

Who Makes a Council Ecumenical?

Reception, Ratification, and the Canon of Councils

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Contents

- I. The Question Nobody's List Answers
- II. The Orthodox Answer at Full Strength
- III. Jerusalem to Nicaea
- IV. The Year the World Groaned
- V. The Experiment the Fifth Century Ran
- VI. Constantinople's Road into the Canon
- VII. Reception Proves Too Much
- VIII. Florence: Signed, Sealed, Refused
- IX. A Canon Needs a Canonizer

Endnotes

For Further Reading

I. The Question Nobody's List Answers

Both Rome and the Orthodox East confess that ecumenical councils speak with the authority of the whole Church—that when the assembled episcopate defines the faith, as at Nicaea and Chalcedon, the definition binds. But that shared confession conceals the sharpest question between them: *which* councils are ecumenical, and who says so? The two communions do not even agree on the count—the Orthodox reckon seven, the Catholic Church twenty-one—and no council ever published the list. No canon of Nicaea names Nicaea ecumenical; no decree of any of the seven enumerates the seven. Something outside the councils has to tell the Church which assemblies spoke for her. The question is what.

The Orthodox answer is *reception*: a council proves ecumenical when the whole Church, over time, recognizes her faith in it. The Catholic answer is *ratification*: a council binds

when the successor of Peter confirms it. This essay sets the two answers against the record—the first councils, the Arian assemblies that outnumbered Nicaea, the twin councils of 449 and 451, Constantinople’s path into the canon, the churches that refused Chalcedon, and the union of Florence that was signed and then repudiated—and asks the calibrated question the evidence can actually answer: not which theory can be proved, but which the record best supports.

II. The Orthodox Answer at Full Strength

The Orthodox account deserves stating in its own voice, because it is older than the question and carries real theological weight. The Church, on this account, does not receive her councils from an office that certifies them; she recognizes them—the way a body recognizes its own voice—because the Holy Spirit dwells in the whole Church, not in one see. The apostles’ council in Jerusalem spoke for “the Holy Spirit and us” (Acts 15:28)—the Spirit and the *assembly*, not the Spirit and one man.¹ No father of Nicaea walked in knowing he sat in the First Ecumenical Council; that standing emerged as the churches embraced the faith it defined. Reception is not a procedure that could have been done faster by a stamp; it is what ecumenicity is.

And the account comes with exhibits. Constantinople, 381: an Eastern synod with no Roman legates and no Western bishops, whose creed every Christian communion now recites—ecumenical by reception, demonstrably not by prior Roman ratification. Florence, 1439: the papal theory given everything it could ask—emperor present, patriarch present, the Greek delegation subscribing, the pope solemnly ratifying—and refused by the Orthodox Church, clergy, monks, and people, until the union dissolved. A council without Rome gave the Church her creed; a council with Rome’s full ratification failed to give her a union. So, the Orthodox conclude, it is in the Church’s living recognition, not in one chancery’s registry, that a council’s ecumenicity comes to light.²

That is the case at full strength. The Catholic reply, developed in the rest of this essay, is not that reception is unreal—a true council is received, and the Church’s embrace of Nicaea is part of Nicaea’s glory. The reply is that reception cannot be the *criterion*: a criterion must be usable when it is needed, and reception, by its nature, answers only after the crisis is over.

III. Jerusalem to Nicaea

Begin where the conciliar idea begins. The council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 is the model both communions invoke, and it repays close reading. The assembly heard the debate; Peter rose and settled the doctrinal question—“he made no distinction between us and them, but cleansed their hearts by faith”—and “all the assembly kept silence” (Acts 15:9,

12). James proposed the pastoral application; the decree went out in the name of the whole council. Assembly and primacy are both in the picture, working together, neither erasing the other. The first council in the Church's history is not evidence for conciliarity *against* primacy; it is evidence that the two were born together.³

Nicaea in 325 follows the same grammar at scale: the assembled episcopate defined the faith, and the definition prevailed—over the following decades—through the tenacity of particular sees, Alexandria under Athanasius and Rome above all. Which raises the question the reception theory must face: what happens when the assemblies themselves go wrong?

