

Letter of the Council of Nicaea to the Egyptian Church

Greek text: Hans-Georg Opitz, *Athanasius Werke III*, (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter & Co., 1938), p. 47-51.

English translation: Revised from NPNF² vol. 2, pp. 12-13, by AJW and AGC.

When the Council at Nicaea had reached its conclusions on the very issues it had gathered to address, it sent a letter to Egypt noting the proceedings of the council and explaining its decisions on matters particularly pertaining to the Egyptian church. This especially concerned Melitius, who had come into conflict with his bishop, Peter, over the issue of Christians who had lapsed during the persecutions of Diocletian. Melitius took a much stauncher view against receiving back into fellowship those who had denounced Christ to avoid persecution. He overstepped his authority and began appointing bishops and other clergymen, some in regions outside of his own. The Council of Nicaea addressed this problem and ruled that Melitius would remain in office with limited authority and the bishops he appointed could retain their positions but would likewise have limited authority. Besides the issue of Melitius, the letter addressed the verdict pronounced against Arius, whose heresy had originated in Egypt. Any other determinations were to be reported by Alexander of Alexandria when he returned home. This letter can also be found in [Table 5](#) of our [Ancient Descriptions of the Council of Nicaea](#) documents.

Greek	English
1. Τῇ ἁγίᾳ καὶ μεγάλῃ θεοῦ χάριτι Ἀλεξανδρέων ἐκκλησίᾳ καὶ τοῖς κατ' Αἴγυπτον καὶ Λιβύην καὶ Πεντάπολιν ἀγαπητοῖς ἀδελφοῖς οἱ ἐν Νικαίᾳ συναχθέντες καὶ τὴν μεγάλην καὶ ἁγίαν σύνοδον συγκροτήσαντες ἐπίσκοποι ἐν κυρίῳ χαίρειν.	1. To the great church of the Alexandrians, which is holy by the grace of God, and to our beloved brothers throughout Egypt, Libya, and the Pentapolis. We bishops assembled at Nicaea, constituting the great and holy council, send greetings in the Lord.
2. Ἐπειδὴ τῆς τοῦ θεοῦ χάριτος καὶ τοῦ θεοφιλεστάτου βασιλέως Κωνσταντίνου συναγαγόντος ἡμᾶς ἐκ διαφόρων ἐπαρχιῶν καὶ πόλεων ἡ μεγάλη καὶ ἁγία σύνοδος ἐν Νικαίᾳ συνεκροτήθη, ἐξ ἅπαντος ἀναγκαῖον ἐφάνη παρὰ τῆς ἱερᾶς συνόδου καὶ πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἐπιτεθῆναι γράμματα, ἵν' εἰδέναι ἔχοιτε, τίνα μὲν ἐκινήθη καὶ ἐξητάσθῃ, τίνα δὲ ἔδοξε καὶ ἐκρατύνθῃ.	2. Since by the grace of God a great and holy council has been convened at Nicaea, after our most pious sovereign Constantine summoned us out of various cities and provinces for that purpose, we at the sacred council thought it most necessary to write you a letter in order that you may know what subjects were considered and examined, and what was eventually decided on and decreed.

