

Catechism 12 Dogma from 2nd to 5th Centuries

- The New Testament remained normative for the Christian community in its understanding of Jesus.
- This is because the New Testament witnesses to the actual experiences of those who knew Jesus prior to his death. Christians continued to experience Jesus through the gift of his Spirit, but only those who knew Jesus were in a position to recognize these post-crucifixion experiences as being experiences of Jesus. Only they were in a position to recognize him.
- Later Christians linked these experiences with Jesus on the word of the first generation of Christians.

- Their understanding would go beyond that of the New Testament, but it could never contradict it.
- Since the second and later generations of Christians belonged for the most part to cultures other than Jewish, they needed to go beyond the language and images of the New Testament as they strove to understand Jesus and to convey their understanding to others.
- The Greeks brought to Christianity a special kind of inquiring mind seeking explanatory language in which to communicate what it was that Christians believed.

- Greek thinkers had to develop Greek words in which to express their insights into Jesus and the meaning he gave their lives. We misunderstand their words if we interpret them abstractly, for their contemplation was of Jesus, and their insights came from within a living, worshipping community.
- At times they were working unawares from false assumptions, and it took time for this to become clear.
- At times people were arguing about words rather than about reality as they had not sufficiently defined their terms.

- Underneath the complexities of misunderstandings, hidden and mistaken assumptions, oversights and false directions (not to mention lies, deception and hypocrisy that interfere with our journey to the truth) we will be looking for the prevailing movement of faith, the insights and convictions that underlie their search, confident that these will assist us in avoiding error and in clarifying the meaning of Jesus for us today.

n. 465 Docetism ('dokeô - seeming')

- In the polytheistic world of the early centuries people had little trouble adding another god to the pantheon. Since emperors were thought of as divine, there was no fundamental problem in accepting Jesus as divine.
- The earliest heresy was to deny the reality of Jesus' humanity. He was imagined by some as a God who took on the appearance of a human body.
- Faithful Christians asserted the full reality of the human Jesus.

The demiurge

(dêmiourgos: one who works for the people)

- In Egyptian mythology Thoth (ibis) hatched the world egg, and brought about creation simply by his word. In certain strands of Greek thought it was asserted that it was impossible for there to be direct communication between the transcendent Deity and creatures. Creation was thought of as the work of an inferior emanation from the Deity.
- Influenced by these ideas Jesus was thought of as the incarnation not of God but of this lower divine emanation - the demiurge responsible for creation.

Irenaeus (died 202) and Gnosticism

- Irenaeus wrote a massive refutation of these heresies in his 'Against the Heresies' (From the Latin 'Adversus Haereses'. The Greek title was 'On the detection and refutation of knowledge (gnosis) falsely so called'. He repeated the Church's belief and insisted on the unity of this belief throughout the Christian world. He knew that to lose Jesus of Nazareth in the fanciful speculations of Gnosticism would be to lose God's own Word which came to us in the person of Jesus.
- However, because his language remained within the symbolic horizon of the scriptures his opponents (the 'Gnostics') kept altering their language and coming up with new and more far-fetched speculations.

- Early in the 3rd century, [Hippolytus](#), a Roman priest, expressed the Christian faith in his 'Apostolic Tradition'. He also wrote a treatise 'Against Noetus' (The Father suffered in the Son).
- At the same time [Tertullian](#) of Carthage wrote a treatise 'Against Praxaeus' (Similar ideas to Noetus).
- Repeating Scripture was shown to be not enough to refute heresy, nor was the naive realism of the [Stoic](#) schools of philosophy.
- The writings of Irenaeus, Hippolytus and Tertullian demonstrated the need to find language to express more clearly the relationship between Jesus of Nazareth and the God whom he addressed as 'Father'.

• School of Alexandria 1. Clement of Alexandria (Late 2nd century)

- ‘We reach some slight understanding of the Omnipotent. Not that we understand what it is, but rather what it is not ... The Omnipotent cannot be named. If at times we do name him in an applied sense, as the One, or the Good, or Mind, or Absolute Being, or Father, or God, or Creator, or Lord, we do so not as uttering his proper name. Rather, because we do not know his proper name, we use these other beautiful names in order to focus our thought on them to prevent us from going astray. For, although these names taken singly do not signify God, taken all together, they suggest the power of the Omnipotent. It remains, therefore, that it is by the grace of God, and only through his Word, that we come to understand the unknown God himself. This is the meaning of Paul’s ‘To the Unknown God’ recalled by Luke in the Acts of the Apostles (17:23)’ (Stromata V.12.82).

