

The Status of the Nicene Creed as dogma of the
Church: theological consultation between...

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THE STATUS
OF THE NICENE CREED
AS DOGMA
OF THE CHURCH

Theological Consultation between Representatives of the U. S. A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs held July 6-7, 1965, in Baltimore, Maryland

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Published Jointly by Representatives of the U. S. A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation and the Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs

Additional copies may be secured from
Publications Office

NATIONAL CATHOLIC WELFARE CONFERENCE

1312 Massachusetts Avenue, N. W.
Washington, D. C. 20005

Printed in U. S. A., 9 - 1965

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*THE STATUS OF THE NICENE CREED AS
DOGMA OF THE CHURCH*

John Courtney Murray, S.J., Woodstock College,
Woodstock, Maryland

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FOREWORD

The coming together of Lutheran and Roman Catholic theologians in the City of Baltimore, Maryland on July 6-7, 1965 for the first of a series of theological dialogues, may be considered as something of an ecumenical milestone in the relationships between these two communions in the United States. To the best of our knowledge this was the first occasion upon which representatives officially designated by agencies of their respective church bodies convened to examine systematically their distinctive understandings of basic elements of the Christian faith.

After nearly two years of negotiations such conversations were officially approved by the U.S. Roman Catholic Bishops' Commission for Ecumenical Affairs and the U.S.A. National Committee of the Lutheran World Federation. A joint Steering Committee met in the offices of Lawrence Cardinal Shehan in Baltimore on March 16th at which meeting it was agreed that conversations should begin with an examination of the role of the Nicene Creed as dogma in the church. The Nicene Creed was chosen because it is a basic statement of faith for both traditions, arises out of the post-Apostolic period, and affords some clues to an understanding of the development and position of dogma in the life of the church. It was also hoped that this first meeting would serve to further mutual acquaintance and communication, to expose sensitive essential issues which might be explored at future meetings, and to understand better the general context within which the several representatives approach apostolic tradition and Holy Scripture in explicating the Christian faith.

The papers prepared as a basis for discussion are printed in their entirety in the pages which follow. Appended to them is a summary statement, the text of which was composed by a drafting committee and, after revision and refinement, was approved unanimously by the entire group. It should be clearly understood that this summary statement represents the judgments of those who participated at the meeting and must not be construed as having the character of an official statement by any of the churches which have sponsored the conversations.

Necessarily lacking in this pamphlet is a transcript of the discussions themselves, which were both intense and fascinating. The issues raised in both of the papers are so fundamental that little more than a beginning could be made at these first sessions. For example, there was little disagreement that the church has a magisterial function, but the question of the basis of authority for the certification of doctrine as dogma was not followed through in depth. The fact of progression was recognized, e.g., from the speaking God to the Word of God to the faith of the church, to dogma, to theology; but the difficult problem of development in theology and its relationship to dogma could not be fully explored. The question was asked whether there are hierarchies both of authority and of dogma and if so what would be the implications of this fact, but examination of these issues was left for a later meeting. The fragmentary character of dogma was emphasized over and over again as well as the fact that although no human phraseology can satisfactorily capture and explicate divine mystery, the necessity to defend the church against error made the formulation of dogma a necessity. How far can one push this recognition of the inadequacy of human words as doctrine attempts to make dogma understandable? This, too, was laid on the table for future consideration. Also deferred for later examination is the question as to exactly what is implied when a group "accepts" a creed—the eternal problem of semantics must be dealt with.

We who were privileged to participate in this dialogue experienced a mutual sense of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and acknowledge this fact gratefully. The climate of the meeting was conducive to a deepening recognition of the inseparable bond which unites us—our one Lord Jesus Christ—and to a growth in

respect and friendship. In his opening devotions Bishop Murphy made use of the Lutheran Service Book and Hymnal, a copy of which had been presented to him by the Lutheran representatives at the March meeting of the Steering Committee.

We are aware of the deep-seated disagreements which divide us and do not underestimate the difficulties of overcoming them. At the same time, neither do we underestimate the powers of the Holy Spirit, and are content as Christian brethren and in obedience to Him to bear testimony to each other regarding our understanding of the Christian faith, trusting His promise that He will ultimately lead us into a mutual understanding of truth.

PAUL C. EMPIE

WILLIAM W. BAUM

September 15, 1965

AGENDA

THEOLOGICAL CONSULTATION BETWEEN THE
U.S.A. NATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE
LUTHERAN WORLD FEDERATION
AND THE
CATHOLIC BISHOPS' COMMISSION FOR
ECUMENICAL AFFAIRS

Catholic Center, 320 Cathedral Street, Baltimore, Maryland
July 6-7, 1965

July 6 (Tues.)—The Most Reverend T. Austin Murphy, Auxiliary Bishop of Baltimore, presiding

- 10:00 A.M. Devotions (led by Bishop Murphy)
Adoption of Agenda and Procedures
Appointment of Recorder
Appointment of Drafting Sub-Committee
Appointment of Future Topics Sub-Committee
Policy on Release of Publicity
Questions Seeking Clarification of Texts of the
Papers: "Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma
of the Church"
- 10:45 A.M. Consideration of the Substance of the Papers
Comments by the Authors on Counterpart
Papers
General Discussion
- 12:00 Noon Recess for Lunch

- 2:00 P.M. Continuation of General Discussion
- 3:45 P.M. Coffee Break
- 4:00 P.M. Continuation of General Discussion
- 5:30 P.M. Closing Devotions (led by a Catholic representative)
- 6:00 P.M. Dinner followed by Informal Conversation
(The Drafting Sub-Committee to meet separately to prepare the text of a recommended summary statement. The Sub-Committee on Future Topics also to meet.)
-

July 7 (Wed.)—Dr. Paul C. Empie, presiding

- 9:00 A.M. Devotions (Dr. Warren Quanbeck)
Report of the Drafting Sub-Committee
Discussion of the Report
- 10:30 A.M. Coffee Break
- 10:45 A.M. Continuation of Discussion of Summary Statement
- 12:00 Noon Recess for Lunch
(Drafting Committee to meet)
- 2:00 P.M. Second Report of Drafting Sub-Committee
Discussion of the Report
Adoption of a Summary Statement
- 3:45 P.M. Coffee Break
- 4:00 P.M. Consideration of Report of Sub-Committee on
Future Topics
Date and Place of Next Meeting
Closing Devotions (Dr. Warren Quanbeck)
Adjournment
-

- 5:00 P.M. Press Conference

Position Papers

THE STATUS OF THE NICENE CREED AS DOGMA OF THE CHURCH:

Some Questions from Lutherans to Roman Catholics

Part I

by

THE REV. DR. WARREN A. QUANBECK

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The Nicene Creed is one of a series of confessional statements of the Lutheran church. To understand its place and function in the Lutheran church it must be seen in the context of these statements.

