

The Centrality of the Nicene *Homoousion* for Joseph Ratzinger's Theology*

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Introduction

With the seventeen-hundred-year commemoration of Nicaea taking place this year, there is much discussion on this most foundational of ecumenical councils. It is fair to ask what the theological implications of these discussions should be, perhaps by comparison with prior commemorations of ecumenical councils. The fifteen-hundred-year commemoration of the Council of Chalcedon, in 1951, for example, was marked with Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Sempiternus Rex Christus*—which followed in the footsteps of Pius XI's commemoration of the sixteen-hundred-year anniversary of Nicaea in 1925, and the same Pope's 1931 encyclical *Lux Veritatis* commemorating the Council of Ephesus. *Sempiternus Rex Christus* charts the circuitous road to Chalcedon, the historical details of the event itself, and then outlines the theological substance of the Definition, commenting: "It is the climax of gladness and the consummation of holy joy, when that comes to pass which the Psalmist said: 'Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to live together in unity' (Ps. 132:1)."¹

During that period of commemorating Chalcedon, Karl Rahner

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¹ Pope Pius XII, *Sempiternus Rex Christus* (1951), §28.

published his famous essay “Chalcedon: End or Beginning,” which sets out to challenge the purportedly neo-Thomist or “manualist” approach to Christology, as being bound to one philosophical system, thus making Chalcedon an “end” rather than a “beginning.”² That is, a dogmatic formulation which resolves the fundamental questions about Jesus’s identity once and for all, rather than something that might stimulate fresh understandings, and be made ever new through the vicissitudes of history and each period’s respective thought-forms.

Controversies about considering specifically Trinitarian dogma as an “end” or a “beginning” have a long lineage. In 1830, Friedrich Schleiermacher managed to publish an exhaustive outline of Christian doctrine with barely any mention of the doctrine of the Trinity until the final chapter; making it seem like an afterthought, an awkward remnant of an earlier age when divine revelation could be received more easily. As is well known, Karl Barth self-consciously and deliberately did the exact opposite when structuring his exhaustive study in the 1930s. The first chapter of the first volume of Barth’s thirty-two-volume *Church Dogmatics* is an exposition of Trinitarian dogma, precisely because this dogma follows revealed logic and, says Barth, cannot therefore be contained or even approached by human philosophy.³

Rahner, in his book *The Trinity*, also contributes to this back-and-forth about the significance of the ordering of chapters in books about Christian doctrine. He claims that, between Peter Lombard’s *Sentences* of 1150 and St. Thomas’s *Summa theologiae* of the thirteenth century, the ordering of treatises on sacred doctrine had undergone an important change. He writes that the treatise *De Deo Uno* places a conceptual and philosophical discussion of God’s oneness—the divine nature, or *ousia*—at the beginning, supplanting the place once held by a discussion of God’s threeness, meaning the salvific reality of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.⁴

When it comes to “ends” and “beginnings,” then, there are significant implications about the relation between dogma and history, and between dogma and philosophy—and indeed about “formally revealed dogma” itself. This discussion has more recently been cast in a different mold by Rowan Williams. Interestingly, to my mind, recalling the Son’s being eternally generated by the Father, he suggests the category of revelation

² This essay was republished as “Current Problems in Christology,” in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 1 (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 1961), 149–200.

³ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1, *The Doctrine of the Word of God* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1975).

⁴ Karl Rahner, *The Trinity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001).

itself should be understood as “generative”—breaking “existing frames of reference,” initiating “new possibilities of life,” and decisively advancing or extending “the range of debate.” However, this approach threatens to present dogma as *only* a beginning, a perpetual set of questions rather than a set of definitive answers. The danger is then that revelation will “extend” the “range of ambiguity and conflict in language” so much that we end up being unable to say much with any confidence at all.⁵ If dogmatic formulations do not “end” in decisively referencing objective realities with stable categories, we might be left only with language, with a grammar, or with theology as a way of thinking.