2. Origen (185-254)

- Origen recognised the metaphorical symbolic nature of Hebrew imagery. 'People hold false opinions and make impious or ignorant assertions about God because scripture is not understood in its spiritual sense, but is interpreted according to the bare letter' (De Principiis 4.2).
- One problem with the Alexandrian school was that the speculation focused on the 'Word' (the 'Logos'), with little attention being paid to the New Testament data on Jesus of Nazareth. The debates bypassed any appreciation of the human psyche of Jesus. They spoke of Jesus' 'nature', a term taken from the empirical sciences. What a being does indicates what a being is. Jesus' actions revealed God. They also revealed a man. In the thinking of the Alexandrian School, the two seem quite mixed, something that confused a true appreciation of Jesus' humanity, constantly mixing the divine and the human with the danger that Jesus would be seen as a hybrid, part God and part man, rather than as the human expression ('incarnation') of God.

School of Antioch **Lucian of Antioch** (240-312)

Lucian insisted on the need to check so-called 'spiritual meanings' by careful literary and linguistic analysis.

- In Alexandria **Sabellius** was condemned for teaching that the 'Father', the 'Word' and the 'Spirit' were simply different aspects of the one God.
- **Arius** (a disciple of Lucian of Antioch) was determined to maintain the distinction between Jesus and the Father while acknowledging that the divine Word was made flesh in Jesus. He opposed Sabellius, but taught that the 'Word' was not the transcendent Deity, but rather an emanation from the Deity (and therefore, logically, a creature). This struck at the very heart of Christianity, driving a wedge between Jesus and God, such that Jesus revealed the Word, but God remained as unknown and unrevealed as ever. Arius's ideas proved very popular.

Council of Nicaea (325)

- **Constantine** became sole emperor in the West in 312 and by 324 was sole master of the Roman Empire. He saw Christianity as a tool for unity and was determined to heal the schism between those following Arius and those opposed to him.
- In 325 he summoned the bishops of the East (about 300 of them) to Nicaea. Only 17 of the 300 bishops were Arian, led by **Eusebius of Nicomedia** (Diocletian's capital in the East, on the eastern shore of the Straits of Marmora. After 338 this became the See of Constantinople). About 30 bishops, including Alexander of Alexandria and the handful of bishops from the West were anti-Arian. The rest, including Eusebius of Caesarea, were anti-Arian but reluctant to endorse the Nicene formula (eventually all but 2 signed).
- Constantine was determined to push the formula through to get unity. He was helped by the evasive answers given by Arius.

