

The Significance of *Homoousios* in Athanasius of Alexandria

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Abstract: In 325, the first ever ecumenical council in the church was celebrated at Nicea to address the Arian question about the nature of the Son. Nicea formulated a creed which contained formulaic expressions that proclaim the right doctrine of the Son. Among these expressions, the term *homoousios* became normative in Trinitarian doctrine. However, the path of *homoousios* into becoming the standard of orthodoxy was not a smooth one. It immediately drew opposition even from among those who supported Nicea. Athanasius himself, the acknowledged champion of Nicea, refrained from using it for decades until he realized its effectiveness in excluding erroneous conceptions about the Godhead. The usage and exposition of the theology of *homoousios*, as reflected in the works of Athanasius, is the concern of this present study. It emphasizes the Athanasian concern to insist on the teaching of *homoousios* inasmuch as to deny it is to cancel the economic works of the Son as the mediator between God and humankind.

Keywords: *Athanasius of Alexandria, Nicea, homoousios, Son of God, ontological unity, equality in essence, mediation, Arians*

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Introduction

R. P. C. Hanson comments that Athanasius had as focus in his theology the relationship of the Son with the Father.¹ The term *homoousios* was promulgated at Nicea as one of the formulae that defines such relationship. In this work, we are going to explore the significance of *homoousios* in the theology of Athanasius. This study will have three sections. The first concerns with tracing the term *homoousios* in the works of Athanasius. Therein, the shifting attitudes of Athanasius with regard to the controversial formula—from his silence up until the period when he commenced to employ it—will be analyzed. In the second part, the sense of the Nicene *homoousios* as explored by Athanasius will be specified. The third part expounds on the import that the theology of *homoousios* brings into the understanding of the nature of the Son as God, both in his proper subsistence and in relation to the Father, and into his function as mediator between God and creation.

Homoousios in the Works of Athanasius

There are two stages that can be identified concerning Athanasius' attitude towards the use of the term *homoousios* in his long and productive literary vocation. First, in his early works, Athanasius' disposition to *homoousios* is characterized by silence, even if, as shall be demonstrated, he actively professed the faith that it represents. Second, in his later works Athanasius can be described as robustly committed to the enshrinement of *homoousios* as an anchor to hold steady the boat of Christian faith beaten by huge waves of the Arian blasphemy.

Early Works of Athanasius

The theology of *homoousios* was promulgated in the Nicene Council. However, except once in *Orationes contra Arianos* 1.9, the term was not used in the works of Athanasius immediately following the great council until the publication of *De Decretis* in 353. But all along, Athanasius continued to teach the Nicene faith by using scriptural terms and other terminologies that demonstrate the ontological unity and equality of the Father and the Son. In the works of Athanasius, the relation between the Son and the Father had never ceased being the center of his concern.² Mindful of the tradition of the Church, he based his theology foremost on the Scriptures. Biblical revelation was the starting point of his theological reflection. Like his contemporaries, he also referred to philosophical categories, but “the main

¹ See R.P.C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy 318-381* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark Publishers, Ltd., 1988), 425.

² Ibid.

and paramount source of his doctrine is the Bible.”³ Although he refrained from mentioning *homoiousios* around this period, Athanasius reflected on the biblical pronouncements on which the sense of the Nicene *homoiousios* was based and derived.

Hanson comments that around this period Athanasius made use of biblical concepts through which the full ontological unity of the Father and the Son was established. Accordingly, these terms are “image” (2 Cor 4:4; Col 1:15), “impress” or “stamp” (Heb 1:3), “truth” (Jn 1:14, 17; 4:6) and “effulgence” or “reflection” (Heb 1:3).⁴ All these scriptural references require that the Son be exactly like the Father whom the Son reveals. The Son cannot be called ‘image’ of the Father, if he bears no likeness with the Father; ‘stamp’ or ‘impress,’ if the being and attributes of the Father are not proper of the Son; ‘truth,’ if no correspondence of being between Him and the Father; and ‘effulgence’ or ‘reflection,’ if the Father is not seen in Him. Another expression used by Athanasius to speak of the Trinity’s substantial relation was the title ‘Emmanuel’⁵ in Isaiah 7:14 and Matthew 1:23. On the basis of the sense of ‘Emmanuel’ as ‘God with us,’ Athanasius asserted that the Son is true God and that He came to dwell among us as God in the form of man. It is through the Son that the immediate presence of God is felt among men.

Besides the above scriptural references, Athanasius also employed other terms that appropriate what the Nicene *homoiousios* conveys about the Son in relation to the Father. They are ‘offspring,’ ‘form,’ and ‘*idios*.’ The term ‘offspring’ was understood as the eternal Son of God; meanwhile ‘form’ stood for substance of God; and ‘*idios*’ was equivalent to the property of God. In *Oratio contra Gentes* 46, Athanasius defined the Son as the good offspring of the Father not by participation, but by the fact that “He is the very Wisdom, very Word, and very own Power of the Father, very Light, very Truth, very Righteousness, very Virtue, and in truth His expressed Image, and Brightness, and Resemblance.”⁶ The clarification that the Son is God from the fact of his ontological status as Son and not on account of participation, which is said of created reality in reference to God, is significant in this regard.

Likewise, in *Orationes contra Arianos*, 3.15, Athanasius countered the heretical claim that God is of “many forms and many parts” by stipulating that “there is but one form (*eidōs*) of the Godhead.” The implication is that the Son and the Father have only one form of the Godhead. Consequently, the Son is of identical nature with the Father. For Athanasius, argues Alvyn Pettersen, “form is synonymous with nature;

³ Ibid., 422.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Khaled Anatolios, *Athanasius* (London: Routledge, 2004), 65.

⁶ Athanasius, *Oratio contra Gentes*, 46.

and the one form stands in marked contrast with the many forms.”⁷ According to this, the Son and the Father are one substance, which makes the divinity of the Son perfectly like that of the Father. Pettersen continues: “Thus, while the Arians’ Godhead has its many forms or natures, one very God and His Son, although divine by grace, yet still essentially a creature, Athanasius asserts the essential continuity and consistency in God, the Father, Son, and Spirit, one nature which unites them, without precluding their personal identities.”⁸ This is exactly how the 325 Council of Nicea understood *homoousios* as an attribute of the Son in respect to the Father.

