

Our Lord Jesus Christ, consubstantial with the Father, true God and true man

Last month we spoke of the *Doctrinal Commentary* of the Holy See from 1998, with its overview of doctrines Catholics must believe and hold. Its first category is doctrines that must be absolutely believed with divine faith, because they're infallibly taught by the Church as being divinely revealed.

To obstinately doubt or deny even one such teaching, we recall from last time, is heresy, incurring automatic excommunication. (Canon 1364) The Church inflicts these penalties not in anger but in love – as a medicine, a stern warning that by these very grave sins, a person has already excluded *themselves* from the full union of faith or charity, and placed their eternal salvation in particular danger. (We should note it's not for private individuals to say that some person is excommunicated; and mitigating circumstances can prevent an automatic excommunication being incurred – for example, unawareness of the penalty, or any factor diminishing full responsibility. (Canon 1324) Excommunications can of course be lifted, for someone truly repentant; someone seeking this should approach a priest in confession.)

The *Doctrinal Commentary* goes on to give a few instances of these doctrines, the denial of which is heresy. And first it names 'the articles of faith of the Creed', an obvious body of infallible dogmas. The Creed we profess every Sunday comes from the first two Ecumenical Councils: the First Council of Nicaea in 325 and the First Council of Constantinople in 381.

With the new translation of the Mass, instead of saying that Christ is '*of one Being* with the Father', we now say '*consubstantial* with the Father'. Some people thought, 'That's too hard to understand'. Well, it's good for our humility to be reminded that God *is* infinitely beyond our comprehension. But it also reminds us of the history of the Council of Nicaea in 325, called to resolve the Arian controversy. Arius, a priest of Alexandria, taught that Christ wasn't co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, but was a lesser being: the first among created beings, but a created being nonetheless – thus, not truly God.

The key term ruling out Arianism, crucial in the whole Nicene Creed, is the Greek 'homoousios' – in Latin 'consubstantial'. Our translation *consubstantial* reminds us of the battle over this one pivotal word. After the Council many Bishops, backed by the newly-Christian Roman Emperors, wanted to compromise by replacing 'homoousios' with 'homo*o*i-ousios'. Rather than saying Christ is of the *same* substance with the Father, that changes it to 'of *like* substance'. The Greek terms famously differ by just one letter – one 'iota' [i]. But that one iota makes all the difference in the world: is Christ truly God with the Father, or is he only 'like' God the Father?

In those times, as St Jerome said, 'the whole world groaned and was amazed to find itself Arian'. The great champion of the Faith, and of the *homoousios*, in the turbulent decades after the Council was St Athanasius, the patriarch of Alexandria. *Athanasius contra mundum*, it was said – 'Athanasius against the world' – because it almost seemed like he was standing alone, when 'in the Arian hurricane, Sees more than can be numbered [bent] before its fury' (St John Henry Newman); until in the end the whole Church swung back to where Athanasius had stood firm. So always profess that one word 'consubstantial' with the memory of this great battle for the doctrine of Christ's true divinity.

One other point about the Creed – everyone as one body, not just the priest, is meant to bow profoundly (*Roman Missal* p. 562; GIRM 275) at the words: ‘and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary, and became man’. How can we not bow in humility and awe as we profess the Incarnation – the infinite God actually becoming one of us? Even if others are neglecting to bow, you at least should humbly do the right thing as the liturgical books prescribe, and show due honour to this incredible mystery.

The *Doctrinal Commentary* gives as the next example of infallible truths of faith ‘the various Christological dogmas’, referencing the Fourth Ecumenical Council, the Council of Chalcedon in 451. In the 300s the great debates had been over the Trinity and Christ’s relationship to the Father. In the 400s, the focus turned to the Incarnation, and how the divine and human in Christ should be spoken of.

‘The Catholic faith was placed in a succession of perils, and rocked to and fro like a vessel at sea...The series of ecclesiastical decisions...alternate between the one and the other side of the theological dogma especially in question, as if fashioning it into shape by opposite strokes... Any one false step would have thrown the whole theory of the doctrine into irretrievable confusion; but it was as if some one individual and perspicacious intellect, to speak humanly, ruled the theological discussion from first to last.’ (St John Henry Newman)

The Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus in 431 had defined that Mary is truly the Mother of God. This was to rule out the Nestorian heresy, which ‘regarded Christ as a human person joined to the divine person of God’s Son’. (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* 466) Calling Mary ‘Mother of God’ reaffirms that God the Son and Jesus are the *one same person* (not two distinct persons). But the debate then swung to the other extreme, where the Monophysite heresy so emphasised Christ’s unity as to say he had only one *nature*, and that ‘the human nature had ceased to exist as such in Christ when the divine person of God’s Son assumed it’. (*Catechism* 467) This means Jesus would not truly share human nature with us.

In 449, another council met at Ephesus – but actually made rulings in support of the heresy. Only one thing stood in the way of the gates of hell prevailing: the Pope, St Leo the Great, who denounced the council as a ‘robber council’. So a further Council was called at Chalcedon, largest of the ancient Councils. When Pope Leo’s letter explaining the true doctrine was read out, the Bishops exclaimed, ‘Peter has spoken through Leo’.

Chalcedon went on to give the classic definition of Christological faith: ‘One and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; “like us in all things but sin”. He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the virgin Mary, the Mother of God.’ (DS 301)

Note how in defining the identity of Jesus, the Council includes Mary, because it’s through her that he’s truly human, and truly connected to the rest of the human race. So one divine person, having two complete natures, divine and human; divinity and humanity each keeping their full identity, yet fully together in the unity of one person: the foundation of our own salvation and our union with God.