

And the Son?

The Filioque, the Eastern Objections, and Whether One Word Must Divide the Church

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I. The Smallest Word in the Schism

The Nicene Creed as recited in the West declares that the Holy Spirit “proceeds from the Father and the Son.” The last three words—in Latin, the single word *Filioque*—do not appear in the creed as the Councils of Nicaea and Constantinople framed it, and the Orthodox East has never accepted them. Around this one word has gathered nine centuries of division: it stood near the head of the grievances in 1054, it has been argued at two reunion councils, and it remains today the doctrinal item most often named when Orthodox Christians explain what separates them from Rome. An essay on it belongs on this site for two reasons. First, honesty: the site’s page on the visible Church acknowledged that the East holds real succession and real sacraments and that its dispute with Rome is of another kind—this essay is that other kind, taken seriously. Second, proportion: a reader deserves to see what the dispute actually contains, because few famous controversies rest on so narrow a real difference, and few narrow differences have been so magnified by the sins of both sides.

II. What the Orthodox Object To

The Orthodox objection is double, and the order matters: for the East the procedural offense is prior to the theological one, and it is the procedural offense that stings after nine hundred years. The creed of 381 was the work of an ecumenical council, the common possession of the whole Church, and the Council of Ephesus in 431 forbade the composition of any rival creed. The West altered the common text unilaterally: the clause arose in Spain, spread through the Frankish empire, and was finally admitted into the creed at Rome in 1014—without an ecumenical council, without the East’s consent, and, the Orthodox add, at the effective insistence of a German emperor. Whatever the doctrine’s merits, a creed sealed by the whole Church was changed by part of it. If Rome may edit the common creed alone, the East asks, what in principle may she not edit alone? On this reading the Filioque is less a heresy than a symptom—the papal claims acting on the Church’s most sacred common text.

The theological objection stands behind the procedural one. In the Eastern grammar of the Trinity, the Father is the sole fountainhead of the Godhead—the monarchia: the Son is begotten of the Father, the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and the one God is one precisely because both derive from the one Father. Jesus’ own words are quoted exactly: the Spirit of truth “who proceeds from the Father” (John 15:26)—He did not say “and from me.” To the Eastern ear, “from the Father and the Son” threatens either two sources in God, which divides the unity, or a blurring of what makes Father and Son distinct. Photius, the ninth-century patriarch in whose controversy the dispute crystallized, pressed the dilemma hard, and a synod at Constantinople in 879 rejected the Latin clause. The Greek Fathers had spoken of the Spirit proceeding from the Father through the Son; that, the Orthodox insist, is not the same claim, and the difference guards the Father’s unique place.

Both procedural texts deserve direct answers. Ephesus’s prohibition on composing “another creed” cannot mean that no council may ever touch the wording—the creed of 381 had itself expanded the creed of 325, adding whole clauses on the Holy Spirit; on the strict reading, Constantinople stood condemned by Ephesus fifty years before the canon was written, which no one holds. What the canon forbids is a rival faith, not a clarifying word within the same faith—and whether the Filioque is the one or the other is exactly the doctrinal question. As for the synod of 879: its own standing is itself disputed between the communions. A council whose authority is part of what the two sides disagree about cannot arbitrate the disagreement; to cite it as decisive is to assume the very ecclesiology it is offered to prove.

III. What the West Actually Means

What does the West mean by the words? Not what the objection fears. The Catholic doctrine, defined at the Second Council of Lyons and again at Florence, is precise on the very point at issue: the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son not as from two principles but as from one principle, by one spiration. Ott states the dogma with his usual economy: “The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and from the Son as from a Single Principle through a Single Spiration,” and grades it *de fide*. The Father remains the source without source; whatever the Son has—including His role in the Spirit’s procession—He has from the Father. Aquinas puts the Latin teaching in a formula the East could almost own: the Spirit proceeds from the Father through the Son, the Son having it from the Father that the Spirit proceeds through Him. Two-sources theology is not what the West teaches; it is what the West condemns.

IV. The Scriptures Both Sides Share

Scripture does not use the technical vocabulary of either side, but its pattern is not neutral. The Spirit is called “the Spirit of his Son” (Galatians 4:6) as readily as the Spirit of the Father. The Son sends Him: “whom I shall send to you from the Father” (John 15:26)—the same verse the East quotes, whose first clause is the West’s point. The Spirit’s relation to the Son is put by Jesus in terms of complete reception:

He will glorify me, for he will take what is mine and declare it to you. All that the Father has is mine; therefore I said that he will take what is mine and declare it to you.

