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Part 2

The Development of Trinitarian Doctrine

Have you ever studied something that you know is true but found it took a lot of effort to try to understand and explain it? The Mystery of the Trinity is like that.

For even the most thoughtful theologian, the most distinguished philosopher, or the holiest saint, the Trinity is a complex reality to grasp and express. God revealed the truth of our Trinitarian faith to the very earliest Christians, but it took time for the Church to clarify the depths of this truth. In fact, it took several centuries for early bishops and Church Fathers to develop and agree on language that would best express the subtle nuances of one God in three Divine Persons.

During these early centuries of Church history, varied ideas about the Trinity existed, especially about Jesus' place in it. The early Church sifted through all these ideas—some correct and some incorrect. Their efforts bore fruit in the early Ecumenical Councils. These Councils produced the Nicene Creed and other clear statements of core Catholic truths. They shaped the language and direction of Trinitarian theology for centuries to come.

The articles in this part address the following topics:

- The Early Church Faces Challenges to Apostolic Faith (page 27)
- Early Christological Heresies (page 29)
- The Ecumenical Councils of the Early Church (page 32)
- The Nicene Creed (page 34)
- The Trinity: Model for Human Relationships (page 36)

6 The Early Church Faces Challenges to Apostolic Faith

After Jesus died, rose, and ascended to Heaven, the early Church faced the enormous task of precisely articulating the doctrine about the Trinity and about Jesus and defending those truths against those who challenged them. During these first centuries, bishops and **Church Fathers** worked at these tasks. They often did so in official gatherings called **Ecumenical Councils**. They developed the language that would reflect, as fully as possible, the depth, breadth, and meaning of these sacred, revealed truths.

Many people had their own theories about who Jesus was and what his time on earth had achieved. Many of these ideas were heresies, or false teachings. This complicated the early Church's task. She was kept very busy defending the true teachings passed on from the Apostles when so many conflicting and false theories were circulating.

The Early Church Develops Trinitarian Language

In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the holy Spirit be with all of you" (13:13). This very early New Testament letter was written in the mid-50s AD. It shows the early Church's firm belief in the Trinity from the earliest times. However, it is one thing to know something is true; it is quite another thing to speak and write about that truth in a way that will make sense to other people. To express the doctrine of the Trinity, the Church Fathers turned to the language of **philosophy**. This language, though



Church Fathers

Teachers and writers in the early Church, many of whom were bishops, whose teachings are a witness to the Apostolic Tradition.

Ecumenical Council

A worldwide gathering of Catholic bishops convened by the Pope to discuss and resolve issues and problems the Church is facing.

philosophy

In Greek this word literally means "love of wisdom." It refers to the study of human existence using logical reasoning.

Catholic Wisdom

The Words of Saint Irenaeus

"The Church, having received this preaching and this faith, although scattered throughout the whole world, yet, as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points just as if she had but one soul, and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them, and hands them down, with perfect harmony, as if she possessed only one mouth."

often difficult for us to understand, was in common use at that time. Paragraph 252 of the *Catechism* explains the following words, which are used to describe Trinitarian doctrine:

- The word *substance* is used to name “the divine being in its unity.”
- The word *person* (in Greek, *hypostasis*) is used to refer to the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each fully God, yet each distinct.
- The word *relation* is used to indicate that the distinction among the three Persons lies in the relationship of each to the others.

Developing this standard vocabulary in speaking and writing about the Trinity was a great help to the Church Fathers. They could more easily express the faith of the early Christian community and defend that faith to those who challenged it. ✚

Saint Irenaeus, Defender of the Faith

Saint Irenaeus was a second-century bishop in what is now Lyons, France. As a prolific writer, he was a key figure in the many controversies that developed as the early Church sought to clarify her Trinitarian faith. His most famous work is a series of books called *Against Heresies*. In it Irenaeus stresses how crucial it was for the Church to safeguard her apostolic faith. This was the faith that Jesus had shared with the Apostles and that they had passed on to their successors. Irenaeus is particularly concerned about Gnosticism. This was one of the false teachings about Jesus that was circulating in the Church at that time. Irenaeus’s courageous effort to defend apostolic faith against Gnosticism and other heresies can inspire us. We too need to speak the truth without fear, trusting always in God’s steadfast love.