Another important term that Athanasius used to express the union of the Son with the Father is *idios* (proper).⁹ The significance of the word *idios* had not been given much attention by theologians before Athanasius.¹⁰ From the word *idiomata* (Latin), it means “attributes, properties of a thing that identify it in its individualness.”¹¹ The term *idios* emphasizes the uniqueness of a characteristic to its subject, making one individual essentially different from others. In this regard, one’s *idios* is the very definition of itself.¹² When the Son is said to be the *idios* of the Father, it means that the Son identifies the Father. Athanasius recalled that his predecessor, Alexander of Alexandria, defined the Son as *idios*, that is, belonging or proper of the Father.¹³ In the same vein, he also appealed to the authority of Theognotus who claimed that the Son was “not external” to the essence of the Father. “The combination of the affirmation that the Son is *idios* to the being of the Father and the negation that he is ‘from outside’ the Father’s being became a cornerstone of Athanasius’s own Trinitarian terminology.”¹⁴

It has been ascertained that the sense of the Nicene *homoousios*—essential unity of the Father and the Son—was consistently taught by Athanasius in his early works employing the above-examined expressions, even if he did not verbalize as yet the homousean formula. Moreover, it ought to be pointed out that Athanasius argued therein that the doctrine of the Son that he espoused was not alien to what had been revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. In his later works, the same understanding of the nature of the Son will be further developed. Moreover, this time around the Alexandrian would no longer keep himself from articulating the controversial formula in his renewed resolve to expose the Nicene faith.

⁷ Alwyn Pettersen, *Athanasius* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1995), 142.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹ Cf. Peter Widdicombe, *The Fatherhood of God from Origen to Athanasius*, revised ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 193-205.

¹⁰ See Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 145.

¹¹ Donald K. McKim, *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Term* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 137.

¹² See A. Pettersen, *Athanasius*, 145.

¹³ K. Anatolios, *Athanasius*, 53.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 53-54.

Later Works of Athanasius

Athanasius started to make explicit reference to *homoousios* in *De Decretis*. We have insinuated that soon after the conclusion of Nicea, Athanasius realized that *homoousios* was alienating from the Church even those who were convinced of the divinity of the Son. This group of ecclesiastics would not accept the homousean formula. Hence, in his works immediately following the council, he preferred the use of scriptural terms and similar expressions that proclaim the Nicene faith. However, it soon dawned on him that the Arians and their supporters could not be stopped in advancing their flawed understanding of the nature of the Son except by insisting on *homoousios*. This is because the Arian could bend to their favor the scriptural references and other categories currently in use for the nature of the Son, but not *homoousios* which they abhorred. For this reason, in the early part of 350s, Athanasius found it necessary to break his silence about *homoousios*.

He commenced to speak about it in *De Decretis*. The treatise was composed to preserve the Nicene confession from thoroughly being invalidated due to the misreading that the Arians ascribed to the homousean formula.¹⁵ In it, Athanasius argued in favor of the orthodoxy of *homoousios* in two stages: first, by demonstrating that it is an elaboration of the scriptural formula ‘from God,’ which was what originally the fathers of Nicea intended to use, and second, by ascertaining that even before Nicea, the fathers had already preached about the divinity of the Son and his unity with the Father using *homoousios*.

In section 19 of *De Decretis*, Athanasius narrated that the fathers at Nicea initially limited themselves to the usage of the scriptural expression ‘from God’ to profess the full divinity of the Son and refute the Arians who regarded the Son as part of the created reality: “The Council wished to do away with the impious phrases of the Arians, and to use the acknowledged words of the Scriptures: the Son is not from nothing, but from God, he is Word and Wisdom, and not creature or work, but a proper offspring of the Father.”¹⁶ The fathers at Nicea made use of the biblical phrase ‘from God’ to oppose the Arian claim that “God made the Son out of nothing.”¹⁷ However, the fathers, according to Athanasius, had realized that the supporters of the Arian view likewise adopted the expression ‘the Son is from God,’ and used the same to establish the point that the Son is equal with other creatures. For they argued that created realities are said in the bible as ‘from God.’

¹⁵ Lewis Ayres, *Nicaea and Its Legacy: An Approach to Fourth-Century Trinitarian Theology* (New York: Oxford University Press Inc., 2004), 141.

¹⁶ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 19.

¹⁷ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 15, in *NPNF2-04, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987.)

To avoid this misreading, the Nicene fathers acknowledged the necessity to express more distinctly the sense of the biblical phrase ‘from God.’ On this point, Athanasius stated that the fathers at Nicea introduced the phrase “‘from the essence of God,’ as specification of ‘from God.’ This is so that the sense of ‘from God’ might not be considered common and equal in the Son and in things originate, but that all others might be acknowledged as creatures, and the Word alone as from the Father.”¹⁸ Athanasius argued that though all creatures are from God, they are ‘from God’ in a different way as the Son is. “For as to the creatures, ‘of God’ is said of them on this account, in that they exist not at random or spontaneously, nor come to be by chance;” whereas “as to the Word, since He is not a creature, He alone is both called and is ‘from the Father;’ and it is significant of this sense to say that the Son is ‘from the essence of the Father,’ for to nothing originate does this attach.”¹⁹ Having clarified this point, Athanasius secured the divinity of the Son citing further the expression of the Council that the Son is a ‘proper offspring’ of the Father. All the clarifications point to His natural Sonship to the Father to the extent that He is truly *homoousios* with the Father who begot Him.

Athanasius began section 25 with a justification for the inclusion of *homoousios* in the Creed stating that the Nicene fathers did not invent, but inherit it from their predecessors. Eusebius of Caesarea, in his letter to his diocese, also acknowledged the usage of *homoousios* in the works of some ancient authors: “To that term (i.e. *homoousios*), thus interpreted, it appeared well to assent. Since we were aware that even among the ancients, some learned and illustrious bishops and writers have used the term *homoousios* in their theological teaching concerning the Father and Son.”²⁰ Athanasius listed by name these predecessors referred to by the bishop of Caesarea. Particularly, he called out Theognostus and Dionysius, bishop of Alexandria (in section 25), and Dionysius of Rome and Origen (in sections 26 and 27).

Also, in section 25, Athanasius kept on citing the statement of Dionysius of Alexandria with regard to his opposition to Sabellius. The bishop had to mount a defense against those who accused him of not using the term *homoousios* to speak of the divinity of the Son: “And I have written in another letter a refutation of the false charge they bring against me, that I deny that Christ was one in essence (*homoousios*) with God.”²¹ He pointed out that although this term was not used in the Scriptures—the only reason why he did not use it— its meaning was not inconsistent but

¹⁸ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 19.

¹⁹ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 19.

²⁰ Eusebius, *Epistula ad Caesarienses*, 13, quoted in Pavel Dudzik, “Nicene Terminology Defended by Athanasius of Alexandria in *De Decretis Nicaenae Synodi* and the Possible Influence of Eusebius’ *Epistula Ad Caesarienses*,” *Vox Patrum* 34 (2014), 61, 133.

