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# The Interpretation of Nicene Christology at the Council of Alexandria (c. 370) and Its Revision

**Abstract:** Although the Council of Nicaea (325) has already been copiously discussed, the document of the Council of Alexandria (370) still offers a fresh insight into the interpretation of the former Council's teaching and into its reception. This article is a theological analysis of the conciliar document, written by Athanasius of Alexandria: *Letter to the African Bishops against the Arians*. The document draws attention to the concept of substance (*ousia*), which was rejected by the Arians as not biblical. The Council disagreed with the Arians' claim, presented the biblical foundation of this term and used the formula: "the Son is of the substance of God," which means that the Son is consubstantial (*homoousios*) with the Father. Ultimately, the Council of Alexandria agreed on the Homoiousian formula of the Son's resemblance "in substance" to the Father (*kat' ousian*). A revision of the conciliar teaching allows us to discover in God the permanent basis (substance) of life and the Greatest Good (*hyparxis*), incomparable with other goods (Jer 9:9 and Heb 10:34).

**Keywords:** *ousia*, substance, *homoousios*, consubstantial, *hyparxis*, resemblance *kat' ousian*

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Henryk Pietras puts forward a thesis that the Council of Nicaea established a creed that nobody accepted.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps it was due to this dissatisfaction that the teaching of the Council of Nicaea (325) was much debatable. Marek Starowieyski mentions a deep post-Nicene crisis caused by various theological, philosophical and

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<sup>1</sup> Pietras, "Pojmowanie synostwa Bożego," 16. Pietras, following P. Szewczyk, adds that the objections to the Nicene Creed were even held by the great defender of Nicaea, Athanasius of Alexandria, in his work *De Decretis*.

political reasons.<sup>2</sup> Undoubtedly, the Nicene Creed needed to be understood and properly interpreted. Meanwhile, as Manlio Simonetti notes in his work “La crisi ariana nel IV secolo,” the Council’s teachings were interpreted in various ways, causing divisions even among the Council’s supporters.<sup>3</sup> The reason for the different and varying interpretations of the Council’s teaching and the theological discussions of the time can be seen in the lack of terminological precision, especially concerning the terms *ousia* and *hypostasis*.<sup>4</sup> The dogmatic split was further caused by the formula imposed by Emperor Constantius at the councils of Seleucia and Ariminum (Rimini) (359), according to which “the Son is like the Father (*homoion tou Patri*),” which both the supporters of Nicaea and its opponents were unwilling to accept.<sup>5</sup>

The Council of Alexandria (c. 370), in this historical and theological context, made a new attempt to interpret the Council of Nicaea. The fruit of the Council is *To the Bishops of Africa. The Letter of Ninety Bishops of Egypt and Libya, including Athanasius* (against Arians). (hereinafter referred to as *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians*) which, according to the collection of conciliar documents *Acta Synodalia. Synodi et collectiones legum* constitutes the official document of the Council.<sup>6</sup> The immediate reason for

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<sup>2</sup> Starowieyski, *Sobory*, 31; cf. Grzywaczewski, “Poglądy Bazylego z Ancyry,” 156.

<sup>3</sup> Simonetti, *La crisi ariana*. Simonetti notes that the supporters of Nicaea were first divided into “traditional supporters of Nicaea” (gli antichi niceni) with Athanasius and Paolinus and “new supporters of Nicaea” (i nuovi niceni) with Meletius (p. 391); then further divisions were made between the homousians following the traditional conciliar doctrine (rigida osservanza nicena) and the homousians originating from the homoiousians (p. 511).

<sup>4</sup> Baron, “Krytyka homojużji Bazylego,” 50. According to Karolina Kochończyk-Bonińska, the Christological and Trinitological terms (*ousia*, *hypostasis*, *prosōpon*, *physis*) were at this time clarified by Basil the Great: Kochończyk-Bonińska, “Bazyli Wielki,” 124.

<sup>5</sup> Schatz, *Sobory Powszechne*, 34–36.

<sup>6</sup> *To the Bishops of Africa*; cf. AS I. The Polish dictionary *Nowy słownik wczesnochrześcijańskiego piśmiennictwa* gives the abbreviated name *Letter to the African Bishops* and includes it among Athanasius’ letters on the decrees of the Council of Nicaea; “Atanazy Wielki,” *Nowy słownik*, 122.

the convening of the Council of Alexandria was the still living and resurgent Arianism.<sup>7</sup> The Council refers to the doctrine of the Council of Nicaea and seeks to demonstrate that it is compatible with the supernatural revelation of God.<sup>8</sup>

