

Consubstantial

Several years ago church-going Catholics experienced the challenge of adapting to a new translation of the Mass. After approximately fifty years of reciting the same words we were compelled to learn a new way of responding and praying.

Perhaps the most noticeable word change came in the midst of the Creed with the reversion to a very ancient word in our tradition to describe the relation of Jesus Christ to the Heavenly Father, “*consubstantial*.” This word roughly translates “*of the same substance*.” Whereas we once proclaimed that Jesus Christ is “*one in being with*” the Father, now we say that he is “*consubstantial*,” that is “*of the same substance*.”

The technical word “consubstantial” is a bit of a stumbling block to understanding. And, even when translated, it seems strange to the modern ear. We tend to think of “substances” in the terms of modern chemistry and/or with respect to liquids or pastes or powders we encounter in our dealings with the material world. A “substance” of some sort may be exuding from a person’s body, but we would not identify them with it.

The word “consubstantial” comes out of the 4th century struggles of the Church to contend with a variety of heresies about the identity of Jesus Christ and at a time when a theology of the Holy Trinity was just being formulated. In fact, on the day I am composing this article we are observing the Memorial of Sts. Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzan. These two “Doctors of the Church” were 4th century champions of those words we recite at Mass on Sunday, The Nicene Creed.

Indeed, during the Advent and Christmas Seasons our consciousness of this epic struggle is tweaked with the celebrations of St. Ambrose, Basil & Gregory, St. John the Evangelist, and the readings from the First Letter of John. That the latter had to defend the belief in “*Jesus Christ come in the flesh*,” suggested that there were

members of the community denying this in some form or other. It is quite possible that they were separating the human Jesus from the divine Christ as was true in many of the heresies to follow.

This is not merely an academic topic: The epic struggle to squelch error and heresy and to uphold the full humanity and full divinity of Jesus Christ in one person was to preserve the most profound aspect of salvation: God really did assume our human nature. In Christ the divine was “married” to the human, thereby elevating our shared human nature to some proximity of divinity “*little less than angels*,” (Hebrews 2:7).

If it is the case that “Christ” merely descended into the man “Jesus” and used him as some sort of puppet and escaped his body before the crucifixion, we would not be able to affirm that “*God is Love*” with the same intensity. Instead, scripture tells us that “*Who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God something to be grasped (exploited). Rather, he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness . . . humbling himself . . . even to death on a cross.*” (Phil 2:6). Clearly, in those famous words of St. Paul, there is no separation of Jesus from Christ: In his humanity and divinity he accepted death on the Cross to save us.

Many people died and suffered exile to defend this faith. Along with the Doctrine of the Trinity, it is preserved in the ancient hand gesture, pictured here for your edification.



