

History of the Catholic Church

The 4th Century: the Church is Legal

Events of the 4th Century

301: Armenia becomes the first state to legalize Christianity

306-337: Constantine becomes Emperor

313: *Edict of Constantine* legalizes Christianity across the Empire

325: Emperor Constantine calls the Council of Nicaea

337: Emperor Constantine is baptized on his death bed

350-400: The Huns attack the Sassanid Empire, Persia

376: The Visigoths appear on the Danube and attack the Roman Empire

378: Battle of Adrianople: Roman army is defeated by the Visigoths (Goths)

378-395: Theodosius I reigns and bans pagan worship making Christianity the official religion of the Empire

381: the First Council of Constantinople

Politics

The 3rd century ended with Emperor Diocletian taking the helm on the Empire and beginning a wide-scale persecution of the Church. Emperor Diocletian's reign is one of the strangest in the Empire. Most emperors preferred to solo rule the empire. Diocletian, conversely, split the Empire into several ruling chunks called the Tetrarchy. Although the idea of a tetrarchy dates back to the time of Alexander the Great, this system of ruling would cause the chaos that begins the 4th century. Diocletian would rule the empire with two co-emperors called caesars who had two assistants called augusti. The two co-emperors are Constantine and Maximinus. Unlike the previous emperors, around 305 Diocletian, realizing that he is too old and infirm to continue to rule the Empire, resigns and gives control of the Empire to Maximinus and Severus beginning a new era of conflict.

Most people assumed that Diocletian would give the title of Caesar to Constantine who had shown himself in battle and became one of the most well-liked leaders of the Empire. It was not to be. Instead, Diocletian, continuing the tetrarchical system gave the title of Caesar to Maximinus and Severus. Severus would take this new title and give the role of Augustus to Constantius and Galerius. Constantius would head west and resolve the conflict on the western side of the Empire, Galerius would head east and resolve those conflicts, Severus would stay in Italy and resolve the conflicts with north Africa, and then Maximinus would resolve the conflicts on the Greek side of the Empire. These men would soon begin a new civil war.

Shortly after peace reigns following the retirement of Diocletian, Constantius died of a serious unknown illness and gave the throne to his son Constantine. Constantine sent a letter to Galerius indicating that his father had died and he now reigns in his stead. Galerius was deeply concerned by this change of leadership. Constantius was always loyal to the Empire and served as the leader of the largest army in the Empire. Constantine was well-liked and very powerful. Too powerful to overcome. Galerius tried to reason and form a treaty with Constantine to protect his rule and the Empire. It was not to be.

Over the next four years the rulers would debate out peace for the Empire. Constantine was quickly building up his reputation and building for himself a powerful empire in the west complete with building projects and invasions to the north. The other emperors were sitting there debating with themselves. Conflict in Italy caused Diocletian to come out of retirement for a council. In this council Constantine was demoted to Augustus, Maximianus was demoted to Augustus, and everyone went their separate ways. Maximianus was furious over the demotion and refused to be called by it. Finally at his breaking point, he began a rebellion against the Empire.

Constantine, already superior in military strength, engaged him. In a dream, Constantine heard God tell him to put the symbol of the Cross on his shields and he would be victorious in battle. He did so. Constantine greatly defeated Maximianus and became the sole ruler of the Roman Empire. With his power fully in place, Diocletian now dead in 311, Constantine takes over the Empire in the same year, 311. He, having been victorious due to the dream and the Cross, has a radically different view of Christianity.

In 313, one of the most pivotal years in the history of Christianity, Emperor Constantine legalizes Christianity in the Roman Empire under the *Edict of Constantine*. From this point until the fall of Rome in 476, Christianity would be considered legal and accepted by the Roman Empire. Constantine accomplished more for the Church than simply legal status. He also gave the Church the Lateran Basilica which would be the home church for Christianity. He funded large projects, mostly his mother Helena's work. He allowed Christians to take active political roles in the governance of the Empire.

With the civil wars over and the Empire having a sole ruler again, the Empire was not at peace. The theological conflicts of the 3rd century entered its pinnacle with Arius about to fight a war within Christianity. With 60% of the Empire backing his beliefs and fully convinced that the only way to prove the legitimacy of his claim, Arius amasses an army and marches against Rome. Constantine, worried about the stability of the Empire, calls together the bishops of the Church in an unprecedented move to resolve these conflicts.