*The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* was written by Athanasius the Great (in Alexandria) towards the end of his life (he died in 373) and therefore the doctrinal content of this *Letter* is an expression of his mature theological thought, which developed under the influence of changing historical, polemical and theological situations.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, it is no less necessary to consider this *Letter* as a conciliar document, expressing the teaching of the Council of Alexandria. Undoubtedly, *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* is part of the process of understanding and accepting the teaching of the Council of Nicaea, a process that we today refer to as the reception of the Council of Nicaea. This is pointed out by Y. Congar, who, when discussing the idea of ecclesial reception, quotes a sentence from this very *Letter*: “To that council [in Nicaea], accordingly, the whole world has long ago agreed, and now, many synods having been held, all men have been put in mind, both in Dalmatia and Dardania, Macedonia, Epirus and Greece [...]”<sup>10</sup> Bernard Sesboüé, following Congar’s thought, states that the quoted words about the assent of the whole civilised world to the Nicene Creed and its acceptance by successive synods is proof that ecclesial reception cannot be “pre-decreed” but only stated *post factum*.<sup>11</sup> According to the current state of research, *The Letter of African Bishops*

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<sup>7</sup> The resurgence of Arianism in the second half of the fourth century is referred to as “Neo-Arianism” and its adherents as “Neo Arians,” with whom Basil the Great also argued; see Kochańczyk-Bonińska, *Defining substance*, 95.

<sup>8</sup> Athanasius, *To the African Bishops*, AS I, 265–275\*. The post-synodal document states that the Nicene Fathers “breathe the spirit of Scripture”: cf. AS I, 3, 268\*.

<sup>9</sup> The process of Athanasius’ personal and theological development is highlighted by DelCogliano in his review of Lucian Dîncea, *Le Christ et la Trinité*, 521–522.

<sup>10</sup> Congar, “La ‘reception,’” 370; cf. AS I, 1, 265\*. Congar defines reception as “the process by which the ecclesial body makes truly its own some expression” (p. 370).

<sup>11</sup> Sesboüé – Wolinski, “Bóg zbawienia,” 230–231.

*against Arians* has not so far been subjected to deeper theological reflection. It has only been noted when researching the infallibility of the Church's Magisterium and the authority of the Magisterium's documents because of two sentences: "the word of the Lord which came through the ecumenical Synod at Nicaea, abides forever"<sup>12</sup> and for this Synod of Nicaea is in truth "a proscription of every heresy."<sup>13</sup>

The aim of this article is first of all to present in detail the theology of the Council of Alexandria (c. 370), which Athanasius the Great conveys in his conciliar *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians*. A theological analysis of the content of this document aims not only to show the historical value of the conciliar teaching against Arianism, but also to show its current value in theology and in the life of faith. The actualisation of this teaching will be shown in the light of the Word of God, to which the conciliar document directly refers.

## **1. The Biblical Foundations of the Concept of *ousia* (Substance)**

The Council of Alexandria (c. 370) disagrees with the Arian view that the term *ousia* (substance) used at the Council of Nicaea is "vexing" to believers and should be rejected together with the term *homoousios* derived from it.<sup>14</sup> The main argument for their rejection is the claim that these terms were not used in the divine Scriptures about God and the Son of God.<sup>15</sup> Consequently, according

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<sup>12</sup> These words are undoubtedly inspired by a text from Isaiah: "The grass withers, the flower withers, but the word of our God endures forever" (Isa 40:8); Schatz, *Sobory Powszechnie*, 37.

<sup>13</sup> This is pointed out by Bernard Sesboüé when discussing ecclesiology with the charism of infallibility and the factual and legal authority of the statements of the Magisterium, in Sesboüé – Wolinski, "Bóg zbawienia," 231–233, cf. AS I, 11, 275\*.

<sup>14</sup> This position is expressed in the letter of the Arians to Emperor Constantius in 359, in which they ask the emperor to forbid the use of the term *ousia* and, consequently, the term *homoousios*: *List synodalny arian*, AS I, 231\*–232\*.

<sup>15</sup> "In divinis scripturis de Deo et Dei Filio non inveniuntur scripta"; *Epistula synodalis arianorum ad Constantium imperatorem de reiectione nomen substantiae* (a. 359 exeunte), AS I, 2, 231.

to the opponents of Nicaea, to speak of the substance of God and the origin of the Son from the substance of God, and to use the term “consubstantial” (*homoousios*)<sup>16</sup> would distort and falsify the revealed truth about God and Christ. The Council responds to these statements by showing in the conciliar *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* that these terms have a biblical basis and are in accordance with Revelation.

According to the Council, the most important biblical text that mention the substance of God is the passage from Jer 9:9, which is quoted in the conciliar document after the Septuagint: “they did not hear a sound of existence.”<sup>17</sup> This is a passage from the prophecy about the destruction of Jerusalem. The modern translation differs from the conciliar one: “Take up weeping and wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation for the pastures of the wilderness, because they are laid waste so that no one passes through, and the lowing of cattle is not heard; both the birds of the air and the beasts have fled and are gone” (Jer 9:9 RSVCE).<sup>18</sup> As can easily be seen, the modern translation of Jer 9:9 does not include the sentence commented on by Council: “and they heard not the voice of existence,” containing the Greek word *hyparxis* (existence, being) on which Council focuses its attention. If the prophet Jeremiah foretells the destruction of Jerusalem because its inhabitants “heard not the voice of existence,” then – according to the Council – they did not hear the voice of God, defined by the word *hyparxis*. The conciliar *Letter* develops this interpretation, explaining that the prophetic words: “they heard not the voice of existence” point to the substance and hypostasis of God. The *Letter* reads: “*hypostasis* is *ousia*, and means

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<sup>16</sup> Following Kočańczyk-Bonińska, I believe that the term consubstantial/coessential (*homoousios*) is better suited to express the controversy over the term substance/essence (*ousia*); Kočańczyk-Bonińska, *Wprowadzenie*, 8.

