



Reassessing the Origins of Christian Healthcare on the Eve of Nicaea's 1700th Anniversary

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Summary

On the eve of the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea (325 AD), this paper re-examines the widespread claim that the council instituted hospitals (xenodochia) throughout the Christian world. Through a critical analysis of the sources, it shows that this belief rests on later, spurious pseudo-canon transmitted via Arabic and Syriac traditions rather than on the authentic Nicene canons.

The paper also considers the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410 AD), concluding that, despite its historical importance, it had no normative influence on Western Christian hospitality.

The study argues that Christian healthcare institutions in the Latin West emerged independently, shaped by local ecclesial, monastic, and charitable traditions.

Introduction

The historical development of hospital institutions remains a valuable field of inquiry [1].

The 1700th anniversary of the First Council of Nicaea (325 AD) (Fig. 1) offers a timely opportunity to re-examine some widespread yet historically unfounded assumptions about the origins of Christian hospitality.

One particularly persistent claim is that the Council of Nicaea formally established the obligation to found hospitals (*xenodochia*) in every inhabited area of the empire. This reassessment gains further relevance in light of Pope Leo XIV's recent visit (November 2025) to Turkey to commemorate the anniversary of the Council. This paper also considers the Council of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (410 AD) (Fig. 2) – a genuine source often invoked in this debate – and examines why it too cannot serve as a normative basis for the emergence of Western hospitality institutions.

The context

The link between “need” and “hospitality” is a product of Christianity. After the fall of the Roman Empire, illness was seen as both divine punishment and a path to redemption, reflecting human weakness and the promise of spiritual growth through suffering.

Humanity was viewed as “infirm”, afflicted by a common weakness, members of a society unable to exert control over its own environment.

Indeed, charity and care were essential aspects of living according to the Gospel, as Saint Augustine affirmed: if the body is the instrument of the soul, it should be cared for. Illness, understood as a visible sign of sin, required spiritual intervention through the works of mercy.

Matthew (25:31-46) lists the corporal works of mercy – among which feeding the hungry, visiting the sick.

Fig. 1. A fresco depicting the First Council of Nicaea at the Vatican's Sistine Salon (public domain - Wikipedia commons).



Fig. 2. Ruined palace at Ctesiphon (public domain - Wikipedia commons).



The link between the works of mercy and the concept of hospitality is clearly illustrated in the Deed of Foundation of the Roman Hospital of Santo Spirito in Sassia, signed by Pope Innocent III in 1204: the friars had the special obligation to welcome and care for the sick and the poor, with special attention to women and children.

This trend peaked with the first Jubilee Year (1300), when crowds of pilgrims sought both spiritual salvation and physical healing in the most important sanctuaries. As a result, major pilgrimage routes were established, and many hospitality centres were built to practice the works of mercy.

The birth of hospitality

The earliest evidence of nosocomial structures or *xenodochia* (housing for the stranger) in Italy traditionally date back to the 4th century AD [1].

Many sources – including non-specialist ones – erroneously attribute the creation of hospitals to the Council of Nicaea, claiming that “the Council of Nicaea established that every inhabited centre should have a place designated for reception”. However, only one academic work – written in Italian and therefore largely overlooked – challenges this long-held belief [2].

In a recent master’s thesis – written in Dutch and accessible only online to a limited audience – one of the present co-authors revisits the issue and emphasizes the need to refine our historical understanding [3].

This latter research focuses on the economic aspects of late antique Christian sites (5–early 7 cent.) in the Eastern Roman Empire, starting with Qal’at Sem’an, the shrine of Simeon Stylites the Elder, about 30 km northwest of Aleppo, in the former province of Syria Prima, within the Antiochene territory. The large scale of both the buildings and the open courtyards suggest that the site was designed to accommodate considerable numbers of visitors [3].

One of its most significant facilities for visitors to the sacred place was the *xenodocheion* – a guesthouse offering free lodging and meals.

The presence of this evangelical recommendation is traditionally traced back to the Council of Nicaea in 325 [4].