In 325 Emperor Constantine calls a council in the city of Nicaea in Asia Minor, which will be called the 1st Council of Nicaea. Around 200-300 bishops from mostly the eastern part of the Empire along with the officials sent by Constantine debated the issues Arius raised. Constantine wanted a quick settlement to the issue. In a sense it was. Some historians record fist fights in the halls of the council. Although largely dismissed today, Nicholas, bishop of Myra, debated with Arius so ardently that they got in a fist fight with Nicholas decking Arius and ending the dispute.

The Council ended with several major proclamations. Arius was deposed as a heretic and forced to amend his ways, he didn't. The Council ratified the statement of belief for the Christian church which is called the Nicene Creed. This effectively ended the dispute over the Christian belief on the nature of the Son and the Father and their shared relationship.

Constantine continued to rule the Empire until his death. Some historians believe that Constantine was baptized on his death bed. Others are unsure about the religious status of Constantine. Strangely he didn't convert during his life and stayed a semi-pagan. Although he didn't practice the rites and rituals associated with the pagan gods and marked all of his imperial signatures with Christian symbols, his conversion is debated.

After Constantine's death, Christianity grew enormously fast and peace reigned following the Council of Nicaea. Throughout the Empire, however, peace was still a struggle. On the eastern front, the Huns were rising to power and conquered the Sassanid Empire, Persia, which was at war against Rome at the beginning of the 3rd century. On the northern front, the Visigoths were rising to power and causing conflicts on the northern borders of the Empire. Rome was still at war and these wars would not be as successful as in previous eras. For instance in the Visigoth wars of 378, Rome is defeated at the Danube. The same area Rome conquered in the 2nd and 3rd centuries.

Theodosius takes over as Emperor in 378 following all these conflicts and begins to reestablish peace. His main contribution to both the Empire and the Christian Church was the outlawing of pagan worship. Not only is Christianity legalized throughout the Empire due to the *Edict of Constantine* in 313 but now all forms of pagan worship are illegal. Additionally Theodosius makes Christianity the official religion of the Empire establishing the Church for centuries to come. Theodosius would be the last emperor of Rome to rule the entire empire. Following his death, his two sons would rule the Empire, one in the east and the other in the west. The Empire would not be ruled by one emperor again.

The conflicts with Arius were not over. Shortly after beginning his reign, Arianism rose to a new feverous pitch. Hoping to settle the dispute once and for all, Theodosius called the 1st Council of Constantinople. In the grand scheme of the early church, this Council is largely forgotten or ignored. The Council ratified the Council of Nicaea and the Creed that it produced, continued to condemn Arianism, and solidified the teachings of the Church.

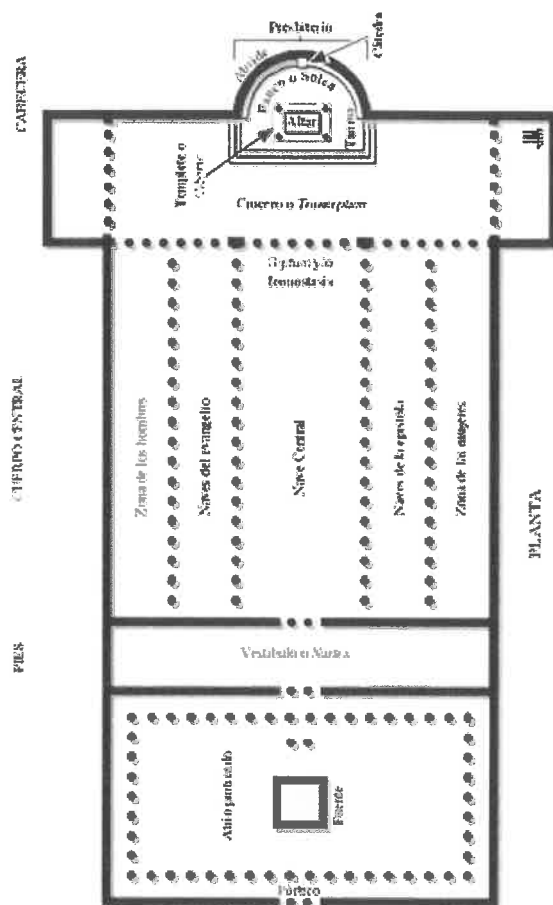
The Church

The church of the 4th century grew at an unprecedented rate. Following the Edict of Constantine in 313, everyone wanted to be Christian. Notice the immense change from the previous centuries. In the 1st and 2nd centuries becoming Christian was a death sentence so the Church carefully guarded the rites and rituals surrounding entrance into the Church. The process opened up in the 3rd century due to the new tolerance by the Roman hierarchy. Now, in the 4th century, no prohibitions or concerns about safety existed. Christianity was legalized. As a simpler form of religion and the new religion of the Emperor and Empire, the Church had thousands of people converting to the faith. What is the Church to do?

