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First Council of Nicaea (now Iznik, Turkey), A.D. 325, fresco, c. 1600. (Courtesy of Creative Commons)

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As Christian denominations in Africa join the preparation for the 1,700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea, clerics, theologians and laypeople are embracing the moment as a chance to reshape the continent's spiritual and social future.

The gathering of bishops in Nicaea (now Iznik, in Turkey) in 325 was called by Roman Emperor Constantine to settle factionalism in the early church caused by Arianism, a theology that said Jesus was not divine, that originated in Africa.

"Why it was held is because an African cleric like myself raised issues that needed to be addressed concerning the doctrine of the Holy Trinity," said Fr. Stephen Njire, a Catholic Church historian at Moi University in western Kenya. "That is Arius. Arius came up with a heresy that necessitated the council."

The anniversary, said Njire, "has everything to do with us, since one of us prompted its being, because of our need for clarity of faith," adding that ideas like Arianism, which the council declared a heresy, help the church by forcing it to formulate doctrine and purify its teachings.

In the late spring of 325 at Nicaea, 318 bishops deliberated on controversies on the nature of Christ, both human and divine, and agreed on a standard statement of faith still known today as the Nicene Creed and said across much of the globe each Sunday. The creed defines God as one entity manifested in three persons: Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

The bishops meeting at Nicaea also established a date for Easter and laid the ground for early canon law.

Protestant, Catholic and Orthodox churches around the globe are celebrating the anniversary, with conferences looking afresh at the council and the lessons it can teach on Christian unity amid divisions and a troubled globe. In November, the World Council of Churches will hold a conference in November titled "Towards Nicaea 2025: Exploring the Council's Ecumenical Significance Today," and a global meeting of evangelical Christians is planned for October in Istanbul.

Last year, before he fell ill, Pope Francis told Eastern Orthodox priests visiting the Vatican that he hoped to travel to Turkey to celebrate the creed with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, and in January, Francis expressed his willingness to work on once again finding a common date for Easter. (The two branches of Christianity, separated by the Great Schism of 1054, follow different calendars, with the Eastern

Orthodox keeping to the Julian calendar and marking Easter a week after the West.)

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In Egypt, the Coptic Orthodox Church will host the Sixth World Conference on NICAIA organized by the World Council of Churches. "(This) is more than a gathering of church leaders; it's a chance for Africa to reshape its spiritual and social future," said the Rev. Jackie Makena, a Methodist theologian and adjunct lecturer at St. Paul's University in Limuru, near Nairobi, who stressed that for Africa, Nicaea was about reclaiming its narrative.

"Amid centuries of colonial influence, the conference offers a platform for African voices to lead conversations on decolonizing theology, leadership and social justice, climate justice and racial justice issues," Makena said.

According to the theologian, across the continent, preparations for the conference in Egypt are in full swing.

"Delegations, including different world communions and theological institutions, are hosting public lectures, paper presentations, and engaging in community discussions," she said.

Makena said that the meeting would show Africa's rich theological heritage and come out with new ways of thinking about faith unbound by colonial legacies. "Institutions and leaders are uniting to ensure that Africa's perspective is not only heard but also forms a cornerstone of the broader ecumenical dialogue," she said.

Fr. John Ngige Njoroge, an Orthodox priest who heads theology and interfaith relations at the Africa Conference of Churches, said Nicaea was the first ecumenical council that demonstrated how Christians could unite to find solutions to challenges, including theological disagreements.

"This is very significant for Africa, where today the propagation of misleading theologies is a threat to Christian unity and human dignity," said Njoroge.

Makena, the Methodist theologian, hopes the anniversary celebration results in a revitalized, inclusive church that bridges divides, whether they be theological, racial or generational. "As Africa plays a pivotal role in this conversation, the hope is that its renewed perspective will inspire unity in diversity," she said.