



Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate
The Family of Alexandria College Graduates Seminar
Pope Cyril The Pillar of Faith Center for Theological Studies

In the Name of the Holy Trinity
“The Church in the First Three Centuries” Course

Lecture 3
Christology in the first three centuries
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What is the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ in the first three centuries?

That is, before the age of Councils; before the Council of Nicaea in 325 A.D.

The fact is, there is some sort of accusation against Christianity. This accusation came through:

- 1- St. Paul, the Apostle. It was said that he set signs for Christianity.
- 2- Saint Athanasius the Great. He is the one who put the signs of Christian Dogma.

As if the doctrine/dogma before St. Athanasius didn't exist, and as if the Christian life before St. Paul the Apostle also didn't exist. This is not true; it can't be said that the Christian faith didn't exist in the first three centuries, nor was it different from what was said by the saints who came after them. However, the challenges that those fathers faced were much more difficult. Hence, from this point, the fathers who defended the faith appeared. We all know what is read in Synaxarion on the day of the departure of the Patriarchs; especially the Patriarchs of Alexandria in Matthew 16:13-16.

The question of our Lord Jesus Christ was to hear their answers; to know people's impressions about Him. All the answers were far from our Lord Jesus Christ and showed that they didn't know Him. When He asked the

disciples ***“But who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter replied and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” (Matthew 16:16).*** St. Peter replied with the words that Christ wanted to hear, and was happy with. He answered early on time, so He blessed him in Matthew 16:17.

As the revelations about the divinity of Christ were not clear, there were many conclusions about His nature. However, with miracles, signs, teachings, Crucifixion, Death, Resurrection and Ascension, all gave them confirmation to believe that that He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God. The Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ will remain the cornerstone in our Christian faith. If you don't know who Christ is !!!, then your Christianity is flawed.

And because of who is Christ is, it was a path to many heresies and heterodoxies till this day. The church strives to preserve who Christ is (The Rock - The Faith).

This was paid by the church throughout the ages martyrs, righteous people, and hermits with their precious blood in their struggle.

Thus, Christianity and Jesus Christ have been under a great attack. No one has ever been attacked or held accountable such as Christ due to Him being extraordinary, a pivotal person who is above time, accepted only by faith and understood only by reason.

There are people who consider our belief in the Divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, was developed by Athanasius; (of course not). Athanasius didn't develop it, but he defended and clarified it.

Additionally, during the first three centuries, there were defending saints before Athanasius. There were also those who attacked and were antichrist before Arius.

+ Moreover, when Athanasius defended the Divinity of Jesus, he defended the faith, he received from the fathers who preceded him. Hence, this faith was firm, consistent and upright from the first Apostolic Age.

There is no doubt that Athanasius's defense of his gift of the Holy Spirit, wisdom and piety was the strongest; and he explained many theological matters.

However, we don't recognise that faith was unknown, and it was Athanasius who created it, because faith existed since the Apostolic age; it is the beginning of the birth of Christianity.

Furthermore, there were others who preceded Arius in questioning the nature of the eternity, and the hypostasis of Jesus such as Marcion and Paul of Samosata.

Had it not been for Athanasius' time coinciding with the era of King Constantine, the severe attack on Christianity would not have occurred when the king issued the Edict of Milan in 313 A.D, the proclamation of religious tolerance. So, the enemy of goodness raged against Christianity and Constantine, who gave freedom to everyone to embrace Christianity; even Constantine, the Emperor, himself became Christian. This opened the path for Christianity; it started the confrontation between the church, the faith and the heretics who attacked the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ, whom the first and the most obvious one was Arius. This is due to many factors such as Arius being a poet and a priest, and he had philosophy and logic. So, he attacked the church when it was spreading in the beginning, and churches were being built after prayers were being held in crypts; starting to take the form of an official religion. Thus, the enemy of goodness started attacking Christianity from within through Arius the heretic.

Constantine, Edict of Milan and the heretic Arius coincided with the presence of Athanasius the Apostle to defend the faith. This doesn't mean that there was no Christianity before, but when the confrontation between them took an ecumenical form, that was because Christianity became an official religion and there were apostolic seats.

