

Ecclesiastical indigestion : The filioque controversy

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The Christian church was once just that -- the Christian church. East and west were united to one another, sharing a common set of beliefs for the first four hundred years of its existence. The phrase *processio spiritus sancti ex patre filioque*, translated from Latin as "the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son", represented a turning point in the history of Christianity. This phrase, specifically the word "filioque", was a major contributing factor in the schism between the eastern and western churches.

The doctrine of double procession cannot be understood when considered apart from Augustine's thought. Augustine, without knowing it, may have set off this controversy which ultimately led to the split between the eastern and western churches. A commentator on Photius believed that every crisis and change in thought in the western church could be traced back to Augustine. In his treatise, *De Trinitate*, he drew upon Scripture and logic to argue in favour of double procession. According to Augustine, the procession of the Holy Spirit was as true from the Son as it was from

the Father. Primordially, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father, who then gave the Son the ability to produce the Holy Spirit.

Augustine wonders why the Holy Spirit is not a son even though he proceeds from the Father. The Holy Spirit is not called a son because he was not born. Rather, the Father and the Son gave the Holy Spirit. He also wonders when the exact moment was when the Holy Spirit proceeded from the Son. If Christ had the Holy Spirit while he was still in Mary, had the Holy Spirit already proceeded from the Son when the Son was born? Did the Holy Spirit not proceed from the Son until the moment when the Son was born? Did it happen at the moment of Christ's baptism? How about when Christ breathed the Holy Spirit on the disciples? Not even the disciples, close followers of Christ, had this power. In Acts 8, Simon Magus tried to buy from the apostles the power to dispense the Holy Spirit.

The filioque made its first creedal appearance in the creed of Damasus. This was the pope's reply to the treatise of Priscillian of Avila in 380. Another creedal appearance was in the creed with the twelve anathemas. This creed was perhaps modelled on the first council of Toledo, 400, but may more likely be the "Libellus in modum symboli", written in 430 by Pastor, bishop of Galicia.

King Reccarred called the council of Toledo in 589, where he first professed the filioque. At this council, the filioque was seen as securing a case against Arianism. The Father and Son were deemed to be equal sources of the Spirit, with the Son not inferior to the Father. The council formulated an anathema against those believing in single procession:

"Whoever does not believe in the Holy Spirit, or does not believe that He proceeds from the Father and the Son, and denies that He is coeternal and coequal with the Father and the Son, let him be anathema."

Manuscript evidence suggests that the creed without the filioque was actually

the one recited at Toledo. Future manuscripts show an increasing support of the creed including the filioque.

Pope Gregory the Great (590-604) also affirmed his belief in the filioque. Pope Agathon's statement of faith in 680 leaves the filioque out, even though the English synod of Hatfield in 680 upheld the filioque. It also held to the decisions of the first five ecumenical councils and of the Lateran council of 649, presided over by Pope Martin I.

The council of Gentilly was convened at Easter, 767. Representatives of the eastern and western churches were joined by Pippin, the king of France. Accusations flew. The delegates of the western church accused the representatives of Constantine V of neglect in icon worship. The eastern delegates accused the western church of the impropriety of inserting the filioque into the creed. No real solutions were attained at Gentilly.

Pippin died in 768. His son Charlemagne took up his crusade in support of the filioque. Charlemagne waved the filioque in the eastern church's face and tried to get papal support for his cause. In fact, he would not rest until he was able to convince Rome to support his ideas. As emperor, he logically played a significant role in the filioque controversy.

In 794, he contacted Pope Hadrian I in regards to a letter that Hadrian had received from Tarasius, patriarch of Constantinople. That letter, also sent to clergy in Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople, expressed support of the Holy Spirit's procession from the Father alone. Hadrian was in agreement with the patriarch's stance. Charlemagne rebuked Hadrian, who replied that same year and defended Tarasius' position. Hadrian said that his decisions were consistent with the teachings of the early church fathers and with Roman church practice. He had previously confessed this at the seventh council of Nicea in 787.

Charlemagne was present at the synod of Frankfurt-am-Main, also held in 794.

Here, the "Libellus", a letter likely written by St. Paulinus of Aquileia, was presented. It defended the double procession of the Holy Spirit and set the Italian bishops against, Elipandus, a supporter of single procession. A letter from Charlemagne to Elipandus in support of the filioque was also read.

St. Paulinus summoned the synod of Cividale in 796 or 797. He used this gathering to justify the insertion of the filioque into the creed. He believed that it was just as acceptable to frame new creeds as it was for the church fathers at Constantinople in 381 to alter the creed written at the council of Nicea in 325. Paulinus deemed as heretics those who did not support the insertion of the filioque.

The council of Jerusalem was called in 808. This is seen as a moment when the differences between east and west came to the fore. A group of Latin monks were resident on Mount Olivet. Their Orthodox neighbours called them heretics and threatened to throw them out of their monastery because the Latin monks recited the Constantinopolitan creed with the filioque. The Latin monks wrote to Pope Leo III, complaining and asking him to inform Charlemagne of their situation. They believed that they were in the right as they had heard the creed with the filioque from Charlemagne himself. The pope sent a response to Jerusalem. He sent the monks a profession of faith aimed at the easterners, which affirmed double procession. Leo told Charlemagne of the affair.

In response to this conflict, Charlemagne had Theodulphus of Orleans to write "De spiritu sancto". He also called the council of Aachen in 809-10. At this council, the delegates approved the work of Theodulphus. They also declared their favour of the filioque. It is possible, but not certain, that the council also acted to add the filioque to the creed.

