

Filioque Flaws

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Paul Jungwirth

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Today, no one disagrees that the filioque was an innovation, first added to the Symbol of the Faith by a 589 Toledo Council.¹ Unless one accepts the overriding authority of Rome, the teaching doesn't belong in the Symbol. Even if the filioque is valid theologoumena, the Symbol is no place for opinion. A more important question, especially for Orthodox living in the West, is whether the filioque is true.

Staniloae says the filioque subordinates the Holy Spirit.² Lossky, on the other hand, says the filioque destroys the *μοναρχία* of the Father. It is hard to see how they can both be right. Lossky even suggests that the Eastern teaching of *μοναρχία* itself risks subordinationism.³ A third accusation, again by Lossky, is that the filioque is rationalistic.⁴

There are many filioques. St. Maximus knew of the teaching and even understood it in an eternal, not merely temporal, sense. When an eastern friend questioned him about it, he admitted that it was poorly expressed, but he assured his friend that it indicated merely the traditional Greek teaching of *δὲ Ἰοῦ*.⁵ Even St. Photios wrote that he could accept the filioque if it bore merely the sense of sending, as the Father sends the Son.⁶ But this is not the sense given in traditional Catholic doctrine.⁷ According to the Catholic teaching, the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from both Father and Son as from a single principle (“ab uno principio”).

Is this subordinationist? Such a label is unclear. St. Photios says similar things, but never in such a vague way. Orthodox polemicists must be wary. If the filioque is subordinationist, why isn't

¹Michael Azkoul, “Saint Photios and the Filioque,” James Graves, editor, *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* (Brookline, MA: Studion, 1983) 10.

²Dmitru Staniloae, *Theology and the Church*, trans. by Robert Barringer (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1980) 107.

³Vladimir Lossky, *In the Image and Likeness of God*, edited by John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1985) 81. Indeed, Chadwick ascribes the double procession of Augustine to his desire to rule out subordinationism: Henry Chadwick, *The Early Church*, Revised edition (London: Penguin, 1993) 235.

⁴Lossky, *Image and Likeness* 76, 80.

⁵George C. Berthold, “Maximus the Confessor and the *Filioque*,” *Studia Patristica* 18.1 (1985): 113–117.

⁶Photios, *Epitomes* 10a. To my surprise, Photios nowhere draws the classical distinction between “theology” and “economy.” But this passage seems consistent with that language: he is saying that while a theological filioque is out of the question, he could accept an economic one. See also Photios, *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit* 91.

⁷See, for example, *The Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. by John A. McHugh and Charles J. Callan (Rockford, IL: Tan, 1982) 93.

the μοναρχία of the Father?

To find an answer, we must more clearly define how the filioque “subordinates” the Holy Spirit. This subordination must be dialectical, not merely a tendency or feeling. If the filioque merely tends to subordinationism or conveys a feeling of subordinationism, that is no reason to break communion. A doctrine’s abuse is no reason to reject its authentic form. Otherwise we would have to reject the Trinity, which, history shows, has tended toward Arianism, Sabellianism, Macedonianism, and other errors.

Subordinationism cannot lie merely in the hierarchy of ὑποστάσεις, because then the ἀρχή of the Father would already be subordinationist. But if subordination does not come from the ὑποστάσεις, it must come from the οὐσία. If the Holy Spirit has a different οὐσία from the Father and Son, then He is indeed subordinate; He is less than God. Catholics of course deny that the Holy Spirit has a different οὐσία, so polemicists must show that the filioque contradicts the one οὐσία of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

Whether or not the filioque itself lowers the Holy Spirit, certain arguments for it certainly do. The filioque began as a response to Arianism.⁸ It was thought that a Son who causes the Spirit would be more clearly divine. But if causality is necessary to divinity, then the Holy Spirit is only divine if He causes yet another divinity, who must then cause another, ad infinitum. The Son has been raised at the Spirit’s expense.

This endless procession of divinities owes more to flawed reasoning than to the filioque itself. It follows not from the Spirit’s double procession, but from the idea that the Son, if a cause, would gain honor. When Photios criticizes the filioque, he only says that a fourth and fifth Person “could” proceed.⁹ The filioque permits it but does not imply it. Elsewhere, Photios connects the endless procession not to the filioque, but to its supporting arguments.¹⁰

Is there anything in the actual filioque that lowers the Spirit? Photios thought so. The crucial principle is this: what is not of the common οὐσία must belong to only one ὑπόστασις.¹¹ On this principle turns Photios’s whole argument.

Suppose that God’s common attributes belong only to His οὐσία. Then spirating, common to Father and Son, must belong to οὐσία. But since the Spirit spirates no one, the Spirit has a different οὐσία and is not God.¹² Here the filioque itself subordinates the Spirit.

Or the reasoning could go another way: The holy Fathers teach that spirating belongs to the Father’s ὑπόστασις; the filioque implies that spirating belongs to οὐσία. Before, the three ὑποστάσεις were distinguished by their various τρόποι ὑπάρξεως, but now the filioque has blended

⁸Chadwick 236.

