

A close-up photograph of a white dove, a symbol of the Holy Spirit, being gently held by a human hand. The dove's head is turned slightly to the left, showing its dark eye and beak. The background is dark and out of focus.

# ON THE HOLY SPIRIT

*Basil the Great*

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# **On the Holy Spirit**

**Treatise in a Defense of the Trinity**

e-artnow, 2021

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EAN 4064066389017

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# Preface.

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The heresy of Arius lowered the dignity of the Holy Ghost as well as that of the Son. He taught that the Three Persons of the Holy Trinity are wholly unlike one another both in essence and in glory. "There is a triad, not in equal glories;" "one more glorious than the other in their glories to an infinite degree." So says the *Thalia*, quoted in Ath. de Syn. § 15. But the Nicene definition, while it was precise in regard to the Son, left the doctrine of the Holy Ghost comparatively open, (Πιστεύομεν εἰς τὸ Ἅγιον Πνεῦμα,) not from hesitation or doubt, but because this side of Arian speculation was not prominent. (Cf. Basil, Letters cxxv. and ccxxvi. and Dr. Swete in D.C.B. iii. 121.) It was the expulsion of Macedonius from the see of Constantinople in 360 which brought "Macedonianism" to a head. He was put there by Arians as an Arian. Theodoret (Ecc. Hist. ii. 5) explains how disagreement arose. He was an upholder, if not the author, of the watchword ὁμοιούσιον (Soc. ii. 45) (but many supporters of the ὁμοιούσιον (e.g., Eustathius of Sebasteia) shrank from calling the Holy Ghost a creature. So the Pneumatomachi began to be clearly marked off. The various creeds of the Arians and semi-Arians did not directly attack the Godhead of the Holy Ghost, though they did not accept the doctrine of the essential unity of the Three Persons. (Cf. Hahn, *Bibliothek der Symbole*, pp. 148-174, quoted by Swete.) But their individual teaching went far beyond their confessions. The Catholic theologians were roused to the

danger, and on the return of Athanasius from his third exile, a council was held at Alexandria which resulted in the first formal ecclesiastical condemnation of the depravers of the Holy Ghost, in the *Tomus ad Antiochenos* (q.v. with the preface on p. 481 of Ath. in the edition of this series. Cf. also Ath. ad Serap. i. 2, 10). In the next ten years the Pneumatomachi, Macedonians, or Marathonians, so called from Marathonius, bishop of Nicomedia, whose support to the party was perhaps rather pecuniary than intellectual (Nicephorus H.E. ix. 47), made head, and were largely identified with the Homoiousians. In 374 was published the *Ancoratus* of St. Epiphanius, bishop of Salamis in Cyprus, written in 373, and containing two creeds (*vide* Heurtley de F. et Symb. pp. 14-18), the former of which is nearly identical with the Confession of Constantinople. It expresses belief in τὸ Πνεῦμα τὸ Ἅγιον, Κύριον, καὶ Ζωοποιὸν, τὸ ἐκ τοῦ Πατρὸς ἐκπορευόμενον, τὸ σὺν Πατρὶ καὶ Υἱῷ 254· συμπροσκυνοί μενον καὶ συνδοξαζόμενον, τὸ λαλῆσαν διὰ τῶν προφητῶν. It is in this same year, 374, that Amphilochius, the first cousin of Gregory of Nazianzus and friend and spiritual son of Basil, paid the first of his annual autumn visits to Cæsarea (Bishop Lightfoot, D.C.B. i. 105) and there urged St. Basil to clear up all doubt as to the true doctrine of the Holy Spirit by writing a treatise on the subject. St. Basil complied, and, on the completion of the work, had it engrossed on parchment (Letter ccxxxi.) and sent it to Amphilochius, to whom he dedicated it.

# Chapter I.

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Prefatory remarks on the need of exact investigation of the most minute portions of theology.

1. Your desire for information, my right well-beloved and most deeply respected brother Amphilochius, I highly commend, and not less your industrious energy. I have been exceedingly delighted at the care and watchfulness shewn in the expression of your opinion that of all the terms concerning God in every mode of speech, not one ought to be left without exact investigation. You have turned to good account your reading of the exhortation of the Lord, “Every one that asketh receiveth, and he that seeketh findeth,”<sup>1</sup> and by your diligence in asking might, I ween, stir even the most reluctant to give you a share of what they possess. And this in you yet further moves my admiration, that you do not, according to the manners of the most part of the men of our time, propose your questions by way of mere test, but with the honest desire to arrive at the actual truth. There is no lack in these days of captious listeners and questioners; but to find a character desirous of information, and seeking the truth as a remedy for ignorance, is very difficult. Just as in the hunter’s snare, or in the soldier’s ambush, the trick is generally ingeniously concealed, so it is with the inquiries of the majority of the questioners who advance arguments, not so much with the view of getting any good out of them, as in order that, in the event of their

failing to elicit answers which chime in with their own desires, they may seem to have fair ground for controversy.

