



SUNDAY OF THE FATHERS OF THE FIRST COUNCIL JUNE 5

THE GOSPEL READING

John 17:1-13

[Christ's Prayer for Himself and the Apostles]

At that time, Jesus lifted up his eyes to heaven and said, "Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, since you have given him power over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him. And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work which you gave me to do; and now, Father, you glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made.

"I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word. Now they know that everything that you have given me is from you; for I have given them the words which you gave me, and they have received them and know in truth that I came from you; and they have believed that you did send me. I am praying for them; I am not praying for the world but for those whom you have given me, for they are mine; all mine are yours, and yours are mine, and I am glorified in them. And now I am no more in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one. While I was with them, I kept them in your name, which you have given me; I have guarded them, and none of them is lost but the son of perdition, that the scripture might be fulfilled. But now I am coming to you; and these things I speak in the world, that they may have my joy fulfilled in themselves."



THE SERMON

With the Feast of the Fathers of the First Council, we are called to come together in Church to celebrate the precious gift of our theology. We expressly commemorate the Fathers of the Church who met during the First Ecumenical Council in 325 in Nicaea, under the protection of Saint Constantine the Great. The Fathers met and affirmed the divine nature of Christ. They recognized that Christ is of the same essence as the Father. And in this way, a fundamental part of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity was established.

Theology can be looked at as the study of God and His relationship to us. For its part, a Church doctrine is a teaching about God that is accepted by the Church as being true. In contemporary society, it is not always easy to meaningfully connect to the theology and the doctrines of the Church. Their relevance in our daily life and routine is often difficult to establish. We may reasonably ask ourselves what practical advantage can theology offer us. The Gospel reading for the Feast of the Fathers of the First Council can help us to better understand our faith. As a result, we may be able to place the continued relevance of theology in perspective.

In the reading, the Lord is praying. He is communicating to the Father. The Lord is interacting with the Father. As Saint John Chrysostom explains, “our Lord turns from admonition to prayer; thus teaching us in our tribulations to abandon all other things, and flee to God. He lifted up His eyes to heaven to teach us intentness in our prayers: that we should stand with uplifted eyes, not of the body only, but of the mind.” Let us consider what the Son says to the Father. It is the moment just before Jesus is captured. The Lord says it is time for the Son to be glorified, because the Son has completed His mission. It is time to praise the Son with the Father, as it was before the creation of the world.

Immediately afterwards, Christ prays for His disciples. He says to the Father: those you see here, my disciples, they are Yours. The Lord gives back to His Father what His Father gave to Him. This act of giving back is fundamental because it sets out the model for our worship, for our liturgy. We say to the Lord in every liturgy: “We offer to You Your own from Your own.” The presiding bishop or priest exclaims this phrase during the Eucharistic Prayer, which is the most solemn part of the liturgy, where the gifts are consecrated.

It is useful to focus on the basics in order to better understand what all of this means for us today. Our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ is the True High Priest. All of us are called to participate in His priesthood. We are called to participate in His sacrifice, His Crucifixion. We do not offer up our own sacrifice, as was the case in the Jewish faith or in other religions which practiced animal sacrifice. Instead, we offer to Him, to Christ, what He offered to us. Through this prayer of confession of Him, as God and Saviour, we ask, pray and entreat Him to send down the Holy Spirit and transform the wine and bread into His Blood and Body, into the Blood and Body of Christ.

In the Gospel passage, the Lord ends by saying that everything He says is not

meant for His Father, but for His disciples, so that His disciples may feel the joy of the Lord. This joy comes from the presence of the disciples at the crossroads of the innermost aspect of the relationship between the Father and the Son. In the same way, we can also experience the Divine Energy of God, within the great mystery of the Holy Trinity. All of this is part of the apostolic tradition which has been handed down to us, and which we are meant to hand down to future generations. However, in order to properly transmit our faith to our children and grandchildren, it is important to first *understand* it and *experience* it in its fullness. Our own witness and example are the most persuasive means to convey our faith to others, starting with our loved ones.

What practical conclusion stems from all this? Why is our theology so important? Quite simply, our theology allows us to experience God in a direct and personal manner. Our theology enables our salvation. This is what the Fathers of the Church wanted to preserve in the First Ecumenical Council. They wanted to protect and maintain the conduit which connects humanity to God, the path that leads humanity to God. This, in fact, is our ultimate goal, to be in full communion with God, always and forever. Saint Athanasius the Great, who played an important role in the First Ecumenical Council, teaches that God was incarnated and became man in order for humankind to come to God. Christ came to us, so we can find our way to Him.

When we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, our purpose is to enter into the innermost aspect of the relationship between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The human mind cannot fully comprehend this mystery, but it can literally be felt, it can be lived as the *joy of the Lord*, as *joy in the Lord*. Let us open ourselves to the theology of the Church, in order to make better sense of God's presence in our life. As the Apolytikion hymn of the Feast of the Fathers declares, "Supremely blessed are You, O Christ our God. You established the holy Fathers upon the earth as beacons, and through them You have guided us all to the true Faith." Glory be to God!