And here we ask: was there no faith in the church in the first three centuries? Was there no belief in the Holy Trinity, theology, eternity, the equality of the 3 hypostases, the belief in the procession of the Holy Spirit and the begetting of the Son out of the Father, the eternity of the Son with the Father? NO, of course, there existed, so we focus on the testimony of the church's Fathers especially pre-Nicene Fathers, regarding the Divinity of our Lord Christ. This reveals the actions of the enemy of goodness against the church. Here we can say that in St. Paul's era, what was previously known was formulated, and not of new doctrinal matters.

Therefore, the sayings of the Fathers are a reference to the church's faith. So, what was in the church in the days of Nicaea was to preserve what they already received from the Apostles and the Fathers, not developing anything new, and any heresy created... They are answered from the writings and origins of the fathers.

And here, in proving Dogmatic Theological facts before Nicaea, we classify the Fathers as the following:

Pre-Nicene Fathers classification:

First: The Apostolic Fathers:

1. St. Clement the Roman
2. St. Ignatius of Antioch
3. Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Izmir
4. Baniyas of Phrygia 130 A.D
5. Barnabas 100 A.D
6. Didache, the Lord's teachings to the Nations, by the twelve disciples
7. Hermas, of the second century

+ All those were Pre-Nicene and before Athanasius, so what were they saying about Christ and Christianity ... They were speaking about The Son as equal to The Father, Jesus Christ the crucified who raised us up with Him, and placed us with Him in Heaven, and about The Holy Spirit, His gifts, and about the incarnation and salvation.

Second: The Defending Fathers:

1. Quadrinos 124 A.D, the letter to Diogenes
2. Aristides of Athens 125 A.D
3. Aristo of Pella 140 A.D
4. St. Justin the Martyr 165 A.D
5. Tatian the Syrian, around 172 A.D
6. Apollinaris from Hierapolis 172 A.D
7. Athenagoras 177 A.D
8. Theophilus of Antioch 180 A.D
9. Meltio, Bishop of Sardis 190 A.D
10. Miltiades 192 A.D

11. Mitokeus Felix, around 200 A.D
12. Hermas the Philosopher 200 A.D

Third: Pre-Nicene Alexandria School Deans:

1. Athenagoras, the Philosopher
2. St. Pantaenus the Scholar
3. St. Clement of Alexandria
4. Origen, the Scholar
5. Heraclas or Yaraklas, the 13th Pope
6. Dionysius, the 14th Pope
7. Theognostus, the Priest
8. St. Pierius
9. Pope Peter the First, the 17th Pope, and the seal of the Martyrs
10. Alexanderos the First, the 19th Pope
11. St. Athanasius the Apostle, the 20th Pope
12. Serapion, the Bishop of Thmuis, or the St. Timios
13. Didymus the Blind

+ They were holy theological defenders with an original dogmatic theological thought.

Fourth: The Monastic Fathers and their writings Pre-Nicene:

- 1- St. Anthony the Great, the Father of Monasticism, born around 251-356 A.D
- 2- St. Amun, from the Monastic Fathers 275 A.D
- 3- St. Pachomius the Great- founder of Christian Cenobitic Monasticism, born around 290-346 A.D
- 4- St. Theodore, born around 323 - 368 A.D

Monasticism is inseparable from Dogma or Theology; faith in our Lord Jesus Christ's Theology is what secures the mind and strengthens man. Anything other than that will make a man vulnerable to many physical lusts.

+ The church considers the sayings, the writings, and the biography of those Fathers, are the basic components in the ecclesiastical tradition; through which faith reaches (is delivered to) us; the faith which St. Jude spoke about in his Gospel and said, "Faith which was once delivered to the saints."

+ The church considers the Fathers as the trustworthy witnesses to the correct understanding of faith, and real living of the good news of salvation, announced through the Holy Bible, as our Lord Jesus Christ, delivered to His Disciples and Apostles.

+ St. Athanasius the Apostle says, “I delivered what I received, without inventing anything out of it. What I learnt, I drew it in accordance with the scriptures.”

+ What our Fathers delivered is a real Dogma and this is the characteristic for those Theological Professors, is to confess the same faith as everyone else, and not to differ from each other or from their Fathers.

