through the coming of the Son of God, we are initiated into the mystery of the Holy Trinity – Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – and are invited to become, in the person of Christ and through Him, children of the Father and co-heirs with Christ through the grace of the Holy Spirit." This is the path of divinization, dear to the Christian East, and which Pope Leo explored in his first Apostolic Letter *In unitate fidei*, published on Sunday, November 23.

Pope Leo, recalling St. Athanasius's proposition, "The Son of God became man so that we humans could be divinized," explains to a world that seems to have lost sight of the purpose of life that "Divinization has nothing to do with man's self-deification. On the contrary, divinization protects us from the primordial temptation to want to be like God (cf. Gen 3:5). What Christ is by nature, we become by grace. Through the work of redemption, God has not only restored our human dignity as the image of God, but He who created us so marvelously has made us participants, in an even more marvelous way, in his divine nature (cf. 2 Pet 1:4). Divinization is therefore true humanization." This last sentence sounds like a gong that fills the silence of those who try in every way to engage with an integral humanism, forgetting the vertical or divine dimension.

The Declaration signed at the Phanar also states that "new and courageous steps on the path toward unity" are necessary. I am certain that this commemoration of the Council of Nicaea is an opportunity for new acts of courage on the part of courageous men. And it is in this perspective that Leo and Bartholomew express their desire to "continue the process of exploring a possible solution for celebrating the Feast of Feasts together each year," without forgetting that it is the duty of all Christians, "with all spiritual wisdom and understanding" (Col 1:9), to work towards "a common celebration of the glorious Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Pope Leo's apostolic journey to Turkey and his visit to the site of Nicaea took place a few days before the 60th anniversary of the lifting of the excommunications. It was December 7, 1965, the eve of the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Aristide Panotis recounts that the Council's loudest applause was heard when *the Joint Declaration of Pope Paul VI and Ecumenical Patriarch Athenagoras I was signed, erasing from memory and from the midst of the Church the sentences of excommunication of 1054.*

The sentence of excommunication was annulled by Pope Paul VI with an Apostolic Brief. Both documents were read—the second by Cardinal Augustin Bea, and the first by Monsignor John Willebrands, respectively president and secretary of the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity—during the public closing session of the Second Vatican Council. The declaration was read simultaneously in St. Peter's and in the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Phanar in Istanbul.

The lifting of the excommunications – we read in the Declaration of Leo and Bartholomew – was a «prophetic gesture [which] has pushed our Churches to pursue “in a spirit of mutual trust, esteem and charity, the dialogue that will lead them, with God's help, to live again, for the greater good of souls and the coming of the Kingdom of God, in the full communion of faith, fraternal harmony and sacramental life that existed among them during the first millennium of the life of the Church”».

The lifting of the excommunications, along with the first steps in the dialogue of charity, were at the origin of the dialogue of truth, that is, theological dialogue. And precisely toward theological dialogue, Pope Prevost and Bartholomew express "continued support for the work of the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue between the

Catholic Church and the Orthodox Church, which is currently examining issues historically considered a source of division." Theological dialogue, along with fraternal contacts, prayer, and joint work, will lead to Christian unity, so that all the baptized in Christ can "contribute in a fundamental and life-giving way to peace among all peoples," in a world that no longer knows peace, but which must not cause us to lose hope.

The Declaration concludes: "While deeply alarmed by the current international situation, we do not lose hope. God will not abandon humanity. The Father sent his only-begotten Son to save us, and the Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, has given us the Holy Spirit to make us sharers in his divine life, preserving and protecting the sacredness of the human person. Through the Holy Spirit we know and experience that God is with us."

Nicaea for Rome and Constantinople

Of Pope Leo's apostolic journey, the speech he gave at the prayer meeting at the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul remains deeply ingrained and profound. I imagined this text as the message that Nicaea delivers to the Churches of Rome and Constantinople.

Pope Leo maintains that the anniversary of the Council of Nicaea is "an ever-present event that presents us with some challenges that I would like to mention." The first of these challenges is the importance of grasping the essence of faith and of being Christian. Refocusing on Christ, we might say. Just as the Church at Nicaea rediscovered unity around the symbol of faith, today the Churches must rediscover unity around the centrality of Christ and the Tradition of the Church, starting with the questions that still arise today since Nicaea: "Who is Jesus for us?