The first major development in the Church was to simplify the process of becoming Christian. In previous centuries the process could take several years and involve many steps to ensure the validity of the person's faith. This process was no longer possible nor necessary. The process was shorted to a year and then the season of Lent. Lent was designed to prepare the initiates for the celebration of the Sacraments at Easter. Thus, Lent was a time of preparation for those entering the Church and for those in the Church to pray for the new members and help prepare them.

The second major development involved church structure. In previous centuries the bishop held the exclusive role to church governance and to the celebration of the Sacraments. With church buildings rising up in every possible city and in many cases several in the same city, the church chose to delegate the celebration of the Sacraments to the presbyters. Thus the bishop was the head of the presbyters and a group of churches over which he presided. The structure of the diocese, taken from the administration of the Roman Empire, became the standard system through which the church divided territory and established the hierarchical structure that would become the standard. Presbyters were sent out as the delegates of the bishop to preside over the Sacraments including the Eucharist in the name of the bishop. Presbyters had the role of governing a particular house church and the care of the flock. The bishop usually presided over a city, then cities were grouped into provinces with a metropolitan bishop, then provinces grouped into patriarchates. The 4th century saw not only the rise of the patriarchates but the establishment of them and the conflicts of power. Since the time of Peter and Paul, the churches of Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem held primacy as the sites of the death of Peter and Paul or major sites of their evangelization. These five churches held prestige across the church. The conflicts of the 4th century led to the solidification of their independence and their unity. Rome always held a place of prestige due to it being the site of the death of Peter and Paul. Next in line was Antioch. As internal struggles emerged, these churches would vie amongst themselves for more authority. Rome never lost its authority and prestige. During the Council of Constantinople in 381, the bishops emerged from the council declaring Constantinople the 2nd in authority after Rome bumping Antioch to 3rd place. No one should be amazed by this considering it's the city of the emperor and the center of the Empire during the 4th century. This change in authority will cause strife amongst the church for years to come.

The third major development in Christianity was the formation of the Ecumenical Council. Although this idea comes from the age of the Apostles when Peter called the Church together to discuss the issue of ministry to the Gentiles, many of the elements of these councils will be new. First, the emperor called the council not the church. Most were not concerned by this issue. He was the ruling authority of the Empire, the one who legalized Christianity, and a huge supporter of the Church. Second, all the bishops would come together to vote on the issues and debate them. This would be the first time since the age of the Apostles that all the bishops got together to discuss the faith of the Church. Third, the church will declare its belief as a body of believers. Until this moment, the bishops largely decided the beliefs based on their interpretation of the Scriptures, beliefs of the people, and the teachings of the other bishops. Now we have statements of beliefs. The fourth consequence of the councils was the anathemas. An Anathema is a negative statement that says that if you believe this, then you are out of the church. For instance,



and presbyters.

The fifth development of the church came as a consequence to the legalization of Christianity. With most people converting to the new religion and basic definitions still in progress, many people were inspired to learn and debate the issues plaguing the emerging church. The intellectuals and the elite of the Empire were not the main instigators of debate. Recall that in the 3rd century debated raged in the street as people came to watch and listen to the great thinkers of the times discuss the issues. In response to this surge in the desire to know the beliefs of the church, people would get into brawls in the street over the definitions of the faith such as the divinity of the Son. Similarly, the influence and example of Arius led to many Christians joining him to fight a war for orthodoxy. People didn't simply go to Mass, pray, and move on with their day. The beliefs of the Church were fundamental to the life of each Christian and inspired them to take action on their beliefs.

The Councils

The 4th century saw the beginning of a tradition of defining beliefs that would become the standard for the church. An ecumenical council is the calling together of the bishops of the church to address issues of belief, function, or morals. Councils are presided over by either a patriarch, designate, or the Pope. The early church council were presided over by a member of the council voted on by the council. Generally the issues addressed at a council are voted upon

if you believe that Jesus is not God, you are excommunicated by the Church. Fifth, the church declared heretics and condemned them. Now the Church can officially deal with those who are promoting heresy and deal with them accordingly.