Cordova

Rome

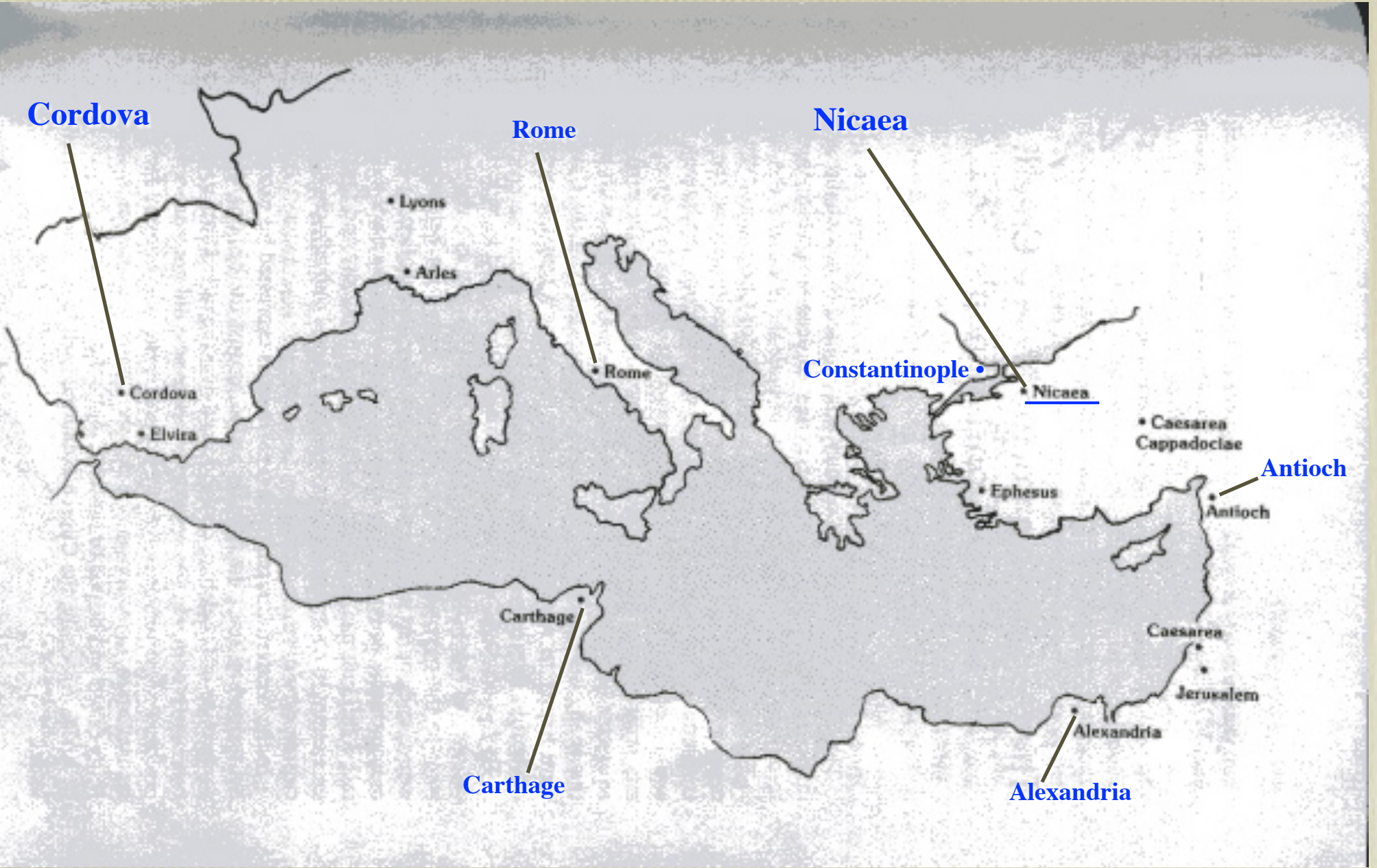
Nicaea

Constantinople

Antioch

Carthage

Alexandria



Council of Nicaea (325)

- So many bishops were reluctant to sign the formula because it introduced into the creed two non-scriptural philosophic terms the meaning of which was unclear to them. Communities were divided over these words and their meaning for the rest of the fourth and throughout the fifth century.
- Jesus, the only-begotten Son of God, begotten by the Father, was declared to be • ‘of the being [**ousia**] of the Father’ and ‘of one being [**homoousios**] with the Father’. The expression ‘**homoousios**’ had been condemned in 272AD (Paul of Samosata), because it seemed to identify the Son and the Father (as in the teaching of Sabellius).
- The council goes on to condemn those who claim that Jesus, the Son of God was made from a subsistence [**hypostasis**] or being [**ousia**] other than that of the Father. How are we to understand the relationship between ‘**ousia**’ and ‘**hypostasis**’?

- **hypostasis?** (Latin: 'subsistentia' or 'substantia'): a metaphysical term referring to that which we come to **understand**; that which '**stands under**' what we contact through our senses; that which answers the question: 'What is it?'; the **hypostasis** is attained in insight (enlightened by faith) and expressed in a concept asserted as true ('real') in judgment.
- **ousia ?** 'essence' (a conceptual category, eg 'deity', 'divinity'), or 'being' (an actual existing being)?
- **homoousios?** same essence (this would imply 2 gods)
- same being (preserves monotheism, but implies identity of Father and Son - see condemnation
- of Paul of Samosata in 272AD)

The achievement of Nicaea

- Preserved what Arianism would have lost: the assurance that in knowing Jesus it is God that we are knowing, and that it is with God that we are reconciled when we are in union with Jesus.
- The synodal statement declared Arius to be in error. It did not comprehensively state the truth. It said 'No' to untrue and misleading ways of stating the relationship between Jesus and God.
- It aimed to give assurance to Christians that in Jesus we have not only the perfect example of human love to God, but also the true expression and assurance of God's love towards us.
- From this base the Church continued to explore its understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.