Saint Irenaeus’s feast day is June 28.



7 Early Christological Heresies

How can 100 percent man and 100 percent God equal 100 percent Jesus? That just doesn't seem to add up! The mystery of Jesus' being fully human and fully divine doesn't make sense as math or science. The early bishops and Church Fathers struggled to articulate and defend this Mystery of Faith against errors and misinterpretations. This is because during the first several centuries of the Church, some **Christological** heresies, or incorrect beliefs about Jesus, developed.

Focusing on Jesus' Humanity Only

Have you ever debated with someone who was so convinced he or she was right that he or she completely lost sight of the truth on the other side? Player X, for them, is the best, so player Y has no value. Something like that happens with the heresies about Jesus.

Some heresies downplayed or denied the divinity of Jesus. For example, Arianism claimed that Jesus was created, just as we were. Arius, its proponent, said that Jesus did not exist before he was conceived in Mary's womb. Arius believed that Jesus was a higher creature than humans but less than God. Nestorianism believed that in Jesus there were actually two Persons. One was divine and one was human. Nestorius argued that it was wrong to say things like "God suffered and died for us" or "God was born of the Virgin Mary." These statements would apply to the human person Jesus, but not to the Divine Person. Nestorius was really concerned about stressing the humanity of Jesus. He would not even allow the Virgin Mary to be known as the Mother of God.

Focusing on Jesus' Divinity Only

Other heresies played down the humanity of Jesus. Docetism alleged that Jesus' humanity was a sort of disguise—he looked like a human and acted like a human, but inside, he was really just God. For example, Docetists claimed that Jesus didn't really suffer on the cross. They said he *appeared* to be suffering, but he couldn't *really* suffer a human death because he was God. Monophysitism believed that Jesus' divinity fully absorbed his humanity, so that, in the end, he was only divine and not human.



Christology

Literally the study of Christ; the systematic statement of Christian beliefs about Jesus Christ, including his identity, mission, and saving work on earth.

The name Gnosticism comes from *gnosis*, the Greek word for “knowledge.” It was a series of religions, common in the Greco-Roman world. It claimed that salvation can be reached only by getting special, secret knowledge from God

Heresies Focusing on Jesus’ Humanity

Name	Belief
Arianism	Jesus was created, just as we were, and he did not exist before he was conceived in Mary’s womb. Jesus was a higher creature than humans but less than God.
Nestorianism	In Jesus there were actually two Persons, one divine and one human. It was improper to say statements that would apply to only the human person Jesus, not the divine Person.

Heresies Focusing on Jesus’ Divinity

Name	Belief
Docetism	Jesus’ humanity was a sort of disguise—he looked like a human and acted like a human, but inside he was really just God.
Monophysitism	Jesus’ divinity fully absorbed his humanity, so that, in the end, he was only divine and not human.
Gnosticism	Salvation can be attained only by acquiring special, secret knowledge from God or God’s agent.

Pray It!

Prayer for Sharing the Truth

Jesus Christ, Son of God and Son of Mary,
 Sharing your truth with the world can be difficult and intimidating. Help us to speak and act in accord with your teaching. Guide us in treating all of your children with respect, care, and understanding. Inspire us to overcome any anxiety we might have in sharing your Good News with the world. Teach us to befriend, pray, and sacrifice so that all may know your truth.

Loving God, strengthen us in times we falter and struggle in sharing your Good News. Help us to always remember that you embrace us in your love and forgiveness.

Amen.

or God's agent. The Christian form of Gnosticism said that Jesus was not a man at all, but a semidivine being. God sent him to share this special knowledge with a select, elite group of people God wanted to save.

