

“NOT AN IOTA OF DIFFERENCE?”: WHY A SINGLE LETTER DOES MATTER

“It makes not one **iota** of difference!” Most people readily admit that most disputes occur over rather insignificant matters. Sure, they may begin over heated political discussions or arguing about which team you root for in a large city— White Sox or Cubs, Jets or Giants. But as people wrestled with understanding the person of Jesus Christ in the early centuries of the Church, sometimes the **battles lines** were drawn over a **single letter** in the Greek alphabet. Was this a case of personal preference, as in Archaeology (Archeology) or flavor (flavour), to highlight a difference with our Canadian neighbors (neighbours) to the north? Actually, it was much more significant than that. Fiercely fought battles, forced exiles and mutual condemnations occurred over the inclusion or exclusion of a **single Greek letter**. The difference between Homousios (Greek: “of one substance”) and homoiousios (“similar substance”) occasioned a Church doctrinal crisis. Potato, potahto? Think again.

There’s that stubborn “iota,” the Greek letter “i.” The early Church wrestled mightily with the theological language to describe the Trinity. While prefigured in the Old Testament and much clearer indications in the New, nevertheless the Church lacked the **conceptual language** to articulate the fullness of that teaching. So too with the idea that Jesus Christ, second person of the blessed trinity is both God and man. Thus, entered *philosophical* language stage left. The **disputes** over such language developed into bitterness and it reached a boiling point. Many Catholics are unaware that the Church’s first ecumenical council was called—not by the Pope— but by the Emperor. For Constantine, **security** of the Empire and the **unity** of the Church were **inseparably linked**. Not every Council summoned by an Emperor was regarded as Ecumenical; that was not considered sufficient.

Nicaea was attended by 318 bishops. This **could be** a symbolic number. Consider Genesis 14:14: “When Abram heard that his nephew had been captured, he mustered **three hundred and eighteen** of his retainers, born in his house, and went in pursuit as far as Dan.” But that may be reading too much into it. Perhaps an attentive and diligent young scribe simply recorded the **actual number** of participants! From the list, we know that most bishops were Eastern; just a few from the West plus two legates of the Pope; twenty participants hailed from Northern Africa. In the early 4th century, Nicaea was a significant city, prosperous. It was protected by 33 ft. high walls and located on the shores of ancient Lake Ascanius, protected by hills to the north and south. Today, all that remain are the ancient city’s ruins, located within the modern city of Iznik, which derives its name from the ancient city.

Time has a way of fading memories, including a city’s Christian past. The historic Byzantine era Church of **Hagia Sophia** (site of Nicaea II in 787 A.D.) is now a **mosque**. Just in 2014, government surveyors stumbled across a submerged late 4th century basilica 165 feet offshore, **ten feet underwater**. For centuries, no one noticed. What for Christians is arguably the most significant doctrinal clarification ever offered probably passes by the locals with nary a notice today in the city of 23,000. That is exactly what happened after the Ottoman conquest of Nicaea in 1331 A.D.— the Christian history fades. And yet who in 325 A.D. could have imagined that the heated debate over the nature of Jesus would literally have a **lasting effect** nearly seventeen centuries later? The 2011 improved translation of the Creed (“**consubstantial** with the Father”) bears witness. But that is the genius of the Church’s tradition and a testament to the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

By God’s grace, the council fathers gathering in **Nicaea in 325 A.D.** dealt in a forthright manner

with the controversy of the day– was Jesus of “like substance” with the Father or “of the same substance” with the Father. It is a fundamental dogma of our faith that Jesus is of the same substance with the Father. While admittedly a philosophical term, and not one that appears in the Scriptures, nevertheless it fits the bill. The Gospel of John records these words of Jesus: “My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one can take them out of the Father’s hand. The Father and I are one.” (Jn10:29-30) But a popular priest and preacher from Alexandria named **Arius** had other designs. He and his followers believed that Jesus was “adopted” as a “Son of God” or that he was created by the Father as a being greater than the angels but **lesser than** the Father– thus similar, but **not co-eternal** with the Father. And that changes everything!

The Nicene Creed is a **foundational text** of our Catholic faith. A creed acts as a yardstick of correct belief. Acceptance or rejection of a creed served to distinguish believers from deniers of a doctrine. A creed was called in Greek a σύμβολον (symbol) signifying half of a broken object which, when placed together with the other half, verified the bearer’s identity. St. Athanasius reflected years later that the debates at Nicaea were **long and laborious**. We do not know who proposed the term “of the same substance,” but **we do** know that ultimately only Arius and two other bishops refused to sign the creed. Truth won. The Holy Spirit guided the Church and Arius’ teaching was condemned. One “iota” made all the difference in the world. With Thomas we say, “My Lord and my God.” (Jn 20:28)

- Occasionally, I forget to turn off my microphone upon entering the sacristy after Mass. Thankfully, I have never said anything that I regret! But an entire **School Board** in Contra Costa County, CA **resigned** after their disparaging and foul-mouthed comments during a Zoom School Board meeting were captured live. Thinking it was a private meeting, the parents’ call for in-person learning were dismissed, one board member implying they “wanted their babysitters” back.
- Ouch! The Vatican is projecting a **\$60 million budget deficit** this year. Obviously, the many pilgrims who visit Rome and the Vatican all but dried up this past year. Makes me feel a little better about the loss of income we experienced from a lack of major events here! In these times, the **generosity** of Cathedral parishioners has never failed to humble me. Believe me, there is light coming at the end of the dark tunnel. Thanks for your cooperation with all of our protocols!
- Imagine looking out the passenger window to see an **engine on fire**. That’s exactly what happened on a flight from Denver to Honolulu. Never take for granted the **skill and composure** of airline pilots. Listening to the mayday audio from that flight is incredible. The pilot calmly states “Denver, departure. United 328, heavy mayday, aircraft, uh, just experienced engine failure, need a turn immediately.” “Heavy mayday” indeed. The Boeing 777 landed safely. The engine debris was sprawled in a suburban Denver backyard. Amazing.
- At 63.4° N latitude, **Trondheim in Norway** boasts the world’s 2nd northernmost Cathedral. Coronavirus restrictions have **limited** inside church attendance to ten (10) people! So, the Bishop pivoted and held Ash Wednesday Mass **outside for 100**. Gutsy move, Bishop– Bravo!

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector