

**Q.** *I've read, and also asked my priest, to explain the Trinity to me. I'm still hopelessly confused. Also, I understand there's a difference between the ways the churches in the East and West understand this. Can you explain? Do these differences matter?*

**A.** It is not surprising that you are confused. As you state to be your predicament, you are seeking an explanation of God Himself and of His Essential Being. I am sure that you have heard this before, but this is the most profound of all Mysteries. Now, when we Orthodox use the word “mystery”, we do not mean a riddle or a problem to be solved. We mean a profoundly mystical reality, which can only be “Experienced” and, certainly, cannot be understood (comprehended). The most spiritual and Godly-wise of theologians have taught us that God can only be known in His acts of Self revelation but, by no means, in His Essence or Being.

For this reason, we Orthodox Christians prefer to confine our conversation about God to those things, which God Himself has taught us about Himself in the Holy Scriptures and in the unbroken Apostolic Tradition. It is this tradition, which is stated in the “Symbol of Faith” (The Creed) as adopted by the first two Ecumenical Councils.

1. That God is one.
2. That God is Eternal (Without beginning in time or end of days.)
3. That God is and always has been a Community (A Trinity) of Persons, each equal and each eternal.
4. That the Unity of the Divine Trinity is found in the relationship of the Eternal Son and the Eternal Holy Spirit to the Eternal Father. (This is sometimes called “Divine Monarchy”)
5. That all that exists in creation was brought into being from nothingness by the Father through the agency of the Son, “By Whom all things were made and without Whom was not anything made that was made.”
6. That all creation is sustained by and we are made Holy by the “Life-creating” Holy Spirit.
7. That the Son is Eternally “Begotten” of the Father and that the Holy Spirit is eternally sent forth: “Proceeds from” the Father.
8. That in God’s economy of salvation: in how God works in creation, the Father sends the Holy Spirit through the Son and the Spirit draws creation back through the Son to the Father.

As far as I know, we dare not say more than this about the Most Holy Trinity.

Now, we turn to your question about the Western (Roman Catholic and daughter Protestant sects) beliefs about the Trinity. Where the Orthodox Church has steadfastly avoided making assertions or logical speculations about God beyond that which He has chosen to tell us, others have not felt constrained by this scruple. It only seemed “Logical” to Arias, for example, and to his followers, all steeped in the “Emanation” language of Platonism, that the Father is eternal and that the Son and Holy the Holy Spirit came forth as the first acts of creation. Thus, where the

fathers of the First Council state the Apostolic Doctrine that Our Lord is “Of one Essence (One in Being) with the Father”, the Arians held that “There was a time when He (God the Son) was not”. And described Him as being of “Similar essence” with the Father.

In about the sixth century, a change began to take place in the Western (Latin) part of Christendom. In place of the Orthodox reluctance to “Speculate” about God beyond that which He has chosen to reveal to us, the Western Church adopted the “Doctrine of Interpolation”. According to this kind of thinking, theology is developed over time and, thus, in time, some ill-conceived efforts to combat heresy, combined with some misapplication of the poetic musings of St. Augustine of Hippo, resulted in a part of the Western Church adding a clause “Filio que” to the Creed. Thus, where the fathers had taught that the Son is eternally begotten of the Father and that the Holy Spirit is Eternally proceeding from the Father, it was now asserted that the Son was Begotten of the Father and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father “and the Son”. At first, the Church of Rome was appalled and angered by the presumption of this local “council”. The Pope even had two silver plaques engraved with the original Creed in Greek and Latin and placed on either side of the altar in St. Peter’s. Nonetheless, by the time of Charlemagne, not only had the modified “creed” become ubiquitous among the Frankish Churches but the belief was abroad that the filio que was in the original Creed and the “Greeks” had taken it out.

Now, it is neither my purpose nor your suggestion that I argue the question here, but, allow me to suggest that the scenario put forth in St. Augustine’s musings, in which the Father begat the Son and the Father and Son looked upon each other in love and that “Love” became the Holy Spirit sounds an awful lot like the emanation philosophy of Arias. In fact, we have compelling evidence that the clause, while introduced into the Latin Church in a furtive attempt to combat Arianism, had, in fact, originally appeared in the “creed” of the Gothic Arian church.

I should also mention, in passing, that the Protestant sects which split from the Roman obedience, for the most part, carried the Filio que doctrine along with them. One peculiar development in recent time has been the gradual drift of commentary on the Filio que from application to the “Essential Trinity” (God in His Being) to the “Economic Trinity” (God as He works in Creation. In the 1970s, the Roman Catholic Catechetical Directory for the United States was published. It contained an explanation of the Creed to the effect that “We say that the Spirit proceeds from the Father because Jesus says that he proceeds from the Father and we say that He proceeds from the Son because Jesus says, ‘I will send you the Holy Spirit’”. Now, as you may notice, this applies the clause to God’s working in the world rather than to God’s Essence or Being. In 1976, I pointed this out to Fr. Alexander schmemann, of blessed memory, and asked if he thought that this represented a movement of the Roman communion toward Orthodox Trinitarian Doctrine. His immediate response was, “No, dear Father! It simply represents the fact that they no longer understand their theology.”

So, you can see that you are not alone in feeling “Hopelessly confused” about the Holy Trinity. But the good news is that you don’t have to understand it because you can’t understand it. After all, to understand means to “Stand under” to “comprehend” or “apprehend” something and who

can expect to surround or grab onto the reality of God in His Divine Essence. All you have to do is to accept the Holy Orthodox Church and to accept the Creed as the statement of the Faith of the Orthodox. I recall an adult class I was conducting over twenty years ago. It consisted both of catechumens and of cradle Orthodox. One of the, people preparing to enter the Church asked me, "What real difference does it (the Filio que) make?"

As I began to develop an answer similar to the one I have just given you, an elderly pious Greek gentleman who was attending the class, slammed his fist on the table and, addressing me, exclaimed, "Father, don't do that!" Then, turning to the Catechumen he continued, "Ask not! Believe or believe not!" Taso's advice is still good advice for both of us. Don't allow yourself to feel "Hopelessly confused" but remain hopefully devoted to "The Faith, once and forever, delivered to the saints."