The question of “where Joseph Ratzinger puts his discussions of the Trinity” seems at first sight less straightforward, because he did not write a systematic theology. He is very like St. John Henry Newman in this respect. Newman, like Ratzinger, does theology *in media res*, in the midst of things, leaving a corpus of occasional works responding to specific situations. Yet in Newman’s corpus, Nicaea does, in a sense, stand at the beginning, for his first major work is *Arians of the Fourth Century*, a discussion of the run-up to and aftermath of the events of 325. In this book, the creed itself is also a beginning, of sorts—an unfortunate or regrettable start of a new period, during which Christians must always cast into vulgar words the secret mysteries previously implicit in pious and prayerful hearts. By the time we reach the end of Newman’s corpus, however, in his last major work, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent*, things have changed. In a discussion of the Athanasian Creed, he presents dogma as very much an end, reminding us that it was called the *Psalmus Quicumque* in the early Church—not “a mere collection of notions,” but a “psalm or hymn of praise.” For, what he calls the “real” and “notional” are here joined into one, signified by the *lex orandi, lex credendi*.⁶ We find ourselves back to somewhere akin to Pius XII’s acclamation about Chalcedon, as the “climax of goodness and the consummation of holy joy.”

In this article, I wish to sketch how Ratzinger might be positioned within this discussion. More specifically, I want to take seriously Ratzinger’s own comment that “the principal word” (*Hauptwort*) of the Council of Nicaea was *homoousion*, meaning that “Jesus is one in Being [*Wesens*] with the Father.”⁷ Ratzinger’s discussions of this term are found in three books

⁵ Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2000), 134–35.

⁶ Newman, *An Essay in Aid of a Grammar of Assent* (London: Burns and Oates, 1870) 128–29.

⁷ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald, 1979);

published between 1968 and 1982: *An Introduction to Christianity*; *The God of Jesus Christ* (1976); and then *Principles of Catholic Theology*.

Introduction to Christianity (1968)

While Ratzinger did not write a systematic theology, if he had done, I suspect he would have followed the structure of the Apostle's Creed. He does this in *An Introduction to Christianity*, *The God of Jesus of Christ*, and various places elsewhere. Indeed, this avoids both the Schleiermacherian and Barthian extremes: the doctrine of Trinity then emerges *in media res*, in the very heart of things, with the second article: "I believe in His only Son, Jesus Christ Our Lord"—that is, with those words *Filium eius unicum*. His first book follows those who consider the Apostle's Creed to have developed from the baptismal formula of Matt 28:19 ("Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit"). Ratzinger charts its development into a *credo* with "a tripartite dialogue" of "question and answer," after which, probably in the second and third centuries, it "was expanded in the middle section" (that is, the second article) with the "question about belief in Christ."⁸ In part II of his book, then, Ratzinger gets into the question about belief in Christ as it was being asked on the theological scene of the 1960s.

He presents what he calls a "dilemma" of being faced with two different options which each attempt to avoid the scandal of the Incarnation, or what he calls "the absolutely staggering alliance of *logos* and *sarx*, of meaning and a single historical figure."⁹ On the one hand, some present everything only as *sarx* or flesh—that is, the "study of history and the critical method." Exemplars of this include unlikely bedfellows Baron von Hügel and Wolfhart Pannenberg. On the other hand, some present everything as *logos* or "meaning," and this is seen particularly in Rudolph Bultmann's historical agnosticism and his existentialist reframing of the Gospel. That is, Ratzinger says Bultmann is "escaping history completely and abandoning it as irrelevant to faith," as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel had tried to do many years previously.¹⁰ For the former tendency, he says, "mere history creates no present"—meaning that reducing certainty to only that which is disclosed by the critical method means Jesus ceases

see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16 vols. (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 208–2012), 6/2:807.

⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (London: Burns and Oates, 1969), 51.

⁹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 141.

¹⁰ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 145.

to be our contemporary, a person with ultimate significance for our own lives in the here and now. Replacing history with contemporary meaning, however, conversely means forsaking the objective reality of Christ himself. There is thus a definite trajectory, he claims, from Bultmannian demythologization to the so-called “death of God theology” which was in vogue in the late 1960s.¹¹