John 16:14–15, RSV

All that the Father has is mine: if the Father’s “all” includes being the source from whom the Spirit proceeds, the Son says here that this too is His—from the Father, which is exactly the Latin qualification. At Pentecost Peter preaches the risen Christ “having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit,” pouring Him out (Acts 2:33). And the Bible’s last chapter gives the picture the West reads as the whole doctrine in an image: “the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb” (Revelation 22:1)—one river, one throne, two named from whom it flows. The external missions of the Spirit, both sides agree, mirror His eternal origin; the West’s claim is that the mirror is accurate.

V. The Fathers, East and West

The Fathers divide by vocabulary, not by faith. The Latins from Tertullian through Ambrose to Augustine say “from the Father and the Son” freely; Augustine, whose

Trinitarian theology formed the West, adds the balancing clause the East requires—principally from the Father. The Greeks say “from the Father through the Son”: Cyril of Alexandria, whose orthodoxy no one disputes, can say the Spirit is proper to the Son and flows from Him, and was challenged on it in his own day and did not retract. The witness that matters most is Maximus the Confessor—the greatest Greek theologian of his century, a saint of both calendars. When Rome’s use of Filioque was already being questioned in the seventh century, Maximus wrote to Marinus that the Latins were not making the Son a second cause of the Spirit: they knew the Father to be the sole cause, and their formula intended what the Greek “through the Son” intends. His verdict, in substance: the two traditions were saying the same thing in different grammars. That letter is the East’s own bridge, built before the schism, and it is the ground on which every serious reunion discussion since has stood.

VI. How the Clause Entered the Creed

How did a word enter the creed? Not by papal ambition—the history here contains the essay’s largest concession, and it cuts against the polemics of both sides. The clause first appears in Visigothic Spain, where the Third Council of Toledo (589) received a converting Arian kingdom: against Arians who denied the Son’s full divinity, confessing that the Spirit proceeds from the Son too was a weapon for Christ’s equality with the Father. From Spain it passed into the Frankish realm, and Charlemagne’s court pressed it aggressively—against, it must be said, Roman resistance. Pope Leo III approved the doctrine but refused the addition to the creed, and had the creed engraved without the clause on silver shields at St. Peter’s, in Greek and Latin, precisely to keep the common text common. Rome held that line for two centuries and yielded only in 1014. The East’s procedural grievance, in other words, was first Rome’s own scruple—which is worth conceding plainly, and worth weighing: the see that resisted the insertion longest is poorly cast as the villain of the story, and the doctrine itself had been confessed in the West for four centuries before the creed changed.

VII. Two Vocabularies, One Mystery

The twentieth century discovered—or rather, recovered Maximus’s discovery—that the two traditions are to a great extent arguing past each other in different languages. The Greek verb of the creed, *ekporeuesthai*, names origination from an ultimate source, and the Greek tradition reserves it for the Spirit’s relation to the Father alone; said with that verb, “and the Son” really would make two ultimate sources, and the East is right to refuse it. The Latin *procedere* is broader—it covers any relation of origin, ultimate or mediated—so “*procedit ex Patre Filioque*” asserts no second fountainhead. The Vatican’s 1995 clarification, requested by John Paul II and addressed to the Orthodox, says this in so

many words: the Father is the sole principle without principle of the Trinity; the Filioque, rightly understood, neither denies it nor competes with the monarchia. On the substance, the Catholic Church teaches what Maximus said the Latins always meant. And one standing fact says it louder than any document: the Eastern Catholic churches—in full communion with Rome—recite the creed today without the Filioque, with Rome’s blessing. A word that Rome required for orthodoxy could not be omitted by churches under Rome’s own roof. It is not required; the faith it protects is. The strongest positive case remains Anselm’s, argued at the Council of Bari and in *On the Procession of the Holy Spirit*: the divine Persons are distinguished from one another only by their relations of origin, since in everything else they are the one simple God. The Son is the Son because begotten; the Spirit is the Spirit because proceeding. But if the Spirit proceeds from the Father alone, exactly as the Son is from the Father alone, then nothing distinguishes Spirit from Son at all — and the Trinity collapses into an undifferentiated pair. The procession through the Son is not Latin innovation; on Anselm’s argument it is what keeps the third Person third.