Among the various authors who reported this data, Michele Voltaggio stated that *xenodocheia* were already a ‘well-established fact’ in the first quarter of the 4th century, citing as a proof the alleged 75th canon of the Council of Nicaea, of which he also gave a translation [5]: “*The building for [the care of] pilgrims, the poor and the sick, which are usually called xenodochia and hospitia, will be distinct in each city. The bishop will choose, among the monks living in the desert, somebody who will be stranger, coming from a far-off country, and far away from his family, who will have good reference about himself and who will not be sufficient, in order that they will be enough for any expenses he will raise them at any time, through the deacons from the believers*”.

However, as the author of the master’s thesis demonstrates,

this cannot be an authentic canon of the Council of 325, as only 20 canons were actually promulgated. For his translation, Voltaggio based himself on the text that can be found in the second part of the *Sacrorum conciliorum nova et amplissima collectio* compiled by J. D. Mansi, which is a “*nova ex arabico versione*” of the “Magni Concilii Nicaeni: Canones LXXXIV” that was compiled by Abraham Ecchellensis [4].

As the description already indicates, this is a Latin translation of an Arabic version of the so-called 84 canons of the Council of Nicaea.

Then, Voltaggio’s Latin translation dates from 1645 and is the translation of a series of Arabic texts, since different versions have been used – versions that are often not direct translations but rather recensions [6]. However, another Latin translation of these Arabic texts, which was made in 1578 by Francesco Torrès, is also included in the work of J. D. Mansi [4, 7].

The original Arabic texts date back indirectly to an early 5th-century Syriac original that some, including A. Vööbus, attribute to Maruta, bishop of Maipherqat in the early 5th century [8]. These are not the canons but “pseudo-canons” attributed to Nicaea but originating in the context of a synod, held in 410 in the Sassanid empire at Ctesiphon and are probably based on existing ecclesiastical legislative texts.

The translation of the Syriac version reads as follows [7]: “*It is the will of the general synod that xenodocheia shall be [established] in all towns. The bishop shall elect a man from the rank of monks who is far from his home country and family, and of whom there is good testimony - he shall be an 'aksenadakra (guest master). Beds and mattresses and other items which are required for the needs of the sick and needy shall be made*”.

Contrary to the initial dating of M. Voltaggio, it is generally held that the *xenodochia* did not emerge before the middle of the 4th century. The 4th and 5th centuries are regarded as a formative period, while the 6th and early 7th centuries mark its coming of age, managed by the monks under the guidance of the bishop, and financed mainly with funds from the Church, possibly integrated by the religious community.

The Case of Ctesiphon

The Synod of Ctesiphon, held in 410 AD within the Sassanid Empire, marks an important moment in the institutional development of the Church of the East. It sought to regularize its ecclesiastical hierarchy and establish doctrinal norms.

While the Synod of Ctesiphon is an authentic and significant ecclesiastical event, it must be understood in its proper geopolitical and ecclesial context. It addressed the needs of Christian communities under Persian rule and was not intended as a universal or ecumenical council. There is no historical evidence to suggest that its canons were ever received, transmitted, or applied in the Latin West.

As such, even if the Ctesiphon synod promoted

xenodochia, this cannot be taken as the foundation for Western Christian hospitality. The lack of transmission pathways, the absence of Latin references, and the different political-religious environment all support the conclusion that Western hospitality structures developed independently.

Conclusion

A careful and critical reading of the sources leads to three main conclusions:

1. The Council of Nicaea did not institute *xenodochia* or hospital care. Claims to the contrary rely on spurious, Arabic-transmitted canons that date to centuries later and have no authority in the original conciliar tradition.
2. The Synod of Ctesiphon (410 AD), while authentic, belongs to the Eastern Church under Persian rule and has no normative value for Western ecclesiastical or charitable practices. There is no evidence of its canons being known or applied in Italy or the Latin West.
3. The emergence of Christian hospitality in Italy must be understood as an autonomous development, shaped by local traditions, monastic spirituality, and episcopal leadership.

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Author's contribution

DL: conceived the study; DL and FB: designed the study; DL, FB, RD and MM drafted the manuscript, performed a search of the literature, revised the manuscript; DL and FB: methodology; FB and RD: investigation and data curation; DL, FB, RD and MM: review; FB, DL, RD and MM: editing.

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