- This first step into using the tools of Greek philosophy to clarify the articulation of faith was, as we have seen, rather clumsy. The period after the Council was one of considerable confusion.
- Many bishops looked for leadership to Constantine and then to his son, Constantius, whom they looked upon as God's anointed.
- But, the emperor was influenced by Eusebius of Nicomedia, the leader of the Arians and bishop of the Imperial Diocese.
- A large number of bishops in the East opted to avoid the ambiguities of 'homoousios' by choosing 'homoiousios', meaning that Jesus being is 'like' (not 'the same as') the being of God the Father.

Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria (died 373)

- Athanasius insisted that it was precisely ‘the divinity of the Father that is in the Son, so that whoever sees the Son sees the Father in him’ (De Synodis 52).
- He favoured using ‘**homoousios**’, but preferred to distinguish ‘**ousia**’ (which is one in the Father and Son) from ‘**hupostasis**’ which states their distinction.
- However, he avoided arguing about words, by allowed other terminology, so long as people were committed both to monotheism and to the acceptance of the divinity of Jesus.

Emperor Theodosius: The Council of Constantinople 381AD

(Creed included in Western liturgy at end of 8th century)

- 150 bishops only. None from the West and none from Egypt. **Gregory of Nazianzus**, bishop of Constantinople, president. **Gregory of Nyssa**, a prominent theologian. **Basil of Caesarea in Cappadocea**, brother of Gregory of Nyssa and friend of Athanasius .
- The Council endorsed the creed of Nicaea.
 - omitted the phrase ‘of the being [**ousia**] of the Father’,
 - repeated the phrase ‘of one being [**homousios**] with the Father’,
 - added some phrases from Scripture
- made no reference to ‘**hypostasis**’.
- The Nicene creed ended with the simple expression ‘We believe in the Holy Spirit’. They enlarged this and added ‘**We believe in one, holy, catholic and apostolic church. We acknowledge one baptism**
- **for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come.’**

- The direct link between Jesus and God was asserted, but what about the reality of Jesus' humanity?
- **Athanasius** himself stresses the divinity of Jesus in such a way that one looks in vain for any awareness of Jesus' human psyche.

see n.471-475

- His friend **Apollinaris**, bishop of Laodicea, was so keen to stress Jesus' divinity that he positively asserted that Jesus did not have a human soul. The bishops of Constantinople declared this to be heresy. They asserted that the Word became a man, and not just 'flesh' with the divine replacing the human psyche.
- The Council also laid claim to a spiritual authority as the Diocese of the Emperor and as 'the new Rome'. This started a power struggle that is still with us.

Theodore, bishop of Mopsuestia (died 428)

- Trained in the theological school of Antioch, and insisted on the reality of Jesus' humanity.
- Jesus is one person ['**prosopon**'], with two 'natures' ['**phusis**'].
 - '**prosopon**' = 'face'. It refers to Jesus as a subject who relates to God and to others, his 'personality' and role.
 - '**phusis**' is a word from science, classifying a being by what it does. Jesus did things that showed he was man. He did things that showed that God was working in and through him. In Jesus two different ways of being and acting are united while remaining distinct.
- Theodore was concerned that in Alexandrian theology Jesus' 'being man' was in danger of being lost in his 'being God'.