²¹ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 19.

homogeneous with the content of Scriptures. Moreover, with the appeal to the work of Dionysius of Rome, the accuser of his namesake in Alexandria, Athanasius wanted to establish that “the Word of God is not a work or creature, but an offspring proper to the Father’s essence and indivisible, as the great Council wrote.”²² Athanasius learned that the Roman pontiff stressed the essential continuity of the Father and the Son to the extent that what the Father is and has, He passed on to the Son being His proper Offspring. Although Dionysius of Rome did not mention directly the Nicene term *homoiousios*, he properly taught its sense implying what the Nicene Council professed that the Son is God in the same way as the Father is God.

Finally, Athanasius found support for the teaching of *homoiousios* in the works of Origen. With regard to this, he wrote: “And concerning the everlasting co-existence of the Word with the Father, and that He is not of another essence or subsistence, but proper to the Father’s, as the bishops in the Council said, you may hear again from the labour-loving Origen also.”²³ By quoting the words of influential ecclesiastical leaders and teachers before the Council, Athanasius proved that the use of *homoiousios* in the Nicene Creed to express the full divinity of the Son was not random, a spontaneous and careless declaration. *Homoiousios* was an expression of faith well received and taught by many Christian teachers before them. Resorting then to its usage was not without basis in the tradition of the Church.

Another work by Athanasius where the term *homoiousios* was discussed profoundly was in *De Synodis*. The Alexandrian composed this work as a response to the twin councils that was convened by the emperor in Rimini and Seleucia designed to forge unity in the church. We can discern two major themes with regard to Athanasius’ exposition of *homoiousios* in this work. It comes first with the discussion from section 33 to 40, concerning the refutation of the homoeans whose position, though was undermined in Seleucia, became normative in the concluding session of the twin councils in Constantinople.²⁴ Then, the discussion from section 41 to 54 carries out its relation to the teaching of the homoeouseans whom Athanasius was conciliating with the Nicenes.

On the first point. The homoeans are those who claimed that the Son is like the Father according to the Scriptures. They did not employ the term *ousia* and its derivatives such as *homoiousios* because it is not found in the Scriptures. Also, they did not support the Arian teaching about the origin of the Son. They acknowledged the

²² Ibid., 26.

²³ Ibid., 27.

²⁴ See Hubertus R. Drobner, *Fathers of the Church: A Comprehensive Introduction*. Hubertus R. Drobner and William Harmless updated bibliographies and expanded the English edition, Siegfried S. Schatzmann, ed. (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2007), 222.

extra-temporal generation of the Son from the Father even as they rejected the Arian slogan ‘there was when He was not.’ According to the homoeans, the Son is ‘from God alone;’ the Father, Who alone is ‘ingenerate’ and ‘unoriginate,’ generates the Son ‘outside time;’ the Son is ‘perfect and true God in nature;’ His existence is ‘before the ages.’²⁵ Acacius of Caesarea, the leader of this group, was sustained by emperor Constantius. The creed that he composed was first introduced, though rejected, in the 359 council of Seleucia. But, it was ratified by the Synod of Constantinople in 359 and then in 360. Valens, who later on ascended to the imperial throne, committed himself to spread it in the East (364-368).

In the concluding session of the twin councils held in the imperial city, the homoeans exercised their influence by dismissing the Nicene expressions such as ‘of the essence’ and ‘co-essential,’ arguing that these “do not please us, for they are an offence to some and a trouble to many.”²⁶ For Athanasius, the objection raised was trivial and not at all persuasive. Moreover, he disputed that just because the term *homoousios* is opposed by some (i.e. the homoeans), it is not to be construed that it is a wrong term for the Son. The problem, Athanasius insisted, was not the term *homoousios* itself, but the misrepresentation of its meaning. To further this view, he provided an analogous evidence among the Jews and the Manichees who had misread the Scriptures. They rejected the Lord and blasphemed His Law, but it did not mean that the divine Scriptures were wrong. Rather, they, the dissidents, had misread the Scriptures.²⁷

Athanasius continued his argument claiming that if the homoeans refused the phrase ‘of essence,’ then they could not claim that the Son was generated ‘from the Father.’ For, how could they attribute to the Father the generation of the Son without signifying His essence?, asked the bishop. They would be signifying something else about the Father, if the generation of the Son is not conceived as proceeding from essence.²⁸ Such would end up in differentiating what belongs to the ‘essence of the Father’ from that which is ‘about the Father.’ The former refers to that which is proper to the essence of God the Father Himself; whereas, the latter refers to things external to Him. With this, when the homoeans claimed the Son was generated ‘from the Father,’ Athanasius speculated that they must have understood it according to the sense that the Son is from something outside of the Father.

The second discussion of the term *homoousios* in *De Synodis* took place in sections 41 to 54. In these sections, Athanasius focused on the teaching of the

²⁵ See J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (U.S.A.: HarperOne, 1978), 248.

²⁶ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 33.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ See Ibid., 34.

homoeouseans and found evidence to illustrate the affinity of their belief with the Nicene confession. According to Athanasius, those “who accept everything else that was defined at Nicaea, and doubt only about the ‘co-essential,’ must not be treated as enemies; nor do we here attack them as Ario-maniacs, nor as opponents of the Fathers, but we discuss the matter with them as brothers with brothers.”²⁹ The doctrine of the homoeouseans (the Nicenes) and the homoeouseans are essentially the same; the only thing that makes them differ from each other are the formula that each preferred to express the same faith. While the homouseans used the term *homoousios* (of one essence), the homoeouseans preferred *homoiousios* (like in essence) to describe the relation of the Son with the Father. Athanasius clarified that they “mean what we mean, and dispute only about the word. For, confessing that the Son is from the essence of the Father, and not from other subsistence, and that He is not a creature nor work, but His genuine and natural offspring, and that He is eternally with the Father as being His Word and Wisdom, they are not far from accepting even the phrase, ‘co-essential.’”³⁰

After showing that both the homousean formula and the ‘like in essence’ expression concur on the right doctrine of the Son, Athanasius adjudged that between the two, the term ‘co-essential’ is the most suitable to describe the essential Sonship of the Son to the Father. This is in reaction to the development in the Trinitarian polemics whereby the Neo-Arians appropriated the category of ‘likeness’ and limited its application to external kinship, excluding from it the notion of essence.³¹ In reaction to this development in the Neo-Arian polemics that Athanasius made this remark: “Like is not predicated of essence, but of habits, and qualities; for in the case of essences we speak, not of likeness, but of identity.”³² On in this respect that it would not be correct to say that the Son is ‘like in essence’ with the Father because, He will be like the Father by participation just as the creatures. It will thus lead to the conclusion that “He is not Truth, nor Light at all, nor in nature God.”³³ Having pointed this out, Athanasius hoped to persuade those whom he regarded as brothers in the homoeousean circle that it would be proper to use ‘co-essential’ more than ‘like in essence’ to specify the essential relation of the Son with Father.