A. *The Scriptures.* It is the Word of God which calls the church into being, maintains and preserves her, and the church lives in loyalty and obedience to this Word. The prophetic and apostolic witness to Jesus Christ the Word of God is found in the Scriptures, which for this reason have a primary place in the church. The authority of Scripture is the authority of the Word of God, that is, the authority of the God who speaks in and through them. This authority must not be understood in a literalistic, legalistic or atomistic way, but is to be seen in the light of three factors.

1. The Holy Spirit. God is sovereign in His church. He is not the God of the Deists, but the living God who uses the things of His creation to confront man with His message. He is present and active in His church, and uses the human testimony to His mighty deeds to further His redeeming work among men. It is the work of the Holy Spirit which enables men to hear God's voice in the Scriptures.

2. The Ministry. God has bestowed the gift of ministry upon His church. It accomplishes its task of serving God and men through the proclamation of the gospel. God uses this proclamation in sermon, sacrament, teaching, counseling and service to effect His saving presence among His people.

3. The Problem of Interpretation. The Scriptures require interpretation, a task which has literary, historical and theological dimensions. The interpreter is concerned to discover what the biblical writer intended to communicate to his readers, and for this work he avails himself of the lexical, literary and historical information which illuminate the text in its historical setting. He is also concerned with theological questions such as the relation of prophecy and fulfillment, the relation of the divine demand (law) to the divine offer of life (gospel), and the problem of the unity of Scripture. The Bible is a record of the saving deeds of God, an interpretation of the significance of those deeds, and also an instrument through which God speaks in the life of the church today.

B. *Creeds and Confessions*. The events of the sixteenth century evoked from the churches of the Reformation a series of theological statements designed to clarify the event of God's saving presence among His people. The Lutheran Confessions may be divided into two main groups:

1. Affirmations of the catholic character and purpose of the Lutheran reformation. These include the three ecumenical creeds, the Augsburg Confession and its Apology (1530), the Schmalkald Articles (1537), and Luther's two Catechisms. Here the Reformers deny the charge that they are innovators, schismatics or heretics, and assert their loyalty to the catholic tradition and their rejection of what they considered to be late medieval deviations from it.

2. As the hope for the unity of Christendom faded, the churches were faced with the task of selfunderstanding in the new situation. The Formula of Concord (1580) seeks to provide a basis for unity within the Lutheran churches, defining their position with respect to current controversies and also in relation to traditional doctrinal disputes.

C. *The Function of Creeds.* Creeds and confessions have a threefold significance in the Lutheran church: Doxology, Self-identification, and Interpretation of the gospel.

1. Doxology. In keeping with the biblical understanding of confession, affirmation of the Nicene Creed is first of all a liturgical act. In its confession of Jesus as Lord and Son of God the church praises God for the deliverance accomplished in the mission of Jesus Christ. The secondary sense of confession as confessing one's sins is not in opposition but tributary to this. By confessing one's sins one acknowledges that God is right when He judges, and adds the voice of the repentant sinner to the chorus praising the Redeemer. When, as happens even in the pages of the New Testament, the primitive confession "Jesus is Lord" is expanded by qualifying expressions, this does not mean the abandonment of the liturgical viewpoint, but seeks to make more precise the identity of Him who is worshipped, and so prevent the assimilation of the Christian faith to Gnosticism or the mystery cults of the ancient world. Confession of the Nicene Creed is therefore first of all assertion of faith in God, of participation in the life offered in Christ, of obedience to the Spirit who reigns as Lord in the church.

2. Self-identification. Confession of the Nicene Creed is also one of the ways in which the Lutheran church seeks to make known her self understanding. The ecclesiastical and theological disputes of the sixteenth century saw labels distributed generously. In this atmosphere the Lutheran church seeks to identify herself as a church participating in the catholic tradition of the west, as standing in continuity with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. It did not seek to repriminate the apostolic age, but accepted the validity of all the theological, liturgical, and administrative traditions which in its judgment did not stand in opposition to the gospel.

3. Interpretation of the gospel. While the primary thrust of confession is doxological, the development of misunderstanding and perversion of the gospel thrust upon the church the necessity of using confession also as a mark of sound teaching. Inasmuch as the Scriptures present formidable problems of interpretation, and can be misunderstood even by men of good will, the confession serves as a guide to the understanding of Scripture by affirming what is sound in the teaching of a given period and rejecting what is skewed. The church of our time thus receives the help of the church of earlier days to aid her to find her way to a true understanding of the Scriptures. We do not find this merely by repeating the theological language of the creeds, but by penetrating to an historically informed understanding of what they affirmed and rejected in their own time. To overlook the historical situation and its conditioning effect puts one in peril of missing the point of the doctrinal statement or of absolutizing the language of the affirmation. In the Lutheran tradition, as in some others, the necessity of this process of historical interpretation has not always been sufficiently recognized, with the result that confession has sometimes been understood to mean only the acceptance of theological propositions about God and Christ rather than confession of faith in Christ.

D. *The creed is not an end in itself but an instrument.* It points beyond itself to the Triune God who has revealed Himself to His creatures. To confess the creed is therefore to commit oneself to God, a commitment which affords a new perspective on every aspect of human life. But because it has this instrumental function, and also because it participates fully in the historical relativity of the time in which it was written, it lays no other absolute requirement on the church. Confession of the Nicene Creed does not commit the church to the cosmology, epistemology, metaphysics, geography or church politics of the men who framed it. The task of proclaiming the gospel in our time requires that we use the language of our day and address ourselves to contemporary situations. If the language or ideas of the fourth century can help us, we are free to use them. Where they are opaque to contemporary men, their use produces more confusion than clarity. Our confession of the Nicene Creed is our recognition that given the fourth century situation we stand with Athanasius against Arius on Trinitarian and Christological issues.

