

CANONS OF THE COUNCIL OF NICAEA

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CANONS OF NICAEA

These compilations of canonical law were enforced through the Council of Nicaea, broadly known as the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea to those who have recognized it alongside the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church. This council was pivotal, as it brought episcopates throughout the entire world to discuss certain matters—particularly the heresy of Arianism. In the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church, one primary figure of notability—Saint Eustathius the Great of Antioch—participated and preached strongly against Arianism before his wrongful deposition. These *Canons of the Council of Nicaea* are compiled from an earlier British English translation, reflecting some slight grammatical differences between American English which encompasses the majority of the Great and Holy Rudder.

CANON 1

If anyone in sickness has been subjected by physicians to a surgical operation, or if he has been castrated by barbarians, let him remain among the clergy; but, if any one in sound health has castrated himself, then it is good that such a one, if enrolled among the clergy, should cease, and that from henceforth no such person should be promoted. But, as it is evident that this is said of those who willfully do the thing and presume to castrate themselves, so if any have been made eunuchs by barbarians, or by their masters, and should otherwise be found worthy, such men the Canons admit to the clergy.

Summary: This canon regulates that no man who is a eunuch—castrated—by his own design may remain a bishop, presbyter, or deacon in the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church. Also, in the future, no one should be appointed to the clergy who is castrated by their own will.

CANON 2

Forasmuch as, either from necessity, or through the urgency of individuals, many things have been done contrary to the ecclesiastical canon, so that men just converted from heathenism to the faith, and who have been instructed but a little while, are straightway brought to the spiritual laver, and as soon as they have been baptized, are advanced to the

episcopate (office of bishop) or the presbyterate (office of elder), it has seemed right to us that for the time to come no such thing shall be done. For to the catechumen himself there is need of time and of a longer trial after baptism.

For the apostolical saying is clear, “Not a novice; lest, being lifted up with pride, he fall into condemnation and the snare of the devil.” But if, as time goes on, any sensual (lit., “soulish”) sin should be found out about the person, and he should be convicted by two or three witnesses, let him cease from the clerical office. And whoso shall transgress these enactments will imperil his own clerical position, as a person who presumes to disobey the Great and Holy Council.

Summary: This canon requires that new converts or re-converts, have an unspecified amount of experience before ordination as a presbyter or bishop in the Church of Christ. The canon adds that if such a man is found in “any sensual sin”, they must be dismissed from office.

CANON 3

The Great and Holy Council has stringently forbidden any bishop, presbyter, deacon, or any one of the clergy whatever, to have a subintroducta dwelling with him, except only a mother, or sister, or aunt, or such persons only as are beyond all suspicion.

Summary: This canon regulates that “subintroducta”, in this case, females, are forbidden from living in the quarters of a bishop, presbyter, deacon or any clergy in the Church, except they be their mother, sister, aunt, or any such person that may be beyond all suspicion as their wife or partner to be wed, or even children.

CANON 4

It is by all means proper that a bishop should be appointed by all the bishops in the province; but should this be difficult, either on account of urgent necessity or because of distance, three at least should meet together, and the suffrages of the absent bishops also being given and communicated in writing, then the ordination should take place. But in every province the ratification of what is done should be left to the Metropolitan.

Summary: The “Metropolitan” is the bishop over a jurisdiction of the Church of Christ which has multiple churches within. In the instance of the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic faith, the ratification of this is left to the Ecumenical Metropolitans of Antioch and Syracuse. This canon states a bishop should have the approval of the bishops in their ecclesiastical province (be that a diocese, eparchy, eparchate, or metropolis).

CANON 5

Concerning those, whether of the clergy or of the laity, who have been excommunicated in the several provinces, let the provision of the canon be observed by the bishops which provides that persons cast out by some be not readmitted by others. Nevertheless, inquiry should be made whether they have been excommunicated through captiousness, or contentiousness, or any such like ungracious disposition in the bishop.

And, that this matter may have due investigation, it is decreed that in every province synods shall be held twice a year, in order that when all the bishops of the province are assembled together, such questions may by them be thoroughly examined, that so those who have confessedly offended against their bishop, may be seen by all to be for just cause excommunicated, until it shall seem fit to a general meeting of the bishops to pronounce a milder sentence upon them. And let these synods be held, the one before Lent, that the pure Gift may be offered to God after all bitterness has been put away, and let the second be held about autumn.

Summary: Those excommunicated in one autocephalous or autonomous church in the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church should not be readmitted in another. If there's questions about the excommunication, the bishops should converse to one another. In order to facilitate that, there will be synods held twice a year in each province.