Capturing the Sense of *Homoousios*

We have traced in the above discussion the usage of the term *homoousios* in the works of Athanasius. It has been illustrated how he, in his early works, proclaimed

²⁹ Ibid., 41.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ See Eunomius, *Apologia* 21-23.

³² Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 53.

³³ Ibid.

its meaning even if he did not make any reference to *homoousios* itself. And, how he, starting with *De Decretis* and then later on in *De Synodis*, decided to abandon his old strategy of keeping mum about *homoousios* and started to openly preach it as a central concept that safeguards the truly divine nature of the Son. In the following, the sense of *homoousios* as understood by Athanasius shall be outlined. It shall be carried out in two steps: First, by drawing its meaning from the analogies used by Athanasius, and second, by exploring its sense through the concept of offspring, which the Alexandrian used as its equivalent in his later writings.

Describing Homoousios through the use of Analogies

For a long time, modern scholars have interpreted the Athanasian sense of *homoousios* according to the Aristotelian categories of primary and secondary substances.³⁴ In chapter 5 of the *Categories*, Aristotle distinguished two senses of *ousia* which differentiate the individual to the species. With respect to the primary substance, Aristotle identified it with an actually existing concrete and numerically one individual; meanwhile, the secondary substance relates to the genus that classifies many individuals of the same stuff.³⁵ These Aristotelian distinctions have affected many modern interpretations of the Athanasian use of *ousia* and its Nicene derivative. However, the work of Abogado has argued that the interpretation of *homoousios* in the light of the Aristotelian metaphysics could not be ascertained in the works of Athanasius.³⁶ The Athanasian reflection on the *ousia* of the Father and the Son understood in the strict sense of unity is not based on any of the Aristotelian distinctions, but on the revelation of the Son about himself in relation to the Father. It is based on biblical statements such as, “I and the Father are one” (Jn 10:30) and “Whoever has seen me, has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). Moreover, Athanasius employed several analogies³⁷ to elaborate on this Scriptural insight about the proper relation of the Son with the Father. It must be noted that the analogies employed by Athanasius are meant to be read in conjunction with each other. The desired picture of *homoousios* is better explained when the different aspects highlighted in these analogies are brought together to reinforce and sometimes correct one or the other’s inadequacy.

a) The analogy of human paternity, of father and son

Athanasius has made use of the fact of human consanguinity to assert that

³⁴ See Christopher Stead, “The Concept of Divine Substance,” in *Vigilliae*, 29 (1975), 10; see George Christopher Stead, *Divine Substance* (Oxford: Clerendon Press, 1977), 113-114.

³⁵ See Aristotle, *Categories and Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 9.

³⁶ J. Abogado, O.P., *Hilary of Poitiers on conciliating the Homoouseans and the Homoeouseans* (Bern: Peter Lang International Academic Publishers, 2016), 98.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 262.

“the son actually derives his existence from his father.”³⁸ Elaborating on this point, Abogado clarifies: “The stress is not that the Father and the Son are parts of the same species, but rather that the existence of the Son is derived from the very being of the Father.”³⁹ Certainly, this human analogy could imply, just as the human father and his son are members of one and the same species, a generic understanding of *ousia* for the Unbegotten Father and the Only-begotten Son in accord with the Aristotelian secondary substance. But this understanding suggested by the reality of the human son completely separated from the father as two individuals of the same species should not be applied to the divine persons, who, though are distinct individuals, are without difference. The reason being that they, as shall be demonstrated below, possessed of exactly the same substance with identical essential attributes.

Athanasius did not apply the analogy of human paternity to describe the generation of the Son from the Father without qualification. There is an aspect of human paternity that can help understand the unity of essence of the Father and the Son, even if Athanasius warned that the divine generation is “not according to the nature of men.”⁴⁰ What the human paternity analogy provides for Athanasius is the understanding that the being of the human son is in its wholeness the same as the being of the human father who begot him. Following this line of thought, when saying the Father begot the Son, Athanasius meant that the Father by the act of natural generation, communicates to the Son all He is and all He has. Therefore, the full divinity of the Father is preserved perfectly in the Son, without diminishing the same in the Father. As Stead states: “What he intends by it has been well expressed in the phrase ‘the full unbroken continuation of being;’ the divine Father communicates to the Son, not just formal characteristics, not just a part of His divine life, but the fullness of His spiritual being, all that He has and is.”⁴¹

Moreover, the human generation analogy also helped Athanasius explain the idea of the asymmetrical relationship of the Son to the Father and guarantee their distinction on the level of subsistence (Person). Inasmuch as the human father begets the son and not vice versa, in the same vein, it is only the Father Who begot the Son and the Son was begotten by Him. The Father is the source; the Son emanated from that source.⁴² “The Father initiates, the Son responds.”⁴³ Hence, one can say that the Son inherits all of the Father, except His unorigination. But the same cannot be affirmed about the Son in respect of the Father.

³⁸ Ibid., 262-263.

³⁹ Ibid., 102.

⁴⁰ Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 20.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² See Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 50.

⁴³ C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 263.

b) *The analogies of continuous natural process: fountain and stream, source and ray of light, vine and branches*

Still in view of expounding on the essential relationship of the Son to the Father, Athanasius added three other physical analogies: fountain and stream,⁴⁴ source and ray of light,⁴⁵ vine and branches.⁴⁶ Stead notes that “all three convey the notion of a common stuff (water, light, vine-tissue) emerging in markedly different forms.”⁴⁷ In other words, constituted by the same water, the stream is *homoousios* with its fountain; by the same light, the ray is with its light source; and by the identical vine-tissue, the branches is with the vine. The three analogies supply the view that by the same divinity (*ousia*) the Son is *homoousios* with the Father, since the divinity of the Father is preserved in its fullness in His Only Begotten Son.

Moreover, similar to the analogy of human paternity, they all express the asymmetrical relationship in the Godhead. The notion of organic continuity and the relation of origin, expressed in asymmetrical relationship, are delineated in the one-way communication of the stream coming from the fountain, the ray from the source, and the branches from the vine. Conversely, it precludes the notion that the stream is identical with its fountain in one subject even if one and the same water run in both. The same can be said of the other two analogies. Being so, the relationship of the Son with His Father must be understood in the same vein. That the Son derives his substance from the Father and not vice versa. That they have one and the same divine *ousia* though they are not one and the same individual. That the Son is not the Father, but the Son came from the Father such that He is *homoousios* with the Father. The Father is the Father in His proper subsistence; similarly, the Son is Himself in His own subsistence.⁴⁸

c) *The analogy of two men simpliciter*

The analogy of two men *simpliciter* employed by Athanasius was controversial for a number of contemporary interpreters of Athanasius. For it seemingly contradicts what, as shown above, Athanasius had said about the strict unity of the Father and the Son. On the surface level, the analogy of two men *simpliciter* suggests “a symmetrical relationship, which allows the thought of perfect likeness obtaining between the two Persons to be freely developed; [while] the suggestion of continuity, of organic

⁴⁴ See Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii*, 24, in NPNF2-04, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987).

⁴⁵ See Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 23, 24; *De Synodis*, 51.

⁴⁶ See Athanasius, *De Sententia Dionysii*, 10.

⁴⁷ C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 263.

⁴⁸ Cf. Athanasius, *De Decretis*, 21.

interconnection, is much reduced.”⁴⁹ This leads to a notion of divinity considered as genus, thereby classifying the Son and the Father as subjects belonging to the same class. It advances a generic understanding of *homoiousios* according to the second *ousia* of Aristotle, which we have denied above. Certainly, the generic sense of unity of essence does not fit the notion of organic continuity that the asymmetrical relationship of the Father and the Son sustains, a point recurrent in the other analogies explored by Athanasius.

Given the fact that Athanasius did make use of this analogy, it needs to be interpreted with the over-all design of Athanasius’ theology. A sober explanation that can admit its inclusion in the work of the champion of Nicea is provided by Stead: “It has been argued that Athanasius, influenced by a desire to reach agreement with the homoeousean party, finally came to accept this ‘specific identity’ as a definitive explanation of the term *homoiousios*; in other words, he adopted a ‘neo-Nicene’ point of view.”⁵⁰ Perhaps, the desire of reconciliation with the ‘like in essence’ theology of the homoeouseans caused Athanasius to turn his attention from the Son-Father to the men-men relationship. Athanasius had this discussed in *De Sententia Dionysii*, 10, though it must be clarified that it was the only instance that such analogy appeared in the work of the Alexandrian.⁵¹ Again, Stead speaks of this thus: “On the one hand, there is evidence that his thoughts were already turning in this direction when he wrote the *De Sententia Dionysii* in the early 350s; for in chapter 10 of this work, he says that the Saviour is *homoiousios* with us in respect of his manhood; which involves precisely the ‘reduced’ or ‘generic’ sense of the word that we are now considering.”⁵²

But it can be explained in another way, by contextualizing the said expression where it is found within the opus. It has to do with the comment of Athanasius on John 15,1: “Since thus also has the Saviour said: ‘I am the vine, you are the branches.’” Accordingly, by this image, the Son classifies Himself as men and *homoiousios* with them. Hence, the Scriptures say: “I will declare thy name unto my brethren.”⁵³ There is no doubt that the term *homoiousios* as employed in this context can be interpreted under the generic sense of the word. However, it should be noted herein that the Son is speaking primarily of the humanity that He took up in the incarnation, which he shared with other men. On the other hand, the way the Son is *homoiousios* with the Father is not the same as the reality of the Son being *homoiousios* to men. Thus, when Athanasius said that men are *homoiousios* with the Son, he was speaking of the humanity shared by the Son with the rest of humanity. The humanity of the Son and

⁴⁹ C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 264.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ See Christopher Stead, “The Significance of the *Homoiousios*,” in *Studia Patristica*, 3 (1961), 400.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 264-265.

⁵³ Hebrews 2: 12; Psalms 22: 22.

that of men make the Son and men of one kind of stuff or species. Indeed, the term *homousios* employed here undertakes the generic sense of substance, but it was applied to the Son-men rather than the Father-Son relationship.

It could only be conjectured that Athanasius was able to realize the problem that the analogy of two men *simpliciter* introduced to the coherence of his elaboration of the theology of *homousios*. Even if the reference is primarily directed to the shared unity of essence that the Son has with other men such that generic understanding becomes warranted, still the application that it extended to the Son and Father relationship could not be discounted from the mind of his opponents. It must have been the reason why Athanasius ceased using it in his later works. After dropping the two men *simpliciter* analogy, he focused on the other images such as the analogy of human paternity, the analogy of continuous natural process (fountain and stream, source and ray of light, vine and branches), already discussed above. There is yet another analogy used by Athanasius that remains to be explored, that of mind and word. To this, we shall now turn.

d) *The analogy of mind and word*

The analogy of mind and word was discussed alongside the doctrine of the deification which the Son effects as the Savior of mankind. Athanasius insisted on the status of the Son to be co-essential with the Father for only by being so that He, being the Father's Wisdom and Word, can deify and quicken men. Only God Himself could self-deify His assumed humanity and deify others. As Athanasius pointed out: "For it is not possible that He, who merely possesses from participation, should impart of that partaking to others, since what He has is not His own, but the Giver's."⁵⁴ However, like the two men *simpliciter*, the interpretation of such analogy creates a problem for contemporary Athanasian scholars.

The reason for this is that if the Son is the Word of the Father, would it not mean that the Son is unhypostatically united with the Father, that is, without its own proper subsistence? But this objection runs in opposition to the repeated stress given by Athanasius to the real distinction between God the Father and God the Son. The evidence in support of this provided above is already sufficient to warrant the exclusion of such reading to the analogy under consideration. Instead, the proper interpretation of the ascription of the Son as the Word of God who illuminates and divinizes humanity should rather be on the fact that the Son shares the power that is exclusively reserved to the divine and not on the question of the distinction of the divine persons. Thus, being the Word or Mind of the Father, the Son must be

⁵⁴ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 51.

homoiousios with the Father in that only through Him that “all things are deified and quickened, [because he] is not alien in essence from the Father, but co-essential.”⁵⁵

The analogy of mind and word which procures for Athanasius the divinizing power of the Son likewise preserves the asymmetrical relationship of the Son with the Father as with the other analogies (fountain and stream, source and ray of light, vine and branches). Stead is on point regarding this, arguing: “On the other hand, there is still a clearly marked asymmetry and distinctness of function; it is the Son, Who is the divinizing agency of the Father, and not vice versa; it is the Father, and the Father alone, Who is the ultimate source of the divine light.”⁵⁶ Athanasius affirmed here the different modes of divinity of the Father and the Son from which flows their respective economic roles. The Father with his perfect divinity deifies through the Son all humanity, including the latter’s own. The Son takes the role of the divinizing agency of the Father, and not vice versa; while the Father remains the ultimate source of the deification.