In response to this Scylla and Charybdis, Ratzinger penetrates to its origins in the well-worn separation of the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. On this front, he follows Barth's rebuke of the Church historian Adolf von Harnack closely, in positing an absolute identity between Jesus's office and his person, replete with a lengthy quote from the *Church Dogmatics*. Ratzinger concludes that “the person is the office, meaning the Jesus of history is always only the Christ of faith and vice versa, so the ‘I’ is the work and the work is the ‘I.’” He says this is why “the Creed offers no teachings of Jesus.”¹² It is Jesus's absolute identity as the Christ that matters—to say “Christ Jesus” is enough. Here we begin to approach the Nicene *homoousion*, although it is not named just yet. If we separate the office—the Christ-ship of Jesus—from the man of Nazareth, we assume access to a dimension of Jesus's being which is not Christ, and not therefore lived at every moment of its existence in the loving sacrifice that culminates at Golgotha. To refuse to separate the two words “Christ” and “Jesus,” however, means everything that can be known about the man of Nazareth can be known only with constant reference to his divine origin from the Father, from the one who calls him into being for the sake of his sacrificial love for each of us. Thus, he writes, “this ‘I’ is not at all something exclusive and independent but Being [*Sein*] completely derived from the ‘Thou’ of the Father and lived for the ‘You’ of man.”¹³

Jesus's having “Being completely derived” from the “Father” points to the *homoousion*, and it is further elucidated in terms of a “complete” or “total openness.” Ratzinger unpacks the logic thus: “If this ‘I’ is believed in as pure openness, as total being derived from the Father; if with its whole existence it is ‘son’—*actualitas* of pure service,” then Jesus's existence “is love,” and must therefore be “identical with God, who *alone* is love.”¹⁴ He here offers a description of the *homoousion*, in its necessary relation to the later formulation of the divine *hypostasis* at Chalcedon, without using all

¹¹ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 145.

¹² Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 149–50.

¹³ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 154; see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Einführung in das Christentum Neunte Auflage* (Munich: Kösel, 2000), 46.

¹⁴ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 155.

that technical terminology. He works from the missteps of various contemporaries to arrive at an understanding of Jesus Christ as the one who cannot be approached except as one whose total being is derived solely from the Father—a radical intensification of the old adage that a saint is someone whose life would not make any sense without God. In Jesus's life, we cannot but see God.

Then Nicaea itself is discussed directly. Ratzinger challenges the once-common position that St. John's "I am" formulae are an "ontologization" of some more authentic and less high-flown kerygma.¹⁵ He says that, to John, the title Son "is not the expression of any power of his own claimed by Jesus but the expression of the total relativity of his existence." That is, John recording Jesus saying "I am" is not arrogating to him some superior state of being in contrast to the humble carpenter's son of the Synoptics, but rather articulating the point that nothing can be known of the Son which is not relative to the Father. Then, this relativity coincides in its "very totality" with the "absolute." Because there is nothing of Jesus that is not Son, because his being is entirely derived from the Father, the "I am" addressed to Moses is spoken through and by Jesus himself.¹⁶ The formulation of Nicaea, says Ratzinger, was "intended to express nothing else than this identity of service and being" in Christ Jesus, the fact that Jesus is so entirely surrendered to the Father (in service, in loving sacrifice), that his speech is identical with God's own, it is God's own word, he speaks with the *ousia* of the Father. Therefore, those who claim Nicaea offers a "so-called ontological Christology" related to "mythical notions of begetting" are wrong. The Nicene *homoousion* develops directly and seamlessly "out of the Johannine testimony."¹⁷

Thus far, there are some impressions which are worth noting before moving on. First, Ratzinger alludes that the refusal to choose between "history" and "meaning" is rooted in the *homoousion*: if the man Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father, then history and meaning are inextricably and inalienably linked, because there is a historical figure whose being is indistinguishable from the source of all being. The relative is wedded to the absolute, the historical to ultimate meaning. Theologians have all too often tried to divorce them, whereas for Ratzinger it is as if Gotthold Lessing's "ugly broad ditch" had already been filled-in by Christ long before Lessing walked the earth. Secondly, it follows therefore that any clear separation

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 168.

¹⁶ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 167.

¹⁷ Ratzinger, *Introduction*, 169.

of Scripture and dogma is unsustainable. The narrative of Jesus might not mention this term *homooousios*, but it describes the life of the one whose “Being is completely derived from” the Father insofar as it radiates a “total openness” to the God who is love, to such a degree that it *is* that love. There is nothing of Jesus that is not radiant with divine love. Thirdly, it should be noted that the mode of the discussion here is, in a loose sense, existential and personalist. This description of the *homooousion* focuses on the lived reality of Christ’s existence in terms of loving service, and the “I”–“Thou” framework—indeed, it is this which works toward the Nicene *homooousion*, perhaps suggesting that this term is a perennial beginning, ever generative of new and startling applications, ever revelatory of the staggering reality of Christ Our Lord.