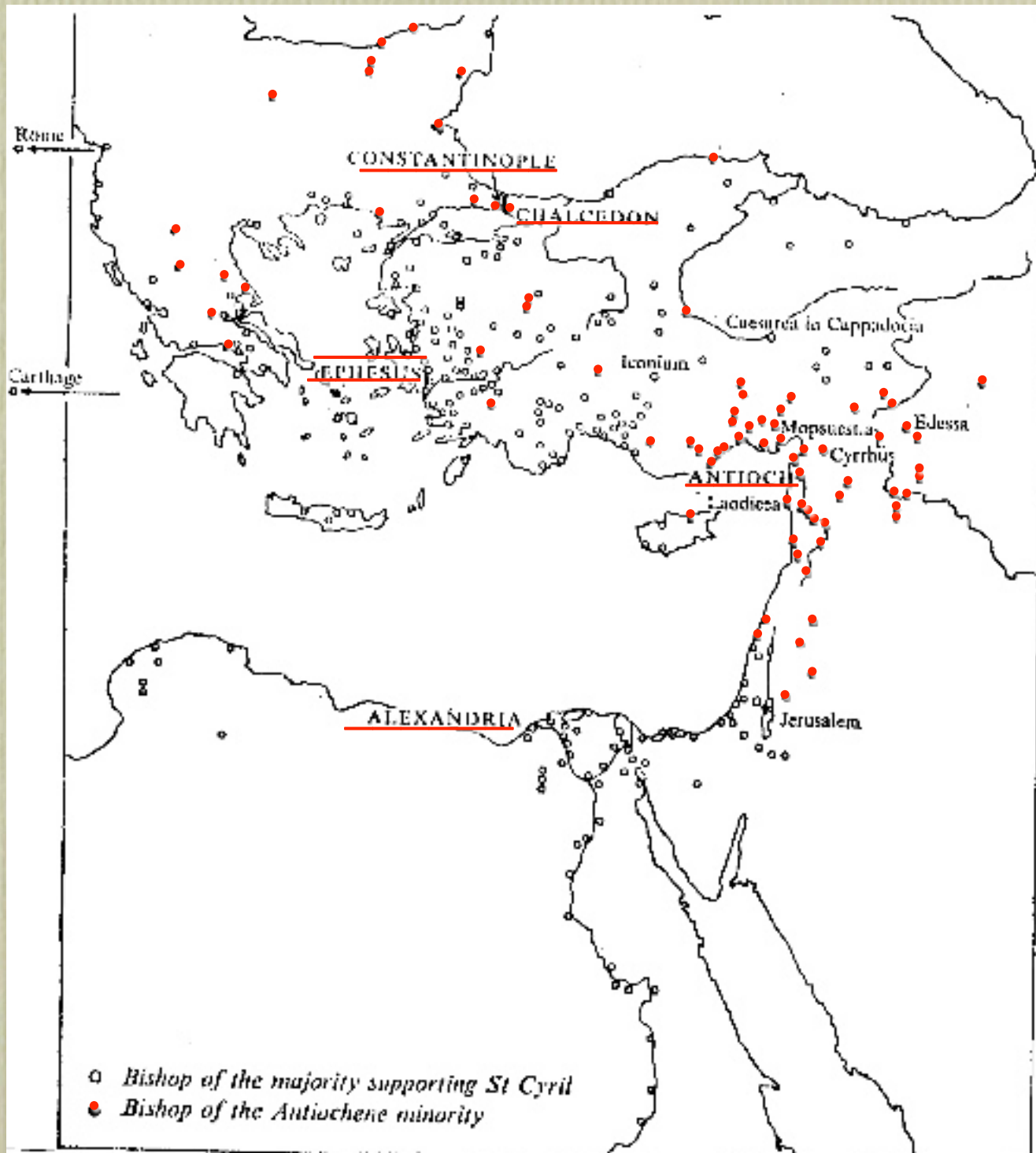
Augustine (died 430)

- Augustine used the Latin 'persona', for the Greek 'prosopon' . 'persona' was used for the mask worn by an actor to reveal the character of the play.

Council of Ephesus 431^{AD}

- **Cyril of Alexandria** opened the Council before **John of Antioch** or the Roman legates had arrived. **Nestorius of Constantinople** refused to attend.
- Nestorius was condemned by the Alexandrians and the bishops of Asia (anti-Constantinople politics!).
- When John of Antioch arrived he held a counter-synod which deposed Cyril. When the Roman legates arrived, they sided with Cyril and excommunicated John. This was not acceptable to the Pope, who insisted that Cyril and John be reconciled.
- Ephesus based its decision on Nicaea, and so achieved a dogmatic solution insisting that Mary is **Theotokos** = Jesus is God. But it failed to open up a theological, speculative way towards solving the existing tensions, and so failed to achieve peace.

Bishops present at the Council of Ephesus 431AD



Eutyches and the Monophysite 'heresy'

- In 448 [Eutyches](#), a 90-year old monk, attached himself to the 'one phusis' formula proposed by Cyril of Alexandria, as his way of insisting that all that was human in Jesus was consumed by his Spirit. Jesus was acting as one conscious subject.
- Other judged that Eutyches, by denying the 'two phusis' formula, was teaching that Jesus' human nature was absorbed into his divine nature – in effect denying the reality of his humanity.
- Theologians took sides without clearly defining what they intended by the word [phusis](#). In fact they meant different things. Cyril meant something close to 'being' or even 'subject. He was wanting to preserve Jesus as one being, one subject. Cyril's opponents used phusis to speak of a way of acting, distinguishing between the divine action of the Word and the human action of Jesus. Each side accused the other of heresy. Eutyches appealed to Pope Leo.

