What Does "Eternally Begotten" Mean?

An article for the *Cathedral Times* by the Very Rev. Sam Candler

Careful. This article is about theology. But it is also about a saint whose feast day the Church celebrated this week. The feast day of Saint Athanasius was May 2.

Most of us have little idea who Athanasius was. Maybe a small number of us saw his name on some church calendar somewhere. A smaller number of us remember his name associated with an old church creed, maybe the Athanasian Creed, and maybe even the Nicene Creed.

But almost all of us who went to church this past Sunday used one of his phrases. When we said together the Nicene Creed, we said that "We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ…eternally begotten of the Father." It is the two words, "eternally begotten" that I write about today. We say the phrase so frequently and easily that most of us have no idea what it might even mean.

Indeed, if we were to pause and consider, literally, what "eternally begotten" means, we would face a puzzle. If someone is "begotten" from a father, doesn't that imply that they were born after the father? Wouldn't that mean that their father pre-existed them? How could the son be eternal if he had been begotten from someone?

Such were the views of the fourth-century Arians, who argued that "there was a time when the Son was not." They argued that, though Jesus was Lord, he was also the "Son" of God; thus, there was a time when he did not exist. These Arians had scripture on their side, quoting Proverbs 8.22 and understanding "Wisdom" to be the Word: "The LORD created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of long ago."

It was apparently Athanasius, who was a secretary to Bishop Alexander of Alexandria at the time, who came up with the phrase "eternally begotten," to describe the co-eternal existence of Christ, the Son, with the Father. He was trying to defend the early Trinitarian theology of the time, that Jesus the Christ had to be completely and eternally equal to the Father. For Athanasius, Jesus could not be lesser than the Father in any way; Jesus had to be of the same substance and of the same eternity.

Thus, the addition of the word, "eternally" to "begotten." Yes, Jesus is the Son of God, but he has also always existed with (and as) God. He is as eternal as the Father. His relationship as the Son is "eternal," which is to say the relationship is "outside time." God has always been Father, and Jesus has always been Son.

The argument can seem tedious and tiny, but it was critical to sustaining what would become the doctrine of the Trinity, that God is truly, and always, and eternally, three; there is no hierarchy within the Trinity.

During the fourth century, empire-changing arguments developed between those who followed Athanasius and those who followed the Arians. The emperor usually determined which party would be in power. When different emperors resulted in Athanasius being exiled five different times, it was said, "Athanasius contra mundum," "Athanasius against the world."

The Church remembers May 2 as the feast day of Saint Athanasius. But, in a way, we also remember Athanasius every time we say the Nicene Creed. When we say the Nicene Creed, we are uniting ourselves with countless Christians who have witnessed before us. Our Christian ancestors have known God as Father, God as Son, and God as Holy Spirit – all equal and co-eternal. They are a relationship, a relationship that saves us daily.
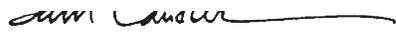
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