The God of Jesus Christ (1976)

I now want to move on to *The God of Jesus Christ: Meditations on the Triune God*. Again, the basic structure is that of the Ur-credo of the Apostle’s Creed, so the second part is on the second article, derived from some Advent talks and, saliently for present purposes, a sermon given at Regensburg in 1975 as part of the 1650-year commemoration of Nicaea. Interestingly, in this book Ratzinger also discusses matters relevant to the *homooousion* in the previous part, focused on God, and God the Father. He says that, when we make the sign of the Cross, “it assimilates into our personal life what was given to us in baptism without intervention or reflection.”¹⁸ He also acknowledges the basic challenge presented by the doctrine of the Trinity in modernity, the challenge that defined Schleiermacher’s, Barth’s, and Rahner’s treatments of the matter. “For most Christians,” says Ratzinger, “an embarrassed silence surrounds this centre of their faith.” He then makes a statement resonant with Barth, again, in which this doctrine is a perpetual beginning, causing us always to start with the radical alterity of God’s revelation, saying that it “is and remains the way to express the fact that God is the Other [*ganz anders*],” that God “is infinitely greater than we, and that he goes beyond our thinking and our whole being.”¹⁹

Needless to say, however, Ratzinger does not leave things with the Barthian *ganz anders*. In fact, he does the opposite, working from a certain similarity between humanity and God, rather than pure dissimilarity. He

¹⁸ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 18.

¹⁹ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 21.

does this with a discussion of fatherhood—as in earthly fatherhood—as something undergoing a crisis in our time. Being a father is today assumed to be a mere “biological accident” with no specific import, or as a relationship whose import is considered inherently tyrannical (we see this latter tendency today, insofar as the word “paternal” is now often used pejoratively rather than a neutral description of fatherly relations). The truth, Ratzinger claims, is that being a father to others is a distinctive role in which a man has “a responsibility toward another person.” This responsibility is distinctly characterized by “conveying” to the other person his or her “true freedom.”²⁰ For the record, Ratzinger does of course discuss maternity shortly after this, as a coequal mode of responsibility to others also exhibited by God. But the important point for this discussion is that he considers a father’s distinctive role as conveying freedom to his children. That is, the sharing of God the Father’s nature, the *homoousion*, configures God the Son with perfect freedom.

He then focuses on something which is discussed briefly in the *Introduction to Christianity* but now gets a more extensive treatment: Jesus’s prayer life. He says that, in “Jesus’s prayer the inner nature of God [*innere Gottes*] becomes visible,” presumably meaning particularly the farewell discourses of John’s Gospel, although both here and in the *Introduction* he mentions also, of course, Matt 11:25–27 (“I praise you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth,” for “all things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son”).²¹ Here, “we see what God is like,” he writes, for “faith in the triune God is nothing but the explanation of what takes place in Jesus’s prayer, in which the Trinity appears in all its brilliance.”²² We learn though this prayer that “it behooves the Father to say ‘Son’ just as it behooves Jesus to say ‘Father.’”²³ The relation of Sonship and Fatherhood is disclosed in Jesus’s prayer, and it reveals Jesus as “the recipient of God’s divine being”—that is, *homoousios* with the Father. Yet something is more explicit here than in the *Introduction to Christianity*: if God is Father once, he is Father in all eternity; if something pertains to the divine *ousia*, it pertains infinitely. “Even before the world was created, God is already the love of the Father and the Son.” In short, there was never a time when the Son was not, nor any time in which the Father was not Father. Again, “he

²⁰ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 22.

²¹ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 27; see also Joseph Ratzinger, *Der Gott Jesu Christi: Betrachtungen über den Dreieinigen Gott* (Munich: Kösel, 1976), 24.

²² Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 27.

