

2. Consubstantial with the Father

One of the most disconcerting changes in the new translation is the replacement, in the Nicean Creed, of “one in being” by the technical term, “consubstantial.”

The first thing to remember is that this word belongs with a set of terms expressing much the same thing in a variety of ways. They include metaphors, drawn from ordinary experience, such as human generation (Father-Son) or the radiation of light (light from light), unexplained statements that echo these (God from God), and also one unfamiliar word, *consubstantial*.

These terms need to be read in relation to each other; they are meant to nuance, correct and reinforce each other mutually.

It would hardly be logical for us to rule out the occasional use of a technical term in religion, since we have recourse to technical language every day of the week. Scanning the financial pages we won’t get far without some idea of what “hedge funds” are, or reading about health-spending we need a certain rudimentary knowledge of what is meant by schizophrenia, for example, while we will surely be quite lost without some literacy in the language of electronics.

Was Jesus Christ simply a human being like us, even if a very extraordinary one? Or was he, as the New Testament seems to say, also in some way divine? Was he, at the deepest level of his being, one with God or was he not? If he was, how is this to be thought?

Here we are dealing with something that we could never have discovered for ourselves – the divinity of Christ, the inner nature of God; these are truths *revealed* to us by God. It took Christians centuries of effort to forge a language in which these things could be spoken about intelligibly and without error.

The problem was that the biblical words and images proved insufficient to resolve the new questions. To answer them convincingly, Church thinkers looked for suitable words, especially from philosophy. “One in being” is the standard translation of one of these, the Greek term, *homoousios*. The Latin Church translated it by “consubstantial,” meaning – crudely – that Jesus was “made of the same substance or stuff” as God.

This earthy way of talking had then to be transposed on to the highest spiritual level. There it meant that whatever God is, Jesus is too – in everything except the relation of Father-Son.

Once we have some idea of what “consubstantial” means, is it really any more difficult than “one in being?” Maybe the simple everyday words of the latter give an impression of intelligibility that is a bit deceptive. In any case, “consubstantial” has stood the test of time right up to our own day.

One truly astonishing thing for us today is that, in ancient times, the discussions involved everyone, even the common people. Saint Gregory of Nyssa recounts, “In the public squares, at crossroads, on the streets and lanes, people would stop you and discourse at random about the Trinity.” Hardly thinkable today!