<p>3. Πρῶτον μὲν οὖν ἀπάντων ἐξητάσθη τὰ κατὰ τὴν ἀσέβειαν καὶ τὴν παρανομίαν Ἀρείου καὶ τῶν σὺν αὐτῷ ἐπὶ παρουσίᾳ τοῦ θεοφιλεστάτου βασιλέως Κωνσταντίνου. καὶ παμπληθὴ ἔδοξεν ἀναθεματισθῆναι τὴν ἀσεβῆ αὐτοῦ δόξαν καὶ τὰ ῥήματα καὶ τὰ ῥήματα καὶ τὰ ὀνόματα τὰ βλάσφημα, οἷς ἐκέχρητο βλασφημῶν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ, λέγων “ἐξ οὐκ ὄντων εἶναι” καὶ “πρὶν γεννηθῆναι μὴ εἶναι” καὶ “εἶναί ποτε ὅτε οὐκ ἦν,” καὶ αὐτεξουσιότητι κακίας καὶ ἀρετῆς δεκτικὸν τὸν υἱὸν τοῦ θεοῦ λέγοντος καὶ κτίσμα ὀνομάζοντος καὶ ποίημα. ἅπαντα ἀνεθεμάτισεν ἡ ἀγία σύνοδος οὐδὲ ὅσον ἀκοῦσαι τῆς ἀσεβοῦς δόξης καὶ τῆς ἀπονοίας καὶ τῶν βλασφημῶν ῥημάτων ἀνασχομένη.</p>	<p>3. In the first place, the impiety and guilt of Arius and his adherents was examined in the presence of our most pious emperor Constantine. We unanimously decided that his impious opinion should be anathematized, along with all the blasphemous expressions he has uttered, namely that “the Son of God came to be out of nothing,” that “there was a time when he was not,” and even that “the Son of God, because he possessed free will, was capable of both evil and good.” They also call him a creature and a work. The holy Council has anathematized all these ideas, barely able to endure it as we listened to such impious opinions (or rather madnesses) and such blasphemous words.</p>
<p>4. Καὶ τὰ μὲν κατ’ ἐκεῖνον οἷον τέλους τετύχηκε, πάντως ἢ ἀκηκόατε ἢ ἀκούσεσθε, ἵνα μὴ δόξωμεν ἐπεμβαίνειν ἀνδρὶ δι’ οἰκείαν ἀμαρτίαν ἄξια τὰ ἐπίχειρα κομισαμένων. Τοσοῦτον δὲ ἴσχυσεν αὐτοῦ ἡ ἀσέβεια, ὥς καὶ παραπολαῦσαι Θεωνᾶν ἀπὸ Μαρμαρικῆς καὶ Σεκοῦνδον ἀπὸ Πτολεμαίδος, τῶν γὰρ αὐτῶν κάκεῖνοι τετυχήκασιν.</p>	<p>4. You must either have been informed of the verdict of our proceedings against him already, or you will soon learn. We will omit relating our actions here, for we would not trample on a man who has already received the punishment which his crime deserved. Yet his deadly error has proved so contagious that it has dragged Theonas of Marmarica and Secundus of Ptolemaïs into destruction, for they have suffered the same condemnation as Arius.</p>
<p>5. Ἀλλ’ ἐπειδὴ ἡ τοῦ θεοῦ χάρις τῆς μὲν κακοδοξίας ἐκεῖνης καὶ τῆς βλασφημίας καὶ τῶν προσώπων τῶν τολμησάντων διάστασιν καὶ διαίρεσιν ποιήσασθαι τοῦ εἰρηνευομένου ἄνωθεν λαοῦ ἡλευθέρωσεν τὴν Αἴγυπτον, ἐλείπετο δὲ τὸ κατὰ τὴν προπέτειαν Μελιτίου καὶ τῶν ὑπ’ αὐτοῦ χειροτονηθέντων· καὶ περὶ τούτου τοῦ μέρους ἃ ἔδοξεν τῇ συνόδῳ ἐμφανίζομεν ὑμῖν, ἀγαπητοὶ ἀδελφοί.</p>	<p>5. But after the grace of God delivered us from those detestable heresies with all their impiety and blasphemy, and from those persons who had dared to cause such conflict and division among a people previously at peace, the rash actions of Meletius and those who had been ordained by him still remained to be dealt with. We now state to you, beloved brothers, what resolution the Council came to on this point.</p>
<p>6. Ἔδοξεν οὖν Μελίτιον μὲν φιланθρωπότερον κινηθείσης τῆς συνόδου—κατὰ γὰρ τὸν ἀκριβῆ λόγον οὐδεμιᾶς συγγνώμης ἄξιος ἦν—μένειν ἐν τῇ ἑαυτοῦ πόλει καὶ μηδεμίαν ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν μήτε</p>	<p>6. The Council was moved with compassion towards Meletius, although strictly speaking he was wholly undeserving of favor, and decreed that he remain in office in his own city but exercise no authority either to ordain or nominate for ordination; and that he</p>