CANON 6

Let the ancient customs in Egypt, Libya and Pentapolis prevail, that the Bishop of Alexandria have jurisdiction in all these, since the like is customary for the Bishop of Rome also. Likewise in Antioch and the other provinces, let the churches retain their privileges. And this is to be universally understood, that if any one be made bishop without the consent of the Metropolitan, the Great and Holy Council has declared that such a man ought not to be a bishop. If, however, two or three bishops shall from natural love of contradiction, oppose the common suffrage of the rest, it being reasonable and in accordance with the ecclesiastical law, then let the choice of the majority prevail.

Summary: This canon primarily states that Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch are the three centers of the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church, having widened jurisdiction over other subordinate churches. In the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Statute, and those lesser canons including this, the Canons of Nicaea, these statements are continuously upheld, as the Church was first identified as Christians in Antioch, and through Rome the Church expanded and through Alexandria as well, spreading it to all people. Beyond being addressed as metropolitans or metropolites, the heads of these churches maintained

archiepiscopal and patriarchal dignity and were metropolitan archeparchs or archbishops. It should be understood, however, that the Alexandrians were placed under the jurisdiction of Antioch, later on. It should also be noted that the Romans who stood against the Melkites, went to Syracuse and elsewhere.

CANON 7

Since custom and ancient tradition have prevailed that the Bishop of Ælia [i.e., Jerusalem] should be honored, let him, saving its due dignity to the Metropolis, have the next place of honor.

Summary: This canon adds patriarchal dignity (see summary on the previous canon) to the bishop of Jerusalem, even though he doesn't have the same wide range of authority as the Ecumenical Metropolitans. The Jerusalemites were likewise later placed under the authority of the Ecumenical Metropolitan of Antioch, alongside Alexandria.

CANON 8

Concerning those who call themselves Cathari, if they come over to the Catholic and Apostolic Church, the Great and Holy Council decrees that they who are ordained shall continue as they are in the clergy. But it is before all things necessary that they should profess in writing that they will observe and follow the dogmas of the Catholic and Apostolic Church; in particular that they will communicate with persons who have been twice married, and with those who having lapsed in persecution have had a period of penance laid upon them, and a time of restoration fixed so that in all things they will follow the dogmas of the Catholic Church.

Wheresoever, then, whether in villages or in cities, all of the ordained are found to be of these only, let them remain in the clergy, and in the same rank in which they are found. But if they come over where there is a bishop or presbyter of the Catholic Church, it is manifest that the Bishop of the Church must have the bishop's dignity; and he who was named bishop by those who are called Cathari shall have the rank of presbyter, unless it shall seem fit to the bishop of the Church to admit him to partake in the honor of the title. Or, if this should not be satisfactory, then shall the bishop provide for him a place as chorbishop, or presbyter, in order that he may be evidently seen to be of the clergy, and that there may not be two diocesan bishops in the city.

Summary: The Cathari, or "the pure," are the Novatianists, not to be confused the Cathari of the Late Middle Ages. The Novatianists were started by an elder named Novatian around AD/CE 250 in Rome. Novatian objected to the forgiveness of those who lapsed during persecution. The churches did not agree with him, so he found three bishops willing to

ordain him a bishop, and he formed his own schism. The Novatianists and Montanists (comparable to Protestant Pentecostals) were the only pre-Nicene schisms in the church except the Gnostics. Novatianist doctrine was exactly the same as the catholic (universal) churches within the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church, except for refusing forgiveness to those who lapsed during persecution. They also would not take communion with any who were divorced and remarried as Christians. This canon allows Novatianist clergy to leave the Novatianists and keep their status as elder or bishop, though the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic bishop would have priority where there was conflict. Following, chorbishop is a rural bishop in the diocese that is also under the direct supervision of the Ecumenical Metropolitans. The office was invented in the late 3rd century and ceased to be used soon thereafter globally, except for in those bodies both within and outside the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church with additional provisions for what authority they may be able to exercise amongst the faithful; it is noted, however that chorbishops are merely appointed and not ordained if ever within the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church.

CANON 9

If any presbyters have been advanced without examination, or if upon examination they have made confession of crime, and men acting in violation of the canons have laid hands upon them, notwithstanding their confession, such the canon does not admit; for the Catholic Church of Jesus Christ requires that which is blameless.

Summary: The examination mentioned here is not a written test, but a questioning done by other bishops. Some of the more heinous sins (blasphemy, bigamy, heresy, idolatry, etc.) made a person ineligible for leadership in the Church. This canon says that churches have to check for these things, and that anyone who was not examined or who was wrongly ordained must be removed from office, or defrocked. The argument used for such rules came from passages like Leviticus 21:17-18, where God tells Moses and Aaron that no one with a blemish can approach the altar of God. They also come in terms with 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

CANON 10

If any who have lapsed have been ordained through ignorance, or even with the previous knowledge of the ordainers, this shall not prejudice the canon of the Church; for when they are discovered they shall be deposed.