The Church Defends the Truth

These Christological heresies caused a great deal of division within the Church. Most of the heresies were incorrect teachings about either Christ's human nature or his divine nature. Because of all of this controversy, the Church Fathers needed to present the doctrine of the Incarnation in clear, careful, and balanced teaching. We can benefit from their writings

Mary, Mother of God: The *Theotokos*

The Catholic Church's teachings and beliefs about Jesus are closely related to her teachings and beliefs about his mother, Mary. As early as the New Testament period, Mary was revered as the Mother of Jesus. However, she did not receive the title Mother of God until the Nestorian heresy was renounced at the Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431. This Council affirmed Mary as the *Theotokos*, a Greek word that literally means "God-bearer" but is often translated as "Mother of God." Today both the Roman Catholic Church and the Eastern Orthodox Churches continue to venerate her with this title. Honoring Mary as the *Theotokos* acknowledges the unique role she played in our salvation. She brought the presence of God into the world in a way no one else could. Because she is the Mother of Jesus, she is also the Mother of God.

How can you bring God's presence into your home, school, and other activities? Let Mary's example of faith and courage motivate and empower you to carry God's life, love, and grace to a world in great need of healing and hope.



today. They are easily available to those who take the time to find them. The Incarnation is truly a mystery, but that does not mean it is completely beyond our understanding. Rather it is a Mystery of Faith because its truth is so deep that we can never exhaust everything that it has to teach us. ✝

8 The Ecumenical Councils of the Early Church

Throughout the Church's history, bishops have met in gatherings called Ecumenical Councils to discuss the challenges facing the Church. A particular focus of the Ecumenical Councils in the early centuries of the Church was the challenges to Christological and Trinitarian doctrines. Between AD 325 and AD 787, seven Ecumenical Councils were held. We will discuss the two most important of these; both took place in ancient cities located in modern-day Turkey.

The Council of Nicaea

In AD 325 the Council of Nicaea declared that Jesus is truly God. In technical language, it declared that God the Son is "of the same substance" as God the Father. Stating and defending this belief countered the heretical claims of Arianism, which maintained that Jesus was more than human but less than God—a sort of "in-between" creature.

The Council of Nicaea also produced the first draft of what is now known as the Nicene Creed. You may be familiar with this Creed from praying it at Sunday liturgy. It states

Ecumenical Councils of the Early Church

Location	Year	Outcome
Council of Nicaea	325	the Nicene Creed
Constantinople	381	revised the Nicene Creed by adding the clauses referring to the Holy Spirit
Ephesus	431	defined the true personal unity of Christ and declared Mary the Mother of God (<i>Theotokos</i>)
Chalcedon	451	defined the two natures of Christ (divine and human)

that Jesus is “born of the Father before all ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” These lines, written nearly seventeen hundred years ago, continue to express, with both beauty and clarity, Jesus’ identity as the Second Person of the Trinity.

The Council of Chalcedon

Whereas the Council of Nicaea focused on understanding the Trinity, especially the relationship and distinction between God the Father and God the Son, the Council of Chalcedon focused on understanding the inner life of God the Son. In

The Second Vatican Council

Not all Ecumenical Councils are part of ancient history. In fact, the Church has continued to hold Ecumenical Councils from time to time throughout her history. Ecumenical Councils are convened by the Pope, the successor to Saint Peter and the Vicar of Christ, or are at least confirmed or recognized by him. The Pope must confirm the decisions made during the Council.

The most recent Ecumenical Council was the Second Vatican Council, convened by Pope John XXIII and held from 1962 to 1965. Sometimes it is referred to simply as Vatican II. This Council issued sixteen documents dealing with a variety of topics, including the liturgy, Christian education, religious freedom, and the relationship of the Church to non-Christian religions. Many of the decisions made at Vatican II continue to affect the spiritual lives of Catholics today.