Summing up the discussion on analogies, it is to be noticed that through them, Athanasius was able to expound on the relationship of the Son with the Father on the level of essence, which Nicea taught through the formula *homoiousios*. The analogies actually simplify the notion of *homoiousios* for the people while safeguarding its orthodox meaning. They proclaim not just the oneness, but also the distinction of the Father and the Son. The asymmetrical relationship consisting of the Father as the source of everything and the Son as the begotten God through whom grace is communicated, but not vice versa, is clearly denoted by them.

Describing homoiousios through the Sense of Natural Offspring

It has been shown that Athanasius had recourse to the import that the concept of offspring offers to argue for the unity of essence of the Son with the Father very early on in his career, that is, many years before his decision to speak openly about the term *homoiousios*. But, the more thoughtful development of Athanasius’s teaching on the essential unity of the Father and the Son came to the fore in his later works as he committed to defend *homoiousios* and integrate the sense of offspring with the said Nicene formula. Such coupling has been initially proposed in *De Decretis*. Its enhanced understanding has been enriched all the more in *De Synodis*, more particularly in the context of his effort to conciliate the teaching of the homoeouseans and the homoeouseans.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ C. Stead, *Divine Substance*, 265.

In *De Synodis*, Athanasius took the concept of ‘offspring’ to demonstrate the similarity in the views of the homoeouseans and the homoeouseans. The sense of the term ‘offspring,’ which, as already noted at the outset, Athanasius claimed having the same sense with the term ‘co-essential,’ has been emphasized to mediate with the homoeousean view. Athanasius postulated that the term ‘offspring,’ which the party of Basil of Ancyra similarly stressed in their teaching, should not be applied to the divine except when understood bearing in mind the transcendence of God. God is transcendent, thus everything material or corporeal could not be ascribed to Him. Athanasius clarified that what remains with the concept of ‘offspring’ purified from any materialist reference is the fact of the similarity of essence of the offspring to the parent. The offspring in this sense inherits everything that the Father is. In this respect, “the sense of ‘offspring’ and ‘co-essential’ is one, and who so considers the Son an offspring, rightly considers Him also as ‘co-essential.’”⁵⁷

Athanasius likewise appealed to the concept of ‘offspring’ to distinguish the Son from creatures and to refute the idea that regards the Son merely as a work of God. He demonstrated this for instance while addressing those who have employed the category ‘unoriginate’ to exclude the Son from the Godhead and number Him among the created beings. The Alexandrian bishop thus clarified the usage of ‘unoriginate.’ Like the term ‘co-essential,’ Athanasius acknowledged that the term ‘unoriginate’ has different senses: “Some, for instance, call what is neither generated, nor has any personal cause at all, unoriginate; and others, the uncreate.”⁵⁸ There are two senses of ‘unoriginate’ offered here. The Son could not be said as ‘unoriginate’ according to the first sense because He is from God the Father, the ultimate origin of all; but the second sense of ‘originate’ suits the Son for He is “not a work or creature but an eternal offspring, and [in this manner we can] affirm accordingly that the Son was unoriginate.”⁵⁹

That the Word is not a work, Athanasius repeatedly avowed, because he is a genuine ‘offspring’ of God the Father: “If we confess that He is not a work but the genuine offspring of the Father’s essence, it would follow that He is inseparable from the Father, being connatural, because He is begotten from Him.”⁶⁰ Many times Athanasius confirmed that the Son is from God or generated from God in a different manner that creatures are from God. The creatures are from God by will; whereas, the Son is from God by essence. Another distinction between the Son and creatures is their mode of unity with the Father. Indeed, those who are faithful to God are

⁵⁷ Athanasius, *De Synodis*, 51.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 48.

united with Him like the saints, angels, and archangels, but they could not claim that “I and the Father are One” like the Son did. Athanasius explained why:

For things originate, though they have an agreement with their Maker, yet possess it only by influence, and by participation, and through the mind; the transgression of which forfeits heaven. But the Son, being an offspring from the essence, is one by essence, Himself and the Father that begot Him.⁶¹

As the proper ‘offspring’ of God the Father, the Son is truly divine and bear equality with the Father. Athanasius provided a series of scriptural passages to illustrate how this should be understood. Relying on scriptural revelation, he postulated that the Son is God and equal with the Father in everything because “all things that the Father hath are Mine” (Jn 16: 15) and “all Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine” (Jn 17: 10). He also listed the attributes that the Son shares with the Father: the name God, Almighty (Jn 1: 1; Apoc. 1: 8), the Light (Jn 8: 12), the Operative Cause (Jn 1: 3; 5: 19), the being Everlasting (Rom. 1: 20; Jn 1: 1, 9; Gen. 19: 24; 1 Cor. 8: 6), being equal to God (Heb. 1: 6; Matt. 4: 11; 24: 31; Jn 5: 23; Phil. 2: 6), the being Truth and Life (Deut. 6: 4; Ps. 50: 1; 118: 27; 84: 7; Mic. 7: 18), the quickening and raising the dead as the Father (Matt. 9: 5; Mark 2: 11; 1 Tim. 1: 17; Ps. 24: 7; Dan. 4: 3; 6: 14). The Son bears all these attributes because he is the natural offspring of God for “an essence foreign from the Father’s essence [... i.e.,] not co-essential with the Father”⁶² would not be able to have the same attributes as the Father’s.

Indeed, Athanasius capitalized on the notion of ‘offspring’ which both the homouoseans and the homoeouseans have made use of in their respective teachings to proclaim the unity of essence of the Father and the Son not just to conciliate the two mentioned ecclesiastical parties, but more importantly, to proclaim the Son’s full divinity and equality with the Father. Such term when understood properly, that is, when grasped devoid of any materialist connotation present in human generation, preserves the true insight of *homoousios*, which is the identity of essence of the Son to the Father from whose essence He was begotten.

The Doctrine of *Homoousios* and The Role of the Son of God as Mediator

The above discussion contends that for Athanasius, being *homoousios* with the Father means that the Son is affirmed to be equal with the Father in divinity. But how is one to properly demonstrate this equality of the Son with the Father in terms of his role and activity towards creation? In the following, the equality of the Son with the Father shall be approached from its implication to the theology of the Son and his role as mediator between God and humankind. There are two issues to

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid., 50.

be explored in this section, namely, the affirmation of the divinity of the Son and the import it has to the mediatorial role of the Son.

