

(4) The character of ministerial life

Most of the Nicene canons are occupied with this aspect of life. The call to a holy life and the demonstration of same are seen to be some of the chief concerns of the conciliar body. Canonical impoundments tended to make the lives of the servants the lives of the church.

It may not be immediately apparent but Nicaea set a pattern in which the church as a body politic was superior to its individual members. The policy of the church as decided in the council would become the rule of the conscience of the individual priest and believer, etc. Church authority would supersede personal judgment in matters where the Scripture did not speak. Some of this is a necessary development but the view was to see the church as the determinate body and this could only result in a location of power in the structure that would make it a harbor for ambitious and politically motivated persons.

b. Constantinople -381

In our present discussion, two canons from Constantinople impress us as being the most interesting and imperative:

Canon II: The bishops are not to go beyond their dioceses lying outside of their bounds, nor bring confusion on the churches; but let the Bishop of Alexandria, according to the canons, alone administer the affairs of Egypt; and let the bishops of the East manage the east alone, the privileges of the church in Antioch, which are mentioned in the canons of Nice, being preserved; and let the bishops of the Asian diocese administer the Asian affairs only; and the Pontic bishops only Pontic matters and the Thracian bishops only Thracian matters.

It seems obvious that this is not an attempt to list all the bishoprics but to inform every bishop that he should mind his own business. However, it is also obvious that in one's territory a given bishop was just about the last word.

Canon III: The Bishop of Constantinople, however, shall have the prerogative of honor after the Bishop of Rome; because Constantinople is the new Rome...

And in this canon it appears that an order of honor was being certified...the honor did not allow the bishop to roam into other fields but it did indicate who should eat first in the cafeteria line! An overall hierarchy is denied in these findings but a rather tightly structured provincial church is seen and that body has considerable authority in its sphere.