²³ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 27.

is himself a Father from all eternity." This is why he is "the standard and measurement of all fatherhood," says Ratzinger, and hence the similarity within dissimilarity when it comes to earthly fathers.²⁴

The eternal generation of the Son is here, in a sense, a beginning, insofar as "being a Christian means participating in Jesus's prayer" by calling God our Father, and this means "looking at the world with this nucleus *as a starting point*."²⁵ The perpetual beginning of the Christian life is falling to our knees and calling God our Father. In doing this, he writes, we become "free, full of hope, resolute, and confident."²⁶ Insofar as to be Father is eternally to share being with the Son—that is, insofar as Jesus is *homoousios* with the Father—we are constituted in the fullness of our human freedom as children of God.

So let us turn to this book's discussion of the second article, on Christ himself. Here Ratzinger utilizes his sermon on Nicaea, and we find that statement I mentioned at the beginning, the "principle word of the council" is *homoousion*: "Jesus is one in Being with the Father."²⁷ Again, he acknowledges the trials and tribulations of Trinitarian theology in modernity, but argues that the issues which provoked that council in 325 still concern us today. An appraisal of the Nicene *homoousion* is, for Ratzinger, central to remedying the disjuncture between contemporary humanity and Trinitarian doctrine. The primary reason for this goes back, again, to people like von Harnack and common assumptions about a purported "Hellenization" that endured in different forms in the twentieth century. With this discussion, Ratzinger brings a new element to his descriptions of the *homoousion*—the relationship between philosophy and theology, between the human logos and the divine Logos. Does this word *homoousion* "mean that a kind of philosophy has been constructed from our faith?" he asks. Was "our faith" supplanted by "the Greek inquiry about Being [*Wesen*], whereas it would have been more biblical and more modern" to do things differently?"²⁸

Ratzinger then proceeds to challenge this view of the *homoousion*. He recalls the responses to the Chalcedonian definition given by bishops in 457, some of which are extant today in the *Codex Encyclius*. One of these describes the bishops as "piscatorie et non aristotelice"—fishermen and not philosophers. Ratzinger writes that this "expression might just as well

²⁴ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 27.

²⁵ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 27 (emphasis mine).

²⁶ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 28.

²⁷ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 78.

²⁸ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 78–79.

have been made by one of the fathers of the Council of Nicaea, for it characterized the state of mind which, in the presence of the Arian temptation, provided the bishops with a sense of direction.”²⁹ He claims that the fathers at Nicaea were not concerned about the “subtle issues of scholars”—that is, the Greek inquiry into Being with all its permutations—“but rather the simple elements [*das Einfache*] that disappeared behind these issues, the quite simple [*einfachen*] and primordial questions of simple people [*einfachen Menschen*].”³⁰

Now, some will ask how a technical term like the Nicene *homoousion* can be considered the proclamation of *piscatorie*, simple fishermen. Ratzinger answers by stating, first, that the *homoousion* is an answer to a simple question, “who is Christ Jesus?”—actually the most basic and fundamental question, the question that every Christian must ask, and ask over and over again. Secondly, while he asks whether the word *homoousion* does not “rather smack of Aristotle,” he concludes that the word—as an *answer*—is also simple. Here, the etymology of the German *einfachen/Einfach* is important. It contains the word for one, *eins*, and therefore simplicity here is oneness, as with divine simplicity. Simple here means single minded, transparent, unified, irreducible—not just basic or unrefined. Ratzinger claims that the word *homoousion* is, in a sense, simple, because it stands in a simple—meaning singular—relationship to one of “the numerous titles with which our faith has right from the start encompassed the mystery of Jesus,” a title he calls “single and unique”: *Son*. The point here is not that Sonship is a simple concept which anyone can understand; it is also that the word “Son” stands in a simple, as in single-minded, relationship with the other word *homoousion*. It is merely a “transposition,” he says, which takes the “very heart of the Bible,” Jesus’s prayer—“literally,” it holds to the “letter” of Scripture—“Jesus is one in Being with the Father.”³¹ Therefore, it is “not a question of adding some philosophy to the Bible”; it is rather “a protection *against* the ascendancy of hermeneutics.”³²

The great error of Arius and all his followers, from the explicit proponents of the third and fourth centuries to the implicitly Arian theologies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, was to let mere philosophical disputation answer the question “who is Jesus?” Recalling the criticisms of Bultmann from the *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger says this can

²⁹ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 79.

³⁰ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 79.

³¹ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 82.

³² Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 82 (emphasis mine; trans. altered—see Ratzinger, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 6/2:810).

only ever end in atheism. He mentions Karl Jaspers as one who answered only as a philosopher, whereby Jesus is man—is creature—and not Son.³³ Here we read that the inevitable trajectory to atheism was recognized by the Fathers, insofar as the Arians sought to protect the purity of God from the scandal of the Incarnation and ended up with a God “whom humanity cannot in any way approach,” and who cannot therefore “play a real role in the world.”³⁴ The Nicene *homoousion* just *is* the answer to the question of God, of God’s immanence as Jesus, and therefore the answer to the question of whether history has meaning, of whether the human logos can speak truthfully about divine realities, of whether the words of Scripture bear eternal truth, and therefore about our own participation in the divine life as children of God. We are enabled by grace to become children of God because Jesus is the Son, and the Nicene *homoousion* is presented by Ratzinger as almost a synonym, what he calls a “transposition” (*Übersetzung*), of this word, “Son.”

Now, before turning to the third and final passage of this paper, let me share a couple of impressions from this discussion. Firstly, this 1976 book continues Ratzinger’s discussion about how history has meaning because of the *homoousion*, as shown particularly by the linking of Arianism with atheism, or a *de facto* atheism of sheer transcendence at least. Secondly, again, any separation of Scripture and dogma is unsustainable, but now even more emphatically so, through the motif of this dogmatic term, as a “transposition,” not a philosophical accretion, or even a development. There are, however, newly emphasized dimensions coming into play. While the *Introduction* works in a loosely existentialist and personalist key, the focus on the prayer of Jesus here I think gives this approach a more explicitly theological basis. Indeed, as Ratzinger states, he had hoped this book “may help build a bridge between theology and spirituality.”³⁵ Recall that the passage discussed here began life as a sermon. The third-person standpoint of metaphysical speculation rarely applies in “spiritual writings,” and Ratzinger hereby connects spirituality with dogma.

But the central element I want to note is that the Nicene *homoousion* is applied as definitive of the relationship between philosophy and faith. It might seem that this presents the *homoousion* as a beginning, insofar as philosophy is merely wielded or utilized as needed in service of faith, and as such our philosophical frameworks will change in every age, just

³³ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 80.

³⁴ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 81.

³⁵ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 3.

as Rahner and Barth and others maintain. After all, Ratzinger writes, on looking back to 325, “the philosophical panorama constantly changes.”³⁶ I want to suggest that there is another way of looking at it, however. The concept of *ousia* embedded in the *homoousion* is here more than just another contribution of philosophy as *ancilla* or handmaid. Ratzinger’s assertion of the identity between the word “Son” and *homoousion* is such that it does not seem quite right to suppose that the word “Son” could just as easily be transposed into a different philosophical key. This can be seen by Ratzinger’s focus on “simplicity”—because the question being asked and the answer being provided are so fundamental, he writes—this word cannot “become obsolete” and it “always remains the same.”³⁷ He says this word *homoousion* captures a “literal reality”—which is exactly what Jesus is as Son to simple and humble fishermen.³⁸

Principles of Catholic Theology (1982)

My third and final text is from *Principles of Catholic Theology*. As maybe a Trinitarian nuance to its 1982 publication date, the passage in question here was originally written for the 1981 sixteen-hundred-year commemoration of the First Council of Constantinople—and no discussion of Nicaea I is really complete without looking to Constantinople I. Yet people often speak of Nicaea when they mean Nicaea-Constantinople, and people frequently speak of the Nicene Creed when they mean the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed of 381. Indeed, astute readers of this article may be asking why my title is not “The centrality of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan *homoousion*.” Well, in *The Principles of Catholic Theology*, Ratzinger provides a way of answering that question.

The initial sense one gets from the passage is that the 1981 commemoration felt like a new beginning, as related to the book’s purpose to flesh out some issues arising during a period of ecumenical optimism, and the fact that the Creed of 381 was then described as, “even today, . . . the common possession of nearly all Christian churches and ecclesial communities.”³⁹ Indeed, that commemoration featured a declaration and joint statement signed by the German leaders of the Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant churches, and Ratzinger here contributes to this developing discussion.

³⁶ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 79.

³⁷ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 79.

³⁸ Ratzinger, *God of Jesus Christ*, 82.