Our task is not to parrot theological expressions but to find ways to proclaim that God is with us today. In Jesus Christ we are committed to the ultimate fact of the universe. Therefore all things are ours, and we must relate to them properly: assigning absolute trust and commitment to God alone, but giving due respect for every created thing in its relation to Him.

Part II

by

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The types of questions which arise concern (I) the Nicene Creed itself (in its Niceano-Constantinopolitan formulation), (II) the Catholic symbols (Apostles', Nicene and Athanasian) as a special class, and (III) the status of dogma in general.

I. In order to give focus to the discussion, it might be well to raise simply two specific questions regarding the content of the *Niceanum*:

1. Granting that the "came down from heaven" need not be understood as asserting anything erroneous, can a Roman Catholic nevertheless admit that its Gnostic overtones make it an unfortunate formulation (a) for us and/or, (b) even more seriously, in its original context?
2. If the reply to "1" is to some degree affirmative, could similar doubts arise in reference to the *homoousion*? If not, why not?

Needless to say, these are questions, not regarding the personal opinions of the theologians to whom they are directed, but regarding what is possible for a Roman Catholic to hold. The import of this distinction is developed in more detail under "3" *infra*.

- II. 1. Do the ancient Catholic symbols have in some sense a higher status than other dogmas of the church? If so, how can this be given effective expression in view of the fact that all dogmas are said to be equally binding?
2. To what extent does the liturgical, "doxological" character and use of these symbols give them a special status? It is often said of dogmatic formulations that they are, in principle, capable of being improved upon. This, presum-

ably, would never be said, e.g., of the Psalms. If they were mistakenly viewed as doctrinal definitions, they would obviously have to be regarded as deficient at many points in light of the N.T. revelation; but it would appear that, even apart from the question of inspiration, their place in the liturgical heritage of the church makes it nonsensical to speak of "improving" them. Could something analogous be said of the Catholic creeds?

III. What are the conditions for asserting that "agreement" (between, e.g., Catholics and Lutherans) exists on a given dogma?

This, clearly, is an enormous problem which obviously cannot be more than superficially discussed in a preliminary meeting. The following points make an effort to specify various aspects of the question:

1. It may be assumed that, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint, doubts whether full dogmatic agreement exists on a given point can be finally resolved only by the decision to enter into full ecclesiastical communion (cf. K. Rahner, *Schriften* IV, 237 ff.). Our question, therefore, deals simply with the kind of partial and putative agreement which is possible between divided churches.
2. This limitation would seem also to require that we abstract from the "how" of acceptance: i.e., from questions regarding the (a) "grounds" and (b) "modalities" of acceptance. Thus this question does not call for a treatment of the problems raised by the facts (a) that the authority of the church and the authority of Scripture play different roles for Protestant and Catholic so that apparently at least some Catholics would doubt that a Protestant can assent to a given dogma "by divine faith", and (b) that the Catholic accepts the dogma as irreformable and the Protestant as, in principle, reformable.
3. Speaking then, not of the "how" of assent, but of the "what" which is assented to, presumably there would be a general agreement that this includes *at least* (a) rejecting what the dogma clearly and unequivocally excludes, and (b) agreeing that what the dogma unequivocally

asserts lacks positive error in the sense that it can, without self-contradiction, be interpreted in an acceptable way.

Thus, for example, to accept the *Niceanum* involves *at least* (a) rejecting the Arianism to which it is directly opposed as well as other heresies, such as Sabellianism or Origenistic subordinationism, which its authors were clearly concerned to avoid, and (b) agreeing that language about which one might have reservations, such as “came down from heaven” or *homoousion*, need not be understood in the context of the creed as asserting error.

4. This, then, brings us to our question. Is this minimal description of the “what” which is assented to in accepting a dogma a sufficient description and, if not, how specify the “more” which is necessary?

The reasons for raising the question are familiar, but it may be useful to mention some of them.

It is often suggested by Roman Catholics as well as others, that the language, concepts or categories in which a dogmatic truth is defined may be *inadequate*, not only in the relatively trivial sense that divine realities can never be fully expressed in human words and thoughts, but, more radically, in the sense that

- i. fundamentally different, and more or less equally adequate, ways of expressing the same truth are possible. (This would seem to be implied by those who say, e.g., that if Christianity had first developed in an Indian environment, Trinitarian truth would have received a very different formulation).
- ii. Some of these alternative formulations may be intrinsically, and not simply in reference to a new historical epoch, more adequate than those actually used in a dogmatic definition.
- iii. The formulations used in a dogmatic definition may become—or even, to some extent, originally have been—positively misleading. (Cf. Küng’s treatment of Trent on justification.)

Can a Roman Catholic seriously grant any or all of these points? If he can, is not this equivalent to admitting that the minimal description of the "what" which is assented to given under "3" is also a sufficient description? If so, it would seem that accepting the *Niceanum* does not *a priori* involve asserting the permanent appropriateness of, e.g., the *homoousion*, and that it leaves open the possibility of finding better categories. (It should be noted, however, that what is said under II. 2 *supra* perhaps provides a way of granting this while, at the same time, repudiating the possibility, or at least the desirability, of ever replacing, for liturgical purposes, the present Nicene Creed with a new version.)

5. The question just raised is perhaps reinforced by a consideration of Scripture. Everyone presumably agrees that one need not, and should not, accept as making truth-claims the historically conditioned conceptuality which the Bible uses in making what the Catholic accepts as its infallible and inspired theological assertions. Does not this necessitate equal freedom in the treatment of dogma which, after all, though infallible according to Roman Catholic belief, is not inspired?

Specifically, this would mean that "dogmatic literalism" can be just as heretical as the scriptural literalism of Arius. The Arian use of the N.T. subordinationist and adoptionist concepts and images was heretical because it was, so to speak, opposed to the intention of the N.T. usage which was to exalt Christ, rather than lower Him. As a result, the church found it necessary to formulate the *homoousion* as a rule of interpretation for the N.T. Christological materials. But is not the rule of interpretation just as much subject to abuse as the originals (particularly when it serves, not as a rule of interpretation, but as an additional source of information regarding the Godhead)?

