Before All Ages

Rev. Fr. Anthony Cook

Last time we talked about Jesus as the only-begotten Son of God, and ended with the question implied in that statement: when, exactly, was He begotten? This is a strange question to ask, considering we have repeated time and again the truth that the Son of God is timeless and eternal - but it is a question that was asked with great insistence in the earliest centuries of Christian history, and most especially at the beginning of the fourth century.

This is not the time to delve deeply into what is known as the Arian controversy - it is enough here to say that there was a movement that took the term “begotten” very literally, without admitting what must be admitted, that the literal meaning of a word cannot apply in all its particular, and especially temporal, implications to the infinite and uncontainable God Who has revealed Himself to us. The phrase of the Creed we are discussing today was included for the express purpose of correcting and guarding against that error.

The text is brief: “Begotten of the Father before all ages.” It reads as a clarification of the prior phrase: “the only-begotten Son of God,” and emphasizes the point that this begetting is not one that can be understood in terms of normal human experience - specifically, time doesn’t come into the equation.

The Creed’s affirmation here is not a new idea - it is the extension of the Church’s unbroken confidence from the beginning that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is Himself truly and fully God. This is how the Lord speaks of Himself in the Gospels, most clearly in the Gospel of John, as in chapter 17, when He speaks of the glory He had with the Father before the universe was made, and in chapter 8 when He offends the religious authorities by saying that, “Before Abraham was, I AM.

This phrase, then, “begotten of the Father before all ages,” qualifies and re-defines the idea of begetting to emphasize the timelessness of the Son, with two words, “before” and “ages” doing the heavy lifting. We will look at both these words in detail.

The word “before” προ, in Greek, is a common preposition in the language. Its primary meaning is spatial - in front of, like a shield that you hold in front of you, or a man standing in front of a house, but it is frequently used to speak of time, in which case it means not in front of, but prior to - before, as in, I washed my hands before I ate, or, we talked about God the Father before we talked about God the Son, but that doesn’t mean that God the Father existed before God the Son, just that we talked about Him first.

The word “ages,” now, is a translation of the Greek word αἰών, which means simply, a period of existence, a particular space of time, and usually, a long one. It is often applied not only to a space of time, but to what exists within that space of time, so that the word may be used interchangeably with the words “world” and “universe,” insofar as they describe this time and place in which we live. We see this sort of thing in English usage all the time. Think of Charles Dickens: “It was the best of times, it was the worst of times” by which he means, of course, that that particular time and place and set of circumstances were significant and dramatic and worth talking about - which is his way of justifying what is a very long book.
The point is, τιόν, or age, is the word that you use in Greek when you’re talking about time and everything that happens in time. Modern English, with the benefit of Einstein’s understanding of the universe, uses the term “space-time” to refer to space and time as existing in a single continuum, but τιόν, although it is a very old word, has always communicated a surprisingly similar concept.

In putting these two words together, “Before all Ages,” the Creed communicates something that neither word alone could convey. The “before” word, πρό, can have either a spatial meaning or a temporal meaning - the “age” word, τιόν, can refer to either time or to space - but used together, they speak of a reality that transcends both time and space. There can’t be any time “before” time; there can’t be any space “in front of” space itself. Nor can there be time before space, or space before time, and thus the very idea of a “Land before Time” is utter nonsense (with apologies to Little Foot and his friends). But, by bringing the two words together, the Creed uses the words of the finite universe to describe the infinite reality that transcends the limits of the universe, using the terms of time and space to affirm a reality that is governed and defined by neither time nor space, being infinitely greater than both. And thus, just because we say that the Son of God is begotten of the Father does not, in fact, require that there was a time when there was no Son, nor that there was a time when He was begotten - because His begetting precedes time itself, and is not bound by the normal constraints of time and space. Even human language and logic are insufficient to describe Him - since the Son of God is timeless, together with the Father, the only way we can speak of His Being outside of Time is to use the term Time, and immediately to negate it. Thus, we say that He is time-LESS, or OUTSIDE of time, or BEFORE the AGES, to affirm that time, which universally applies to everything that exists in the “normal” manner of existing, does not apply to Him.

The central point here is not what we know, but what we admit we do not know. The words of the Creed here are words of humility and caution, words that avoid any particular theory or perspective on the nature of the universe in favor of something far more important. The word “age” describes the realm of being in which we exist - and the Creed uses it to emphasize that whatever we are by nature, the Son of God is infinitely greater, absolutely other. We are creatures of the ages - of the periods of time - of time and space. He is not. We are limited - He is not. We begin and end - He does not. We experience time chronologically - He does not. As the Lord says by the Prophet Isaiah, “My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Thus the Church, in words of deepest humility, affirms with absolute confidence a truth beyond our comprehension. She does not presume to know the exact nature of the universe, of space and time, nor does She dare to speculate on the the questions of science, whether there is a single age or many ages, a single universe or a multiverse. But nonetheless, in broad strokes, She affirms that all that we know and experience is temporal, contingent, dependent, caused - and that the Son of God, together with the Father is timeless, perfect, eternal, un-caused. There is an absolute boundary between God and us, and the Church, in using the word τιόν, age, has chosen the largest word available, affirming that we are creatures of the ages - and God is the Creator of the Ages, entirely beyond our knowledge and understanding.