- In 449 a synod was held at Ephesus led by Dioscorus of Alexandria. It supported the rebellious clergy (including Eutyches) against Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople.
- This synod was supported by the Emperor Theodosius.
- Pope Leo rejected this Council which was dubbed 'Latrocinium' ('Council of Robbers'). In 450 the Emperor died.

Council of Chalcedon 451

The 'Tome' of Pope Leo

'The same who, remaining in the form of God, was made man in the form of a servant. For each of the natures retains its proper character without defect; and, as the form of God does not take away the form of a servant, so the form of a servant does not impair the form of God ...

For the selfsame who is truly God is truly man. And there is no illusion in this union, while the lowliness of man and the loftiness of God meet together. For as 'God' is not changed by the compassion exhibited, so 'man' is not consumed by the dignity bestowed. For each 'form' does the acts which belong to it in communion with the other: the Word performing what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carrying out what belongs to the flesh. The first shines out in miracles; the second succumbs to injuries.'

Council of Chalcedon 451

The Council makes very sad reading. Little attempt was made to seek understanding. The declaration from Pope Leo provided a way through as it gave clear expression to the Western Church's understanding of the reality of Jesus' humanity. The bishops finally agreed to the following statement.

Council of Chalcedon (451) - expansion of Nicene Creed (325 and 381)

‘Following the holy fathers, we unanimously teach that:

our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son,

the same perfect in divinity,

the same perfect in humanity.

truly God and

truly man, of a rational soul and body

of one being with the Father in divinity;
(real)

of one being (abstract) with us in humanity,

being in all things as we are, without sin [Hebrews 4:15].

Begotten of the Father before all time

as to his divinity,

begotten in recent times,

for us and for our salvation,

from the virgin Mary, Mother of God,

as to his humanity.

One and the same Christ, Lord, only-begotten in two natures

without confusion

without change

without division

without separation

The differences in natures

is in no way removed by reason of the union,

but rather, the properties of each are preserved,

coming together in one person and one subsistence

not divided and separated into into two persons

but one and the same only-begotten Son,

God-Word, Jesus Christ, the Lord

as previously the Prophets and Jesus Christ himself taught us,

and the creed of the fathers handed down to us.’

Speaking of 'the Son, our Lord Jesus Christ', the Council asserts he is

- 'perfect in divinity, perfect in humanity; true God and true man
- of rational soul and body
- of one being ['**homoousios**'] with the Father in divinity
- of one being ['**homoousios**'] with us in humanity,

Note the ambiguity in the term **homoousios**.

In relation to the Father it refers to one and the same being
(there is only one God).

In relation to us it refers to one and the same species
(there is more than one human being).

- 'being in all things as we are, without sin' (Hebrews 4:15).
- begotten of the Father before all time as to his divinity.
- begotten in recent times, for us and for our salvation, from the virgin Mary, mother of God, as to his humanity.'

‘We confess one and the same Christ, the Son, the Lord,
the only-begotten made known in two natures [‘**phusis**’]

Antiochene

without confusion, without change, without division, without separation

- **without confusion:** Not a mixture of divinity and humanity
- Humanity is like ours (but without sin)

- So human consciousness, decisions, feelings, emotions, thoughts, words, actions.

- **without change:** Not inhuman, not ahuman, not subhuman, not superhuman. His humanity is not more than, less than, other than our humanity.
- **without division:** Both ways of acting coexist in one subject,

- and in one object of understanding

- **without separation:** He who acts in a human way is he who acts in a divine way

- The differences of the natures is in no way removed by reason of the union but rather the properties of each are preserved
- coming together in one 'person' ['prosopon'] and one 'subsistence' ['hupostasis'].

Note the accommodation of differences in preferred terminology, in the acceptance of 'prosopon' and 'hupostasis' as equivalent terms for that which identifies Jesus.

Granted that there is only one God,
what does it mean to speak of a 'divine nature'?