Conclusion

It will be observed that these queries are intended to press on our Roman Catholic friends the question of what they think must

be included in the notion of dogmatic development (at least as this applies to some dogmas—it would seem that the Marian dogmas belong in a different category). Does it involve progress in some absolute sense? Must one accept a metaphysical outlook according to which “the dogmatic categories of being and substance” have priority over “the scriptural categories of presence and function” with the result that it is possible to say that “The Christian . . . now (after Nicea) has come to understand more fully what Christ, the Lord with us, is?” This is what Father Murray asserts in some provocative pages in which he says that “the first ecumenical question is . . . what think you of the Nicene *homoousion*?” (*The Problem of God*, New Haven, Yale, 1964, pp. 49-60 esp. 58, 50 and 53). Apparently Father Lonergan agrees with him when he says that doctrinal development involves, not simply transcultural progress from one “experimental priority” to another, but also progress towards a metaphysical “objective priority” (Cf. R. L. Richard, S.J., “Contribution to a Theory of Doctrinal Development,” *Spirit as Inquiry: Studies in Honor of Bernard Lonergan*, ed. F. E. Crowe, Continuum II/3 1964, pp. 205-227).

The question is a serious one. Was de Maistre expressing a view which has no right to exist within Roman Catholicism when he tells us that the church

“weeps over these definitions which rebellion extorted from her and which always were evils, since they all suppose disbelief or attack and could only arise in the midst of the most dangerous disturbances. A state of war raised these venerable ramparts around the truth. No doubt they protect her, but they conceal her, too. They have made her unassailable, but by that very act, less accessible”. (*On Church and Society*. E.T., 1960, p. 24).

THE STATUS OF THE NICENE CREED AS DOGMA OF THE CHURCH

by

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There is a preliminary issue of method. For my part, I do not think it useful, at the outset of ecumenical dialogue, for a Catholic to propose to a Lutheran Catholic questions that emerge from a Catholic theological problematic. The converse likewise holds. Such questions might be considered unanswerable, or possibly peripheral, or even irrelevant. The basic question concerns the problematic which gives rise to particular questions. In what follows, therefore, I shall attempt to state the major questions which the Catholic theologian puts to himself with regard to the Nicene faith (N and NC) and to indicate the lines of answer.

I. The Nicene faith and Scripture.—Historically, this was the primary question. It still is. In a context dealing, in general, with the fallacy of archaism, the primary function of the theologian was thus stated by Pius XII: “It is also true that the theologian must constantly return to the sources of divine revelation. It is his function to show how (*qua ratione*) the truths which are taught by the living magistry are contained in Sacred Scripture and in the divine tradition, be it implicitly or explicitly. Moreover, both of these sources of revealed doctrine contain treasures so varied and so rich that they are in fact inexhaustible. Consequently, the theological sciences are kept forever young by the study of their sacred sources. In contrast, as we know by experience, speculation becomes barren when it neglects an ever more profound investigation of the sacred deposit. For this very reason, however, positive theology, as it is called, may not be equated with merely historical science. The reason is that, together with these sacred sources, God has given to his Church the living magistry, in order

that the truths which are contained in the deposit of faith only obscurely and in some implicit fashion may be brought to light and formulated. The divine Redeemer entrusted this deposit to the magistry of the Church alone, not to the individual Christian or even to theologians.

When therefore, as it has often happened throughout the ages, the Church exercises this function of hers, whether the exercise be ordinary or extraordinary, it is clear that a false method would be brought into play if what is clear were to be explained by what is obscure. On the contrary, the converse method is plainly imperative. Hence when our predecessor Pius IX taught that the most exalted office of theology is to show how the doctrine defined by the Church is contained in the sources, he added, with good reason, “in the very sense in which it was defined” (*Humani generis*, DB 2314).

With regard to Nicaea, the basic relationship between the dogma and the Scriptures appears in Athanasius’ famous statement of the conciliar intention in his Letter, *De decretis nicaenae synodi* (350/351). The original intention had been to adhere to the credal tradition and therefore to use the “confessional words of Scripture” (*ibid.*, n. 19; MPG 25, 448). However, the scriptural words (especially “ek tou patros”) were twisted by the Eusebians to their own sense. Hence “the Fathers, perceiving their craft and their impious cunning, were forced to state more distinctly what is meant by “from (the) God” and to write that the Son is “from the essence” (*ousias*) of God, in order that “‘from (the) God’ might not be considered common and equal in the Son and in things originate, but that all things else might be acknowledged as creatures and the Word alone as from the Father” (*ibid.*, col. 449).

Similarly, the Fathers had wished to adopt the scriptural theme that the Son is “the true power and image of the Father, in all things like (*omoios*) and exactly like (*aparallaktos*) the Father” (*loc. cit.*). Again, however, these phrases proved inadequate as the safeguard of scriptural doctrine against the Eusebian evasions. Hence the Fathers “were again compelled to gather up the mind (*dianoian*) of the Scriptures and to state and write again more clearly what they had said before, that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousion*) with the Father, in order that they might make clear that the Son is not merely like, but is from the

Father as the same in likeness (*tauton tē homoiōsei*)” (*ibid.*, col. 451). Therefore the anti-Arian formulas of the creed state the “mind” of the Scriptures. Between Scripture and dogma there is an identity of sense. The dogma defines what is revealed in the word of God.

What then is the mind of the Scripture that is identically the mind of Nicaea? Again Athanasius makes the classic statement, in his third *Oratio contra Arianos* (356-362, during the Egyptian exile?): “Thus, given that they (Father and Son) are one, and given that the divinity itself is one, the same things are said (in the Scripture) about the Son that are also said about the Father, except that the Son is not said to be Father” (MPG 26, 329). This is the famous Athanasian rule of faith. It is a synthesis of scriptural doctrine; it is likewise a statement of the mind of Nicaea—the sense of “ek tēs ousias tou Patros” and “homoousion.” The Son is all that the Father is, the one God; but he is not the Father; he is from the Father.