Athanasius divided reality between the creator and the created. The reality of God distinguishes Himself as the absolute primal being over creation. In this regard, the divinity is proper to God Himself and the Son. It has been shown that the Son is *homoousios* to the Father because He receives the whole being of the Father such that He is fully divine. This means that the attributes of the Father are likewise attributes of the Son. That the Son possessed them properly as his own in exactly the same infinite degree as they are in the Father inasmuch as they are one and the same in both. Let us specify what these attributes are. Lyman offers the following that define divine being and they shall be used here as guide to elaborate on this aspect of Athanasian teaching: “Eternity, transcendence, and unity were fundamental definitions of divine being.”⁶³

On the attribute of eternity and the eternal generation of the Son it was Origen who had first wrote about it. Athanasius merely followed this Origenistic notion of God which includes in its understanding eternity of the Logos.⁶⁴ Opposing the Arian slogan “there was once when the Son was not,” Athanasius bolstered the argument for the co-eternity of the Son with the Father, saying: “if the Son is the ‘Word’ and ‘Wisdom’ of God, how was there ‘a time when He was not?’”⁶⁵ Imagine how God the Father could exist without His Word and Wisdom! It is simply impossible, if not utterly irreverent, to conceive of it. There is no interval between the Father and the Son, nether in time nor in thought. The Son, as the Word and Wisdom of God, is unable to be later than His Father, but coeternal with Him. For this reason, Athanasius “confesses and acknowledges that the Son was ever; for He is eternal, as is the Father, of whom He is the Eternal Word.”⁶⁶

Similarly, the assertion of the transcendent God does not contradict the belief in the existence of the Son who together with the Father is equally transcendent. Being generated from the Father from all eternity, the Son receives all that belong to the Father,⁶⁷ including the attribute of transcendence. However, it is one thing to posit that the pre-incarnate Son has been generated as transcendent essence, another to say that the incarnate Son maintains the same transcendental quality. It is a common notion across religions that the transcendental being is necessarily invisible and

⁶³ Jon M. Robertson, *Christ as Mediator: A Study of the Theologies of Eusebius of Caesarea Marcellus of Ancyra, and Athanasius of Alexandria* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 132.

⁶⁴ See R.P.C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 425.

⁶⁵ Athanasius, *Depositio Arii*, 3, in NPNF2-04, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987.)

⁶⁶ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 1. 18.

⁶⁷ See Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 2. 24.

beyond the contamination of the created realm. However, biblical faith reveals that the transcendent God renders Himself visible and comprehensive to men through His Only Begotten Incarnate Son. Is this inconsistent with the transcendence of the Godhead? Not at all! Rather, it is because God is transcendent and of infinite power that God can make Himself present in the world as He wills, that the Godhead through the person of the Son can assume humanity and live with men. He can make His providential presence felt by men, even if He is beyond them, not despite, but because of His transcendence.

Like the Father who is of transcendent essence, the Son by nature is invisible and incomprehensible to men. Nevertheless, He became approachable to men by His own will and power in obedience to the Father. Athanasius said: "As, then, if a man should wish to see God, Who is invisible by nature and not seen at all, he may know and apprehend Him from His works: so let him who fails to see Christ with his understanding, at least apprehend Him by the works of His body, and test whether they be human works or God's works."⁶⁸ Hanson affirms this: "For Athanasius, God is indeed transcendent: He is invisible and unapproachable to transitory things and particularly to humankind on earth. But this does not entail a metaphysical barrier between God and us: when men call upon Him in trouble and distress then He shows His kindness 'which He exercises through His own Word and in Him.'"⁶⁹ Truly, as the Scriptures say, though in the form of God, Christ emptied Himself and became man, even a servant who served others until death on the cross.⁷⁰ His deeds prove Himself as the God of love through whom and in whom the same love of the Father is communicated to and received by men.

Still, Athanasius was mindful to alert his readers about the pagan mockery of Jesus Christ on the cross. In fact, the Arians adopted this argument based on the suffering of the incarnate Logos as basis to deny Him equality with the Father. Beeley exposes this Arian view of the cross as obstacle for divinity: "To mock the cross on the grounds of Jesus's suffering and humiliations is thus a fault of aesthetic perception (*C.Gent.*1.20), because one sees Christ in human terms rather than perceiving both His Divinity on the cross and His power at work in the world today."⁷¹ For the Arians, the death of the Christ is the obvious evidence of the failure of the one who made himself equal with God. But they failed to take notice that after Christ's death, he was resurrected. Athanasius put stress on the resurrection as evidence of Christ's divinity,

⁶⁸ Athanasius, *Oratio de Incarnatione Verbi*, 54.1, in *NPNF2-04, St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987).

⁶⁹ R.P.C. Hanson, *Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, 424.

⁷⁰ See *Philippians* 2: 5-9

⁷¹ C. Beeley, *The Unity of Christ*, 127-128.

implying that what the unbelievers think impossible has been made possible; what they think unsuitable, suitable; and who they perceive as merely human, is actually divine. Ultimately, Christ, according to the Alexandrian bishop, was able to convince “those who mock or do not believe to recognize His Divinity and power”⁷² that the One Who died on the cross was also the One Who saved the universe.⁷³

Lyman suggests that the unity of the Father and the Son, is more of an ontological presupposition of the divine attributes rather than one among the defining attribute itself. The Son is eternal and transcendent because the Son is one in essence (*homoousios*) with the Father. This has been the foundational insight on the Godhead by Athanasius. However, Athanasius did not teach the unity of the Son with the Father according to the understanding of the Sabellians, who taught that the Father is also the Son, and vice versa. The unity of the Godhead according to Athanasius is the essential relation of the Two, maintaining the plurality of Persons; whereas, the Sabellian unity in the Godhead indicates only one underlying hypostasis of God under plurality of names or manifestations.⁷⁴ The simplicity of the divine substance excludes any notion of division in the Godhead, but it also does not conflate the existence of the Father and the Son as distinct individuals.

In this regard, the Son cannot be conceived as the unbegotten God, nor the Father the begotten one. Their personal distinction subsists, but distinction ceases to become a factor on the level of essential relation. Notwithstanding their personal distinctness, the Son, being *homoousios* with the Father, never ceases to be in union with the Father, nor the Father from the Son, for both are indivisible unity. Ontologically speaking, because they are one substance, all the Father is, the Son is in the same manner; all the Father has, the Son has in the same manner; all essential attributes ascribed to the Father can also be ascribed to the Son. Moreover, the Father and the Son are not just one substance, but also that they perform only one act inasmuch as all that the Father does, He does through the agency of the Son. The single activity of the Father and the Son proceeds from the fact that they are indivisibly one in substance.

Therein lies the continuity of theology and economy in the thought of Athanasius. The economic manifestation of the Godhead in relation to humanity is rooted in intra-trinitarian relation of the divine persons. Moreover, the unity principle that defines the being of the Father and the Son likewise governs their unified act in creation and redemption. Athanasius said: “For it is proper to the Son, to have the

⁷² Athanasius, *Oratio de Incarnatione Verbi*, 1, in NPNF2-04, *St. Athanasius: Select Works and Letters*, Schaff, Philip and Wace, Henry, eds. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, reprinted 1987).

