

What Are We Praying and Why?

Consubstantial: A very old word renewed

In comments about the new translation of our Mass prayers the one word I hear questioned most is *consubstantial*, the English form of the Latin word *consubstantialis*. This “new” word in the Profession of Faith replaces the previous phrase *one in being with the Father* in the Nicene Creed which we usually pray at Sunday Mass. The word was the subject of a very long and contested debate in early Christianity, in connection with the development of the Church’s belief about the divinity of Jesus Christ. Today we take for granted that Jesus was God, based on how we understand the gospel stories about him, and over 2000 years of Church teaching. But how we read and understand the gospel stories about Jesus’ divinity today was not the way the earliest Christians read them. It actually took several hundred years, and much discussion and debate, for the Church to think and speak of Jesus as God in the way we do today. The word *consubstantial* was at the heart of that often very heated debate for many years. It means “*of one substance*”, or “*of the same substance*”, and expresses the relationship of the Father and the Son within the Most Holy Trinity. Some official leaders and teachers in the early Church denied that the Son was equal in status to the Father, while others taught he was. In 325 the Council of Nicea used the term *consubstantial* to define the proper understanding of the divinity of Christ, namely, that the Son is equal to the Father. But it took another 56 years and 9 church councils before the Emperor Theodosius authoritatively decreed that *consubstantial* did indeed express the Faith of the Church in the divinity of Christ, and that all belief to the contrary was heresy. So, if you wonder just what *consubstantial* means, know that you share a long and rich tradition with many of our ancient ancestors in Faith!

Please let us know what else about our faith tradition you'd like to find out more about.
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