The fourth major development was the buildings used by the church. The 3rd century experienced the beginning of what we call a church. Part of a house designated for the celebration of the Sacraments and a place of worship for the faithful. The expansion of this house church led to rooms for the bishop and presbyters as well as a storage room and a baptistry. With the donation of Constantine of the Lateran Basilica, the new standard for church buildings became the basilica. The basilica is a roman meeting hall designed to hold a large number of people and allow for the exchange of debates or discussion. The building is basically a large rectangle with side chambers, an entrance area, and a place for the emperor, official, or the person giving an oral address. This early church design gave Christians a huge space to congregate and the ability to hear the proclaimed word and the preaching by the bishops

with the majority vote becoming the faith of the church. Most of the councils of the church will give statements of belief some with an anathema or excommunication attached for defying the council's decision.

The Council of Nicaea (325)

The first council presided over by the Church since the Council of Jerusalem in 50 AD. Emperor Constantine called the council to address the issue of Arianism throughout the Empire. Between 200-300 bishops attended the council that lasted one month before making its final conclusions. The major issues were Arianism, the Melitian schism, church structure, and the date of Easter. As early as Pope Sixtus I in 128, the date of Easter was moved to Sunday in the West. The East kept the date of Easter as the 14th of Nisan whichever day that fell. The Melitian schism was a break off group in Egypt that the Council suppressed. The main issue was Arianism. After massive debate regarding the nature of Jesus, the Son of God, to his Father, the council promulgated the Nicene Creed which is the standard statement of belief for the Church. After its promulgation, the Church excommunicated Arius and denounced all his teachings. The last major issue was Church structure. The Council declared that Rome would have primacy over the other patriarchates but that each patriarchate is independent but bound by the same belief structure.

The Council of Constantinople (381)

With new issues emerging and Arianism emerging for a second round, Emperor Theodosius called the Council of Constantinople to address the new issues emerging in Christianity. Again the council reaffirmed the anathemas and condemnations of Arianism and reaffirmed the Creed of Nicaea. Additionally the Council condemned Macedonianism and Apollinarianism and established Constantinople as the 2nd chair in the authority of the patriarchates.

Spirituality

The developments of the 3rd century led to the emergence and flowering of new spiritual movements in the 4th century. While the church is debating issues of theology and practice and people throughout the Empire are watching as these debates peak, a different group is forming out in the hinterlands of each city. In the 3rd century we met St. Anthony of the Desert who left the civilized world to engage the life of the Spirit in the desert and began the first eremitical communities. In the 4th century we meet St. Benedict and St. Scholastica. These twin siblings would hear the call of Jesus to sell everything and follow him. Emerging from a life of riches and status, St. Benedict sold everything and wandered out into the desert leaving his sister in the care of a group of virgins. She will follow after him soon. As he begins his life, more people flock to him based on his example. As more people followed, St. Benedict organized this growing group into a community of hermits or a community of brothers forming the first monastic community. This community would have an abbot as the ruler and follow a basic pattern and rule of life. Unlike the hermit who lived a solitary life, this new group would live a communal life in what we now call the monastic life. St. Benedict would write a rule called the *Rule of St. Benedict* to govern all monastic communities. His sister, St. Scholastica, would follow a few years later and form the women's side of the monastic communities.

Heresies

Arianism

By the turn early 320's, Arius will emerge as one of the strongest powers in the Christian Church. His belief that Jesus is not the Son of God and is not in any way a deity will convince 60% of the Empire. He will continue to promote and encourage his theology even to the point of starting a war with the Christian church to ensure that his teachings are correct. His opponents are just as vocal and persistent in their beliefs. Whereas Arius slogan is "God is one", his opponents will use the slogan "Always the Father, always the Son."

Arianism centers on the belief that God is entirely and completely one. No other gods exist and nothing can break the monarchy of the Father without breaking the 1st Commandment. Therefore Jesus cannot be God since that would create two gods and breaking the oneness of God. Furthermore, if Jesus is the Son of God, then that means there was a moment when the son was not; a moment when the Father created the Son and became a Father. Therefore Jesus cannot be God since he has a beginning and God doesn't have a beginning.

The opponents of Arianism clarify that the Son was always with the Father. The Father eternally begets the Son, not as a moment in time, but as a fact of his being. The very fact of God the Father is that his fatherhood is the process through which the Son becomes the Son. The Son always existed since the beginning of time and will always exist.