2. If “To the fool on his asking for wisdom, wisdom shall be reckoned,”<sup>2</sup> at how high a price shall we value “the wise hearer” who is quoted by the Prophet in the same verse with “the admirable counsellor”?<sup>3</sup> It is right, I ween, to hold him worthy of all approbation, and to urge him on to further progress, sharing his enthusiasm, and in all things toiling at his side as he presses onwards to perfection. To count the terms used in theology as of primary importance, and to endeavour to trace out the hidden meaning in every phrase and in every syllable, is a characteristic wanting in those who are idle in the pursuit of true religion, but distinguishing all who get knowledge of “the mark” “of our calling;”<sup>4</sup> for what is set before us is, so far as is possible with human nature, to be made like unto God. Now without knowledge there can be no making like; and knowledge is not got without lessons. The beginning of teaching is speech, and syllables and words are parts of speech. It follows then that to investigate syllables is not to shoot wide of the mark, nor, because the questions raised are what might seem to some insignificant, are they on that account to be held unworthy of heed. Truth is always a quarry hard to hunt, and therefore we must look everywhere for its tracks. The acquisition of true religion is just like that of crafts; both grow bit by bit; apprentices must despise nothing. If a man despise the first elements as small and insignificant, he will never reach the perfection of wisdom.

Yea and Nay are but two syllables, yet there is often involved in these little words at once the best of all good

things, Truth, and that beyond which wickedness cannot go, a Lie. But why mention Yea and Nay? Before now, a martyr bearing witness for Christ has been judged to have paid in full the claim of true religion by merely nodding his head.<sup>5</sup> If, then, this be so, what term in theology is so small but that the effect of its weight in the scales according as it be rightly or wrongly used is not great? Of the law we are told “not one jot nor one tittle shall pass away;”<sup>6</sup> how then could it be safe for us to leave even the least unnoticed? The very points which you yourself have sought to have thoroughly sifted by us are at the same time both small and great. Their use is the matter of a moment, and peradventure they are therefore made of small account; but, when we reckon the force of their meaning, they are great. They may be likened to the mustard plant which, though it be the least of shrub-seeds, yet when properly cultivated and the forces latent in its germs unfolded, rises to its own sufficient height.

If any one laughs when he sees our subtilty, to use the Psalmist’s<sup>7</sup> words, about syllables, let him know that he reaps laughter’s fruitless fruit; and let us, neither giving in to men’s reproaches, nor yet vanquished by their disparagement, continue our investigation. So far, indeed, am I from feeling ashamed of these things because they are small, that, even if I could attain to ever so minute a fraction of their dignity, I should both congratulate myself on having won high honour, and should tell my brother and fellow-investigator that no small gain had accrued to him therefrom.

While, then, I am aware that the controversy contained in little words is a very great one, in hope of the prize I do not shrink from toil, with the conviction that the discussion will both prove profitable to myself, and that my hearers will be rewarded with no small benefit. Wherefore now with the help, if I may so say, of the Holy Spirit Himself, I will approach the exposition of the subject, and, if you will, that I may be put in the way of the discussion, I will for a moment revert to the origin of the question before us.

3. Lately when praying with the people, and using the full doxology to God the Father in both forms, at one time “*with the Son together with the Holy Ghost,*” and at another “*through the Son in the Holy Ghost,*” I was attacked by some of those present on the ground that I was introducing novel and at the same time mutually contradictory terms.<sup>8</sup> You, however, chiefly with the view of benefiting them, or, if they are wholly incurable, for the security of such as may fall in with them, have expressed the opinion that some clear instruction ought to be published concerning the force underlying the syllables employed. I will therefore write as concisely as possible, in the endeavour to lay down some admitted principle for the discussion.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> Luke xi. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Prov. xvii. 28, lxx.

<sup>3</sup> Is. iii. 3, lxx.

<sup>4</sup> Phil. iii. 14.