The most famous sources for the Fathers' sayings:

1) The Greek writings:

It is known as “Partologia Graeca” PG. It consists of 161 large volumes. Noting that all the writings of the Fathers of Alexandria and the monastic writings are in this section as they all wrote in Greek.

2) The Latin writings - It is known as Partologia Latina PL.:

It consists of 121 big volumes + the English language.

The most well-known sources in English are the Pre-Nicene Fathers and Post-Nicene Fathers. They were issued in Edinburgh, Scotland. This collection is in 380 volumes divided into 3 sections:

- A section for Ante-Nicene fathers ANF; its volumes are 10 volumes.
- A section for Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers NPNF; the first group.
- It consists of 14 volumes; they are the writings of St. Augustine which are 8 volumes, and the writings of St. John Chrysostom which are 6 volumes.
- A section for Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers; the second group which consists of 14 volumes to the writings of the rest of the Fathers.

**** Christology of Christ according to Ante-Nicene Fathers:**

The Son is a Hypostasis, different from the Hypostasis of the Father, but begotten of Him before all ages and of one essence (equal to Him in essence).

1. The eternal Being/begetting of the Son from the Father.
2. The Divinity of Jesus Christ; the incarnated Son.

First: The eternal being of the Son of the Father

“The only begotten Son of God, begotten of the Father.”

The Holy Bible uses the word “The Father” to express the first Hypostasis in the Holy Trinity. The word “the Son” is used to express the second Hypostasis (just for clarification). It uses the word “begetting” to express the relationship between the Father and the Son. These expressions are not taken in their physical human meanings, but the Holy Bible uses them (not us) because human expressions fail to express the Lord.

Therefore, these words are the closest in the human language to expressing the relationship of the son to the Father.

The closest word to express the first Hypostasis as being the Source, and the Spring of the other Hypostases is the word “The Father”. The closest word to express the second Hypostasis as being a Hypostasis begetting and coming out of the Father, is the word “The Son”.

The Father is the source and the spring, and the Son is begotten of Him, of His nature and essence, and equal to Him in Eternity and everlasting life without being separated from Him. He is begotten of Him and still in Him, exactly like the begetting of thought out of the mind. The thought doesn't leave the mind, nor does it separate from it, yet it remains still in it, whether it is announced or spread among others.

- ☛ The begetting of the Son; His exiting of the Father is a unique begetting. We can't describe it as creatures because the creature can't describe the Creator, and the inconceivable using perceptible things. So, the Son is called the expression “OMonognees”, that is the only Begotten Son.
- ☛ He is the only begotten of the Father according to nature, meaning of the same nature as the Father. However, for us, we believers, our

begetting of the Father is by adoption not by nature, according to the love of God.

- The begetting of the Son of the Father is in an incomprehensible way, neither by cutting nor by division but in a way that can't be uttered (incomprehensible) according to the words of the Prophet Isaiah in his generation: ***“He was taken from prison and from judgement. And who will declare His generation? For He was cut off from the land of the living; For the transgressions of My People He was Stricken” (Isaiah 53:8)***. So, the begetting of the Son is a begetting that can never be examined because it is not of a created nature.
- St. Irenaeus in the 2nd century says; *“whoever asks us about the begetting of the Son of the Father, we answer that no one comprehends this exodus or this begetting because it is in fact entirely indescribable.”*
- Before All Ages:
It is eternal being before all ages as in the Book of Micah: ***“Whose goings forth are from of old, from everlasting.” (Micah 5:2)***

There was never a time where the Son didn't exist. The Father can't be called a Father unless He has a Son. So, if the Son hadn't existed since eternity, then the Father would have changed, and God does not change. If the Son is “the Word” how could we imagine the existence of a time when the Father is without “the Word” or “the Wisdom” or “the Mind”? God forbids this happening. It is a begetting before all ages and beyond/above time, an everlasting begetting; meaning, it didn't occur in a certain period of time, then ended. It is a permanent begetting like the birth of thought from the mind; it is always born without stopping or interruption. Also, like the birth of light out of the sun. It is a unique begetting which is not known and limited to any human language. However, according to the effort and diligence of the human language we use it to express things that are not expressed.