Periodically holding Ecumenical Councils, synods, and other gatherings is a sign of the Church’s willingness to explore pressing needs and issues. She wants to respond to these concerns with the message, values, and truth of the Gospel.





solemnities

Important holy days in the Catholic liturgical calendar, such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, and All Saints' Day.

other words, what is the relationship between Jesus' humanity and his divinity? In the year 451, the 350 bishops attending the Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus' two natures (his human nature and his divine nature) are undivided and inseparable. Jesus is 100 percent human and 100 percent divine. He is not half man and half God; nor is he two Persons somehow pushed into one. Jesus, God the Son, is *one* Divine Person with *two* natures. As the *Catechism* states, quoting a document produced by the Council of Chalcedon, Jesus is "consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity"³ (467). ✚

9 The Nicene Creed

Chances are you've studied the Declaration of Independence already. Part of it sums up what people in the British colonies of North America believed in 1776 about their civil rights. A creed does something like that also. A creed is a summary statement of the beliefs of an individual or a community. The creed most Catholics are familiar with is the Nicene Creed. The formal name for this creed is the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed. It is the product of two Ecumenical Councils—the Council of Nicaea held in AD 325 and the Council of Constantinople in AD 381, at which it was promulgated.

Proclaiming Shared Beliefs

Catholics say the Nicene Creed at Sunday celebrations of the Eucharist as well as at **solemnities**, Baptisms, and other special liturgical celebrations. This recitation of the Creed during a liturgy is called the profession of faith. Saying the Creed together in this way allows the gathered assembly to "respond to the word of God proclaimed in the readings taken from Sacred Scripture and explained in the homily and that they may also call to mind and confess the great mysteries of the faith" (*General Instruction on the Roman Missal*, 67). It also underscores our unity as one community of faith. We can help and support one another in our efforts to be faithful to the truths we profess together. Moreover, because we belong to a global Church, we are united in faith, through the Creed, with Catholics throughout the world.

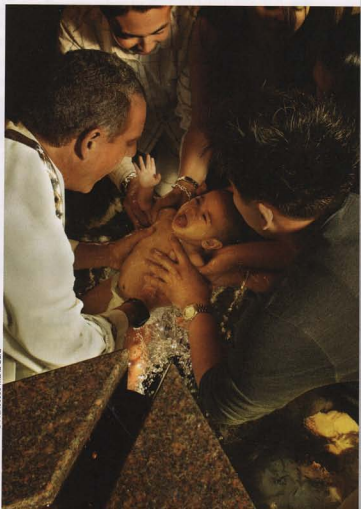
The Creed and Baptism

From the early centuries of the Church, the Creed has played an important role in the liturgy of Baptism. Because Baptism is the Sacrament by which one becomes a Christian, it was important for the people being baptized to know and profess the beliefs of the community they were joining. Most Catholics today were baptized as babies, so our parents and godparents promised to raise us according to the faith of the Church as stated in the Creed. Thus, praying the Creed each Sunday is a way for us to dedicate ourselves again to the Catholic faith. We renew our commitment to the promises made by us, or by others on our behalf, at our Baptism.

Key Concepts in the Nicene Creed

Even if you are familiar with the Nicene Creed, take the opportunity to read it carefully now and find where it expresses these key doctrines of our faith:

- The Creed expresses a Trinitarian faith in God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit.
- The Creed identifies Jesus' birth, death, Resurrection, and Ascension as key events in our salvation.
- The Creed states the four "marks" or characteristics of the Church: the Church is one, holy, catholic, and apostolic.
- The Creed affirms belief in the resurrection of the dead and in the Last Judgment.



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When we pray the Nicene Creed, we renew our baptismal promises. Read the Creed on page 36. Identify what it states about the three Divine Persons of the Trinity and the Church.

The core truths of the Church expressed clearly and concisely, in a way that invites prayer, reflection, and further study—this is the wisdom and the appeal of the Nicene Creed. †

The Nicene Creed

I believe in one God,
the Father almighty,
maker of heaven and earth,
of all things visible and invisible.

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,
the Only Begotten Son of God,
born of the Father before all ages.
God from God, Light from Light,
true God from true God,
begotten, not made, consubstantial
with the Father;
through him all things were made.
For us men and for our salvation
he came down from heaven,
and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate
of the Virgin Mary,
and became man.