<sup>17</sup> *kai ouk ēkousan phōnēn hyparxeōs*: AS I, 4, 268.

<sup>18</sup> To the text quoted by the Council, the words may refer: “have fled and are gone” (RSVCE). However, the NETS translation of the Septuagint reads: “Take up wailing for the mountains, and a lamentation regarding the paths of the wilderness, because they failed to the point that there are no people; they did not hear a sound of existence; from the birds of the air even to animals they departed; they went away.”

nothing else but very being, which Jeremiah calls *hyparxis* [...]. For *hypostasis*, and *ousia*, is *hyparxis* [existence]: for it is, or in other words exists.”<sup>19</sup> The phrase: “*hypostasis* is *ousia*” clearly shows that the Council of Alexandria remains faithful to the theology of the Council of Nicaea, which had not yet distinguished between *hypostasis* and substance.<sup>20</sup> Both terms required theological clarification. Despite this, the identification of the divine substance with the divine hypostasis did not prevent the Council from professing belief in one God in the Trinity.<sup>21</sup> In the controversy with the Arians, however, the most important statement is that the *hypostasis/substance* is *hyparxis* because it “is, or in other words exists.” This understanding of *hyparxis* was probably influenced by Philo of Alexandria, for whom God is “being, existence.”<sup>22</sup> The conciliar *Letter* takes the philosophical sense of the word and identifies it with the concept of divine substance (identical to hypostasis as

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<sup>19</sup> AS I, 4, 268\*.

<sup>20</sup> Werbick, “Dottrina trinitaria,” 591. According to Jürgen Werbick, the identification of hypostasis and substance is evident in the anathema at the end of the *Profession of Faith of the 318 Fathers* with regard to the Son: “those who say ‘there once was when he was not’, and ‘before he was begotten he was not’, and that he came to be from things that were not, or from another hypostasis [Gr. *hypostaseos*] or substance [Gr. *ousia*, Lat. *substantia*], affirming that the Son of God is subject to change or alteration these the catholic and apostolic church anathematises.”

<sup>21</sup> At the end of the post-synodal document we read: “For it is made clear both among you and among all, and no Christian can have a doubtful mind on the point, that our faith is not in the Creature, but in one God, Father Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible: and in one Lord Jesus Christ His Only-begotten Son, and in one Holy Ghost; one God, known in the holy and perfect Trinity”; AS I, 11, 275\*.

<sup>22</sup> According to H.W. Attridge, the sense of the Greek *hyparxis* can be found in Philo in his exegetical writings: *De opificio mundi* and *De decalogo*. In the former, Philo writes of Moses, who in describing the creation of the world “he teaches us that the Deity has a real being and existence” (*De opificio mundi*, 170), formulates a similar thought in the latter *De decalogo* 83: “[Moses] Having, therefore, previously spoken of the existence of God, and also of the honor to be paid to the everlasting God; he then, following the natural order of connection proceeds to command what is becoming in respect of his name; for the errors of men with respect to this point are manifold and various, and assume many different characters”; cf. Attridge, *La Lettera agli Ebrei*, 496.

interpreted by Nicaea). Divine substance, which “is and exists” (*hyparxis*), thus expresses the essential truth of God.

The biblical foundation for the concept of substance in relation to the Father and the Son is recognised by the Council of Alexandria in two other texts which confirm and strengthen the interpretation of Jer 9:9. The first is the text of Exod 3:14: “I am who I am.” According to the Council, the text of Exod 3:14 containing the divine tetragram YHWH identifies God as the One who exists (“I am who I am”), and this means that, as a Divine Being, He is the very existence Himself. *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* quotes the text of Exod 3:14 after the Septuagint: *egō eimi ho ōn* (I am the one existing), thus confirming the interpretation of the Greek *hyparxis* (Jer 9:9) as the divine substance that is existence itself.<sup>23</sup> In contrast, the second text quoted in the conciliar document reads as follows: “Had they stood in my *hypostasis*” (Jer 23:22).<sup>24</sup> This is an excerpt from God’s speech about prophets who failed to fulfil their mission. If, according to the Council, the *hyparxis* in the text of Jer 9:9 defines simultaneously *hypostasis* and substance, the quoted text with the term *hypostasis* confirms the Conciliar interpretation.

After presenting the biblical foundation for the concept of substance (*ousia*), the Council moves on to express the mystery of Christ.