Apollinarianism

Apollinarianism rose to the scene in 362 following the promulgation of the Council of Nicaea by his bishop. Although strongly influenced by the Council of Nicaea and desiring to follow its constitutions, he deviated strongly from them and would be condemned by the Council of Constantinople. Apollinarianism taught that the Son existed with the Father from all eternity and therefore the "Word" became flesh and dwelt in a body. But the word did not become fully flesh but housed in this body. His heresy is similar to Docetism in that Jesus didn't become fully human.

Pelagianism

Little is known about the life of Pelagius. Unlike most the other heresies that focus on beliefs, Pelagianism focuses on practice. Pelagius was deeply upset by the apostates that delivered over the holy books and relics to the Romans. He believed that this level of apostasy was unforgivable and those who committed it should be exiled from the Church permanently. His teaching focused on our personal will in attaining our salvation. He felt that we needed to work for our salvation and the good works we do are the means through which we are saved.

The Church rebutted this heresy rather quickly. We are saved through Jesus. Although good works are important and part of the path for our salvation, we have no other means of salvation except through Jesus.

Key Figures

St. Nicholas: St. Nicholas was bishop of Myra. We have very little evidence of his life. He was bishop and imprisoned by Diocletian during the persecutions of the 3rd century. The church remembers him for his remarkable charity. One day he heard that a father was going to sell his daughters into prostitution because he didn't have enough money for their dowry. Inspired by this story, he went and put enough money in the girls' shoes to pay their dowry. St. Nicholas was one of the major key figures at the Council of Nicaea and the prevailing voice that ended Arianism and established the divinity of the Son.

Arius: Although I have mentioned him several times already, now for the conclusion. Arius was from Alexandria where he studied theology and became bishop. Frustrated by the degradation of the monarchy of the Father he began promoting his theology and encouraged a great amount of the Empire to support him including emperors. Eventually the Emperor Constantine called a Council to settle this debate. Arius was condemned a heretic at the Council and forced to renounce his beliefs. He refused and his name was added to the list of excommunicated people called the diptychs. Years later, he debated the bishops convinced he was right. They were partially persuaded, he was given the option to reform some of his beliefs and be readmitted to the Church. As he processed into the church to be recomunicated, he had to use the lavatory. As he sat on the toilet relieving himself, he died. He was never fully reconciled.

St. Athanasius: Athanasius was bishop of Alexandria during the time of Arius. He fought heavily against the Arian heresy and wrote several letters promoting the statements of Nicaea and the faith of the church. Arius prevailed over him deposing Athanasius as bishop and exiling him. Athanasius would be exiled three more times before the controversy ended and finally given his post as bishop of Alexandria. He died at 74 after spending 35 years in office and 15 years in exile.

St. Augustine: One of the most prominent of the Church Fathers and the most prolific writer of the Christian Church at 84 works. He was born in the Roman province of Numidia to a Christian mother and pagan father. He spent the first 30 years of his life wandering the pagan world trying to find truth. He got involved with Manichaeism and other major religious movements. In the midst of his quest he met St. Ambrose who was bishop in Milan. Ambrose and Augustine would debate matters of religion and philosophy leading to the conversion of Augustine. He converted and was almost immediately named the bishop of Hippo. He spent the rest of his life leading his flock and writing. At the end of his life, the north Africa cities would be sacked and he would work to keep his flock from the effects of these marauding forces. St. Augustine is the first church father to write only in Latin starting a new era of church history where the church would speak only Latin.

Art and Music

With the availability of large spaces and the necessity of training people in the faith, Christian art takes a huge turn in the 4th century. Whereas the other centuries focused on persecution and the hope of winning against our aggressors, the 4th century turned to catechesis. The new forms of art would begin depicting the life of Jesus in the churches as a way of teaching the people the life of Jesus and helping them progress in their learning of the faith. Two new images will emerge:

the Last Supper and the Passion of Jesus. The Passion of Jesus, as depicted below, focuses on the events. We are used to the gory imagery of the Crucifixion. This theme will not emerge until the 12th century. The 4th century focuses on the events not the horror of the event. Similarly the Last Supper is the central theme that depicts the way Christians worship God. These images will be common in the churches of the 4th century.



