



## SUNDAY OF THE FATHERS OF THE FIRST COUNCIL

May 28

### 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."*



GREEK ORTHODOX  
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## THE SERMON

On 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 the year 325 AD 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, while being a distinct Person from 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 theology can offer us. The Gospel reading for the Feast of the Fathers of the First Council can help us better understand our faith. As a result, we may be able to place the continued relevance of theology in perspective, understanding the practical implications for our everyday life.

In the reading, the Son is praying. He is communicating to the Father. The Son 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 arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. 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 afterward, Christ prays for His disciples. He says to the Father: those you see here, my disciples, they are Yours. The Son 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 God the Father in every Divine 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 holy gifts (the bread and wine) are consecrated.

It is useful to focus on the basics in order to understand better 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, which means to participate in His sacrifice, His Crucifixion, and His Resurrection. We do not offer our own sacrifice, as was the case in the Jewish faith or other religions that practiced animal sacrifice. Instead, we offer to Him, to

God, what He offered to us. We ask, pray, and entreat our heavenly Father to send down the Holy Spirit and transform the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ, His Son.

In the Gospel passage, the Lord says that His disciples kept His word, that they believed Him. We are His disciples. He says we are His, and He keeps us. He entrusts us to the Father, so we may be one with Him, one Body of Christ. This will result in us receiving His joy — the joy of being one with Him, as He is one with the Father.

In the same way, we can also experience the presence of the Holy Spirit, the Divine Energy of God, within the great mystery of the Holy Trinity. The Father loves the world and sends His only Son so that we might be saved. The Son entrusts us to the Father and sends the Holy Spirit, so we are never alone. In the Holy Spirit, the Son lives in us, and we are one with the Father and with one another.

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. To do so, it is important first to 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 comes 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. If Jesus were not God, of one essence with the Father, He could not unite us to God. He could not send God the Holy Spirit to be with and in us. We could never be divinized — that is, mystically united to God and transformed by Him — if the Lord Jesus were not God.

However, the Fathers affirmed that the Lord Jesus is indeed God the Son. They wanted to protect and maintain that which connects 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 incarnate and became man in order for humankind to participate in His Divinity, that is, to be transformed and made divine by theosis. Christ came to us, so we can find our way to Him.

When we celebrate the Divine Liturgy, our purpose is to enter 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 joy in the Lord. The Father is with us, through the Son, and in the Holy Spirit. We are not alone, and we do not struggle alone. God is with us and gives us His grace to struggle and attain eternal life. 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!