προχειρίζεσθαι μήτε χειροθετεῖν μήτε ἐν χώρα μήτε ἐν πόλει ἐτέρᾳ φαίνεσθαι ταύτης τῆς προφάσεως ἕνεκα, ψιλὸν δὲ τὸ ὄνομα τῆς τιμῆς κεκτῆσθαι,	appear in no other district or city on this pretense, retaining no more than the normal level of authority.
7. Τοὺς δὲ ὑπ' αὐτοῦ κατασταθέντας μυστικωτέρᾳ χειροτονία βεβαιωθέντας κοινωνηθῆναι ἐπὶ τούτοις, ἐφ' ὅτε ἔχειν μὲν αὐτοὺς τὴν τιμὴν καὶ λειτουργεῖν, δευτέρους δὲ εἶναι ἐξάπαντος πάντων τῶν ἐν ἐκάστῃ παροικίᾳ καὶ ἐκκλησίᾳ ἐξεταζομένων τῶν ὑπὸ τὸν τιμιώτατον <ἀδελφὸν> καὶ συλλειτουργὸν ἡμῶν Ἀλέξανδρον προκεχειρισμένων, ὥς τούτοις μὲν μηδεμίαν ἐξουσίαν εἶναι τοὺς ἀρέσκοντας αὐτοῖς προχειρίζεσθαι ἢ ὑποβάλλειν ὀνόματα ἢ ὅλως ποιεῖν τι χωρὶς γνώμης τοῦ τῆς καθολικῆς ἐκκλησίας ἐπισκόπου τῶν ὑπὸ Ἀλέξανδρον.	7. The Council also decided that those who had been appointed by him, after having been confirmed by a more legitimate ordination, should be admitted to communion on these conditions: that they should continue to hold their rank and ministry, but regard themselves as inferior in every respect to all those who have been ordained and established in each place and church by our most-honored fellow-minister, Alexander. Thus they will have no authority to propose or nominate whom they please, or to do anything at all without the agreement of some bishop of the catholic church who is one of Alexander's subordinates.
8. Τοὺς δὲ χάριτι θεοῦ καὶ εὐχαῖς ὑμετέραις ἐν μηδενὶ σχίσματι εὑρεθέντας, ἀλλὰ ἀκκληιδώτους ἐν τῇ καθολικῇ καὶ ἀποστολικῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ ὄντας ἐξουσίαν ἔχειν καὶ προχειρίζεσθαι καὶ ὀνόματα ἐπιλέγεσθαι τῶν ἀξίων τοῦ κλήρου καὶ ὅλως πάντα ποιεῖν κατὰ νόμον καὶ θεσμὸν τὸν ἐκκλησιαστικόν.	8. On the other hand, those who by the grace of God and your prayers have not been found in schism, but have continued blameless in the catholic church, shall have authority to nominate and ordain those who are worthy of the sacred office, and to act in all things according to ecclesiastical law and custom.
9. Εἰ δέ τις συμβαίῃ ἀναπαύσασθαι τῶν ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ, τηνικαῦτα προσαναβαίνειν εἰς τὴν τιμὴν τοῦ τετελευτηκότος τοὺς ἄρτι προσληφθέντας, μόνον εἰ ἄξιοι φαίνονται καὶ ὁ λαὸς αἰροῖτο, συνεπιψηφίζοντος αὐτῷ καὶ ἐπισφραγίζοντος τοῦ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας ἐπισκόπου.	9. When it happens that those holding offices in the church die, then these who have been recently admitted will be advanced to the office of the deceased, provided that they are found worthy, that they are duly elected, and that the bishop of Alexandria ratifies the decision.
10. Τοῦτο δὲ τοῖς μὲν ἄλλοις ἅπασι συνεχωρήθη, ἐπὶ δὲ τοῦ Μελετίου προσώπου οὐκέτι τὰ αὐτὰ ἔδοξε διὰ τὴν ἀνέκαθεν αὐτοῦ ἀταξίαν καὶ διὰ τὸ πρόχειρον καὶ προπετεὲς τῆς γνώμης, ἵνα μηδεμία ἐξουσία ἢ	10. This right is allowed for all the others indeed, but to Meletius personally we by no means grant the same permission, on account of his former disorderly conduct and because of the rashness and fickleness of his character. We want no authority or jurisdiction to be