³⁹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 112.

The passage recounts the background to both Nicaea and Constantinople. Since the conversion of Constantine, the pantheons of Greece and Rome “had ceased to be credible,” and monotheism had emerged as a superior belief. This placed the faith under significant pressure, insofar as it was then “recognised as [the] heir to ancient philosophy,” which was the Greco-Roman “religion of reason”—but Christianity was originally a faith of revelation.⁴⁰ As such, says Ratzinger, “the conflict about the meaning of the concept ‘Son of God’ could not fail to reach dramatic proportions.”⁴¹ That is, a Greco-Roman construal of the divine *ousia* cannot “beget” a Son, but could perhaps create a firstborn of all creation who was not *homoousios* with him—which would mean that there was a time when the “son” was not. The context immediately prior to Nicaea is thus described as one of struggle among “political accommodation, philosophical enlightenment and the resistance of religion [Christianity] to both of them.”⁴²

He writes that Arius’s proposed solution to this struggle was “extraordinarily appealing,” given the context, because Arius “embedded” Christology “in a framework acceptable to the ruling modes of thought [*Plausibilitätsstruktur*].”⁴³ Arianism was philosophically convincing—no doubt popular among those who were more *aristotelice* than they were *piscatorie*—but it was also politically expedient, seeming to insert Christianity in the trajectory of Roman history, as just another chapter within the Greco-Roman worldview.

Given the significance of the issue, then, we can understand why Constantine saw fit to convoke “the first ecumenical council in history” in 325. The outcome, as described by Ratzinger, was a definitive rejection of “the notion of a Christianity of accommodation.” While Arius sought to soften the word “Son” into a metaphor or mere image, the fathers at Nicaea decided Christ is *homoousios* with the Father and that, as such, he is God in the literal sense—he bears the divine *ousia* as much as does God the Father—and thus, “they incorporated the formula [*homoousion*] . . . into their confession of faith, their creed.”⁴⁴

Again, the place of philosophy is central to Ratzinger’s argument. He writes, beginning strikingly with the word “if”—showing the almost complete identity of the term *homoousion* and Son once again—“if a

⁴⁰ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 113 (trans. altered).

⁴¹ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 113.

⁴² Ratzinger, *Principles*, 113–14.

⁴³ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 114; see also Ratzinger, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8/2:707.

⁴⁴ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 114.

philosophical concept was . . . joined to the biblical words, it was only for the purpose of saying . . . that the Bible is to be taken seriously in its literal meaning and is not to be modified by philosophical accommodations to a mode of thought that is more widely acceptable.”⁴⁵ Arius’s great error was to get this the wrong way round, to have “measured Christianity by the norms of enlightened understanding and altered it accordingly.”⁴⁶ The word *homoousios* is therefore described as a clarification of the central “belief that is the essence of Christianity,” not as an innovation or development.⁴⁷

Notwithstanding all this, however, we all know that the reception of the council of 325 was hardly straightforward. Here we encounter Ratzinger’s quote from St. Basil’s *De Spiritu Sancto* about the “the incomprehensible chatter, the confused din of uninterrupted clamouring” which had “filled almost the whole of the Church” during Nicaea’s immediate reception. This quote was of course to become particularly recognizable after 2005, when the then Pope Benedict XVI applied it to the reception of the Second Vatican Council. *Principles of Catholic Theology* focuses on this original troublesome period in the fourth century, covering Constantius II’s rapprochement with Arianism or semi-Arianism in 360, which claimed to have annulled the Nicene Creed.⁴⁸ He then works toward 381, focusing on the developing theologies of the Cappadocians, before what is described as “a new consensus” was reached at Antioch in 379.

The passage closes by outlining various reasons as to why this consensus was reached, culminating in 381. This includes the Cappadocian Fathers’ reflections, which “approached the problem of Christian monotheism from a new angle”: not seeing the consubstantiality of Son and Spirit as challenging monotheism, but actually as revealing it, recognizing triune monotheism in its own right.⁴⁹ In addition to this, Ratzinger says that, in the run-up to Constantinople, “a new threshold of history was reached” and Christianity gained a new “confidence of thought.” The suffering of the martyrs and their “deep-rooted reliance on the prayer and on the liturgy of the Church” revealed the Nicene faith to be authentic as the ground of that prayer and liturgy, sufficient to lead those witnesses to enter into Christ’s loving sacrifice by the shedding of their blood.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 114–15.

