

Defending the church's truth claims

8. The various creeds of the churches

When he converted to Christianity the Emperor Constantine found that there was a variety of understandings of the nature of reality knocking around in the churches in his empire. He lost no time in banging the heads of the disputatious church leaders together and getting them to agree a statement of faith at Nicaea.

The First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea 325 CE declared belief in God and (in Greek, as translated in the first prayer-book of Edward VI,) "in one Lorde Jesu Christ, the only begotten sonne of GOD, begotten of his father before all worldes, God of GOD, light of light, very God of very God, begotten, not made, beeying of one substauce [homoousios] with the father; through whom all thinges were made, who for us men, and for our saluation, came doune from heauen, was incarnate by the holy Ghoste, of the Virgin Mary and was made manne...." A mighty incantation. It declared further (English translation in Rowan Williams, *Arius*, 2nd Ed.SCM Press 2001 p.278), "As for those who say, 'there was when he was not', or 'he did not exist before he was begotten', or 'he came into being out of non-existence', or who fantasize that the Son of God is [made] from some other hupostasis or ousia, or that he is created or mutable or changeable, such people the catholic and apostolic church anathematizes". (If those were the questions, are we sure we now fully understand the answer?)

That statement turned out to be inadequate to prevent all further dispute about the exact 'it must have beens' relating to Jesus, and a hundred years later a further council was called at Ephesus.

The Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus was held in 431 CE. Nestorius had become Bishop of Constantinople in 428. He was convinced that it must have been the case that (put crudely in English) Jesus was a human person joined to the divine person of God's Son. As it turned out, Nestorius was quite wrong. The Ecumenical Council of Ephesus declared "that the Word, uniting to himself in his person the flesh animated by a rational soul, became man". It further declared Mary to be (according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* in English) "Mother of God not that the nature of the Word or his divinity received the beginning of its existence from the holy Virgin, but that, since the holy body, animated by a rational soul, which the Word of God united to himself according to the hupostasis, was born from her, the Word is said to be born according to the flesh".

But still there was room for dispute and twenty years later the bishops met once again this time at Chalcedon to sort matters out.

The Fourth Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon was held in 451 CE. The Monophysites were convinced that it must have been the case that (put crudely in English) the human nature of Jesus had ceased to exist as such in him when the

divine person of God's Son assumed it. The Council of Chalcedon declared: "Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess 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..... We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one prosopon [person] and one hypostasis".

But still not everyone could quite agree on what the experience of Jesus meant, even in terms of Greek philosophy (which all still shared), and eighty years later yet another council was called at Constantinople.

The Fifth Ecumenical Council of Constantinople 553 CE declared "there is but one hypostasis [person] which is our Lord Jesus Christ, one of the Trinity"..."He who was crucified in the flesh, our Lord Jesus Christ, is true God, Lord of glory, and one of the Holy Trinity."

As to what we think of today as biology, two councils (which were not ecumenical councils) had new material to add. The Council of the Lateran 649 CE declared on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church that Jesus was conceived "by the Holy Spirit without human seed". [Augustine taught that original sin was transmitted from 'Adam' through human seed]. The Council of Friuli 796 CE declared, "He is naturally Son of the Father as to his divinity and naturally son of his mother as to his humanity, but properly Son of the Father in both natures."

There was then a long pause for thought until in 1854 Pope Pius IX proclaimed that the mother of Jesus also had an unusual conception. "The most Blessed Virgin Mary was, from the first moment of her conception, by a singular grace and privilege of almighty God and by virtue of the merits of Jesus Christ, Saviour of the human race, preserved immune from all stain of original sin".

There the Roman Catholic church rested for a hundred years until in 1950 Pope Pius XII proclaimed that Jesus' mother had had a privileged early resurrection: "Finally the Immaculate Virgin, preserved free from all stain of original sin, when the course of her earthly life was finished, was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory, and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, so that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son, the Lord of lords and conqueror of sin and death".

On 21 November 1964 Vatican II declared (Lumen gentium 57) that Jesus's birth "did not diminish his mother's virginal integrity, but sanctified it" and (LG 59) the "union of the mother and the Son in the work of salvation is made manifest from

the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death". (Quotations from Geoffrey Chapman *Catechism of the Catholic Church* already cited).

The different understandings of underlying reality. That being the package for which Roman Catholics sign up, it remains to point out that other churches claim that salvation is better assured if you accept significantly different packages. The Reformation was not the first indication that unity might unravel. Orthodox readers will note that, after a dispute about the matter which had been running since the eighth century, the Roman Catholic church finally parted company with the true faith (as the Orthodox see it) at the Council of Florence held in 1438 CE when it declared its belief that the Spirit 'proceeds' from the Son as well as from the Father (the filioque). The belief of Anglican readers includes the filioque, but, as to Christmas, stops short at the time of the Reformation. The belief of most other churches with Protestant roots also stops before the changes in the position of the mother of Jesus.

Defending the church's truth claims.. "The union of the mother and the Son in the work of Salvation is made manifest from the time of Christ's virginal conception up to his death" is on the face of it the most important ecumenical statement about the mechanics of salvation made by any Christian church in the last hundred years, possibly in the last thousand years. A plain man would have expected it to bring all inter-church 'talks' about visible organic unity to an abrupt halt while experts puzzled over the question whether it could possibly mean what it appears to say, and preachers held their breath until the implications were worked out. Two saviours? working on the job together? all along? Can there have been a mistranslation from the Latin? How does the sentence resonate in terms of ousia, hypostasis and prosopon? Is the original crack in monotheism being widened to accommodate a fourth Person? "Union of the mother and the Son in the work of Salvation": imagine the uproar in the streets of Alexandria if the Bishop of Rome had tried that one on in the first quarter of the fourth century CE. Crowds, banners, chanting: "Rome - Out - Out Out Out"; local church councils hastily convened to denounce the novelty as heretical; counter-councils gathered to affirm that the doctrine was no novelty, but had always been implicit in the former doctrine, nay, in the New Testament itself, waiting these many years to be made 'manifest'. But in the streets around Lambeth Palace there was a silence. Forty years on 'talks' rumble on. It is difficult to know quite what to make of this; or whether it will in the end prove to be easier to defend the new doctrine than the silence about it.

Unity and the small print. As we glimpsed in Part 1, people in pews everywhere are beginning to get restive, because the doctrinal material they are required to repeat is, as it seems to them, so unintelligible, so somehow irrelevant, so impossible to talk convincingly about to people outside. Church leaders convinced that God is calling them to visible organic institutional unity seldom mention it, but to a plain man it is obvious that there are today several significantly different Christian faiths on offer, not one single one. It is extraordinary that church leaders have for so long got away with not making this clear. The illusion of a single faith is preserved in various English traditions by using such phrases as 'the Faith', 'the faith once delivered to our fathers', 'our traditional belief' and so on. Don't you believe it.

Always remember to check the small print. It may help to have done that when we get to telling the truth about our faith in Part 15.

In Part 9, we come to the nub of the matter, how does all this tie in with the good news that Peter and Paul preached all those years ago when the Jesus phenomenon was fresh in everybody's mind?