<sup>5</sup> *i.e.*, confessed or denied himself a Christian. The Benedictine Editors and their followers seem to have missed the force of the original, both

grammatically and historically, in referring it to the time when St. Basil is writing; ἤδη ἐκρίθη does not mean “at the present day is judged,” but “ere now has been judged.” And in a.d. 374 there was no persecution of Christians such as seems to be referred to, although Valens tried to crush the Catholics.

<sup>6</sup> Matt. v. 18.

<sup>7</sup> Ps. cxix. 85, lxx. “The lawless have described subtilties for me, but not according to thy law, O Lord;” for A.V. & R.V., “The proud have digged pits for me which are not after thy law.” The word ἀδολεσχία is used in a bad sense to mean garrulity; in a good sense, keenness, subtilty.

<sup>8</sup> It is impossible to convey in English the precise force of the prepositions used. “*With*” represents μετά, of which the original meaning is “amid;” “*together with*,” σύν, of which the original meaning is “at the same time as.” The Latin of the Benedictine edition translates the first by “*cum*,” and the second by “*una cum*.” “*Through*” stands for διά, which, with the genitive, is used of the instrument; “*in*” for ἐν, “*in*,” but also commonly used of the instrument or means. In the well known passage in 1 Cor. viii. 6, A.V. renders δι’ οὗ τὰ πάντα by “*through whom* are all things;” R.V., by “*by whom*.”

# Chapter II.

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The origin of the heretics' close observation of syllables.

4. The petty exactitude of these men about syllables and words is not, as might be supposed, simple and straightforward; nor is the mischief to which it tends a small one. There is involved a deep and covert design against true religion. Their pertinacious contention is to show that the mention of Father, Son, and Holy Ghost is unlike, as though they will thence find it easy to demonstrate that there is a variation in nature. They have an old sophism, invented by Aetius, the champion of this heresy, in one of whose Letters there is a passage to the effect that things naturally unlike are expressed in unlike terms, and, conversely, that things expressed in unlike terms are naturally unlike. In proof of this statement he drags in the words of the Apostle, "One God and Father of whom are all things,...and one Lord Jesus Christ by whom are all things."<sup>1</sup> "Whatever, then," he goes on, "is the relation of these terms to one another, such will be the relation of the natures indicated by them; and as the term 'of whom' is unlike the term 'by whom,' so is the Father unlike the Son."<sup>2</sup> On this heresy depends the idle subtilty of these men about the phrases in question. They accordingly assign to God the Father, as though it were His distinctive portion and lot, the phrase "of Whom;" to God the Son they confine the phrase "by Whom;" to the Holy Spirit that of "in Whom," and say that this use of the syllables is never interchanged,

in order that, as I have already said, the variation of language may indicate the variation of nature.<sup>3</sup> Verily it is sufficiently obvious that in their quibbling about the words they are endeavouring to maintain the force of their impious argument.

By the term “*of* whom” they wish to indicate the Creator; by the term “*through* whom,” the subordinate agent<sup>4</sup> or instrument;<sup>5</sup> by the term “*in* whom,” or “*in* which,” they mean to shew the time or place. The object of all this is that the Creator of the universe<sup>6</sup> may be regarded as of no higher dignity than an instrument, and that the Holy Spirit may appear to be adding to existing things nothing more than the contribution derived from place or time.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> 1 Cor. viii. 6.

<sup>2</sup> The story as told by Theodoret (Ecc. Hist. ii. 23) is as follows: “Constantius, on his return from the west, passed some time at Constantinople” (*i.e.* in 360, when the synod at Constantinople was held, shortly after that of the Isaurian Seleucia, “substance” and “hypostasis” being declared inadmissible terms, and the Son pronounced like the Father according to the Scriptures). The Emperor was urged that “Eudoxius should be convicted of blasphemy and lawlessness. Constantius however...replied that a decision must first be come to on matters concerning the faith, and that afterwards the case of Eudoxius should be enquired into. Basilus (of Ancyra), relying on his former intimacy, ventured boldly to object to the Emperor that he was attacking the apostolic decrees; but Constantius took this ill, and told Basilus to hold his tongue, for to you, said he, the disturbance of the churches is due. When Basilus was silenced, Eustathius (of Sebasteia) intervened and said, Since, sir, you wish a decision to be come to on what concerns the faith, consider the blasphemies uttered against the Only Begotten by Eudoxius; and, as he spoke, he produced the exposition of faith, wherein, besides many other impieties, were found the following expressions: Things that are spoken of in unlike terms are unlike in substance; there is one God the Father of Whom are all things, and