IV. The Year the World Groaned

Put yourself in the year 360. The twin councils of Ariminum in the West and Seleucia in the East—between them involving far more bishops than Nicaea—have just subscribed a compromised creed that abandoned the Nicene “consubstantial.” Jerome, looking back, fixed the moment in a sentence: “The whole world groaned, and was astonished to find itself Arian.”⁴

Now apply the reception test. It can tell the Christians of 360 nothing—reception is precisely what the Arians appear, at that moment, to have won. The larger councils, the imperial favor, the subscribing majorities: every observable mark of “the mind of the Church” pointed the wrong way. What actually held the line was not a poll of the churches but particular sees and bishops—Athanasius in exile, Hilary, and Rome—refusing assemblies that had every conciliar credential except the right faith and the right communion. The faithful of 360 needed to know *then* which councils bound them. A criterion that can only ratify the winner centuries later is not a criterion; it is a history written by one.

V. The Experiment the Fifth Century Ran

If history ever ran a controlled experiment on this question, it was in the three years between 449 and 451—two councils, every variable held but one.

Ephesus, 449: the emperor Theodosius II convoked it; the great Eastern sees attended; the numbers were ample; Dioscorus of Alexandria presided. It vindicated the heretic Eutyches, deposed the orthodox bishops, refused to allow Leo's Tome to be read, and did its work by intimidation and violence. Leo of Rome, alone among the patriarchs, repudiated it outright—*latrocinium*, a robbery, and his name for it stuck to it permanently: the Robber Council.⁵

Chalcedon, 451: an emperor convoked it too—Marcian now—and the same churches attended. The one variable that flipped was Rome. Leo's legates presided; the council deposed Dioscorus, the previous council's president, in the legates' formula—for daring, among other crimes, to excommunicate the pope; the fathers acclaimed "Peter has spoken through Leo" when the Tome was read; and the council wrote to Leo asking him to *confirm* its acts, because, as the fathers put it, he had presided over them as head over members.⁶

Weigh the two assemblies by the reception theory's own marks—imperial summons, patriarchal attendance, majority vote. The Robber Council possessed every one. What it lacked was Peter. That single difference is why one assembly is a byword and the other is the Fourth Ecumenical Council, and—the point that matters for the criterion question—the difference was visible *at the time*, not centuries later. The fifth century could tell 449 from 451 in real time because it had something better than a prediction about future reception: it had Rome's judgment.

VI. Constantinople's Road into the Canon

The strongest Orthodox exhibit deserves the closest look. Constantinople, 381, was indeed an Eastern synod: no Roman legates, no Western bishops, not summoned in concert with Rome. If papal confirmation were what makes a council ecumenical, how did the council that gave the Church her creed qualify?

Answer: by acquiring, later, exactly the thing the theory names. For seventy years the council of 381 was reckoned what it was—a revered Eastern synod. It entered the Church's canon of councils when Chalcedon, meeting under Roman presidency, read its creed and confirmed it as the faith of the fathers. And Rome's handling of it shows the discrimination a ratifying authority makes: the creed was embraced; the third canon—elevating Constantinople for the imperial reason that it was New Rome—was resisted in the West for centuries. That is not reception operating instead of ratification; it is ratification operating with precision, keeping the council's faith and declining its politics.⁷

VII. Reception Proves Too Much

Here is the argument that, more than any other, decides the question. Apply the reception test consistently and it dismantles the very councils it is meant to certify—Chalcedon first of all. Chalcedon was *not* received by the whole Church. The churches of Egypt, Armenia, and much of Syria—a vast portion of the Christian world of 451, heirs of Athanasius and Cyril—rejected it permanently. Their descendants, the Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, and Ethiopian communions, reject it still, fifteen centuries on. If ecumenicity means reception by the whole Church, Chalcedon fails the test to this day.⁸

The Orthodox do not conclude that Chalcedon failed of ecumenicity; they conclude, rightly, that the non-receivers were wrong. But that answer gives the game away. It measures reception by the *true* Church—and identifies the true Church as the one that received the true councils. The circle is perfect, and it is a circle. It is, in fact, the same circle this site examines in the sola-scriptura debate: Scripture's table of contents is not itself Scripture, so a canon of books needs a canonizer; the councils' table of contents is not itself conciliar, so a canon of councils needs one too.⁹

VIII. Florence: Signed, Sealed, Refused

What, then, of Florence? In 1439, after months of debate at Ferrara and Florence, the Greek delegation—the emperor present, the patriarch of Constantinople having died during the council—subscribed the decree of union with the Roman Church; Mark of Ephesus alone among the bishops refused. The pope ratified it. And the union failed: the delegates were repudiated at home, the decree was formally renounced, and within fifteen years Constantinople had fallen. If papal ratification were sufficient, the Orthodox argue, Florence would bind the East today.¹⁰