⁹Photios, *Mystagogy* 8, 12, 37.

¹⁰Ibid. 40.

¹¹Ibid. 6, 36, 64. See also Justin Popovich, “The Life of Saint Photios,” James Graves, editor, *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, trans. by Ronald Wertz (Brookline, MA: Studion, 1983) 51.

¹²Photios, *Mystagogy* 34.

the distinguishing marks with the one οὐσία.¹³ The Spirit's cause is no longer the Father, but an οὐσία that is bare and impersonal.¹⁴ This reasoning makes the Trinity into a composite of ὑπόστασις and οὐσία, whereas before ὑπόστασις and οὐσία were inseparable.

So what is the basis for such an important principle: that qualities not of the common οὐσία can belong to only one ὑπόστασις? First, it is the Cappadocian way of speaking. For them, οὐσία is a principle of unity, and ὑπόστασις is a principle of difference. Photios follows this usage. Indeed, it is so natural to him, it is hard to distinguish when he is arguing for this principle and when he is assuming it. He prefers to defend it not in the abstract, but only in terms of the filioque.¹⁵

He reasons that the filioque implies composition in God. This composition could fall in two places, both unsatisfactory. First, the filioque makes the Son a second cause, and thus in God are two principles of causality.¹⁶ This is the accusation repeated by Lossky, that the filioque disposes of the μοναρχία of the Father.¹⁷ Both Father and Son become αἰτίαι and ἀρχαί. Before, the Father, as sole ἀρχή, was source of the divine οὐσία, giving the Trinity its unity. Now the unity consists of an οὐσία divorced from any ὑπόστασις, so again the Godhead is divided.

Catholics deny that the filioque makes the Son a second principle. This is the purpose of “ab uno principio.” But Photios pre-empts this reasoning: If the filioque does not divide the causal principle, composition merely shifts to the Father Himself. “If the Father surrenders and is displaced from one of His own characteristic properties, yet that property is preserved uncompounded, will they not be forced to admit that if He does possess that property, He will be divided by the innovation in it?”¹⁸ The Father is divided: He is part in Himself and part in the Son.¹⁹ He is both remote and proximate cause.²⁰

Another way of putting this confusion is to say that the Son shares in the ὑπόστασις of the Father.²¹ Photios writes that if the Father were to share causality with the Son, “the two ὑποστάσεις of the Godhead would coalesce into one person. And thus Sabellios, or rather some other semi-Sabellian monster, would again sprout up among us.”²² Sabellios taught that Father, Son, and Spirit had no substantial reality, but were only masks. The filioque's confusion of Father with Son likewise empties the ὑποστάσεις of content and reduces everything to the divine οὐσία.²³

¹³Ibid. 47.

¹⁴James Graves, editor, *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*, trans. by James Graves (Brookline, MA: Studion, 1983) 89n.27.

¹⁵The only abstract defense appears briefly in Photios, *Mystagogy* 17, where he asserts that all common properties of things belong to nature. This is a surprising over-simplification of ancient philosophy. St. John of Damascus, for instance, did not ascribe all common properties to nature, as shown by John of Damascus, *Fount of Knowledge* 26, 30. Given Photios's high education, I'm not sure what to make of this passage.

¹⁶Photios, *Mystagogy* 14.

¹⁷Ibid. 11.

¹⁸Ibid. 10. All translations of Photios are from *On the Mystagogy of the Holy Spirit*.

¹⁹Photios, *Mystagogy* 16.

²⁰Ibid. 62.

²¹Ibid. 16.

²²Ibid. 9. See also ibid. 15.

²³Ibid. 19.

The phrase “ab uno principio” arouses further confusion. What is this one principle? Is it the Father Himself? In that case, what is actually asserted by the filioque? Is it the divine οὐσία? But then the Spirit is His own cause. Or is it the shared causality between Father and Son? If that is a real thing, is it not a fourth ὑπόστασις?

Yet another interpretation exists of the “uno principio.” Augustine calls the Spirit the mutual love of Father and Son,²⁴ and the West has tended to follow him.²⁵ Because the love is shared by Father and Son, the Spirit has one origin, not two.²⁶ This is not merely an economic relationship, for “anyone who can understand the generation of the Son from the Father as timeless should also understand the procession of the Holy Spirit from them both as timeless.”²⁷

Sometimes the filioque is blamed for Augustine’s reducing the Father, Son, and Spirit to mere relations, but the inference seems to run the other way. Rather, Augustine’s teaching that the Persons are relations is based on his commitment to absolute divine simplicity. He reasons that the Persons are neither substances, which would imply three gods, nor accidents, which would imply changeableness in God.²⁸ Because Augustine views the Persons as relations, he struggles to distinguish the Spirit from the Son.²⁹

Aquinas follows Augustine, except reasoning that love is from the will, he calls the Spirit the will of God.³⁰ This interpretation seems to run afoul of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, which taught that will is φύσις: of nature.³¹ How, then, can the Spirit alone be God’s will? This objection is answered by an appeal to absolute divine simplicity. God’s will is not some separate thing, but like all God’s attributes, it is identical with His essence.³² But identifying the Spirit with God’s essence seems only to tangle the matter further. It vindicates Photios’s accusation of Sabellianism.

