

Father dcn. Raphael Cyrus (24-05-2026) St Dunstan's poole

Sermon: John 17:1-13 & Nicaea – Full Text with Footnotes and Endnotes

In the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ

What does it mean for us to be “one” in a world that constantly divides? Today, the Holy Church sets before us the words of our Lord from John 17:1-13, the High Priestly Prayer, and commemorates the holy Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council at Nicaea. These two belong together because, in the Gospel, we hear Christ praying for the unity of His disciples, and in the Council we see the Church defending that unity in the truth.

Our Lord says in John 17:21

“Holy Father, keep through Your name those whom You have given Me, that they may be one as We are one.”

This prayer of Christ is not simply about human cooperation. The unity of the Church is not like that of a club, a political party or a nation. Christ says, “that they may be one as We are one.” The unity of the Church is rooted in the life of the Holy Trinity.

This is especially important for us in our Orthodox parish, because we come from many nations, languages, cultures, and backgrounds. Some were born Orthodox. Some discovered Orthodoxy later in life. Some come from Eastern Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Western Europe, North America, or elsewhere. Yet when we stand before the Gospel and later in the queue to receive communion, we are not many churches. We are one Church. The Church that Christ established on the foundation of the Apostles!

The Church is the miracle of the risen Christ, bearing fruit at Pentecost and continuing throughout history.

The world often divides people by nationality, race, politics, language, or culture. But in the Church, Christ unites humanity in his Body by feeding them with his Body!

Therefore, receive the Body of Christ to become the Body of Christ.

Saint Cyril of Alexandria says:

“For all are united in Christ through the one Holy Spirit, and we become one body in Him.”¹

¹ Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Book 17, PG 74:478-479.

Our unity is not defined by a single ethnicity but by the celebration of a single entity journeying towards a single goal. For this reason, at every Divine Liturgy we confess the Creed: “I believe in one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church.”

These words define our identity.

We say the Church is ONE because Christ is one. The Church has one Head — Jesus Christ. The Church proclaims one faith, one baptism, and one Eucharist. The Fathers of Nicaea defended this unity against false teaching because division in doctrine eventually leads to division in communion.

Saint Ignatius of Antioch wrote in the first century: “Wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”²

And here we must also speak carefully about something highly relevant today: the modern idea of ecumenism.

Certainly, our prayers are for the unity of all Christians, reflecting Christ's own prayer for unity. The Orthodox Church has never promoted hatred, isolation, or triumphalism. We should speak to all people with humility, kindness, and love, instead of engaging in harsh polemics against non-Orthodox groups.

However, the unity Christ prays for isn't based on the lowest common denominator. It doesn't require us to abandon truth for superficial agreement. It's not a half-and-half truth!

Too often in the modern world, ecumenism becomes: “Let us ignore our differences so we can feel united.” But the holy Fathers did not gather at Nicaea to reduce the faith to the smallest possible statement that everyone could tolerate. They gathered to defend the fullness of the truth revealed in Christ.

[Even the ancient philosopher Plato taught:

“Truth is the bond of all unity; without it, there is only appearance.”³]

And as the renowned Orthodox theologian Fr. Georges Florovsky wrote:

“Unity in the Church is not a matter of external agreement or compromise, but of common adherence to the apostolic truth which the Spirit preserves in the Body of Christ.”⁴

² St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8:2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library, 2003.

³ Adapted from Plato, *Republic*, Book V. (Exact wording paraphrased for sermon clarity.)

⁴ Florovsky, Georges, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, Nordland Publishing, 1979, p. 125.

[Christos Yannaras, who was one of the most distinguished modern Christian philosophers, also reminds us that the Church is not merely an institution of social consensus. He writes:

“The Church exists in the true communion of persons in Christ; unity is not the suppression of difference but the harmony of persons who participate in the truth of God.”^{5]}

In other words, unity is not achieved by sacrificing truth or by settling for what everyone can tolerate. True unity embraces diversity without compromising the truth—it is a unity of love, grounded in Christ, as revealed in Scripture and lived out within the Church’s holy tradition.

Saint Irenaeus said:

“Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace.”⁶

Today many people say: “Doctrine divides, love unites.” But in the Orthodox understanding, truth and love cannot be separated. Christ is both Truth and Love.

We also confess that the Church is HOLY.

The Church is holy not because all her members are perfect, but because Christ is holy and the Holy Spirit dwells within the Church. The Church is a hospital for sinners, a place of healing and transformation.

Saint John Chrysostom says:

“The Church is not a courtroom for condemnation, but a hospital for the healing of souls.”⁷

This holiness is revealed in the saints — ordinary men and women transformed by grace. Holiness is the Church's true purpose. We are not here merely to preserve external customs, but to become saints. The Church is the catalyst for sainthood.

Then we say the Church is CATHOLIC.