The polemic intention of Nicaea was to outlaw the Arian “impiety” as contrary to the mind of the Scriptures. The doctrinal intention was to make a positive statement of the Christian faith by gathering up the mind of the Scriptures. The Council had to give a positive answer to the Arian question in its first form: “Is the Son Son or a creature?” Hence it affirmed the full divinity of the Son, who is God in the fullness of the sense in which the Father is God. It also affirmed the mysterious uniqueness of the origin of the Son; it is as Son that he is “begotten” (*gennetos*), and only in this sense is he originate (*genetos*). Finally, it affirmed the unity of the Godhead in Father and Son. (It did not, however, explicitly specify the nature of this unity. This specification had to wait until the Arian question was asked in its second form, in the later, Eunomian phase of the controversy.) This threefold positive affirmation was made as a statement of the mind of the Scripture.

Hitherto it has chiefly been a question of the relationship of material identity in content between the Nicene dogma and the Scripture. There is the further question of their formal relationship—the question of Scripture as the norm of the dogma defined by the Council.

It is evident that the Nicene Church considered the relationship between the Scriptures and the magistry to be reciprocal

The word of the God in the Scriptures was regarded as the norm of the faith of the Church. Even Arius, and later Eunomius, felt it necessary to appeal to this norm, though their doctrinal systems owed nothing to Scripture. The Arian formulas were judged by this norm and condemned as false. Judged likewise by this norm, the Nicene formulas were put forward as the true faith; this is clear from the Athanasian rule. At the same time, the Nicene Church considered it to be the magisterial function of the Church to interpret the Scriptures and to declare their sense in formulas that were to be accepted by faith on pain of exclusion from the communion of the faithful. The word of God therefore is the norm for the magistry in declaring the faith of the Church. At the same time, the magisterial interpretation of the word of God and its declaration in the word of the Church is normative of the faith of the Church.

This is substantially the theology stated by Pius XII in the citation given above. It may be doubted whether it is possible fully to conceptualize the reciprocal relation between the word of God and the word of the Church, precisely because it is a question of a polar tension. One can at best undertake to give an adequately balanced description of a relationship which, like all relationships, in the end escapes exact definition.

The essential error would be a theological idealism, so called, which would assert that either the individual consciousness of the Christian or the collective consciousness of the Church is the norm of faith; that neither consciousness is bound on the word of God as a norm which confronts it; that the content of belief therefore is derived solely from the inward teaching of the Holy Spirit. The opposite error would be a biblical positivism, which would posit the word of God as "already out there now," and assert that the content of faith is to be derived from it by the methods of rational hermeneutic. Both errors have in common the same vice; each of them in different ways separates the Word of God from the Spirit of God.

Perhaps the analogue for a true understanding of the reciprocal relationship between Scripture and magistry is, in the ultimate instance, the indivisible Trinity itself, in which, as the

Athanasian Creed states, there is “*nihil prius aut posterius.*” Differing in their modes or origin, the Word and the Spirit are absolutely correlative (*simul sunt*). The same correlation exists between Word and Spirit in the history of salvation, amid a difference of function. The Word of God, Christ the Son, stands, as it were, over against and above the Church, seated at the Father’s right hand as the Lord-of-us. In contrast, the Spirit of God, the Father’s Gift to the Church through Christ Jesus, abides hiddenly in the Church (cf. Jn 14:16) as the Lord-with-us (cf. Acts *fete passim*).

The relationship between Word and Spirit is conveyed by John (cf. 16:13-15) through the image of the relationship between Yahweh and his people—a speaker-hearer relationship (the analogy is deficient but valid). The Word spoke to men from outside them, as it were, in deed and word (cf. Jn 15:26: “all that I have said to you”). The Word still speaks to the Church through the written word of God which is also somehow outside-of-us, above the Church, like the Word himself, containing a revelation that is at once definitively given to the Church and never fully to be comprehended by the Church. The Spirit in turn, indwelling in the Church, is the true hearer of the Word, as they are the true people of God who faithfully hear his word (cf. Ezechiel; cf. Lk 11:28). He is “the Spirit who is from God,” who has been “received” by the people of God, “that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor 2:12). It is the Spirit-with-us who gives understanding of the Word-above-us, both in himself and in the written word which is itself a gift to the Church and not, in the end, a work of the Church. The forbidden thing therefore is to separate Word (or word) and Spirit (or spirit, the charism of the Church), or to confuse them by mistaking their respective functions.

II. The authority of the Nicene faith.—The authority of N and NC as the rule of faith derives formally from the authority of the magistry of the Church, “whose function it is to judge with regard to the true sense and interpretation of the sacred Scriptures” (Council of Trent, sess. 4, DB 786). This function of judgment is a function of certification. In the case, N and NC, in virtue of the assistance of the Holy Spirit, the true hearer of the word of God, certify as true the three affirmations noted

above, together with the fourth in NC (the expansion of the article on the Holy Spirit in N). It is to be noted that, when the affirmations are certified as true, the understanding contained in the affirmations is not certified as adequate (cf. *infra*).

It is hardly necessary to add that the authority of N and NC does not depend on the fact that the material identity of sense between Scripture and dogma can or cannot be established by the methods of rational hermeneutic. To say this would be to make biblical scholarship the norm of the faith of the Church—*quod absit*. Finally, in accord with what has been said above, that fact that the status of N and NC as dogma derives formally from the act of the magistry in no wise derogates from the authority of the word of God, the Scriptures, as the source of revelation. Nicaea certified the *homoousion* as a true statement of faith because the Scriptures say of the Son whatever they say of the Father, *excepto Patris nomine*. On the other hand, the word of God, somehow “already out there now,” does not certify itself as the word of God. Still less does it wait on scholarship for such certification of its sense as scholarship may provide. Judgments of certainty belong to the magistry. And such judgments are certain because it is true to say of the Church—*analogously*, of course, and *proportione servata*—what is said of the Spirit himself: “He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak” (Jn 16:13).

III. The immutability of the Nicene dogma.—Immutability, like certainty, attaches to judgments, to affirmations, and to the sense in which the certain judgment or affirmation is made. On the other hand, the immutability of an affirmation, again like its certainty, does not preclude development—that is, fuller understanding—of the sense in which the affirmation is made.