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<sup>23</sup> Modern scholars note that in the LXX translation, the sense of the name *egō eimi ho ōn* (Ex 3:14) takes on an ontological meaning, whereas in the Hebrew Bible (TM text), the name YHWH points to God’s salvific acts, i.e., it says that God has been and will be for His people a saviour and protector; Lemański, *Księga Wjścia*, 151.

<sup>24</sup> *kai ei estēsan en tē hypostasei mou*: AS I, 4, 268\*. In the NETS translation of the Septuagint: “And if they had stood in support of me and if they had heard my words, they would also have turned them, my people, from their evil doings.” In the USCCB Bible: “Had they stood in my council, they would have proclaimed my words to my people, they would have brought them back from their evil ways and from their wicked deeds.”

## 2. Jesus Christ is “Of the Substance of the Father”

The conciliar *Letter of African Bishops against Arians* insists on the divine origin of the Son from the Father in close connection with divine substance. If the Arians reject the notion of substance (*ousia*) and claim that Jesus Christ as Son-Logos “is of God,” then – according to the Council – such a formula (“of God”) means that He is created by God “from non-being” in the same way as all other creatures. For it can be said of every creature that it “is of God” because it was created by Him out of nothing. Therefore, following the thought of the Council of Nicaea, the Council of Alexandria emphasises that the Son “is of the substance (*ousia*) of the Father.” We read of this – seemingly minor difference – in the conciliar *Letter* as follows: “But the Bishops, [...] expressed more plainly the sense of the words “of God,” by writing that the Son is of the substance [*ousia*] of God, so that whereas the Creatures, since they do not exist of themselves without a cause, but have a beginning of their existence, are said to be “of God,” the Son alone might be deemed proper to the substance of the Father. For this is peculiar to one who is Only-begotten and true Word in relation to a Father, and this was the reason why the words “of the substance” were adopted.”<sup>25</sup> These words clearly indicate that between saying: “The Son is of God” and saying: “The Son is of the substance of God,” there is a fundamental difference. In the first case, this would mean that the Son is of God like all creatures, and so he too would be a creature, and consequently not equal to the Father. In the second case, on the other hand, the claim that “the Son is of the substance of the Father” means that He is equal to the Father, and consequently He is “consubstantial with the Father” – as recorded at the Council of Nicaea. Therefore, the Arian claim that Jesus Christ is “of God” (and not of the substance of God) is unacceptable, since the formula “of God” can only be applied to creatures. *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* includes quotations from inspired texts that state that creatures are indeed “of God”: “For we also are of God” (1 John 5:19); “there is one God of whom are all things” (1 Cor 8:6; cf. Eph 4:6); “old things are passed away, behold all things are made new, but all things are

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<sup>25</sup> AS I, 5, 270\*.



of God” (2 Cor 5:17–18).<sup>26</sup> However, the Council interprets these texts only in relation to creatures, that is, to the first creation and to the new birth from God in the sacrament of baptism. In contrast, the origin of the Son, begotten by the Father, is of a different kind than the Christian birth from water and from the Spirit.

Ultimately, then, the key to understanding the mystery of Jesus Christ is the truth of His origin (His being and existence) “of the substance of the Father.” This is why the quoted passage of the *Letter* repeats the formula that “the Son is of the substance of the Father,” which is “peculiar to one who is Only-begotten and true Word in relation to a Father.” By contrast, human beings (as part of creation) and all other creatures are of God, but they are not of His substance. Only Jesus Christ is of the divine substance of the Father, and therefore He is “consubstantial” with the Father and equal to the Father in divinity. It is clear from the conciliar document that our (human) relationship to God will never be (and cannot be) a substance-based relationship (we are not of God’s essence), but always remains a relationship by the grace of Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ, on the other hand, as the Son, is of the substance of the Father and therefore remains in union with the Father and is His likeness in a special way. This thought is developed further in the conciliar *Letter*.

### **3. Unity of the Son with the Father and Likeness of the Son to the Father (*kat’ ousian*)**

The Council of Alexandria reiterates the words of the Lord Jesus, hotly debated with the Arians: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30) and: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9), posing the question how they are to be understood. More specifically, they ask in what way the Son “and the Father are one” and in what way he “has seen the Father”? *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* first presents the Arian solution to these questions. According to the Arians, the Son is one with the Father and

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<sup>26</sup> The Synodal Fathers mention the followers of Eusebius who, on the basis of a misinterpretation of these words, believe that the Son comes from the Father just as we come from the Father through baptism: AS I, 5, 269\*.