one Lord Jesus Christ by Whom are all things. Now the term 'of Whom' is unlike the term 'by Whom;' so the Son is unlike God the Father. Constantius ordered this exposition of the faith to be read, and was displeased with the blasphemy which it involved. He therefore asked Eudoxius if he had drawn it up. Eudoxius instantly repudiated the authorship, and said that it was written by Aetius. Now Aetius...at the present time was associated with Eunomius and Eudoxius, and, as he found Eudoxius to be, like himself, a sybarite in luxury as well as a heretic in faith, he chose Antioch as the most congenial place of abode, and both he and Eunomius were fast fixtures at the couches of Eudoxius....The Emperor had been told all this, and now ordered Aetius to be brought before him. On his appearance, Constantius shewed him the document in question, and proceeded to enquire if he was the author of its language. Aetius, totally ignorant of what had taken place, and unaware of the drift of the enquiry, expected that he should win praise by confession, and owned that he was the author of the phrases in question. Then the Emperor perceived the greatness of his iniquity, and forthwith condemned him to exile and to be deported to a place in Phrygia." St. Basil accompanied Eustathius and his namesake to Constantinople on this occasion, being then only in deacon's orders. (Philost. iv. 12.) Basil of Ancyra and Eustathius in their turn suffered banishment. Basil, the deacon, returned to the Cappadocian Cæsarea.

<sup>3</sup> *cf.* the form of the Arian Creed as given by Eunomius in his 'Απολογία (Migne, xxx. 840. "We believe in one God, Father Almighty, of whom are all things; and in one only begotten Son of God, God the word, our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom are all things; and in one Holy Ghost, the Comforter, in whom distribution of all grace in proportion as may be most expedient is made to each of the Saints."

<sup>4</sup> *cf.* Eunomius, Liber. Apol. § 27, where of the Son he says ὑπουργός.

<sup>5</sup> On the word ὄργανον, a tool, as used of the Word of God, *cf.* Nestorius in Marius Merc. Migne, p. 761 & Cyr. Alex. Ep. 1. Migne, x. 37. "The creature did not give birth to the uncreated, but gave birth to man, organ of Godhead." *cf.* Thomasius, Christ. Dog. i. 336. Mr. Johnston quotes Philo (de Cher. § 35; i. 162. n.) as speaking of ὄργανον δὲ λόγον Θεοῦ δι' οὗ κατεσκευάσθη (*sc.* ὁ κόσμος).

<sup>6</sup> Here of course the Son is meant.

## Chapter III.

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The systematic discussion of syllables is derived from heathen philosophy.

5. They have, however, been led into this error by their close study of heathen writers, who have respectively applied the terms “*of whom*” and “*through whom*” to things which are by nature distinct. These writers suppose that by the term “*of whom*” or “*of which*” the matter is indicated, while the term “*through whom*” or “*through which*”<sup>1</sup> represents the instrument, or, generally speaking, subordinate agency.<sup>2</sup> Or rather—for there seems no reason why we should not take up their whole argument, and briefly expose at once its incompatibility with the truth and its inconsistency with their own teaching—the students of vain philosophy, while expounding the manifold nature of cause and distinguishing its peculiar significations, define some causes as principal,<sup>3</sup> some as cooperative or con-causal, while others are of the character of “*sine qua non*,” or *indispensable*.<sup>4</sup>

For every one of these they have a distinct and peculiar use of terms, so that the maker is indicated in a different way from the instrument. For the maker they think the proper expression is “*by whom*,” maintaining that the bench is produced “*by*” the carpenter; and for the instrument “*through which*,” in that it is produced “*through*” or by means of adze and gimlet and the rest. Similarly they appropriate “*of which*” to the material, in that the thing

made is “of” wood, while “according to which” shews the design, or pattern put before the craftsman. For he either first makes a mental sketch, and so brings his fancy to bear upon what he is about, or else he looks at a pattern previously put before him, and arranges his work accordingly. The phrase “*on account of which*” they wish to be confined to the end or purpose, the bench, as they say, being produced for, or on account of, the use of man. “*In which*” is supposed to indicate time and place. When was it produced? In this time. And where? In this place. And though place and time contribute nothing to what is being produced, yet without these the production of anything is impossible, for efficient agents must have both place and time. It is these careful distinctions, derived from unpractical philosophy and vain delusion,<sup>5</sup> which our opponents have first studied and admired, and then transferred to the simple and unsophisticated doctrine of the Spirit, to the belittling of God the Word, and the setting at naught of the Divine Spirit. Even the phrase set apart by non-Christian writers for the case of lifeless instruments<sup>6</sup> or of manual service of the meanest kind, I mean the expression “*through or by means of which*,” they do not shrink from transferring to the Lord of all, and Christians feel no shame in applying to the Creator of the universe language belonging to a hammer or a saw.