In the first place, therefore, it will be forever immutably true to say that the Son is consubstantial with the Father, that he is all that the Father is, except for the name of Father. Moreover, it will be forever forbidden so to understand the Nicene dogma—so to “interpret” it, so to “develop” its sense—as, in the end, to affirm that the Son is not consubstantial with the Father, not all that the Father is, except for the name of Father. Finally, it will be forever forbidden to say that the Nicene dogma is

mutable in the sense that it has or may become irrelevant, of no religious value or interest (cf. *infra*), no longer intelligible *suo modo* as a formula of faith. No such menace of irrelevancy hangs over the scriptural revelation, that the Son is all that the Father is, except for the name of Father. Similarly, no such menace threatens the *homoousion*. The pertinent citation here would be Vatican I, *Constitution on Faith*, ch. 4, "On Faith and Reason" (DB 1800).

In the second place, however, no less pertinent is the canon of Vincent of Lérins, cited in the same chapter, which urges the Christian and the Church to growth in understanding, knowledge, and wisdom, "in eodem scilicet dogmate, eodem sensu, eademque sententia." The historical fact is that the Nicene dogma underwent development.

First, the *homoousion* was applied to the Holy Spirit, explicitly by Gregory Nazianzen, later implicitly by Constantinople I, still later commonly. Second, what was only implicit in the original Nicene affirmation about the divine unity came to explicit statement in the latter phase of the Arian controversy. Following on this, the *homoousion* was applied to the Trinity, the "triada *homoousion*" of Constantinople II (canon 1). In the course of this development, the word lost the connotations of "origin from," which it had in the original Nicene text. It came to be simply a statement of the numerical identity of the Three in the one divine substance. In this sense the notion was foundational to the systematic Trinitarian formula first struck off (it seems) by Anselm and later canonized by the Council of Florence, "All things are the one thing, where no opposition of relations intervenes." Every notion acquires fuller meaning when it becomes an organic part of a systematization.

The question, however, may be asked, whether the Nicene dogma admits further development today, whether it can be stated in other categories. The answer is no. Nicaea answered the Arian question, "Is the Son Son or a creature?" The answer was necessarily cast in the categories of the question, God or creature, from the Father as begotten or from the Father as made. There are no other categories in which the answer can be cast. And the question itself, in the categories of its asking, is not time-

conditioned, the product of a particular culture; it is perennial, the product of the human mind as such.

Many other questions may indeed be asked about the Son; but they would have to be answered in their own terms, not by a reinterpretation of Nicaea. The Nicene answer to the Nicene question is final and definitive. There is no going beyond it, since it brings the believer to the very edge of the abyss of the mystery of the eternal Son, who is God of God. In this sense, the *homoousion* is a "limit-concept."

Obviously, this is not the place to enter the enormous area of theological development to which Nicaea opened the way. Every mystery of faith creates a problem for the theologian. In the case, the problem inheres in the mysterious affirmation that the Son is "God of God." But if he is God, he exists *a se*; if he is God of God, he exists *ab alio*. A contradiction seems to appear. This is the problem to which Augustine addressed himself, and to which Aquinas fashioned the solution, in so far as a solution is available. The key to the solution is the psychological analogy, glimpsed by the intuitive genius of Augustine, formulated by the philosophical intelligence of Aquinas, and—it may be added—re-stated with newly profound understanding by Bernard Lonergan.

The appeal is to human interior intellectual and moral experience, that is, to the experience of the procession of the inner mental word (concept) from the act of understanding (insight), and to the experience of the procession of the act of moral choice (love) from the intellectual estimation and desire of the good. The analogy is metaphysical, because man is the image of God. It is not therefore merely a matter of metaphor. One can be admitted to a measure of analogical, imperfect, obscure understanding of the processions of the Word and the Spirit in the inner trinitarian life of God. All this, of course, is theology, not dogma. The premise of the Augustinian and Thomist theology, however, is the Nicene dogma under its ontological aspect (cf. *infra*). In certifying the scriptural truth, the dogma also certified that human intelligence, under the light of faith, can and should go on to an analogical understanding of what God is—the one Being who is subsistent Intelligence—and how God is Triune: God the Father, the God who speaks; God the Son, the

Word uttered by the Father, who is begotten because uttered; God the Holy Spirit, procedent from Father Son as their Love and Gift.

IV. The religious value of the Nicene dogma.—The dogma was consciously formulated as a test of orthodoxy. As someone has said, it was not a creed for catechumens but for bishops. Here is its first religious value; for orthodoxy is a religious value. This value, however, is extrinsic. The essential inherent value of the dogma lies in its certification of what God is in himself, antecedent to whatever He may be to us. The question, what is God, is not the appropriate subject for idle musing on a summer afternoon. However unanswerable it may be in the end, it is the first and last of all religious questions. Nicaea gave the certified answer—that God is the Father and that the Son is Son. Thus Nicaea also answered the other urgent religious question, whether we are redeemed or not. The premise of its asking can only be the basic OT conviction that only God can redeem us. Nicaea answered by certifying that the Son is God of God; therefore He could save us and He did and does. This is, of course, the soteriological argument, so called, that was incessantly alleged by the protagonists of the Nicene faith (about the Spirit as well as about the Son). In a word, Nicaea explained what John meant when he said, “God is love” (1 Jn 4:16).

V. The Nicene faith and human intelligence.—It is presumably too late in the scholarly day to bother discussing the question, whether Nicaea initiated the process of “die Hellenisierung des Glaubens.” The categories of the Nicene argument—God or creature, begotten or made—were not Hellenic but biblical. Moreover, the *homoousion* is not a category at all. A category is an abstract classifying concept which furnishes the essential definition of a number of individual instances. The *homoousion*, however, first defined with complete concreteness what the Son is, what only the Son is. Later it defined, again concretely, what the Spirit is. Finally, it defined, still concretely, what the Trinity is—“the one nature or substance (*ousian*), the one power and authority (*exousian*), the consubstantial Trinity, the one divinity to be adored in three subsistences (*upostasesin*) or persons (*prosôpois*)” (Constantinople II).

If there was any “categorizing” here, it was simply the collocation of Father, Son, and Spirit in the order of the Godhead. And “God” is not a category. Finally, the use of the word “*homoousion*” did not involve the Church in the endless argument about the metaphysical concept of substance—the concept which contemporary philosophy is desperately struggling to thrust out with a pitchfork, what time it always returns (to paraphrase the Horatian tag). The *homoousion* is not a metaphysical concept. It is a dogmatic coinage whose content is the mind of the Scripture with regard to what the Son is.