VIII. What Remains Between Us

What, then, still divides? Honesty compels the answer: less than the centuries suggest, and not nothing. Serious Orthodox voices have themselves moved toward the semantic reading—Kallistos Ware, who once treated the Filioque as church-dividing, later wrote that on further study he had come to regard the problem as lying more in the realm of semantics than of basic doctrine. But the hard-line Orthodox position remains held, and the procedural question remains real even where the theology is reconciled: who may touch the common creed, and by what authority? That question is not about the Spirit’s procession at all. It is the question of this site’s page on apostolic succession—the papacy’s authority—wearing a pneumatological costume, which is why the Filioque could be resolved tomorrow and reunion would still wait on the older dispute. What this essay claims is narrower: that the doctrine itself, as the Catholic Church actually defines it—one principle, one spiration, the Father the source without source—contradicts nothing the East confesses, meant what Maximus said it meant, and has been guarded on both sides by saints who would be astonished to find their grammars still keeping their heirs from one chalice. The creed confesses the Spirit as Lord and giver of life. A dispute conducted for nine centuries about His procession, largely in His absence, is a dispute both sides should be glad to lay down.

Endnotes

1. The creed of Constantinople (381); the prohibition of rival creeds is canon 7 of the Council of Ephesus (431) in the traditional numbering — the same prohibition stands in

the definition of that council's sixth session, 22 July 431 — whose scope—a different creed, or any alteration—is itself part of the dispute. The insertion at Rome under Benedict VIII in 1014, at the urging of Emperor Henry II, is common historical ground.

2. John 15:26; Galatians 4:6; John 16:14–15; Acts 2:33; Revelation 22:1, RSV. The principle that the Spirit's temporal missions mirror His eternal origin is common to both traditions.

3. Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, trans. Patrick Lynch (1955; TAN reprint, 1974): “The Holy Ghost proceeds from the Father and from the Son as from a Single Principle through a Single Spiration. (De fide.)” Ott cites the Second Council of Lyons (1274) and Florence (1439), both defining “not as from two principles, but as from one.”

4. Augustine, *De Trinitate* XV.17.29, where he explains the qualifier: God the Father alone is He “from whom the Word is born, and from whom the Holy Spirit principally proceeds. And therefore I have added the word principally, because we find that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son also”; again at XV.26.47. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/130115.htm>. Cyril of Alexandria's usage and the challenge of Theodoret are summarized from the standard patristic collections; Maximus the Confessor, Letter to Marinus (c. 645–646), summarized rather than quoted—the letter survives in part and its translations vary.

5. Third Council of Toledo (589) and the anti-Arian function of the clause; Leo III's silver shields, engraved with the creed unaltered, are reported in the *Liber Pontificalis* and were noted on both sides of the later controversy.

6. Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, *The Greek and Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit*, published in *L'Osservatore Romano* on 13 September 1995 at the request of John Paul II, on *ekporeusis* and *procedere* and on the Father as sole principle without principle; text at catholicculture.org.

7. Kallistos Ware's revised judgment—that the difference is more semantic than doctrinal—is summarized here rather than quoted; it is reported from his later work and interviews, revising the position of *The Orthodox Church* (1963).

8. On the papal-authority question that outlives the doctrinal reconciliation, see this site's page on apostolic succession; on the standing of the Orthodox churches, the page on the visible Church.

9. Anselm, *De Processione Spiritus Sancti*, summarized rather than quoted; the argument's structure follows Thomas J. McKenna, “Greek and Latin Gods: Anselm's Defense of the Filioque,” *Saint Anselm Journal* 14.1 (2018): 111–131, held in the site's reference library.

For Further Reading

The Greek and Latin Traditions Regarding the Procession of the Holy Spirit, Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity (1995)—the Vatican’s clarification, addressed to the Orthodox.

Defending the Filioque, Catholic Answers—the case in brief, with the Scriptures. Free online at <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/defending-the-filioque>.

Filioque, Catholic Encyclopedia—the history of the clause and the controversy. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/06073a.htm>.

Summa Theologiae, by Thomas Aquinas—the procession of the Holy Spirit, including “through the Son”. Free online at <https://www.newadvent.org/summa/1036.htm>.

Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma, by Ludwig Ott—the defined doctrine with its notes, and the Lyons and Florence texts.

The Orthodox Church, by Kallistos Ware—the Orthodox account, from the bishop whose later judgment this page cites.

Greek and Latin Gods: Anselm’s Defense of the Filioque, by Thomas J. McKenna, Saint Anselm Journal 14.1 (2018).

Then he showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing
from the throne of God and of the Lamb.

Revelation 22:1

* * *

*Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit,
as it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.*

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A Note on Authority

This essay represents the author's articulation of *the Catholic doctrine of the Filioque, in answer to the Eastern Orthodox objections*, drawing on Scripture, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Church Fathers, and the major theological tradition. It is offered as a personal defense, not as an official statement of the Church's teaching. Where this defense is fortunate enough to align with the magisterial teaching of the Church, the credit belongs to the tradition that formed it. Where it falls short, the responsibility is the author's alone.