⁴⁶ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 115.

⁴⁷ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 115.

⁴⁸ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 115.

⁴⁹ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 118.

⁵⁰ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 118.

Here we get to what I think is the important point for understanding the Nicene *homoousion* in relation to Constantinople. Ratzinger concentrates on St. Basil's importance for this period. In Basil, he claims, this period of renewal is shown to be one in which the influence of the Holy Spirit comes to the fore. He says that, for Basil, "devotion to the Holy Spirit" as God is "not a theological theory, but a search for the spirit of faith, a search for divine life and for the renewal of the Church in the Spirit."⁵¹ It stood as a challenge to the political power that had seduced a Church into error, and hence, it includes also the foundation of monasticism enshrined in Basil's Rule. This, in its simplicity and holiness, gave forth "a persuasive power that was stronger" than the two bulwarks of Arianism or semi-Arianism—that is, "rationalistic accommodation" and political expedience.⁵²

This is related to Ratzinger's description of the rather grim years of Constantius II, in which "the Church was disavowing her own decision [for the *homoousion*], and consequently, her right to make her own decisions."⁵³ Through the decades long trials and tribulations of the *homoousion*, "it becomes clear," he says, "that the unity of the Church is not to be brought about by human effort, but can be effected only by the Holy Spirit."⁵⁴ The Nicene *homoousion*, specifically, is therefore itself understood only *in media res*, in the midst of things; it is always relatively incomplete because it cannot be properly thought about or studied without reference to the ongoing witness of the Spirit in history—it depends on its own historical trajectory after its formulation. Indeed, in this way it is joined to the Spirit, as if—as described by the farewell discourses of John, from whence, for Ratzinger, the *homoousion* itself derives—another came as an advocate to lead the followers of Christ into the fullness of truth.

There are thus two elements which come to the fore in *Principles*: (1) the living witness of the Spirit in history, bound to the Nicene *homoousion*; and (2) the positioning of the *homoousion* against accommodation of any kind, philosophical or political—to whatever governing mode of thought seems so palatable and seductive to those living as the world lives. On this last point, Ratzinger is very clear: "today," he writes, we can learn a great deal from the *homoousion*—that the Church cannot be saved by "compromise

⁵¹ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 120.

⁵² Ratzinger, *Principles*, 120.

⁵³ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 116.

⁵⁴ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 121.

or accommodation or by mere theorizing,” but only “from a depth of faith that opens to the door to the Holy Spirit.”⁵⁵

Conclusion

Ratzinger cannot easily be inserted into the discussion around Trinitarian dogma as an “end” or a “beginning.” The *homoousion* is in some ways a beginning, capturing what he calls the nucleus or starting point of Christian life, the Our Father. In another way, there is a finality implied by this term on the question of philosophy. The incorporation of the word *ousia* into a confession of faith is so definitive as to offer almost a synonym for Christ’s own self-description as Son. Moreover, his discussions of the *homoousion* present it as a final exemplar with a perennial relevance, insofar as different ideological paradigms so often threaten the simplicity of the Nicene faith, and the proponents of such ideologies invariably argue, as did the Arians, that basic biblical realities are time-bound metaphors or images for some other fashionable concept. For Ratzinger, this was Marxist liberation; for us today, other ideologies take that place.

Yet there is also a sense in which the Nicene *homoousion* is for Ratzinger neither an end nor a beginning. It can never but be *in media res*, in the midst of things, because the achievement of 325 almost came to nothing without the development of the giftedness of the Spirit in history. As for Newman, in dogma the “real” and “notional” are joined into one, and we find ourselves somewhere akin to Pius XII’s acclamation about the “climax of goodness and the consummation of holy joy.” In any case, the relation of the *homoousion* to such characteristically Ratzingerian hallmarks—spiritual simplicity, a suspicion of political ideologies, the intertwining of philosophy and faith, and indeed history and meaning—suggests there is a strong case to be argued that the Nicene *homoousion* is indeed central for Joseph Ratzinger’s theology, and this theology should therefore figure in the discussions about Nicaea taking place in the current year. N.V

⁵⁵ Ratzinger, *Principles*, 121.