What does it mean, in its essential core, to be Christian? The second challenge concerns the urgency of rediscovering the face of God the Father in Christ: "In Jesus we find the true face of God and his definitive word on humanity and history." It is in this challenge that Pope Leo warns against a "resurgent Arianism, present in today's culture and sometimes even among believers: when we look at Jesus with human admiration, perhaps even with a religious spirit, but without truly considering him as the living and true God present among us. His being God, Lord of history, is somehow obscured and we limit ourselves to

considering him a great historical figure, a wise teacher, a prophet who fought for justice, but nothing more. Nicaea reminds us: Christ Jesus is not a figure from the past, he is the Son of God present among us, who guides history toward the future that God has promised us."

The third challenge is the mediation of faith and the development of doctrine. This third challenge expresses the content of *Unitatis Redintegratio*, which in number 6 clearly states that the manner of enunciating doctrine must be distinguished from the actual deposit of faith, in these terms: "At the same time, we must distinguish the core of faith from the formulas and historical forms that express it, which always remain partial and provisional and can change as we delve deeper into doctrine..."

This gives the Catholic and Orthodox Churches three paths to pursue: following the Lord Jesus, like the Apostle Andrew, and centering our lives on Him, in a constant conversion of heart; believing in Christ, transmitted to us by the Tradition of the Church: the Son of God present among us, who guides history toward the future God has promised us; finally, the Churches must know that the diversity of historical formulations and forms of the faith does not undermine the unity of faith in the Kerygma.

For all Christians in the Church, it remains to work day and night with lit torches, like the fishermen of the Bosphorus. This image was used by Pope Leo in his farewell address from the Cathedral of the Holy Spirit: "Dearly beloved, before saying goodbye, I would like to recall the figure so dear to you, Saint John XXIII, who loved and served this people, stating: 'I like to repeat what I feel in my heart: I love this country and its inhabitants.'" And observing the fishermen of the Bosphorus from the window of the Jesuit house, busy with their boats and nets, he wrote: "The spectacle moves me. The other night around one o'clock it was raining cats and dogs, but the fishermen were there, fearless, in their rugged toil. [...] To imitate the fishermen of the Bosphorus, to work day and night with lit torches, each in his own small boat, at the command of the spiritual leaders: this is our grave and sacred duty."

From Nicaea to Jerusalem

The anniversary of Nicaea coincided with the moment when the universal Church pauses to reflect and ask itself: "Who is Jesus Christ in the lives of women and men today, who is he for each of us?"

This question concerns everyone, including those "Christians who risk reducing Jesus Christ to some kind of charismatic leader or superman, a distortion that ultimately leads to sadness and confusion." Why sadness? Because if God did not become man, then man and God once again become infinitely distant.

At the ecumenical prayer meeting near the archaeological excavations of the ancient Basilica of Saint Neophytos in Iznik, Pope Leo recalled that "we are all invited to overcome the scandal of divisions that unfortunately still exist and to nourish the desire for the unity for which the Lord Jesus prayed and gave his life. The more reconciled we are, the more we Christians can bear credible witness to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, which is a proclamation of hope for all, a message of peace and universal brotherhood that transcends the boundaries of our communities and nations." This desire for unity among all the disciples of the one Master becomes a path to be followed, where the journey involves not only following, but also positioning oneself with a view to continually lowering oneself in humility and conversion.

Leo XIV, too, continues along the path traced by his predecessors, looking to the ultimate goal of unity. Full unity among Christians, with a view—as he reminded the leaders and representatives of the Churches and Christian communities he met in the Syriac church of Mor Ephrem—to a "spiritual journey" toward the Jubilee of the Redemption of 2033 and "a return" to Jerusalem, to the Upper Room, the site of Christ's Last Supper and Pentecost.

The anniversary of Nicaea, in which Christ is placed back at the center of everything, beyond all the sociological and flat discourses that the Church has sometimes risked pursuing and producing, becomes the starting point for a new journey towards the Jubilee of 2033. Pope Leo also firmly believes this, in continuity with Pope Francis, as Pope Prevost had the opportunity to remind the members of an ecumenical pilgrimage from the United States of America, last July 17, 2025, to Castel Gandolfo: «In the Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year,

Pope Francis observed that “this Holy Year will guide the path towards another fundamental anniversary for all Christians: in 2033, in fact, we will celebrate the two thousand years of the Redemption accomplished through the passion, death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus” (*Spes non confundit*, 6). Spiritually, we all need to return to Jerusalem, the City of Peace, where Peter, Andrew, and all the Apostles, after the days of the Lord's Passion and Resurrection, received the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, and from there they bore witness to Christ to the ends of the earth.”

May this be the right time for all of us to set out for Jerusalem, to bear witness to Christ, knowing what awaits us in Jerusalem: to die and be resurrected with Him.