sees the Father “by reason of resemblance.” The *Letter* reads: “if they are asked how they are one, and how he that has seen the Son has seen the Father, of course, we suppose they will say, ‘by reason of resemblance,’ unless they have quite come to agree with those who hold the brother-opinion to theirs, and are called Anomaens.”<sup>27</sup> The Council considers that the idea of the Son’s resemblance to the Father does not explain the texts John 10:30 and John 14:9, which reveal that the Son is one with the Father and has seen the Father. Indeed, this resemblance can be interpreted in different ways.<sup>28</sup> According to the Council, the Arian understanding of the resemblance of the Son to the Father is erroneous. In the conciliar *Letter* we read: “if once more they are asked, ‘how is He like?’ they brasen it out and say, ‘by perfect virtue and harmony, by having the same will with the Father, by not willing what the Father wills not.’”<sup>29</sup> The words about “perfect virtue and harmony” (*symphōnia*) imply that Jesus Christ is like the Father only by moral perfection and by acting in accordance with the Father’s will (he wants what the Father wants). In this view, His resemblance would be the same as that of creatures to their Creator, especially rational and free creatures. The Council rejects this interpretation and insists that the resemblance of the Son to the Father is of a different kind. If free and rational creatures can be likened to God by imitation and by participation in the life of God, then Jesus Christ as Son of the Father is likened to Him “in substance (*kat’ ousian*).” The term *ousia* is

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<sup>27</sup> AS I, 7, 271\*. Anomaeans were called those who claimed that the Son was not like the Father. According to Basil the Great, “the first who dared to say openly and to teach that the only Son is unlike God and the Father in substance (*kata tēn ousian*) was, according to what we know, Aetius the Syrian”: Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* I 1. 26–29 [SC 299, 144]. Marta Przyszychowska demonstrates in her research that the names “Anomaeans” and “Eunomians” better reflect the character and distinctiveness of the doctrine of Aetius and Eunomius than the name “neoarians” promoted by many scholars: Przyszychowska, *Historia sporu eunomiańskiego*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> J.N.D. Kelly believes that the Synod of Alexandria and Athanasius are cautious in speaking of the resemblance of the Son to the Father. To speak of the resemblance of the Son to the Father is correct only on the condition that the substance of the Father and the Son is one and indivisible; Kelly, *Początki doktryny chrześcijańskiej*, 192–193.

<sup>29</sup> AS I, 7, 271\*–272\*.

again crucial here. The Council demonstrates that created entities are not like the Creator in terms of substance, because the substance of God is unchangeable, while created substance is changeable. In the *Letter* we read: “But that originate things are changeable, no one can deny, seeing that angels transgressed, Adam disobeyed, and all stand in need of the grace of the Word. But a mutable thing cannot be like God who is truly unchangeable, any more than what is created can be like its creator.”<sup>30</sup> The examples cited in these words confirm the mutability of rational creatures and thus their dissimilarity to God, who is unchangeable. The resemblance of creatures to God cannot therefore be a resemblance originating from substance (in substance: *kat’ ousian*).

The Council acknowledges that rational and free creatures can become like God through imitation and through participation. Regarding resemblance by imitation of God, the *Letter* expresses this thought as follows: “For we too, albeit we cannot become like God in *ousia*, yet by progress in virtue imitate God, the Lord granting us this grace, in the words, ‘Be merciful as your Father is merciful’ (Luke 6:36), ‘be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect’ (Matt 5:48).<sup>31</sup> It is clear from these words that the resemblance of creatures to God is not only possible, but is also willed by God. These words also indicate that Christ’s disciples are called to imitate God, through which they become more like him. As far as resemblance by participation is concerned, this thought is not further developed in the conciliar document, but only hinted at. In the *Letter* we read: “This is why, with regard to us, the holy man said, ‘Lord, who shall be likened unto you,’ (Ps 40[39]:6; 83[82]:2) and ‘who among the gods is like you, Lord’ (Exod 15:11), meaning by gods those who, while created, had yet become partakers of the Word, as He Himself said, ‘If he called them gods to whom the word of God came (John 10:35; cf. Ps 82:6).<sup>32</sup> The biblical texts quoted after

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<sup>30</sup> AS I, 7, 272\*.

<sup>31</sup> AS I, 7, 272\*.

<sup>32</sup> AS I, 7, 272\*; In the NETS translation of the Septuagint: “as for your thoughts – there is none that will be like you” (Ps 39:6); “Who is like you among the gods, o Lord? Who is like you, glorified among holy ones” (Exod 15:11).

the Septuagint in which the resemblance to God is mentioned are interpreted by the Council in the sense of participation by the grace of Christ (“partakers of the Word”). Being “gods” in the likeness of God therefore means being united to the incarnate Son of God and participating in his life. According to the Council, we are called gods and are likened to God because, by the grace of Christ, we are “partakers of the Word (*Logos*).” Resemblance through participation in Christ and resemblance through imitation of God complement and complete each other. However, this kind of resemblance does not apply to the person of Christ.