Summary: If a person denied Christ or offered sacrifice to the Roman gods during persecution, he is never to be a church leader. If he is already ordained for some reason, he

shall be deposed. The canon in contemporary times applies to the same, except to the other gods that be in numerous pantheons or lack thereof.

CANON 11

Concerning those who have fallen without compulsion, without the spoiling of their property, without danger or the like, as happened during the tyranny of Licinius, the Council declares that, though they have deserved no clemency, they shall be dealt with mercifully. As many as were communicants, if they heartily repent, shall pass three years among the hearers; for seven years they shall be prostrators; and for two years they shall communicate with the people in prayers, but without oblation.

Summary: For those that are used to a purely biblical—or even purely apostolic—Christianity, there are many defining words here. These all resulted from the Church of Christ having to learn how to deal with situations of church discipline. Basically, if anyone denied Christ or offered sacrifice, and the persecutors didn't have to hurt those within or confiscate property to get a Christian to do so, there's a long path of discipline to go through before they are admitted to communion. The canon even mentions that those who do so wouldn't deserve even that (which is true), but the Church is being merciful, as the Christ is merciful. In the early Church, people sat in sections. There were those admitted to communion; there were those learning the basics of the faith in preparation for baptism, called catechumens; there were hearers, who had made no decision to continue as Christians but were considering; and there were penitents, or prostrators as they are called here, who were forbidden from communing in penance for something they did. This canon requires those who lapsed without having to be compelled to sit with the hearers for three years, the penitents for seven years, and then they could pray with the rest of the congregation but not commune and partake of the Great Mystery that is the Eucharist or Holy Communion. That may seem harsh, as it adds up to 12 years, but such people needed to be grateful they're admitted to the Church at all, in reminiscence to the functions of the Temple prior to its destruction. An oblation is a sacrifice, and the early church thought of communion together and the Great Mystery as a sacrifice.

CANON 12

As many as were called by grace, and displayed the first zeal, having cast aside their military belts, but afterwards returned, like dogs, to their own vomit, so that some spent money and by means of gifts regained their military stations; let these, after they have passed the space of three years as hearers, be for ten years prostrators.

But in all these cases it is necessary to examine well into their purpose and what their repentance appears to be like. For as many as give evidence of their conversions by deeds, and not pretense, with fear, and tears, and perseverance, and good works, when they have fulfilled their appointed time as hearers, may properly communicate in prayers; and after that the bishop may determine yet more favorably concerning them. But those who take the matter with indifference, and who think the form of not entering the Church is sufficient for their conversion, must fulfill the whole time.

Summary: Apparently, this canon is directed toward those that were in the army under Constantine's co-emperor Licinius. When the civil war started, or perhaps before, he required his army to sacrifice to the pagan gods. Some Christians left the army rather than sacrifice. Those who stayed and sacrificed were considered lapsed from the faith, just as all those who sacrificed under persecution were considered lapsed. Some, though, who left changed their mind and returned. Some of those even bought their way back into Licinius' army. After Licinius lost the civil war, those in his army wanted back into the Church of Christ. After all, it was the emperor who supported Christianity who won the civil war.

CANON 13

Concerning the departing, the ancient canonical law is still to be maintained, to wit, that, if any man be at the point of death, he must not be deprived of the last and most indispensable Viaticum. But, if anyone should be restored to health again who has received the Great Mystery when his life was despaired of, let him remain among those who communicate in prayers only. But in general, and in the case of any dying person whatsoever asking to receive the Great Mystery, let the bishop, after examination made, give it.

Summary: This canon law makes provision for a person receiving the Great Mystery even if they are going through the penance. If they recover from his illness, they remain banned.

CANON 14

Concerning catechumens who have lapsed, the Great and Holy Council has decreed that, after they have passed three years only as hearers, they shall pray with the catechumens.

Summary: A catechumen, someone learning the basics of the faith in preparation for baptism, denying the Christ or sacrifice during a persecution, has to go listen with the hearers for three years before you are readmitted as a catechumen.

CANON 15

On account of the great disturbance and discords that occur, it is decreed that the custom prevailing in certain places contrary to the canons, must wholly be done away; so that neither bishop, presbyter, nor deacon shall pass from city to city. And if anyone, after this decree of the Great and Holy Council, shall attempt any such thing, or continue in any such course, his proceedings shall be utterly void, and he shall be restored to the Church of Christ for which he was ordained bishop or elder.

Summary: This canon regulates that bishops, presbyters, and deacons stop from moving from city to city. It should be a given courtesy for such office-holders to announce their coming through whichever cities they visit.

CANON 16

Neither presbyters, nor deacons, nor any others enrolled among the clergy, who, not having the fear of God before their eyes, nor regarding the ecclesiastical canons, shall recklessly leave from their own church, ought not by any means to be received by another church; but every constraint should be applied to restore them to their own parishes; and, if they will not go, they must be excommunicated. And if anyone shall dare surreptitiously to carry off and in his own church ordain a man belonging to another, without the consent of his own proper bishop, from whom although he was enrolled in the clergy list he has seceded, let the ordination be void.