αὐθεντία αὐτῷ δοθείη, ἀνθρώπῳ δυναμένῳ πάλιν τὰς αὐτὰς ἀταξίας ποιῆσαι.	given to him, for he is a man liable again to create similar disturbances.
11. Ταῦτά ἐστι τὰ ἐξαίρετα καὶ διαφέροντα Αἰγύπτῳ καὶ τῇ ἁγιοτάτῃ Ἀλεξανδρέων ἐκκλησίᾳ· εἰ δέ τι ἄλλο ἐκανονίσθη ἢ ἐδογματίσθη συμπαρόντος τοῦ κυρίου καὶ τιμιωτάτου συλλειτουργοῦ καὶ ἀδελφοῦ ἡμῶν Ἀλεξάνδρου, αὐτὸς παρὼν ἀκριβέστερον ἀνοίσει πρὸς ὑμᾶς ἅτε δὴ καὶ κύριος καὶ κοινωνὸς τῶν γεγενημένων τυγχάνων.	11. These are the things which specifically affect Egypt, and the most holy church of the Alexandrians. If any other canon or ordinance has been established, our Lord and most-honored fellow-minister and brother Alexander, who is present with us, will explain the more specific details when he returns to you, since he has participated in all we have done and has in fact been the leader.
12. Εὐαγγελιζόμεθα δὲ ὑμᾶς καὶ περὶ τῆς συμφωνίας τοῦ ἁγίου πάσχα, ὅτι ὑμετέρας εὐχαῖς κατωρθώθη καὶ τοῦτο τὸ μέρος, ὥστε πάντας τοὺς ἐν τῇ ἐφ᾽ ἀδελφούς τοὺς μετὰ τῶν Ἰουδαίων τὸ πρότερον ποιοῦντας, συμφώνως Ῥωμαίοις καὶ ὑμῖν καὶ πᾶσιν ἡμῖν τοῖς ἐξ ἀρχαίου μεθ' ὑμῶν φυλάσσουσι τὸ πάσχα ἐκ τοῦ δεῦρο ἄγειν.	12. We also have good news for you that we have harmonized our opinions on the subject of the most holy feast of Easter, which has been happily settled through your prayers. All the brothers in the east who have previously kept this festival when the Jews did have agreed with the Romans, with us, and with all of you who have kept Easter with us from the beginning, to follow the same custom we do.
13. Χαίροντες οὖν ἐπὶ τοῖς κατορθώμασιν καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κοινῇ εἰρήνῃ καὶ συμφωνίᾳ καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ πᾶσαν αἵρεσιν ἐκκοπῇ, ἀποδέξασθε μὲν μετὰ μείζονος τιμῆς καὶ πλείονος ἀγάπης τὸν συλλειτουργὸν ἡμῶν, ὑμῶν δὲ ἐπίσκοπον Ἀλέξανδρον τὸν εὐφράναντα ἡμᾶς τῇ παρουσίᾳ καὶ ἐν ταύτῃ τῇ ἡλικίᾳ τοσοῦτον πόνον ὑποστάντα ὑπὲρ τοῦ εἰρήνην γενέσθαι καὶ παρ' ὑμῖν.	13. So rejoice in these results and in the general agreement and peace, as well as in the cleansing of all heresy. Receive our fellow-minister and your bishop Alexander with great honor and abundant love, because he has greatly delighted us by his presence. Even at his advanced age, he has undergone extraordinary efforts in order that peace might be re-established among you.
14. Εὐχεσθε δὲ καὶ περὶ ἡμῶν πάντων, ἵνα τὰ καλῶς ἔχειν δόξαντα ταῦτα βέβαια μένοι διὰ τοῦ παντοκράτορος θεοῦ καὶ διὰ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ ἐν ἁγίῳ πνεύματι, ᾧ ἡ δόξα εἰς τοὺς αἰῶνας τῶν αἰώνων. ἀμήν.	14. Pray on behalf of us all, that the things we decided were appropriate may be maintained without violation through Almighty God, and our Lord Jesus Christ, together with the Holy Spirit, to whom be glory forever. Amen.