Council of Nicaea 325

1. prohibition of self-castration for clergy
2. establishment of a minimum term for catechumens (persons studying for baptism)
3. prohibition of the presence in the house of a cleric of a younger woman who might bring him under suspicion (the so called *virgines subintroductae*, who practiced Syneisaktism)
4. ordination of a bishop in the presence of at least three provincial bishops^[6] and confirmation by the metropolitan bishop
5. provision for two provincial synods to be held annually
6. confirmation of ancient customs giving jurisdiction over large regions to the bishops of Alexandria, Rome, and Antioch
7. recognition of the honorary rights of the see of Jerusalem
8. provision for agreement with the Novatianists, an early sect
9. elders who had been ordained without sufficient examination were not to be recognized
10. elders who had lapsed but had not been found out were to be deposed
11. mercy was enjoined toward those who had lapsed without compulsion, even though it was recognized that they did not deserve it
12. those who had left the military but later sought out to be restored to their military position were to be excommunicated. Depending on the sincerity of their repentance, they could be readmitted to communion earlier.
13. those who were fulfilling penance could receive communion if they were dying. But if they got well again, they were to finish their penance.
14. catechumens who lapsed were to have three years as hearers before being allowed to become catechumens again
15. bishops, presbyters, and deacons were not to wander into neighboring cities to officiate
16. clergy who refused to return to their home church were to be excommunicated, and the ordinations of those who were ordained by these wandering clergy were to be considered null and void
17. prohibition of usury among the clergy
18. precedence of bishops and presbyters before deacons in receiving the Eucharist (Holy Communion)
19. declaration of the invalidity of baptism by Paulian heretics
20. prohibition of kneeling on Sundays and during the Pentecost (the fifty days commencing on Easter). Standing was the normative posture for prayer at this time, as it still is among the Eastern Christians. Kneeling was considered most appropriate to penitential prayer, as distinct from the festive nature of Eastertide and its remembrance every Sunday. The canon itself was designed only to ensure uniformity of practice at the designated times.

The Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed

I believe in One God,
the Father Almighty,
Maker of Heaven and Earth,
and of all things visible and invisible.

And in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Son of God,
the Only-Begotten, begotten of the Father before all ages;
Light of Light;
True God of True God;
begotten, not made;
of one essence with the Father,
by Whom all things were made;
Who for us men and for our salvation
came down from Heaven,
and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

And He was crucified for us under Pontius Pilate,
and suffered, and was buried.
And the third day He arose again,
according to the Scriptures,
and ascended into Heaven,
and sits at the right hand of the Father;
and He shall come again with glory to judge the living and the dead;
Whose Kingdom shall have no end.

And in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life,
Who proceeds from the Father;
Who with the Father and the Son together is worshipped and glorified;
Who spoke by the prophets.

And in One, Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church.

I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins.
I look for the resurrection of the dead,
and the life of the world to come.

Council of Constantinople 381

The first canon is an important dogmatic condemnation of all shades of Arianism, and also of Macedonianism and [Apollinarianism](#).^[20]

The second canon renewed the Nicene legislation imposing upon the bishops the observance of diocesan and patriarchal limits.^[20]

The third canon reads:

The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honour after the [Bishop of Rome](#) because [Constantinople](#) is [New Rome](#).^{[22][21][20]}

The fourth canon decreed the consecration of [Maximus](#) as [Bishop of Constantinople](#) to be invalid, declaring "that [Maximus] neither was nor is a bishop, nor are they who have been ordained by him in any rank of the clergy".^{[20][23]} This canon was directed not only against Maximus, but also against the Egyptian bishops who had conspired to consecrate him clandestinely at Constantinople, and against any subordinate ecclesiastics that he might have ordained in Egypt.^[24]

The fifth canon might actually have been passed the next year, 382, and is in regard to a *Tome* of the Western bishops, perhaps that of [Pope Damasus I](#).^[20]

The sixth canon might belong to the year 382 as well and was subsequently passed at the [Quinisext Council](#) as canon 95. It limits the ability to accuse bishops of wrongdoing.^[20]

The seventh canon regards procedures for receiving certain heretics into the church.^[20]

Prologue

I S T E N carefully, my child,
to your master's precepts,
and incline the ear of your heart (Prov. 4:20).
Receive willingly and carry out effectively
your loving father's advice,
that by the labor of obedience
you may return to Him
from whom you had departed by the sloth of disobedience.

To you, therefore, my words are now addressed,
whoever you may be,
who are renouncing your own will
to do battle under the Lord Christ, the true King,
and are taking up the strong, bright weapons of obedience.

And first of all,
whatever good work you begin to do,
beg of Him with most earnest prayer to perfect it,
that He who has now deigned to count us among His children
may not at any time be grieved by our evil deeds.
For we must always so serve Him
with the good things He has given us,
that He will never as an angry Father disinherit His children,
nor ever as a dread Lord, provoked by our evil actions,
deliver us to everlasting punishment
as wicked servants who would not follow Him to glory.