All this, however, only clears the way for the real argument. Nicaea said the very same thing that the Scriptures had said, but it certainly did not say it in the same way. The notorious accusation that the *homoousion* was “unscriptural” did not lack foundation. The first series of post-Nicene synods, beginning with the Dedication Council at Antioch in 341, refused to use the word. The second series, beginning with the third synod of Sirmium (357) explicitly forbade its use. The real issue, however, was not simply one of words. It concerns the ontological aspect, so called, of the Nicene dogma, and the warrant for making the transition from the scriptural mode of conception and utterance to a different mode. There are three questions—historical, dogmatic, theological.

Historically, on the witness of Athanasius, the transition was made for reasons of polemic necessity. Moreover, the new usage was defended as an exception, not as an instance of a general principle. The Nicene Fathers would have been enormously astonished, had anyone told them that they were engaging in the development of doctrine. This fact, however, is itself not astonishing. In what concerns the processes of art, whereby things are made, a man must know what he is going to do before he does it. In contrast, in what concerns movements of intelligence, whereby knowledge is acquired, a man must first reach the term of the movement—the knowledge itself—before he can know what the term is, much less understand the process whereby he reached it. This is why the great issue today—in our case, the development of trinitarian doctrine—was no issue at all while the development was going on. This would be true even apart from the

energizing fact of the moment, the rise of historical consciousness and the blessed decline of "classicism."

Dogmatically, the transition was certified as valid by the authority of the Church as the authentic interpreter of the mind of the Scriptures. The certification falls both on the term of the transition—the Nicene dogma as a statement of revealed truth—and on the validity of the mode of the statement.

The theological question is much more difficult. It is not an issue of certainty but of intelligibility, and it is twofold. First, is there an intelligible relationship between the scriptural and the dogmatic modes of conception and utterance, which would explain their homogeneity of sense? Second, is the historical process of movement from one to the other intelligible? Evidently, the second question is the more difficult. It raises the issue of the intelligibility of history—and indeed in its most complicated form, which concerns the history of thought.

It is obviously impossible in this paper to explore both of these questions or either of them. It may suffice briefly to suggest some considerations relevant to each in turn.

1. The ontological aspect of the Nicene dogma.—It was a providential dispensation that Christianity was born in the world of Hebraic culture and grew in the larger world of Hellenistic culture. The providential character of the dispensation is seen in the fact that in both of these cultures the mythical consciousness, characteristic of the primitive, had been transcended, at least in principle, through a differentiation of the mythical and the intellectual consciousness. The transcendence was of course, effected in different ways.

In the Hellenic world the mythical consciousness was transcended by virtue of the metaphysical impulse, resultant in the Platonic insight, whereby man was admitted into the world of theory, distinct from the world of community, and the norm and measure of man's dramatico-practical life. Contributory also were the scientific impulse, of which Aristotle may here serve as the example, and the humanistic impulse, visible chiefly in the great Greek dramatists and historians. In the Hebraic world, on the other hand, the mythical consciousness was transcended by virtue of the prophetic word of God. The "speaking God"

notified himself to the people as their Lord and Creator, He who is-with the people, He who is the Holy One. In the conception of Yahweh anthropomorphisms and symbols abounded. There was, however, a true knowledge of God, a profound consciousness of the reality proclaimed in the text of Hosea: "I am God and not man" (Hos 11:9). There was, consequently, a fuller liberation from the mythical consciousness in religion than was achieved in any other ancient culture.

To be brief, implicit in the OT understanding of the word of God there was a certain dogmatic realism. That is, there was the consciousness that the word of God is true and therefore it notifies that which is: God is God and not man. This realism was dogmatic in the sense that it was unreflective, a matter of direct consciousness that went unanalyzed. God was simply believed to be God and not man, and there was an end of the matter. The realism in consequence was only implicit. It was not thematized by explicit distinction between the mythical and the intellectual consciousness. The latter was simply manifested in the act of faith itself.

To be even more brief, the same dogmatic realism was implicit in the NT word of God. Thence it carried over into the apostolic kerygma and didache; and thence further into what Origen identified as "the certain line and the manifest rule" of faith, which required that "the preaching of the Church must be adhered to, that which has been handed on (*tradita*) from the apostles through the order of succession and abides in the churches up to the present moment" (*De principiis*, praef., 1, 2). Further witness to the realism in the preaching of the Church as in the word of God was, for instance, the exclusion of heretics from communion. Even more striking witness was the witness of the "white-clad army of martyrs" who died, not for myths or ideas or religious experience, but for their adhesion to reality, for their faithful affirmation of truths endowed with ontological reference, for their love of him whom they believed to be Lord and Father, who had not spared him who is the Only-begotten but really sent him for man's redemption.

The conclusion here is that the Nicene dogma, under the aspect of its ontological reference, did not represent a leap, as it were, into an intellectual world alien to the Christian message—

a leap from religious experience to ontology. The word of God itself, which became the apostolic kerygma and then the preaching of the Church, is a matter of true affirmations to which corresponds reality as it is—the reality of God and His saving counsel in man's regard. There is no more "ontology" in the Nicene dogma than there is in the word of God itself. In both there is the same dogmatic realism. It was always implicit in the word of God; it becomes explicit in the Nicene dogma. Therefore the word of the Church is homogeneous in its sense with the word of God. In the dogma there is no new sense, alien and heterogeneous to the sense of the word of God, accruing to the dogma by reason of the transition from the scriptural consideration of the "God who acts" to the dogmatic consideration of the "God who is" (or, in technical terms, from the *prius quoad nos* to the *prius quoad se*, from what is prior in the order of experience to what is prior in the order of being).

2. The movement from didache to dogma.—There is no question that Hellenistic culture played a part in the formulation of the consubstantiality of the Son and Spirit. Had there been no Gnostics and Marcionites, no Sabellians, and especially no Arius and Eunomius, there would have been no need to draw up the "bishop's creed." And had it not been for Hellenistic culture, there would have been no Gnostics, Sabellians, Arians. Hellenistic culture, from which these errors derived, was simply the occasion and cause, under the providence of God, which enabled and obliged the Church to render explicit what had always been implicit in the word of God—its ontological aspect, its dogmatic realism.