- 'Nature' is a scientific classification according to behaviour
- The higher we ascend the scale of being, the less something is defined by its nature. The more free a being is, the more its behaviour is defined by the choices it makes, and not by its 'nature'.
- God is total freedom. So God's 'nature' means what God chooses to do. We can know God only by knowing what God has chosen to do in relation to us.
- God has chosen to express God's self in a perfect human way in Jesus, who is the Way to God, and the answer to our question: 'What is God's nature? What does God choose to do? How does God choose to relate to us?'

- Dogma developed as people attempted to express the symbolic/heart statements of the New Testament in terms that answered the questions people were asking in their searching for clarity of meaning by defining error and pointing the way towards the truth. What they contemplated in Jesus required an expanding of the meaning of words such as 'prosopon (person)', 'phusis (nature)' 'hupostasis (substance)', and 'ousia (being)'.
- It is essential to grasp the questions that they were attempting to answer.
- It is essential also to grasp the fact that in attempting to find clear, finely chiselled philosophical words, they were attempting to speak of the same Jesus that we find in the simpler, more homely words of the New Testament.

Faithful Christians in the first four centuries

- Our personal religious experience is confirmed and given meaning by our believing what has been handed down through tradition, especially the sacred scriptures.
- We are taught to believe that Jesus is fully human, like us.
- We are taught that Jesus is truly the Son of God: his being, his decisions, his actions, come from God. From the beginning Christians affirmed this in their words/lives.
- The pressure to state clearly what people meant by what they said, and the false judgments that were condemned as undermining faith created a dynamic that kept clarifying the question, and uncovering ambiguities and implicit contradictions, as well as defining terms with accepted meanings to give expression to the wonderful mystery of Jesus in his relationship to God and to us.

The Councils of the early Church cannot be thought of as the last word on Jesus. They belong to their time and necessarily suffer from the limitations of the horizons of thought within which they were conceived. We are to reject what they rejected, but we must not forget that they were attempting to answer their questions with the limited tools at their disposal. They never claimed that theirs were the only questions, so they never claimed that theirs were the only answers. What we are looking for are the false understandings that they rejected, and the consistent thrust of their faith-convictions that directed them in their quest for clarity.

We have to find for our time the words that will express the insights that they expressed in their way, and we have to find new insights to answer the new questions that we are asking, always faithful to the Tradition.

Cardinal John Henry Newman

Newman speaks of 'timid and narrow minded people who were unwilling to receive the truth in that depth and fullness in which scripture reveals it and who thought that orthodoxy consisted in being at all times careful to comprehend in one phrase or formula the whole of what is believed on any article of faith.'

(Arians in the fourth century' 1.5.2)

In a sermon on the Trinity Newman says: 'May we never speak on subjects like this without awe; may we never dispute without charity; may we never inquire without a careful endeavour, with God's aid, to sanctify our knowledge, and to impress it on our hearts, as well as to store it in our understanding.'

(Parochial and Plain Sermons VI on the Feast of the Holy Trinity).

His words apply to the whole of Church teaching.

Opening address at Second Vatican Council - Pope John XXIII
October 11th 1962

‘Christians and Catholics of apostolic spirit all the world over expect a leap forward in doctrinal penetration and the formation of consciences in ever greater fidelity to authentic teaching. But this authentic teaching has to be studied and expounded in the light of the research methods and the literary formulations of modern thought. For the substance of the ancient deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is to this latter that careful and where necessary patient consideration must be given, everything being measured according to the requirements of a teaching authority that is predominantly pastoral in character’.



Hymn to the Holy Spirit

Words and Music Kevin Bates.

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Spirit come,
transform us,
open wide our eyes.
Seeing with
your wisdom
clearer truth can rise.

Spirit come,
remind us
of stories often told.
Living out
the mystery,
eternal truths unfold.



Spirit bring us
comfort in times
beset by fear,
refreshing hope
and meaning when
God's own breath
is near.

Spirit teach us
patience as our own
spirits yearn.
Nourish with
your passion
the life and love
we learn.



Spirit breathe
so gently
that broken lives
may heal,
sacred wounds
embracing
and through them
hope reveal.

Spirit come
propel us
your justice
to release.
Imprisoned hearts
keep crying
and longing for



Spirit come
unite us,
divisions days
be done.

Let our heart
and mind be a sign
of kingdom come.

Spirit find us
waiting
when our last breath
is done.

Your breath of life
keep singing
the song our lives
begun.



To Father
Son
and Spirit
be songs
of joyful praise.

We will breathe
your tenderness
and love,
for all our days.