

THE FILIOQUE: TRUTH OR TRIVIA?

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Not uncommon is the opinion that the *filioque*, and the controversy surrounding it, is a piece of medieval theological trivia. Individuals who hold this opinion are astonished at the attention given to the matter by traditional Orthodox. Nothing seems so incredible to them as the fact that a single word (*filioque*) could have been a major cause in the rupture of Christendom. Indeed, they look past theology to politics, economics, culture, and human pride to explain the division. While one may well agree that the falling away of the Roman Patriarchate is not attributable solely to the *filioque*, yet the part it played in the papal apostasy must not be underestimated.

What does the addition of the *filioque* ("and the Son") to the Nicene Creed mean? Why is it so important to the history of the Church and Christian theology? Let us examine it from several points of view.

THEOLOGY

The classical teaching of the Scriptures and the Fathers is that the Trinity possesses "one cause" (*monarchia*): God the Father. He is the single "source" (*pege*) and "origin" (*aitia*) and principle (*arche*) of the Son and the Spirit. The Son is eternally "begotten" (for want of a better word) from the Father, and the Holy Spirit eternally "proceeds" (for want of a better word) from the Father. In other terms, the persons of the Trinity are distinguished by the properties of "causation" (the Father), "generation" (the Son) and "procession" (the Holy Spirit). Without these identifying properties, there would be nothing to separate them, and the three-in-one God would vanish. These properties mark their separate Personalities.

- a) The *filioque* sets up two "causes" in the Trinity, the Father and the Son; or the Father and the Son are together the one "cause" of the Spirit. In either case, the "monarchy" of the Father is abolished.
- b) If the Son is also the "cause" of the Spirit, He shares in the identity or Personality (*hypostasis*) of the Father. The difference between them is lost and the error of Sabellius is revived.¹
- c) The *filioque* negates the equality of the Persons because the Father and Son share in a property ("causation") which the Spirit does not. In fact, the Son becomes superior to the Father and the Spirit. The Father has only His compromised property of "causation," the Spirit is limited to the property of "procession," but the Son *adds* to His property of generation the property of "causation."

ECONOMY

When the Scriptures and Fathers speak of the coming of the Spirit "through the Son" or that the Spirit is "sent" by the Son, this relationship refers to the divine Economy, that is, the deployment of the Persons in time. Their missions for the salvation of the world, according to the Plan of God (*oikonomia Theou*). Therefore, when some early Fathers spoke of the Spirit

proceeding from the Father and the Son, they were speaking of the Spirit's mission in the world, and not of His "mode of being" (*tropos hyparxeos*). In their writings, they made no clear distinction between the Trinity in eternity and the Trinity in time ("the oeconomic Trinity"). In any case, these Fathers seemed little concerned with the Trinity outside His relationship to man and the universe.

ECCLESIOLOGYⁱⁱ

The change of the Creed on the authority of one Bishop, Pope Leo IX in 1043, had enormous ecclesiological implications. No Pope before him, no matter how great his power or arrogance, dared to alter the Creed. How, then, did Leo presume to order the addition of the *filioque* to the Creed in its recitation during the liturgical offices of the Church? Simply because the Bishops of Rome had, for several centuries before Leo, begun to revise the Christian ecclesiology. The authority of the Pope was now greater than the authority of a Council of the whole Church. He was *over* the Church, bearing universal jurisdiction and power. He was now "the vicar of Christ," "the successor to St. Peter," the "head of the Church and the world," "the Bishop of Bishops."

Traditionally, each Bishop and his flock constituted the Church in a particular place. The visible unity of the Church was found in the unity of the episcopate (St. Cyprian of Carthage) and her invisible unity in a common faith, a common mind, a common law forged by the Holy Spirit. The Bishop, then, represented his people at the gathering of Bishops (council or synod). Their decisions were guided by that same Spirit. Again, the Universal Church reflected the unity—in—multiplicity of the Trinity. Each Bishop was equal to every other, all Bishops and their Churches forming "the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church", even as the Three Persons in the Trinity, co—equal in every way, are but one God. But the Pope, as master of the Church, denies not only the equality of Bishops, but, similarly, the equality of the divine persons. Finally, if the Pope is the Bishop of the Catholic Church, then the local Churches lose their integrity and are no longer catholic in themselves, but become *parts* in the organism of the single Body of the Church. In a word, a new theology leads to a new ecclesiology.

EPISTEMOLOGYⁱⁱⁱ

The *filioque* is the result of philosophical speculation – principally that of Augustine of Hippo (380-430) – and not of apostolic theology. The knowledge of God, however, is revealed; it is not the product of logic, no matter how cogent. The truth concerning the Trinity comes by Holy Tradition and is assimilated by the individual through the Grace of the Church. As St. Photius said, one is "initiated" into such knowledge (*gnosis*). This "initiation" (*mystagogia*) begins with baptism and is increased with our perfection in the Spirit. Outside the Church, outside of Christ, there is no such condition for divine knowledge. The *filioque*, then, is a sign that those who believe it and advocate it for others either were not initiated or have surrendered the privilege.

Roman Catholics and Protestants insist that the *filioque* is only an explanation of the clause – "I believe...in the Holy Spirit, the Giver of Life, Who proceeds from the Father". But from whom did they obtain permission to give such an explanation and to add it to the Creed? From where did they gain a wisdom greater than the collected Spirit-inspired wisdom of an Ecumenical Council? In truth, their argument rests on the idea of "doctrinal development" (with which they have suffused the Scriptures and the Fathers and, in the case of Roman Catholics, used to bolster

the authority of the Pope). They teach what was never taught before, that the Christian Faith changes, often to accommodate contemporary standards. Interestingly, neither the word so dear to Christians, *Theotokos*, nor some formula concerning the two natures and wills in Christ were added to the Creed by subsequent Councils of the Church. Only in the eleventh century was the *filioque* finally appended to the Creed, the consequence of the Roman bishop's losing the true "mystagogy," the consequence of the West's adopting the metaphysical principles of Greek philosophy.

FINAL COMMENTS

The defense of traditional theology and the rejection of the *filioque* – truth or trivia? Was this controversy in behalf of our salvation or a plaything for ivory-tower theologians? Careful examination of the issue will lead the serious student to only one answer. If it is true what the German historian, Harnack, said in describing the Fourth century Arian controversy, that the fate of the world hung on a single Greek letter, *iota*^{iv}, it is no less true that the fate of the world hung on a single Latin word, *filioque*.

Footnotes:

- ⁱ This third century heretic taught that the one God *appeared* in three forms. The "three persons" were really "three masks" hiding one Person. Masks were used in this way in the Roman theatre.
- ⁱⁱ Ecclesiology refers to the doctrine of the Church (*ecclesia*), her nature and structure.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Epistemology here refers to spiritual knowledge and discernment.
- ^{iv} Harnack's reference is to the Orthodox advocacy of the word *homoousios* (the Son is of the same essence as the Father) while the Arians employed *homoiousios* (the Son is of like essence with the Father.)