

### III. THE HOLY TRINITY

#### A. Terminology

When describing and discussing our faith, the meaning behind our words is critical. So, we must be clear of what we mean when we define terms and use them appropriately according to those definitions. Many of the definitions we presently use were developed in the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, such that some writers had very different terms and definitions when expounding on theology. The Ecumenical Councils and the writings of the great Fathers established the meanings of the terms of formulas we use today.

Along the path, although there was frequently much confusion of terms, this does not negate the fact that there were real heresies and true differences in Christological understanding.

The following terms, therefore, have been developed over time to represent the Truth.

- ***Ousia*** = Essence. *Ousia* is a Greek term meaning “essence.” It relates to the characteristics of being within a category or genus. For example, the divine *ousia* is characterized by unchangeableness, timelessness, unlimitedness, etc. The human *ousia* is characterized by all the general and universal characteristics that are involved in being human, such as created and limited. In the New Testament, *ousia* is only used to describe goods. It was only in the third century when this term was used to describe the unity of the Holy Trinity.
- ***Homoousios*** = One (and the same) Essence. *Homoousios* is a Greek term meaning “of the same or one essence.” This term is used to describe how the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are One because they share the same *Ousia* or Essence. We believe in one God. For example, we speak of Jesus Christ as being *homoousios* with the Father in His Divinity as we declare in the Creed saying “of one essence (*homoousios*) with the Father.” We also believe that Jesus Christ is *homoousios* with man in His humanity since He was incarnate, took flesh, and became man. In Christ, we find a double consubstantiality since He is *homoousios* with the Father and at the same time *homoousios* with us. Although this term was not mentioned in the Holy Scripture, it was defended by St. Athanasius especially in the Council of Nicaea against the Arian heresy. It is also relevant in the Chalcedonian debate.
- ***Hypostasis*** = Individual. *Hypostasis* is a Greek word meaning “individual.” It is an existential and ontological term. Sometimes, this is also translated as “person”, but this term alone often can cause confusion due to varying philosophical and historical uses. (See *prosopon*, below). In the Early Church, *ousia* and *hypostasis* were considered to be synonyms. It wasn’t until the Cappadocian Fathers that the two terms were more rigorously defined and the revealed truth of the Holy Trinity was explained as one *ousia* in three *hypostases*. The Holy Apostle Paul, in his Epistle to the Hebrews, describes our Lord Jesus Christ, as “being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person (*hypostasis*)...” (Heb 1:3). The Coptic translation of this and other verses does not translate the word *hypostasis* because of the difficulty and uniqueness of this term. Unfortunately, the confusion persists, because there is no specific Latin term for *hypostasis*, but it is instead translated as *substantia* or *persona*, which created much confusion in the councils.

- ***Ousia and Hypostasis.*** *Ousia* continues to mean “essence” and *hypostasis* is used to describe the subjectivity and distinctness that resulted from a group of particular characteristics among the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all One Being and the same Essence, having all the same divine characteristics. However, the Father is distinct in that He is unbegotten, the Son in that He is begotten from the Father, and the Holy Spirit in that He proceeds from the Father. As St. Severus wrote:
 

We say that essence and *hypostasis* are concepts which indicate the existence of existing things. ‘Essence’ (*ousia*) discloses that the subject (is and) exists and *hypostasis* says that it subsists. With regard to the Trinity, the essence is the Godhead: Father, Son and Spirit are God without diminution or gradation. With regard to the *hypostases*, in each case a particularity is expressed of the goodness of the Father, Son, and Spirit. Thus, for the Father, the non-begotten applies (agenetos in the twofold meaning of ‘unbecome’ and ‘unbegotten’); at the same time, however, the begetting is in reference to the Son; for the Son, the being begotten of the Father independently of time, and for the Spirit the proceeding from the Father. ‘The particularities (propriétés) remain fixed and unalterable; they characterize without mingling each of the hypostases and do not divide the common essence.’<sup>1</sup>
- ***Physis*** = Nature. *Physis* is a Greek term meaning “nature.” This term is not often used, because its meaning is not clear. It has been used as a synonym for both *ousia* as well as *hypostasis*. A clarification of its intended meaning is therefore important whenever it is used. But it is typically used to describe the sum of the properties or qualities of an essence, usually from the outside. For example, the “nature” of gold is that it is beautiful, non-corrosive, and one of the best conductors of electricity.
- ***Prosopon*** = Person. *Prosopon* is a Greek term meaning “person.” It is often a synonym for *hypostasis* when speaking about the Holy Trinity. A second meaning for this word outside this subject is outward mask, face, or appearance of something that does not necessarily have to do with the subjectivity or individuality of something. If this second sense is used when describing the Incarnation, it would result in the Nestorian heresy; and if it is used to describe the Holy Spirit, it may result in the Macedonian heresy. It is therefore again important to clarify the intended meaning whenever it is used. *Prosopon* can be the outer face of a company, but it is not necessarily an individual. It is unlike *hypostasis*, which is a concrete existence of an individual.

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<sup>1</sup> St. Severus of Antioch, Homily 109 (PO 25:239), See Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, v. 2, p. 2, *The Church of Constantinople in the Sixth Century* (Louisville, KY: John Knox, 1995), p. 146.