

July 25, 2011

Credo II

By Msgr. Richard Antall *

The second change in the creed that has been talked about a great deal is the translation of the Latin “consubstantialem.” This was translated as “one in being” and now is to be “consubstantial.” Apparently, this was the topic of some debate because it is alleged that people will find the new wording “awkward” or will not understand it.

The real awkwardness of “one in being” is that it can mean many different things. I can imagine a modern Juliet saying she is “one in being” with her Romeo. A general statement, even one that is poetic, can aim at expressing a truth, but is handicapped by the complexity of that truth. In this case, we are talking about the essence of God. We have to be careful not to speak in ways that make the inner life of the Trinity sound like the ties of human affection or sympathy.

One of my uncles married a woman who was especially close to her sisters. Her sister-in-law, another of my aunts, admired the unity of the three sisters and once said, “Those three are closer than the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity.” The hyperbole was intended to be humorous, not blasphemous. No three human persons can hope to be as united as God.

The “closeness” of the three Persons is the central mystery of our faith. Obviously, no language can really express the profundity of the mystery that is God. The shell on the papal coat of arms which I have seen so frequently in my time here in Rome is a reminder of that.

The Holy Father said that in designing his coat of arms he wanted to

allude to the story of St. Augustine trying to compose his writing on the Trinity and taking a walk on the seashore. The saint saw a boy with a shell carrying water who said that he planned to empty the sea into a hole he had dug in the sand. The great Doctor of the Church concluded that he was trying to do something similar: capture the infinite mystery of God's being in the finite brain of man. Pope Benedict, who is a theologian, knows the inadequacy of words with relation to the deepest mystery of the universe.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says that, "in order to articulate the dogma of the Trinity, the Church had to develop its own terminology with the help of certain notions of philosophical origin: 'substance,' 'person,' 'relation' and so on ..." (no. 251). There is a technical vocabulary to guard against misinterpretations of divine mysteries. Thus we have the word "consubstantial."

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger once said that it was very important for sacramental faith to "keep alive the question of being," especially in our time, which he called, "a philosophically impoverished era." That is why I think it is right to insist that the more general "one in being" be replaced by the more technical "consubstantial."

We are never going to understand the Trinity. However, a more exact language shows greater humility and respect in the presence of the God who is much greater not only than our hearts but also than our heads. Graham Greene said he started on his path of conversion when his future wife told him that we Catholics did not "adore" Mary, that there was a distinction between adoration and "dulia." We offer our reverence, "dulia," to the saints and to Mary "hyperdulia," the highest of reverence. The agnostic Greene was so impressed by the articulation of the distinction that he began to study the faith and became a Catholic.

Our belief in the Trinity can likewise be a source of evangelization

and edification to others around us. The caution with which we speak about the mysteries of God is a demonstration of how important the articles of our faith are to us.

Seriousness in language indicates respect for the divinity. The word mystic came from the Greek word ordering silence about what was an experience of the divinity. We are not silent about God, but we are very careful in describing him.

Our faith in a Triune God is not something easy to understand. There is a whole history of misunderstandings of the essence of God. There were times when there was a real danger of great numbers of Christians losing faith in the Trinity.

On a recent trip to Ravenna in Italy, I was reminded how at a certain point of time there was a real threat that Christians in the West would succumb to the heresy that the Second Person of the Trinity was not equally divine.

The Goths who conquered the western part of the Roman Empire were Arians and believed that the Son of God was less divine than God the Father. An Arian baptistery still stands in the city, and some churches were originally built for that sect, which had converted the barbarians who had conquered Rome.

Walking down the streets of Ravenna, I explained to a priest friend of mine from another country the change in the translation of the Creed. When I translated “one in being” for him, he was surprised and said, “But that is not the point of consubstantial. If we do not express Jesus’ divinity correctly, we could become like the Jehovah Witnesses, who think the Son is a lesser being.” The Nicene Creed still has the traces of the controversy with the Arians, that is why we insist that, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.”

Respect for our tradition should make it easy to say a special word like “consubstantial” without complaining. A priest friend said that objected to the change of wording because “how is my mother going to understand that?” She might do better than he thinks. The change of language can actually provide us with a propitious moment for catechesis.

In fact, the word consubstantial can open up for us the second great mystery of faith: the Incarnation. Last year, the Pope Benedict XVI published an apostolic exhortation to give expression to the reflection of the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God.

In “Verbum Domini” (“The Word of the Lord”), as the document is called, the Pope points out this relation of the mysteries: “As the Prologue of John clearly shows us, the Logos refers in the first place to the eternal Word, the only Son, begotten of the Father before all ages and consubstantial with him: the word was with God, and the word was God. But this same Word, Saint John tells us, “became flesh” (John 1:14); hence Jesus Christ, born of the Virgin Mary, is truly the Word of God who become consubstantial with us.”

The great English writer G.K. Chesterton wrote in “Orthodoxy” that our Christian civilization depended at times on the words we used to describe God and his grace working in the world. He uses the metaphor of a rudder guiding a great ship. The Church’s sensitivity to words is nothing new, but perhaps more crucial than ever in our age of ambiguity. We tend to favor keeping things vague. We need more precision in our lives, and that can start with our language about God.

Therefore we rejoice in the new translation of the Creed, which will make our mouths work a little harder, and perhaps our brains, too.

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