Charlemagne sent an embassy to Leo III. Leo admitted that the filioque was essential to retaining orthodoxy. He also admitted that he had approved singing the

creed in Frankish lands, but he had not intended for that to cover the singing of amended creeds. Leo thought that all the trouble that had been encountered could have been avoided if the monks had held to custom and sung the creed for instructional purposes only and not at Mass. Leo was reluctant to abandon the creed without the filioque. He even had the creed in Greek and Latin inscribed on silver shields and posted in St. Peter's Basilica. Both creeds left out the filioque.

Pope Leo supported the work of the fourth ecumenical synod, which supported single procession. He said that if anyone taught otherwise, they should be either deposed or anathematised, depending on the position they held in the church. Vigilius repeated this at the fifth ecumenical synod and again by Agatho at the sixth synod.

At the beginning of the ninth century, the creed with the filioque was used in Spain, France, northern Italy, and Germany. Rome was reluctant to include it. Understandably, they wanted to keep peace with Constantinople. No evidence over the next two centuries has been found that has shown that Rome altered the creed. Even during the time of Photius, who so vehemently tried to assert that Rome had adopted the filioque, there has been no evidence to support that.

The council of Constantinople was held from 879-880. It was aimed at adding the filioque to the creed, but that clause was not specifically mentioned. The legates of Pope John VIII did not object to this addition. Unlike most western churches, Rome had not yet altered the creed.

Photius was a layman who was named the patriarch of Constantinople from 856-67 and again from 878-86. Photius accused the western church of heresy because of its stance on the filioque. Photius believes that the filioque is blasphemy. He thinks that the procession of the Spirit from two beings gives it a double case, thus obscuring the simplistic nature of God. Photius then questions just who proposed

dual procession in the first place.

Photius defends single procession, stating that six out of seven ecumenical synods upheld the procession of the Holy Spirit from the Father alone. The second synod established this idea, the third received it by tradition, the fourth confirmed it, the fifth supported it, the sixth sealed it, and the seventh proclaimed it. Photius sees attempts of support of the filioque as "profane, self-sufficient contentions against God."

Photius denies the Holy Spirit's procession from the son. He believes that the Spirit comes from the Father alone. He says that the Father has the distinctive property of bringing forth the divine essence in others. The Holy Spirit could only get its divine essence from the hypostasis of the Father. Photius asks that if all persons of the Trinity are equal, and if the Spirit proceeds from the Father, and if the Spirit also proceeds from the Son, then how come the Spirit does not proceed from itself? If this were true, then why would the Son not proceed from the Father and the Spirit?

Photius says, "if ... the Son is also a cause of the Spirit, then the personal feature of the Father is distributed to the Son." This is in line with Augustine's beliefs on dual procession. Augustine argues that Christ is divine because he created another divine being, the Holy Spirit. Augustine says that since the Father can have the Holy Spirit proceed from him, so can the Son, because the Father has given to the Son all that the Son has. The Holy Spirit cannot be lifeless while the Father and Son have life, as the Father has decided that life should come from him. Photius argues that if the Holy Spirit takes its life from the Father and the Son, what then prevents the son from getting its life from the Holy Spirit? A fault in Photius' logic is that this makes each person of the Trinity interchangeably father to one another.

One other idea, aside from Photius' interpretation of Augustine's writings, is that the church's mission to the Bulgars was the immediate cause of the filioque

controversy. Pope Nicholas I sent Latin missionaries to Bulgaria. Conflict arose with the Greek missionaries already there. The Latin missionaries had introduced the filioque to emphasise the differences between the eastern and western churches. The Greeks denounced the Latins for this. Nicholas attacked Photius, who called a synod in 867 to deal with the situation. At this synod, Photius charged the Latin church with having corrupted the creed by adding the filioque. Pope Nicholas I was excommunicated by Photius, the bishop of Constantinople, for inserting the filioque into the creed.

An exact time of Rome's adoption of the filioque cannot be pinpointed, but a likely moment has been discerned. In the time of Emperor Henry II, he persuaded Pope Benedict VIII to have the creed sung during Mass. This change was likely implemented because the pope could no longer hold over the emperor's head a text that Charlemagne held as a crucial component of Christian orthodoxy.

The most striking evidence of the rift that the filioque had caused, and the incident most familiar to the church as a whole, occurred in 1054. Michael Cerularius was patriarch of Constantinople and Leo IX was bishop of Rome. Michael made an attempt to reclaim the primacy of Constantinople. This caused Leo to excommunicate him. Michael then called a synod in July 1054 to address this issue. At that synod, he condemned the papal legates that had been sent by Leo to the synod. He criticised Rome for corrupting the creed by inserting the filioque and for teaching unsound doctrine. Michael believed that the German emperor had pressured Benedict into including the filioque into the creed. Michael then returned Leo's gracious favour and excommunicated Leo.

This incident in 1054 was not the beginning of schism between the east and west. This actually opened the church's eyes to the schism that was already there and had been there for many years. The pain was healed somewhat by councils in Lyons

in 1274 and in Florence in 1439. However, no permanent healing has been reached. In the current ecumenical translation of the Nicene Creed, the filioque is placed in brackets. This was done in an attempt to please both the western church by retaining the filioque and the eastern church by making the filioque optional. Most western churches include this form of the Nicene Creed in their worship books. To date, the only major western church that has removed the filioque has been the Church of England, which removed it in 1985. Peace and a resolution of this matter may only come, in the eyes of an eastern author, when the west abandons its efforts to assert the importance of the filioque and returns to the ancient form of the creed without the filioque. Only then, says this author, will the church be truly unified and see the error of its ways, having split apart so many years ago.