⁷³ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Gentes*, 1.

⁷⁴ See J. Robertson, *Christ as Mediator*, 157.

things of the Father, and to be such that the Father is seen in Him, and that through Him all things were made, and that the salvation of all comes to pass and consists in Him.”⁷⁵ Athanasius referred to a single Creator and a single Redeemer, in Whom both the Father and the Son were included,⁷⁶ because “the Father is the source of all things and all divine actions, and the Word serves to carry out the Father’s actions, both in creation and in redemption.”⁷⁷

Both the Father and the Son are distinct subjects of divine actions. Moreover, the unique union of the Father and the Son in the Godhead guarantees that there is sole Creator and Redeemer of all creation and rejects the necessity of an ontological mediator between God and creatures.⁷⁸ When the Father acts, the Son acts in that same activity of the Father, but according to the mode of the Son’s personal subsistence in relation to the Father. Such that when the Father created the world, He created it through the Son; and when the Son redeemed humanity, He did so with the Father as principle of His authority. The Son, performing the role of mediator between the Father and creation, is not outside the reality of the Godhead of the Father, who through the Son, directly acts in the creation of the world and the restoration of all creation in redemption. Robertson, in reference to this, comments that the term ‘mediator’ as applied to the Son bears the sense of what he terms as ‘revelational mediation.’⁷⁹ According to this, the Son is not conceived as the third party between God and men. For the Son dwells among men as God and reveals God the Father in and through Himself in relating with men.⁸⁰ As a consequence, whatever the Son does in the world the Father does as well given that they are inseparable in essence and in activity. Just as the Son was active in the beginning when the Father created the world, so the Father is in act in the redemptive deed of the Son.

All of the activities of the Son in his capacity as mediator between the Father and created universe since the time of creation until the final restoration of mankind in God are possible because of the fact that the Son is *homoiousios* to the Father. The Son is able to create because the Son is God; Only God who is himself being can turn nothing into something. The Son is able to redeem mankind because the Son is God; Only the uncreated perfect God can make the created participate in his perfection such that the created, sustained by the divine grace, is able to walk on the path of perfection. And the Son will be able to gather everyone on the Last Day and restore mankind under the authority of the Father who created them because the Son is God

⁷⁵ Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 2. 24.

⁷⁶ See J. Robertson, *Christ as Mediator*, 151.

⁷⁷ Christopher Beeley, *The Unity of Christ – Continuity and Conflict in Patristic Tradition* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2012), 129.

⁷⁸ See Athanasius, *Orationes contra Arianos*, 2. 26; 29. 4.

⁷⁹ J. Robertson, *Christ as Mediator*, 175.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 176.

and has the power in Himself to carry out the restoration as the Father would; Only the eternal God can usher temporal created beings into life eternal. In other words, the Son is able to perform his role because the Son bears in Himself the essence and power of the Father. The truly divine nature of the Son, i.e., the affirmation of his being *homoousios* to the Father, is necessarily required for the Son to function as the true mediator between God and creation. Robertson affirms our contention when he articulates that “the only possible imaging of God necessitates not only a similarity with God..., but an identity with God.”⁸¹

To better appreciate this, we recall here the kind of mediation that the Arian teaching proposed which was unacceptable for the Alexandrian bishop. Although the Arians taught that the Son was a creature, they did not consider him merely as one of the creatures. Rather, they conceived of the Son as someone who is less than God but superior to the rest of creatures. The Son for them should function as a middle being between God and creation given that it is unthinkable for the Godhead to be in contact with created reality. Such view of mediation does not only make God appear indifferent to creatures or egotistical as it is believed that it is beneath God’s dignity to associate with created reality, but it also presents an exalted view of creation to the point of arrogating to itself the function of God. Since the Arians would not sustain that the Son is God, as they denied that He is *homoousios* to the Father, then they maintained that the infinite gap between God and humankind could be bridged by someone who has been created and also that the same creature could bring the rest of creatures with him to God. Such view is nothing but a rehearsal of the paradigmatic sin of the first couple in the book of Genesis who wished to be perfect on their own independent of God’s grace.

To avoid the absurd conclusion that proceeds from this Arian position, Athanasius maintained as a principle that the mediation that admits full divinity of the Son is the only perspective that can render a satisfactory account for the agency of God in creation. This is because nothing external to God can join creation to God. Only God has the power to bring creation to Himself. This is because the ontological gap that exists between God and the created world is infinitely distant which can only be traversed by an infinite being. No creature, however exalted, can overcome this ontological divide because of creation’s incapacity to grasp God by virtue of the natural difference between creation and the Creator. It is then axiomatic that the gulf between creation and God should be bridged from the side of the divine and not from that of creation. Only God, and there is no other, has the power and will to mend this gulf. It is for this reason that Athanasius postulated that the mediation cannot be conceived in terms of a function performed by any other creature, but only

⁸¹ Ibid., 180. It is so, although what is referred to here is the Athanasian doctrine on ‘image,’ because, as the same author rightly observes, what Athanasius “understood of divine mediation is embedded in his theology of the image of God” (Ibid., 177).

in terms of condescension of the divine love in the sending of his own begotten Son. The Son's mediatorial role toward creatures necessitates the immediate presence of God in creation and this is possible only with the belief in the Son's own substantial identity with the Father.

Conclusion

After the Nicene Council of 325, the *homoousios* formula remained vague and ambiguous not just to its opponents but even among its supporters. In fact, there were several readings imputed to *homoousios*: the materialist reading that the Arians initially conceived it to be, the Sabellian sense held by some allies of the Nicenes, and the orthodox reading that safeguards both the equality in essence and the distinction in persons of the Father and Son espoused by the Nicenes. The Nicenes distanced themselves from its Sabellian interpretation because by then the Arians had adopted it as their weapon of choice against the Nicene confession. Athanasius had realized this polyvalent character of *homoousios* such that he refrained from using it in his early works even if he continued to preach its faith using other expressions. Eventually, after over 25 years since Nicea, Athanasius saw the necessity to reaffirm *homoousios* as the expression that safeguards the Nicene faith. In his works, Athanasius clarified the Nicene understanding of *homoousios* and proved its significance in affirming the divinity of the Son. The proclaimed essential unity permits an understanding that the Son receives all that the Father is and has, and that the Son is indivisibly one in substance with the Father. This understanding is necessitated looking at the role of the Son as mediator between God and creation which started in the act of creation and continues until its restoration in God on the Last Day. It is only because the Son is *homoousios* to the Father that creation and salvation of humankind has been and will be made possible.^{PS}

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