- The Hypostasis of the Father is the origin and the source of the Holy Trinity from Whom, The Son is begotten before all ages, and the Holy Spirit is proceeded before all ages. For the exodus of the Son of the Father, we use the word “begetting”, and for the exodus of the Holy Spirit of the Father, we use the word “procession”

☞ So, we say light out of light; the Son bears His Same nature and His essence as our teacher St. Paul the Apostle says, ***“Who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person.”***
(*Hebrews 1:3*)

****Important note:**

If the analogies bring us closer to the truths of God, they cannot fully express these facts, and more than one analogy for the same truth can be used, provided that each analogy approximates only one aspect of this fact, although it differs from it in other aspects.

For example, the Son is separated from the Father, so He is inseparable from Him. The beam separates from the sun, and the sun's ray is not the core of the sun, so they are similarities.

+ Begotten, not created

Begotten does not mean creation from nothing, but rather an eternal exodus from the Father, and all beings are created, but the Son is begotten because the word “created” indicates that He did not exist before He was born. No one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and the one to whom the Son wills to reveal Him. “Of one essence with the Father,” this expression came from the Greek language (*Homo Ousyon*), meaning of the same essence as the Father. As for Arius, he suggested an alternative title (*Homi Ousyon*), meaning similar to the Father in essence, which was rejected by St. Athanasius.

+ The three Hypostases share the same characteristics of the one divine essence, which is what we call the essential characteristics such as eternity - everlasting life - creation - wisdom - power - absolute wisdom - life.

There is no characteristic trait that is not known to the three Hypostases, except that the Father is the origin, the Son is begotten, and the Holy Spirit is the procession.

Thus, with an attribute by which each hypostasis is distinguished from the other two, which is what we call the legal trait. The Father alone is the source. The Son alone is the begotten of the Father before all ages, and the Holy Spirit alone is the proceeding from the Father eternally.

+ We have learned that the Son came out of God the Father, and with this exodus, He was born from the Father, so He is the Son of God, and is called God for His unity with the Father in essence. Therefore, He is God and the Son of God, and they are one. Even the ray of the sun, when it comes out, remains connected to it, and the sun remains in the ray because it is from it. There is no division in the substance. The ray is an extension of the sun. Thus, Christ is a spirit from a spirit and a God from a God, and He who came out of God the Father is that one God, and the Son of God and the two are one. That is why we say by whom all things were made ***“All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.”*** (John 1:3)

Saint Irenaeus says: "The Creator of the world is in truth the Word of God. This is our Lord".

The Scholar Athenagoras says: "He created the universe and instituted a plan by the Word of God".

Second: the divinity of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son:

- ❖ We believe that our Lord Jesus Christ is God Emmanuel, which is interpreted "God with us".

And all the names of the Father are also attributed to the Son, the Almighty, the Highest, the Lord of all, the King of Israel, who is and who has declared to people in Himself that "All that the Father has is mine".

We saw the Son saying, "You have heard that it was said: ... but I say to you: ..." that is, He declaring that He is God Himself and speaks with His authority.

In the redemption, the whole creation saw how the Creator was condemned for the sake of man. They saw the invisible, the infinite was confined to the body, the unaffected suffered, the immortal died, and the heavenly was laid in a tomb. These things declare His divinity and His love for mankind and do not call for any doubt.

- ❖ "Because He suffered for us as a man and pitied us as the Lord." (Saint Irenaeus)
- ❖ "He died according to the flesh for the redemption of man, and yet He lives forever." (Tertullian the Scholar)

In this saying, the Scholar Tertullian confirms that those who reject the One and the Cross, thinking that this is not befitting the greatness of God, are far from true understanding and faith. Without the One and the Cross, we would not have this salvation that our Lord Jesus Christ completed because of His love for us and His care for us.

From here it is clear that what was stated in the Nicene faith was in agreement with the thought of the fathers who preceded them.

Here is the timeline:

- The Act (Law) of the Apostles, Rome, 2nd century
- Irenaeus, Lyon, 180 A.D
- Tertullian, Carthage, 200 A.D
- Cyprian, Carthage, 250 A.D
- Origen, Alexandria, 250 A.D
- Gregory, New Caesarea, 270 A.D
- Eusebius, Caesarea 325 A.D
- Council of Nicaea, Nicaea, 325 A.D

Glory be to God Forever Amen.