In Orthodoxy, “catholic” means “whole” or “universal.” And the Church is universal because Christ came to save the whole world.

⁵ Yannaras, Christos, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013, p. 85.

⁶ Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 24:1, ANF Volume 1.

⁷ John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues*, Homily 2, PG 49:201-203.

The Church is catholic because it possesses the fullness of the faith. Wherever the Orthodox Church gathers, the wholeness of the apostolic faith is present in our worship.

Our parish, in fact, reflects the wholeness of the Kingdom of God, in which every people and tongue glorifies God together. A parish made up of different nationalities is not something to be tolerated — it is a visible icon of Pentecost and of the Kingdom to come.

Finally, we confess that the Church is APOSTOLIC.

The Church is apostolic because the Church preserves the faith handed down(παράδοσις) by the Apostles without alteration. The Fathers of Nicaea did not invent a new faith. They defended the apostolic faith against distortion.

Saint Athanasius the Great, defender of Nicaea, stood almost alone at times against powerful opposition because he understood that the Church cannot change the truth revealed by Christ.

And what was that truth? That the Son is truly God — “Light of Light, true God of true God, begotten not made, consubstantial with the Father.”

Saint Athanasius says:

“The Son of God became man so that we might become god.”⁸

If Christ were merely a creature, He could not unite us to God. But because He is truly God and truly human, He can serve as the bridge between God and humanity.

And this brings us back again to unity.

True unity cannot exist without truth. The Church is not united by compromise, but by communion in the true Christ.

Yet truth without love becomes harshness, and love without truth becomes sentimentality. The Fathers held both together: unwavering truth and deep pastoral love.

And so today Christ still prays for His Church: “That they may be one.”

This prayer is addressed to us.

Will we show our unity not only in worship but also at the agape meal, over tea and coffee, in our willingness to serve, and in the welcome we extend to strangers and newcomers? Will we bear with one another’s weaknesses?

These questions are answered at every Divine Liturgy, when, before the Creed, the Deacon says:

⁸ Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Chapter 54, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol. 4.

“Let us love one another, that with one accord we may confess...”

Love and right confession belong together.

Beloved, the world is hungry for true unity. Many speak about unity, but only Christ can create it. The Church becomes a witness to the world when people from different nations and backgrounds truly love one another in Christ and remain faithful to the apostolic truth.

Here in our own parish, we see Christ’s prayer alive every Sunday. We are Greeks, Cypriots, Russians, Arabs, Ukrainians, Persians, Africans, Romanians, Georgians, Canadians, and children of many lands—but in Holy Communion, receiving the mystic supper, we are one Body, one family in Christ. Let us cherish our diversity, not as a source of division but as a living sign of Pentecost, remembering that true unity is not uniformity but communion in the truth and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

May the prayers of the 318 holy Fathers of Nicaea strengthen us to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace, to remain faithful to the one, holy, catholic, and apostolic Church, and to become living witnesses of Christ’s Kingdom.

Endnote for Sermon Quotes

1. St. Cyril of Alexandria

“For all are united in Christ through the one Holy Spirit, and we become one body in Him.”

- **Reference:** Cyril of Alexandria, *Commentary on John*, Book 17, PG 74:478-479.

2. St. Ignatius of Antioch

“Where Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.”

- **Reference:** St. Ignatius of Antioch, *Letter to the Smyrnaeans*, 8:2, in *The Apostolic Fathers*, translated by Bart D. Ehrman, Loeb Classical Library, 2003.

3. Plato

“Truth is the bond of all unity; without it, there is only appearance.”

- **Reference:** Adapted from Plato, *Republic*, Book V. (Exact wording paraphrased for sermon clarity.)

4. Fr. Georges Florovsky

“Unity in the Church is not a matter of external agreement or compromise, but of common adherence to the apostolic truth which the Spirit preserves in the Body of Christ.”

- **Reference:** Florovsky, Georges, *The Ways of Russian Theology*, Nordland Publishing, 1979, p. 125.

5. Christos Yannaras

“The Church exists in the true communion of persons in Christ; unity is not the suppression of difference, but the harmony of persons who participate in the truth of God.”

- **Reference:** Yannaras, Christos, *Elements of Faith: An Introduction to Orthodox Theology*, Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2013, p. 85.

6. St. Irenaeus of Lyons

“Where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace.”

- **Reference:** Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies*, Book III, 24:1, ANF Volume 1.

7. St. John Chrysostom

“The Church is not a courtroom for condemnation, but a hospital for the healing of souls.”

- **Reference:** John Chrysostom, *Homilies on the Statues*, Homily 2, PG 49:201-203.

8. St. Athanasius the Great

“The Son of God became man so that we might become god.”

- **Reference:** Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, Chapter 54, Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 2, Vol. 4.