

EARLY CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY

Topic: Lessons from Ancient Christian Catecheses and Polemics
Convener: Alexis James Doval, Saint Mary's College of California
Presenters: Daniel H. Williams, Baylor University
Daniel E. Doyle, Villanova University

Professor Williams opened the session with a paper titled "A Catechetical Commentary on the Nicene Creed." According to Williams, the anonymous *Incipit fides Nicaena* is a completely unique, though much ignored, Latin text from the later fourth century. C. H. Turner in 1939 prepared the only critical edition, based on a sole ninth-century codex, under the title of *Commentarius in Symbolum Nicaeanum*.¹ This is the version reprinted in the first volume of the *Patrologiae Latinae Supplementum* (1958),² and is twenty-one columns in length. Since Turner, no scholar has focused attention on this text, offered a translation in any European language, or integrated it into the Latin doctrinal history of the later fourth century. With a completed translation in hand, Williams presented some observations on the text and raised some problems that have to do with the evolution of the Nicene creed as a statement of faith in the churches in the west.

Williams argued, contra Turner, that the document is not a polemical tract but rather was composed as a type of theological catechism for teaching the Nicene creed by someone who had had little exposure himself to the creed or the details of the theological controversies surrounding the creed. The propositions of the creed are theologically simplistic, presented as *de facto* extensions of biblical teaching meant to fend off the falsehoods of heresy. What is remarkable about this text is how unremarkable it is for informing us about either Nicene or Arian theology, even though it is likely from the later fourth century.

Professor Doyle followed with a paper titled, "*Ambitio* and *Superbia* as Impediments to Theological Truth in Augustine's Writings." He began by describing a modern context for this topic, stating that one of the great challenges faced by the contemporary church is finding the right balance between the role of the pastoral *magisterium* (the college of bishops in communion with its head, the bishop of Rome) to authoritatively define church teaching and the duty of the scholarly community of theologians to deepen our understanding of the received doctrines through careful exploration in light of modern knowledge and insights; to critique the limitations of the received formulas of faith and formulate better ways to express them; and to search for deeper insight into the consequences and implications of faith convictions.

¹*Ecclesiae Occidentalis Monumenta Iuris Antiquissima. Canonum et Conciliorum Graecorum Interpretationes Latinae* (Oxford, 1913) I.2 appendix X. 330-47. Edited from the ninth-century *Codex Vaticanus Regina 1997*.

²PLS I.220-40 (Dekkers, *Clavis Patrum Latinorum*, 1745).

Doyle explored Augustine of Hippo's critique into the roles played by *ambitio* and *supurbia* in the theological enterprise of seeking religious truth by focusing on his *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* and his *Letter 238 to Pascentius*, drawing attention to his hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the roles played by ambition, pride and innovation as obstacles in attaining religious truth. He argued that Augustine's concerns are particularly applicable today now that the primary venue where theological debate and exploration takes place has shifted from seminaries and monasteries to the academy. In Augustine's time, theologians were affirmed who were deemed loyal and perhaps "conservative" in promoting the received tradition. In our present experience, theology is conducted primarily in the academy, and scholars are rewarded largely on the basis of publications in prestigious journals which mainly judge work favorably on the basis of novelty and innovation. This, in turn, shapes the kind of theological investigation that is encouraged. Consequently the theologian experiences some degree of pressure to be "novel and innovative" in order to assure a "place at the table." Doyle argued that we would do well to be more critical of what motivates our scholarship and can find some guidance for doing so in the writings of Augustine. In the discussion that followed, some concern was expressed about using "innovation" or "novelty" too strictly as a sign of questionable motives in scholarship.

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