It is clear from the conciliar *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* that the resemblance of Jesus Christ to the Father is a resemblance “in substance,” meaning that the divine substance of the Son and the Father is shared. If the Son “and the Father are one” (John 10:30), then the Son is “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) – according to the teaching of the Council of Nicaea<sup>33</sup> – and He is similar in substance (*kat’ousian*) to the Father. Consequently, the Son is equal to the Father. According to the Council, the Son’s resemblance to the Father in substance emerges even more clearly from the words of the Lord Jesus: “He who has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In the *Letter* we read: “For that which a man sees in the Father, that sees he also in the Son; and that not by participation, but essentially [*ousia*].”<sup>34</sup> If the Son were not united to the Father in one substance (only in some other way), then his words (“He who has seen me has seen the Father”) would only have a figurative and allegorical sense. According to the conciliar interpretation of John 14:9, every baptised person who is united to God by grace and imitates God in his life could say in a figurative sense that they “have seen God.” Meanwhile, the words of the Lord Jesus have a literal sense and actually express the truth that in Jesus Christ the Father is fully and completely visible: whoever has seen the incarnate Son has seen the invisible Father. The Council of Alexandria explains that such “seeing” is only possible when the substance of the Father and the substance of the Son are one and the same substance.

<sup>33</sup> Mulenga, *The Arian Controversy*, 42–43.

<sup>34</sup> AS I, 8, 273\*.

In a similar way, the Council interprets the words of the Lord Jesus: “I and the Father are one” (John 10:30). The key to properly understanding these words is again the concept of substance. What makes the Son and the Father (the Divine Persons) one God (“I and the Father are one”) is the divine substance. Following the teaching of Nicaea, the Council of Alexandria ultimately moves towards a Christological conclusion: “the meaning ‘Coessential’ is known from the Son not being a Creature or thing made: and because he that says ‘consubstantial’ does not hold that the Word is a Creature.”<sup>35</sup>

For the Council of Alexandria, there remains the question of the action of Jesus Christ, which in the controversy with the Arians was related to the interpretation of the words of the Lord Jesus: “only what [the Son] sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise” (John 5:19).<sup>36</sup> In the conciliar *Letter* we read: “Why, if, as they say, the Son is a Creature and the Father is His Maker, surely the Son would be His own maker, as He is able to make what the Father makes, as He said. But such a supposition is absurd and utterly untenable, for none can make himself.”<sup>37</sup> These words express the argument *ad absurdum* against the Arians: if the Son does all that the Father does, and the Father makes (creates) the Son, then the Son would have to make (create) himself together with the Father. The Council therefore rejects the Arian interpretation and accepts the literal sense of John 5:19. Jesus Christ as the incarnate Son does indeed do all that the Father does, because he is consubstantial with the Father. The Son is not made (created) by the Father and is always one with the Father in one substance. Only as non-created and consubstantial can He do all things together with the Father.

According to the Council’s theology, from the oneness of the divine substance all the divine attributes of Jesus Christ also originate. *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* clarifies this point with reference to the words of the Lord Jesus: “All that the Father

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<sup>35</sup> AS I, 9, 274\*.

<sup>36</sup> In the USCCB Bible: “a son cannot do anything on his own, but only what he sees his father doing; for what he does, his son will do also.”

<sup>37</sup> AS I, 7, 272\*.

has is mine” (John 16:15). The *Letter* reads: “He has the prerogative of creating and making, of Eternity, of omnipotence, of immutability. But things originate cannot have the power of making, for they are creatures; nor eternity, for their existence has a beginning; nor of omnipotence and immutability, for they are under sway, and of changeable nature, as the Scriptures say. Well then, if these prerogatives belong to the Son, they clearly do so, not on account of His virtue, as said above, but essentially [*ousia*], even as the synod said, ‘He is of no other substance’ [*ousia*], but of the Father’s [*ousia*], to whom these prerogatives are proper.”<sup>38</sup> These words indicate that all the Divine (substantial) attributes of the Father are also attributes of the Son. They arise directly from the one divine substance which the Father communicates to the Son in the act of divine “begetting.” The Council recalls that these qualities are not acquired by Jesus Christ through moral conduct and perfection, but “by nature,” that is, imparted by the begetting Father together with the Divine substance.

In the polemic with Arianism, the Council of Alexandria teaches the Divine substance is not compound. If the divine attributes of Jesus Christ did not come from a simple divine substance, this would mean that God is a compound being. In the conciliar *Letter* we read: “If it is from virtue, the antecedent of willing and not willing, and of moral progress, that you hold the Son to be like the Father; while these things fall under the category of quality; clearly you call God compound of quality and substance.”<sup>39</sup> The Council defends thus the indivisibility and oneness of the Divine substance. The prerogatives or properties of the Son and the Father neither divide the Divine substance nor violate its oneness.<sup>40</sup> *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* gives a clear formula concerning the oneness and indivisibility of the Divine substance: “For He is simple *ousia*, in which quality is not, nor, as James says, ‘any variableness or shadow of turning’ (Jas 1:17).”<sup>41</sup> The words about “simple *ousia*” clearly indicate its indivisibility and consequently

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<sup>38</sup> AS I, 8, 272\*–273\*.

<sup>39</sup> AS I, 8, 273\*.

<sup>40</sup> Kochańczyk-Bonińska, “Bazyli Wielki,” 126.

