

“Year of the Eucharist”—“What does THAT word mean?” (Pt. 2)—Fr. Steve Lape

Last week, we started looking at the meaning of certain words that many people may find difficult to define. We covered the words “oblation” and “supplication” last time, words that are sometimes heard in the Mass prayers. This week, we’ll start looking at certain words found in the Profession of Faith that Catholics say together at Mass usually on every Sunday or holy day of obligation. That Profession of Faith is also known as the Nicene Creed, a unity of statements which sum up the major beliefs that we share as Catholics. It’s called the “Nicene” Creed, since its origins are found in the Council of Nicaea (an ancient city now called Iznik, Turkey), which was a major gathering of Christian bishops, convened by the Roman Emperor Constantine I, in 325 A.D. The point of this Council was to settle certain issues in the Church at the time, especially the divine nature of Jesus as God the Son. Certain teachers in the Church at that time were suggesting that Jesus was less than God the Father, not equal. Thus, one of the major beliefs that has been reinforced since that major council is that Jesus is truly of “the same substance as” God the Father. The word we use in the Creed at Mass to sum that belief up is “consubstantial.” One of the great mysteries of our Christian faith is that God is One in 3 Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. They are all in an eternally loving bond with each other, being 3 distinct Persons in their Oneness. We’ll never fully understand that mystery in this lifetime, but we accept it as one of our most central beliefs.

There have been many heretical movements over the centuries that have suggested Jesus as not being fully divine or fully human. Arianism was the major one at the time of the Council of Nicaea, which promoted Jesus not being eternal, but came into existence at some point in time, and, thus, was less than God. Docetism was the word used to describe groups in the early church centuries which denied Jesus was really human, that His humanity was only an illusion, for, as they usually put forth, “how can God die?” “How could God lower Himself to such a wretched, corrupt state of being as human nature?” Docetism comes from the Greek word “dokesis,” meaning “apparition.” This belief was soundly rejected at the Council of Nicaea. Monophysitism, which was a movement suggesting that the divinity of Christ overwhelmed Jesus’ humanity (and thus making Jesus seem less than fully human, was rejected in the 451 A.D.

Council of Chalcedon. Monothelitism was a 7th century heresy which purported that Jesus had only one will in His 2 natures of divinity and humanity. This was condemned at the 3rd Council of Constantinople in 680-681. The correct understanding in our Catholic faith is that Jesus had two wills, divine and human, since He had two natures. If there was only one will, then Jesus would be less in either His divinity or humanity. Thus, what we as Catholics hold to be true about Jesus Christ today is that He is one person with two natures—fully divine and fully human, with a divine will and a human will.