## Footnotes

<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity of gender in ἐξ οὗ and δι’ οὗ can only be expressed by giving the alternatives in English.

- <sup>2</sup> There are four causes or varieties of cause: 1. The essence or quiddity (Form): τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι. 2. The necessitating conditions (Matter): τὸ τίνων ὄντων ἀνάγκη τοῦτ' εἶναι. 3. The proximate mover or stimulator of change (Efficient): ἡ τί πρῶτον ἐκίνησε. 4. That for the sake of which (Final Cause or End): τὸ τίνος ἕνεκα. Grote's *Aristotle*, I. 354. The four Aristotelian causes are thus: 1. Formal. 2. Material. 3. Efficient. 4. Final. *cf.* Arist. *Analyt. Post.* II. xi., *Metaph.* I. iii., and *Phys.* II. iii. The six causes of Basil may be referred to the four of Aristotle as follows: Aristotle. 1. τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι 2. τὸ ἐξ οὗ γίνεται τι 3. ἡ ἀρχὴ τῆς μεταβολῆς ἡ πρώτη 4. τὸ οὗ ἕνεκα Basil. 1. καθ' ὃ: *i.e.*, the form or idea *according to which* a thing is made. 2. ἐξ οὗ: *i.e.*, the matter *out of which it is made*. 3. ὑφ' οὗ: *i.e.*, the agent, using means. δι' οὗ: *i.e.* the means. 4. δι' ὃ: *i.e.*, the end. ἐν ᾧ, or *sine quâ non*, applying to all.
- <sup>3</sup> προκαταρκτική. *cf.* Plut. 2, 1056. B.D. προκαταρκτικὴ αἰτία ἡ εἰμαρμένη.
- <sup>4</sup> *cf.* Clem. Alex. *Strom.* viii. 9. "Of causes some are principal, some preservative, some coöperative, some indispensable; *e.g.* of education the principal cause is the father; the preservative, the schoolmaster; the coöperative, the disposition of the pupil; the indispensable, time."
- <sup>5</sup> ἐκ τῆς ματαιότητος καὶ κενῆς ἀπάτης. *cf.* ματαιότης ματαιότητων, "vanity of vanities," Ecc. i. 2, lxx. In Arist. *Eth.* i. 2, a desire is said to be κενὴ καὶ ματαία, which goes into infinity,—everything being desired for the sake of something else,—*i.e.*, κενή, void, like a desire for the moon, and ματαία, unpractical, like a desire for the empire of China. In the text ματαιότης seems to mean heathen philosophy, a vain delusion as distinguished from Christian philosophy.
- <sup>6</sup> ἄψυχα ὄργανα. A slave, according to Aristotle, *Eth. Nich.* viii. 7, 6, is ἔμψυχον ὄργανον.

## Chapter IV.

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That there is no distinction in the scriptural use of these syllables.

6. We acknowledge that the word of truth has in many places made use of these expressions; yet we absolutely deny that the freedom of the Spirit is in bondage to the pettiness of Paganism. On the contrary, we maintain that Scripture varies its expressions as occasion requires, according to the circumstances of the case. For instance, the phrase “*of which*” does not always and absolutely, as they suppose, indicate the material,<sup>1</sup> but it is more in accordance with the usage of Scripture to apply this term in the case of the Supreme Cause, as in the words “One God, of whom are all things,”<sup>2</sup> and again, “All things of God.”<sup>3</sup> The word of truth has, however, frequently used this term in the case of the material, as when it says “Thou shalt make an ark of incorruptible wood;”<sup>4</sup> and “Thou shalt make the candlestick of pure gold;”<sup>5</sup> and “The first man is of the earth, earthy;”<sup>6</sup> and “Thou art formed out of clay as I am.”<sup>7</sup> But these men, to the end, as we have already remarked, that they may establish the difference of nature, have laid down the law that this phrase befits the Father alone. This distinction they have originally derived from heathen authorities, but here they have shewn no faithful accuracy of limitation. To the Son they have in conformity with the teaching of their masters given the title of instrument, and to the Spirit that of place, for they say *in* the Spirit, and