For our sake he was crucified under
Pontius Pilate,
he suffered death and was buried,
and rose again on the third day

in accordance with the Scriptures.
He ascended into heaven
and is seated at the right hand of the
Father.

He will come again in glory
to judge the living and the dead
and his kingdom will have no end.

I believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord,
the giver of life,
who proceeds from the Father and the
Son,
who with the Father and the Son is
adored and glorified,
who has spoken through the prophets.

I believe in one, holy, catholic and
apostolic Church.

I confess one Baptism for the
forgiveness of sins
and I look forward to the resurrection
of the dead
and the life of the world to come.
Amen.

10 The Trinity: Model for Human Relationships

What does the Trinity have to do with you? For many Catholics the Trinity can seem like an incomprehensible mystery, a distant reality, or an abstract theory. In fact, the Trinity isn't unrelated to our human experience. The *Catechism* tells

us that “there is a certain resemblance between the unity of the divine persons” (1890) and the kind of relationships we should have with one another.

What is this “certain resemblance”? How should our human relationships reflect what we see in the Trinity? The Trinity is a dynamic communion of Persons who dwell together in love and unity. They never cease to reach out with grace, compassion, and mercy to all humanity. Our Triune God is not distant from us, unconcerned with our joys and struggles; rather, our God is involved in human history. Our God is so involved, in fact, that he became part of human history through the Incarnation of Jesus Christ.

This is the God in whose image we are created, and this is the God with whom we are destined to live forever in Heaven. While we live on earth, we are to live like this God—in relationship with others, not in isolation. As the *Catechism* states, through “exchange with others, mutual service and dialogue”⁴ (1879), we grow as people, discover our gifts and talents, and learn to live in the way God wants. In this way the Trinity, as a communion of Divine Persons, gives us a foundation for relationships built on unity, truth, and love.

How can you use the Trinity as a model for your own relationships?

Live It!

Take Time to Listen

How can we live a Trinitarian life, in communion with God and with others? How can we grow in that “mutual service and dialogue” (*Catechism*, 1879) that God wants for us as sharers in his life and love? Building upon our baptismal grace that unites us in love with God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—we can work toward mutual respect and love toward one another. Mutual respect and love require that we take time to listen.

Listening is not always easy. If you sense a conversation will be difficult, pray first. Ask the Holy Trinity for help in seeing the other person as a child of God and a brother or sister in Christ. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you to listen.

Then focus on the person speaking and give your full attention. Try not to think of what you might say in return. Eliminate distractions—such as a cell phone or TV. If you don’t understand something, ask questions. Make eye contact.

When it is time for you to respond, ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to speak with love and to provide the advice, encouragement, or support the other person needs.

- You can be involved in the lives of your family members, even when it is inconvenient.
- You can reach out to a new student at your school.
- You can enlarge your circle of friends and acquaintances to include people that others may have overlooked or excluded.
- You can take on a new role or ministry in your parish community.

Can you think of other ways?

When we live out our call to community in these and other ways, we are truly following God's design. That design is revealed for us in the Mystery of the Holy Trinity: three Persons living forever in unity and love as One. ✠

God created us to live as a part of a community, supporting, serving, and loving one another. How do you support, love, and serve those in the communities of your family, school, church, and city?

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Review

1. What difficult tasks did the early Church face in safeguarding the apostolic faith?
2. What were the two main types of heresies about Jesus in the early Church?
3. Why do we use the title "Mother of God" to refer to Mary?
4. What did the Council of Nicaea declare about Jesus? What belief about Jesus was the Council defending?
5. What did the Council of Chalcedon affirm about the relationship of the human and divine natures in Jesus?
6. Why do Catholics say the Nicene Creed at certain liturgical celebrations?
7. What are some of the key doctrines of the Catholic faith that the Nicene Creed states?
8. In what ways can the Trinity be a model for human relationships?