<sup>41</sup> AS I, 8, 273\*.

confirm that the substance of the Son and the substance of the Father are one and the same substance. According to the Council of Alexandria, the “qualities” of the Son and the Father do not divide this substance and appear within the one divine substance.<sup>42</sup> In the *Letter* we further read: “if it is shown that it is not from virtue (for in God there is no quality, neither is there in the Son), then He must be proper to God’s *ousia*.”<sup>43</sup> It follows from these words that “quality” in God is “proper to God’s *ousia*.” Since the Council of Alexandria, following faithfully the thought of the Council of Nicaea, identified hypostasis with substance, it necessarily attributed the qualities of the Divine Person to substance.<sup>44</sup> It is therefore clear that the theological thought of the Council as expressed in the conciliar *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* was centred on the notion of substance, which explains the mystery of Christ in accordance with the teaching of the Council of Nicaea.

#### 4. A Revision of the Theology of the Council of Alexandria

A revision of the Council of Alexandria (c. 370) can be derived from the interpretation of Jer 9:9 (in the Septuagint version) and from the meaning of the term *hyparxis*.<sup>45</sup> According to the conciliar interpretation, it means substance, i.e., something that is and exists. The Council refers the term to God, although in other texts of Scripture *hyparxis* means: ‘possession of something, goods, property, or

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<sup>42</sup> This thought is developed by Basil the Great in his controversy with the Anomeans; Simonetti, *La crisi Ariana*, 514.

<sup>43</sup> AS I, 8, 273\*.

<sup>44</sup> It is not until Basil the Great that properties in God are explicitly attributed to the divine Hypostases (Persons), and the hypostasis is differentiated from substance; Werbick, *Dottrina trinitaria*, 592–593.

<sup>45</sup> It is noteworthy that in the work of Anastasius of Sinai under the title *Viae dux* of c. 700, the term *hyparxis* is used several times in a similar sense in which it was understood at the Synod of Alexandria (c. 370). The document says that “God is *hyparxis* – an unnamed and unknowable being,” and then applies the term to the Holy Spirit and the whole Trinity: “The Trinity, according to the natural order of things, is a community of individual persons, but with regard to the divine substance the Trinity is a being (*hyparxis*) superior to any other”; quoted by Przychyńska, *O Definicjach*, 58–60.

even health.<sup>46</sup> However, it takes on a special meaning in the light of the New Testament. *Hyparxis* appears in Heb 10:34, where reference is made to Christians who, when faced with the plundering of their property,” were aware that they have better and lasting possession. The loss of material goods (*ta hyparchonta* in the plural) is of no importance to them because they know that they possess one indivisible and lasting good (*hyparxis* in the singular) in heaven.<sup>47</sup>

This thought is further developed by Benedict XVI in his encyclical *Spe salvi*; he mentioned the new “substance” (*hyparxis*) that Christians have found as a better basis for existence – “a basis that abides, that no one can take away.”<sup>48</sup> Combining the interpretation of *hyparxis* in the conciliar *Letter* (Jer 9:9) with the interpretation of *hyparxis* in the text of Heb 10:34, it can be said that God is the basis of a new life that is permanent because He substantially is and exists. Believers in Christ base their lives on God as an enduring and firm foundation.

The significance of the ancient interpretation of *hyparxis* as substance (of God) is further extended in the light of the modern interpretation of Jer 9:9, which sees in God’s words announcing the destruction of Jerusalem the pain of God’s compassionate love.<sup>49</sup> The substance of God – as distinct from all created substances – is therefore not only the very personal existence of God (*hyparxis*), but is also the love (*agapē*) of God (cf. 1 John 4:8, 16).

The topicality of Council’s theology can also be derived from the interpretation of Jer 23:22 (LXX): *kai ei estēsan en tē hypostasei mou* (“Had they stood in my hypostasis”). In modern translations of this text, the word “hypostasis” does not appear, being replaced by the word “support”: “if they had stood in support of me” (NETS).<sup>50</sup> According to the Council, “standing in the hypostasis” of God defines the necessary condition for the prophets to proclaim

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<sup>46</sup> 2 Chr 35:7; Dan 11:24; Prov 18:11; 19:14; Ps 77[78]:48. In these texts, *hyparxis* means: having something, goods, property, health; cf. “hyparxis”, en.wiktionary.org.

<sup>47</sup> Malina, *List do Hebrajczyków*, 458.

<sup>48</sup> Benedict XVI, *Spe salvi*, no. 8.

<sup>49</sup> Haag, *Das Buch Jeremia*, 81.

<sup>50</sup> *A New English Translation of the Septuagint*.



the word of God. Only a prophet who abides in God and is united to Him can authentically proclaim the word of God. In contrast, the contemporary text of Jer 23:22: “if they had stood in my council” (RSVCE) indicates more a readiness (“standing”) to do God’s will.<sup>51</sup> The conciliar interpretation seems to clarify the contemporary understanding of this text. Well, the readiness to do God’s will and even more the implementation of it in the Christian life requires a living relationship with God. Abiding in God and participating more and more in the Trinitarian life of God is the basis not only of Christian existence, but also of every Christian action. In other words, the theology of the Council of Alexandria emphasises the primacy of grace in the *praxis* of the Church community.