The long process which led to the explicit realism of the Nicene dogma was dialectical. The whole of the "ante-Nicene problem," so called, consists in the exploration of this dialectic. It will have to suffice here to indicate simply the structure of the dialectic, under omission of citation from ante-Nicene authors which would illustrate its content.

The material principle was the objective set of contradictions, either explicit or implicit, evident in ante-Nicene thought (e.g., in Origen, between his firm adherence to the affirmations of the rule of faith and the subordinationism in his trinitarian theology,

owing to the influence of Middle Platonism). These contradictions were possible and inevitable because the realism of the word of God was merely dogmatic and implicit. It is quite possible for the dogmatic realist, precisely because his position is unreflective, to make true affirmations—in the case, the affirmations contained in the word of God—and then proceed so to explain his affirmations as to contradict their sense, without perceiving the contradiction (as Origen did not).

The dialectical process was the elimination of the contradictions, which required that they first be perceived and made explicit (in this respect, Arius performed the major service by his flat and altogether correct statement of the problem of the Son).

The formal principle of the dialectical process was the thinking subject—or more concretely and historically, the whole series of ante-Nicene thinkers who wrestled with the problem of the Son (now as then, no one man can be the bearer of the process of development of doctrine, which is normally dialectical).

The term of the dialectic was the Nicene dogma, a development of the doctrine in the word of God—the affirmation that the Son is Son (the affirmation long contained in the word of God and in the rule of faith) and the affirmation that the Son is Son because he is from the substance of the Father, consubstantial with the Father, begotten and not made (the development of the rule of faith). From the dogma all the previous contradictions were removed, chiefly sabellianism and subordinationism. It had been seen that they were contradictions, incompatible with the word of God which says of the Son all that it says of the Father, except for the name of Father.

This was the term of the dialectic when the process was conducted by intelligence under the light of faith. Another term, however, was possible, and in fact it was reached—the heresy of Arius and Eunomius, for whom the formal principle of the dialectic was human reason alone, and for whom therefore its term was the evacuation of the mystery announced in the word of God. It only remains to say that none of the men engaged in the dialectic understood the dialectic in which they were engaged. This, as has been said, is in the nature of an intellectual movement. Its intelligibility, as a movement, is hidden from its par-

ticipants. But when the Holy Spirit is present in a movement, men build better than they know.

A final remark is necessary. It must remain only a remark, since it really starts a whole new subject. Nicaea contains no philosophy and it canonizes no philosophy—no metaphysic or epistemology. Nevertheless, it laid the foundations of a philosophy. It accomplished the definitive transcendence of the mythical consciousness in philosophy and religion. It carried Christian thought beyond a critical realism, in which imagination substitutes for intelligence, for which the final categories of understanding are space and time, and in which the real is, in the end, the experience of the real. It also carried Christian thought around, as it were, the sublimities of Platonic idealism, which does not heed the injunction made by the word of God and obeyed by the word of God itself: “Let what you say be simply ‘yes’ or ‘no’” (Mt 5:37). Nicaea made explicit the dogmatic realism implicit in the word of God. By so doing, it laid the foundation of the philosophical movement towards a critical realism, for which that is real which can be intelligently conceived and reasonably affirmed—in which therefore the axiom obtains, “*Ens per verum*”: I know what is when I affirm what is true.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

Following is the text of the joint statement issued in Baltimore July 7 at the close of the first official theological discussion in the United States between representatives of the Roman Catholic Church and the major Lutheran churches.

In praise to God, and in gratitude for those gifts of His Spirit whereby He steadily draws His people to unity in Christ, we rejoice in this first official theological conversation in the United States between Roman Catholic and Lutheran believers.

Those regularly appointed to arrange for and summon this meeting selected the topic for discussion: The Status of the Nicene Creed as Dogma of the Church.

The main points of the conversation are summarized in the following paragraphs:

1) We confess in common the Nicene Faith and therefore hold that the Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, who was made man, suffered, died, and rose again for our salvation, is true God; that He is from God the Father as Son, and therefore other than the Father; that the Godhead is one and undivided; and that the Holy Spirit, together with the Father and the Son, is to be worshipped and glorified.

2) The Nicene Faith gathers up and articulates the biblical testimony concerning the Son and His relationship to the Father.

3) The Nicene Faith, formulated by the Council at Nicaea in 325 and developed in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed, was a response to contemporary errors. The Church was obliged

to state her faith in the Son in non-biblical terms to answer the Arian question.

4) The confession that Our Lord Jesus Christ is the Son, God of God, continues to assure us that we are in fact redeemed, for only He who is God can redeem us.

5) The Nicene Faith, grounded in the biblical proclamation about Christ and the trinitarian baptismal formulas used in the Church, is both doxology to God the Father and dogma about God the Son.

6) As we reflect upon the role of dogma in our separated communities, we are aware of the following:

(a) The Nicene Faith possesses a unique status in the hierarchy of dogmas by reason of its testimony to and celebration of the mystery of the Trinity as revealed in Christ Our Savior, and by reason of its definitive reply to an ever-recurring question. This does not imply that the Nicene Faith exhausted the richness of Scripture regarding the person of Christ. For example, the Council of Chalcedon in 451 confessed that He was "in every respect like us, except without sin."

(b) We are agreed that authoritative teaching in the Church serves the people of God by protecting and nurturing the Faith. Dogma has a positive and a negative function. It authoritatively repudiates erroneous teaching, and asserts the truth as revealed in the saving deeds of God and in His gifts to His Church and to His world.

(c) The way in which doctrine is certified as dogma is not identical in the two communities, for there is a difference in the way in which mutually acknowledged doctrine receives ecclesiastical sanction.

(d) Different understandings of the movement from kerygma to dogma obtain in the two communities. Full inquiry must therefore be made into two topics: first, the nature and structure of the teaching authority of the Church; and, secondly, the role of Scripture in relation to the teaching office of the Church.

7) We together acknowledge that the problem of the development of doctrine is crucial today and is in the forefront of our common concern.

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