The filioque, then, at once subordinates the Spirit and violates the Father’s μοναρχία. It does one because it does the other. It elevates the Son to cause, either by creating two ἀρχαί or by merging the Son into the Father. But then causality is part of the divine nature, and the Spirit is no longer divine. Both consequences follow from the filioque’s confusion of Father with Son.

Nonetheless, these errors in Augustine do not condemn him, although some would prefer this. Azkoul, for instance, is so eager to defend Orthodoxy he wants to revise the Fifth Ecumenical Council. It calls Augustine a “Father,” but this was based on the ignorance of the Greeks present there.³³ But condemning Augustine was not the approach of Photios. According to him, all men,

²⁴Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.12, 15–16.

²⁵For example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.19.8.

²⁶Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.15.

²⁷Ibid. 15.47. All translations of *De Trinitate* are from Augustine, *The Trinity*, trans. by Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (Brooklyn, NY: New City, 1991).

²⁸Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.5–6.

²⁹Ibid. 5.15.

³⁰Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.19.4.

³¹Norman P. Tanner, editor, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, volume 1 (Washington: Georgetown, 1990) 128–130.

³²Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.19.5.

³³Azkoul 24n.67.

even the Fathers, have erred. We do not condemn people for their errors, but for their stubbornness when corrected.³⁴ When Augustine struggles to grasp the Trinity, he seems to welcome correction. He writes, “I am as keenly aware of my weakness as of my willingness.”³⁵

What of the accusation, prominent in modern Orthodox writers, that the filioque is “rationalistic” or “scholastic”? Photios does not make this charge. He seems to have a high regard for reason, and much of his argumentation depends on so-called scholastic categories. Nonetheless, there is some justice to the accusation.

Lossky complains about Aquinas’s argument from “relation of opposites.”³⁶ Aquinas reasons that every real relation must be a real opposition.³⁷ Since there is no opposition between paternity and spiration, the Father can have both these properties. He has paternity as Begetter of the Son and spiration as Breather of the Spirit. But if paternity and spiration are not opposed, neither are their complements: filiation and procession. Because filiation and procession are not opposed, they can both be in a single person. Thus they would not signify two other Persons, but only one, unless something else distinguished them. The Son and Spirit are distinguished by their origins. The Son’s origin is the Father alone, but the Spirit’s origin is the Father and Son.

This reasoning is rationalistic not because it’s rational, but because it leans too heavily on the mysterious terms “generation” and “spiration.” We cannot know the content of these words.³⁸ Aquinas presumes too much when he argues that generation and procession cannot in themselves distinguish Son from Spirit.

Moreover, Thomas’s reasoning here isn’t actually cogent. Just because the Father may both generate and spirate, it does not follow that Son or Spirit can be both generated and spirated. According to Aristotle, a cause may have many effects, but an effect can have only one cause. If Aquinas were right, we would have no basis not to call the Son spirated and the Spirit generated, but in fact no one does this. The terms themselves are sufficient for a distinction.

Accusing the West of rationalism does not excuse the East from demonstrating the falsehood of the filioque. We cannot reject the filioque simply based on “mystery.” While the Church teaches many mysteries, a polemic against the filioque is not one of them. On the contrary, no Orthodox appealed to this argument until it was devised by Barlaam the Calabrian.³⁹ This was the argument that first prompted St. Gregory Palamas to respond. He believed he could prove the filioque’s falsehood. If the filioque’s truth were indeed unknowable, its falsehood would be likewise unknowable, and it would be not heresy but valid theologoumena.

The accusations modern Orthodox make against the filioque are true, but broad labels such

³⁴Photios, *Mystagogy* 68.

³⁵Augustine, *De Trinitate* 5.1.

³⁶Lossky, *Image and Likeness* 80. See also Azkoul 9.

³⁷Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1.28.3; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* 4.24.8.

³⁸Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. by Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1998) 54–55.

³⁹John Meyendorff, *A Study of Gregory Palamas*, trans. by George Lawrence (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 1998) 43.

as “subordinationist” or “rationalist” are unhelpful. Compared to the concrete objections of St. Photios, these terms represent a loss of precision. On the one hand, the filioque—both itself and its supporting arguments—implies a lesser οὐσία for the Holy Spirit. This is its subordinationism. On the other hand, the filioque blends the ὑποστάσεις of Father and Son. This is its semi-Sabellianism and its injury to the Father’s μοναρχία. Finally, the filioque is rationalist not because its defenders employ logic—something Photios and Gregory Palamas did as well—but in a specific way: by assuming too much knowledge of “generates” and “proceeds.”

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