Summary: This is punishment decreed for violators of the previous canon of Nicaea.

CANON 17

Forasmuch as many enrolled among the clergy, following covetousness and lust of gain, have forgotten the divine Scripture, which says, “He hath not given his money upon usury,” and in lending money ask the hundredth of the sum, the Great and Holy thinks it just that if after this decree anyone be found to receive usury, whether he accomplish it by secret transaction or otherwise, as by demanding the whole and one half, or by using any other contrivance whatever for filthy lucre’s sake, he shall be deposed from the clergy and his name stricken from the list.

Summary: The early Church of Christ believed that lending money at interest (usury) was a sin. Getting caught doing it, according to this canon, would get clergy removed from church leadership. It’s important to understand the context of this. In the United States of America, Christians often want to apply Christian commands to the government or to the banks, which are secular institutions. The early Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic

Church knew that Christians are supposed to be family. They are supposed to share their resources (see 2 Cor. 8:13-15, for example). But what Christians are commanded is not what secular institutions are commanded. The Bible guides Christians into obedience to God, not into social activism except where noted otherwise without disobeying God. Notice that the punishment for charging interest is removal from church leadership, not being taken to court. This is a church matter, not a civil one.

CANON 18

It has come to the knowledge of the Great and Holy Council that, in some districts and cities, the deacons administer the eucharist to the presbyters, whereas neither canon nor custom permits that they who have no right to offer should give the Body of Christ to them that do offer. And this also has been made known, that certain deacons now touch the Great Mystery even before the bishops. Let all such practices be utterly done away, and let the deacons remain within their own bounds, knowing that they are the ministers of the bishop and the inferiors of the presbyters. Let them receive the Great Mystery according to their order, after the presbyterate, and let either the bishop or the presbyterate administer to them. Furthermore, let not the deacons sit among the presbyters, for that is contrary to canon law and order. And if, after this decree, any one shall refuse to obey, let him be deposed from the diaconate.

Summary: This canon primarily denotes the differences in the office holders for bishops, presbyters, and the male deacons.

CANON 19

Concerning the Paulianists who have flown for refuge to the Catholic Church, it has been decreed that they must by all means be rebaptized; and if any of them who in past time have been numbered among their clergy should be found blameless and without reproach, let them be rebaptized and ordained by the bishop whichever is most local of the Catholic Church of the Christ; but if the examination should discover them to be unfit, they ought to be deposed. Likewise in the case of their deaconesses, and generally in the case of those who have been enrolled among their clergy, let the same form be observed. And we mean by deaconesses such as have assumed the habit, but who, since they have no imposition of hands, are to be numbered only among the laity.

Summary: Paulianists is a reference to Paul of Samosata, who believed that Jesus did not pre-exist. He believed that the Christ came upon Jesus at birth, and it was only through righteousness that Jesus achieved oneness with God. He was accused of heresy in AD/CE 269 and removed from the office of bishop. He found protection from a queen in Syria,

however, and so he was able to continue teaching for a few years. His followers, obviously, still existed 60 years later. This canon regulates they have to be rebaptized to be admitted to the Ancient Orthodox Catholic Apostolic Church. Paulianist baptism was not to be accepted. If they were clergy in the Paulianist church, then they could be ordained after baptism into the Great and Holy Apostolic Church of Christ. Deaconesses, or female deacons, are mentioned here, and they mention that “the duties of the deaconess are set forth in many ancient writings.” These duties almost exclusively had to do with women, and they were especially needed at baptism for the sake of modesty. Sometimes, though, they would instruct the female catechumens as well. They were never allowed to teach men, and most did not have the laying on of hands.

CANON 20

Forasmuch as there are certain persons who kneel on the Lord’s Day and in the days of Pentecost, therefore, to the intent that all things may be uniformly observed everywhere (in every church), it seems good to the Council that prayer be made to God standing.

Summary: The practice of praying while standing on Sunday and between Passover and Pentecost was a long-standing tradition. So this tradition predates Nicaea by around two centuries, at least. The reason for this is that the first day of the week and Passover were days to celebrate the resurrection. Since they were days of celebration, kneeling and fasting were forbidden. There are many who believe, falsely, that the Council of Nicaea instituted the observance of Sunday as the Lord’s Day. The council did not. It’s mentioned in Ignatius’ Epistle to the Magnesians, mentioning observing the Lord’s Day rather than the Sabbath in about 110 and the Letter of Barnabas mentions the first day of the week in opposition to the Jewish Sabbath around 130 AD/CE. The observance of the Lord’s Day and the avoidance of fasting and kneeling on the first day of the week is a very ancient tradition.