### Conclusions

The theology of the Council of Alexandria (c. 370) presented in the conciliar *The Letter of African Bishops against Arians* contributes to the Church’s approval of the teaching of the Council of Nicaea (325). First of all, it defends the philosophical concept of *ousia* and seeks it in the sources of Revelation. It finds it implicit in Old Testament prophecy in the Book of Jeremiah (Jer 9:9), together with Exod 3:14 and Jer 23:22. In the latter Council’s view, the concept of substance has a biblical foundation and is therefore in conformity with Revelation and therefore its use in theology and in the creed is legitimate and even necessary.

The concept of substance (*ousia*) in conciliar theology is key to resolving the Christological question. Jesus Christ is of the substance of God and is therefore “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) with the Father. The formula: “the Son is of the substance of God,” means that the Father, by divine begetting, communicates the divine substance to the Son. By virtue of this one common divine substance, the Son and the Father form an inseparable unity (“I and the Father are one”: John 10:30), all the acts of the Son are the acts of the Father (“only what [the Son] sees the Father doing; for whatever he does, that the Son does likewise”: John 5:19), the divine attributes

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<sup>51</sup> Stachowiak, *Księga Jeremiasza*, 279.

(qualities) of the Father are the attributes (qualities) of the Son (“All that the Father has is mine”: John 16:15).

The conciliar formula: “the Son is of the substance of the Father,” also means that He is like the Father in all things. The Council adopts the *Homoiousian* stance according to which the Son is like the Father “in substance” (*kat’ousian*). The conciliar *Letter* clarifies the difference between the resemblance of the Son to the Father and the resemblance of creatures to God. The resemblance of the Son originates from the divine substance of the Father and the Son, while the resemblance of creatures is a result of the creative acts of God, and of the imitation of God and participation (by grace) in his life.

Finally, the Council of Alexandria accepts the Nicene Christology with the term “consubstantial” (*homoousios*) and agrees with the *Homoiousian* formula of the resemblance of the Son to the Father “in substance” (*kat’ousian*).

Revising the conciliar teaching allows us to discover in God the permanent basis (substance) of life and the Greatest Good (*hyperaxis*), incomparable with other goods (Jer 9:9 and Heb 10:34). The Council also teaches that an ever fuller union with the Triune God enables us to fulfil the Christian vocation and points to the primacy of grace in every Christian activity (cf. Jer 23:22 LXX).

### **Interpretacja nicejskiej chrystologii na Synodzie w Aleksandrii (ok. 370) i jej aktualizacja**

**Abstrakt:** Chociaż na temat Soboru w Nicei (325) powiedziano już bardzo wiele, to jednak dokument Synodu w Aleksandrii (370) wnosi jeszcze coś nowego do interpretacji nauki soborowej i do jej recepcji. Niniejszy artykuł jest teologiczną analizą posynodalnego dokumentu, napisanego przez Atanazego z Aleksandrii: *List do biskupów Afrykańskich przeciw arianom*. Dokument skupia uwagę na pojęciu substancji (*ousia*), które jest odrzucane przez arian jako niebiblijne. Synod nie zgadza się z twierdzeniem arian i przedstawia biblijne podstawy tego terminu oraz wyjaśnia jego sens w połączeniu z biblijnym terminem *hyperaxis* u Jr 9,9. Synod używa formuły: Syn jest z substancji Boga, który oznacza dla niego, że Syn jest współsubstancjalny (*homoousios*) z Ojcem. Tę synodalną formułę wyprowadza Synod z wypowiedzi Jezusa o jedności z Ojcem (J 10,30), o Jego wspólnych czynach i działaniu z Ojcem (J 5,19), o Jego wspólnych przymiotach z Ojcem (J 16,15). Formuła: Syn jest z substancji Ojca, oznacza także, że jest On podobny do Ojca “według substancji” (*kat’ousian*). Podobieństwo Syna nie wynika z naśladowania Ojca ani też z uczestnictwa w życiu Ojca. Ostatecznie Synod w Aleksandrii przyczynia się do eklezyjalnej recepcji nauki Soboru w Nicei (325), przyjmuje Nicejską

chrystologię z terminem “współsubstancjalny” (*homoousios*) i zgadza się z formułą homojużjan o substancjalnym podobieństwie Syna do Ojca (*kat’ ousian*). Aktualizacja nauki synodalnej pozwala nam odkryć w Bogu trwałą podstawę (substancję) życia i Największe Dobro (*hyparxis*), nieporównywalne z innymi dobrami (Jr 9,9 i Hbr 10,34). Synod naucza również, że coraz pełniejsze zjednoczenie z Trójjedynym Bogiem uzdalnia nas wypełnienia powołania chrześcijańskiego i wskazuje na prymat łaski w każdym chrześcijańskim działaniu (por. Jr 23,22 LXX).

**Słowa kluczowe:** *ousia*, substancja, *homoousios*, współsubstancjalny, *hyparxis*, podobieństwo *kat’ ousian*

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