But look closely at what the argument needs, and what it actually has. Catholics do not hold that ratification compels assent on the ground—no theory of councils holds that a true council cannot be refused. Chalcedon itself, ratified and ecumenical, was refused by Egypt permanently; the refusal made the refusers non-Chalcedonian, not Chalcedon non-ecumenical. Florence shows the same thing in the other direction: a council can be valid and binding and still be rejected by those it was meant to reconcile. Refusal is a fact about the refusers. It is not evidence that nothing binding happened. What Florence genuinely demonstrates is that ratification without reception purchases no *peace*—a lesson the modern dialogue has absorbed—and that is a truth about the conditions of unity, not about the criterion of ecumenicity.

IX. A Canon Needs a Canonizer

Step back and let the bare list make the quiet argument. No council ever defined the list of councils. The Orthodox seven is fixed by—what, exactly? Not by a council, on pain of regress: an eighth assembly certifying the seven would itself need certifying. Not by unanimous reception, which Chalcedon never had and has not got yet. The number seven is a consensus of the Byzantine centuries, real and venerable—but a consensus is a fact, not a criterion, and it goes silent at exactly the moments a criterion is needed: in 360, when the consensus appeared Arian; in 449, when a robber council wore every conciliar credential the East recognized.

The Catholic answer is at least an answer. The councils bind that the successor of Peter confirms: that is why the fifth century could know 449 from 451 while the dust was in the air; why Constantinople's creed entered the canon at a council Rome presided over, while its third canon waited outside; why the Church has never counted as ecumenical any council Rome rejected. The record does not entail the Catholic doctrine of the papacy—history rarely entails, and this essay has not claimed proof. It claims what the evidence supports: that every alternative criterion either arrives too late, proves too much, or quietly smuggles in the very authority it set out to replace. The reader who finds that conclusion uncomfortable is invited to do what this essay has done—state the reception theory at full strength, walk it through 360, 449, 451, and the churches that never received Chalcedon—and see whether it survives its own test cases.¹¹

Endnotes

1. Acts 15:28 (RSV).
2. For the reception account, Timothy Ware (Kallistos), *The Orthodox Church*, on the ecumenical councils and how their authority is recognized.
3. Acts 15:6–29 (RSV); the quoted phrases are from vv. 9 and 12.
4. Jerome, *Dialogue Against the Luciferians* 19, on the aftermath of Ariminum (359).
5. Leo, Letter 95, calling Ephesus II a *latrocinium*.
6. Acts of Chalcedon, sessions 1–3; the acclamation is from session 2; the council's letter to Leo, transmitted with the acts, requests his confirmation. The fuller record is walked on this site's companion essay, *Did the First Millennium Know the Papacy?*
7. Constantinople I (381); its creed read and confirmed at Chalcedon (451); canon 3 and the West's long resistance to it, renewed against Chalcedon's canon 28.
8. The Oriental Orthodox communions—Coptic, Armenian, Syriac, Ethiopian—reject Chalcedon to this day.
9. See this site's essay *Is Sola Scriptura Scriptural?* for the canon argument in its scriptural form.
10. Council of Ferrara–Florence, union decree of 6 July 1439; Mark of Ephesus refused to sign, and the union was repudiated in the East thereafter.
11. The Orthodox count seven councils, Nicaea I (325) through Nicaea II (787); the Catholic Church counts twenty-one, through Vatican II. No conciliar decree of either communion defines its list.

For Further Reading

The Council of Chalcedon (451), the definition and canons of the fourth ecumenical council. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum04.htm>.

The Council of Basel–Ferrara–Florence, including the union decree of 6 July 1439. Free online at <https://www.papalencyclicals.net/councils/ecum17.htm>.

Dialogue Against the Luciferians, by St. Jerome—§19 for the world that “groaned” to find itself Arian. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3005.htm>.

The Ravenna Document, Catholic–Orthodox Joint Commission (2007) on conciliarity and authority. Free online at <https://www.christianunity.va>.

The Early Papacy—To the Synod of Chalcedon in 451, by Adrian Fortescue—Rome and the early councils.

The Orthodox Church, by Timothy Ware (Kallistos)—the Orthodox account of the councils and their reception.

An Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine, by St. John Henry Newman. Free online at <https://www.newmanreader.org/works/development/>.

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“For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things.”

—Acts 15:28

*Ad maiorem Dei gloriam
To the greater glory of God*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author’s articulation of *the Catholic account of what makes a council ecumenical*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the

Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.