Precisely because this truth transcends our understanding, the Creed does not stop with this affirmation, but repeats the point in different words, to ensure that in every way possible it affirms that the Son of God is truly and fully God, perfect and eternal. So next time, we will consider what it means that He is Light of Light, true God of true God.

The above is the fourteenth installment of our new Adult Education Program, updated weekly at http://theruleoffaith.typepad.com. Comments/questions are welcome, by email or via a comment on the website.
Cheesefare

Thursday, January 4

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
- 7:00 pm Greek School (5:30-7:30 pm)
- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Friday, January 5

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
- 7:00 pm Greek School (5:30-7:30 pm)
- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Saturday, January 6

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
- 7:00 pm Greek School (5:30-7:30 pm)
- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Sunday, January 7

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Monday, January 8

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Tuesday, January 9

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Wednesday, January 10

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Thursday, January 11

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Friday, January 12

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Saturday, January 13

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Sunday, January 14

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Monday, January 15

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Tuesday, January 16

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Wednesday, January 17

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Thursday, January 18

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Saturday, January 20

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Sunday, January 21

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Monday, January 22

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Thursday, January 25

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Friday, January 26

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Saturday, January 27

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Monday, January 29

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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Tuesday, January 30

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
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- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)

Wednesday, January 31

- 6:00 pm Presanctified Liturgy
- 7:00 pm Greek School (5:30-7:30 pm)
- 11:00 pm Apokreatiko (7:00-11:00 pm)
A Retreat at Saint George Greek Orthodox Church, Southgate

Thriving in Our Lives

Friday evening and All-day Saturday,
January 26-27, 2018

Presented by author and professor
Dr. Philip Mamalakis

Friday
6:00 pm  Hors d’oeuvres, dessert, coffee
7-8:30 pm  Talk and Discussion

Saturday
9:00 am  Coffee & light breakfast
9:30 am  Session #1
11:00 am  Break
11:30 am  Session #2
12:30 pm  Lunch
2-3:30 pm  Session #3

God created us to thrive, as human beings, in intimate relationships with Him and others. However, it is heard to live in peace with one another in the home, in the family, and in the community. Join our conversation and discussion with Dr. Philip Mamalakis as he shares with us how Christ, through His Church, invites us to thrive in our homes, relationships, marriage, and parenting.

Friday Evening, 7:00 – 8:30
Thriving in Our Home
For many, Church is somewhere we go to experience the sights, sounds, and smells of Orthodoxy before we return to the ‘real world’ of our lives. How can we connect the reality of the Kingdom of God, as encountered in Church, to daily life at home, workplace, and school?

Saturday Morning, 9:30 – 11:00
Thriving in Our Marriage
Explore the unique aspects of marriage as we understand it in the Orthodox Church. Many couples hope to live ‘happily ever after,’ but become discouraged as they face the normal struggles of marriage. Join us as we discuss God’s plan for ‘happily ever after,’ looking at how to thrive in all intimate relationships.

Saturday Mid-day, 11:30 – 12:30
Thriving in Our Relationships
It’s easy to let the tasks and chores of daily life distract us from a deeper reality: that God is inviting each of us, daily, to grow in His life and love through our relationships with others. We will explore this path and learn strategies for thriving in our daily lives.

Saturday Afternoon, 2:00 – 3:00
Thriving in Our Parenting
It’s easy to wonder if our children will stay connected to the Church when they grow up, but it’s hard to know the best way to respond. What can parents do to help kids grow and thrive as Orthodox Christians? We can’t impose our faith on our kids, but we can foster an environment that will allow them to grow into children of God.

Dr. Philip Mamalakis, with his wife Georgia and seven children, lives in Boston, MA, where he is the Assistant Professor of Pastoral Care at Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology. He is author of The Journey of Marriage in the Orthodox Church and the recently-released Parenting Toward the Kingdom. Dr. Mamalakis will be available for book signing, so bring your copy or purchase one at the retreat.

Attendance is free. Hosted by the Saint George Orthodox Parents & Adults organization. All adults, both married and single, are welcome. Some childcare is available on a first-come, first-served basis, with advance notice. Please call the Church office for details.

RSVP: www.stgeorgesouthgate.org or by phone: 734.283.8820
by Monday, January 22, 2018

Saint George Greek Orthodox Church
A parish of the Metropolis of Detroit
Grecian Center-Apollo Hall
16300 Dix-Toledo Road
Southgate, MI 48195
ST. GEORGE GREEK ORTHODOX CHURCH
GRECIAN CENTER
16300 DIX-TOLEDO ROAD - SOUTHGATE, MI 48193

APOKREATIKO CARNEVALE

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 10, 2018

GREEK & AMERICAN MUSIC BY DJ JOHN PAPADONTAS
PHOTO BOOTH
DOORS OPEN 7:00 PM / DINNER 7:30 PM
PREMIUM BUFFET / OPEN BAR
ADULTS - $30 YOUNG ADULTS 12-20 - $15 CHILDREN 11 & UNDER - FREE

COSTUMES ENCOURAGED
FOR TICKETS CALL THE CHURCH OFFICE * 734-283-8820
OR RESERVE TICKETS ON OUR WEBSITE STGEORGESOUTHGATE.ORG