

Hilary of Poitiers and the Politics of *Aequalitas*, Human and Divine

In his *De synodis*, published c. 357 AD in the context of the widespread ecclesiastical, theological, and political conflicts of the so-called “Arian Controversy,” the Gallic bishop Hilary of Poitiers attempted to forge an alliance between former episcopal enemies across the linguistic and political divide between East and West. Key to his attempted solution to the theological gridlock of previous decades is the introduction of a highly novel central term for the relationship between divine Father and Son: *aequalitas*. By the use of this term in conjunction with, and even in preference to, previous formulas, Hilary believes he has found a way to emphasize both the distinctness of divine Father and Son defended by so-called “homoiousians,” and the identity in honor, power, and all divine characteristics upheld by advocates of the Council of Nicaea.

While the concept of inter-personal equality, grounded in identity of substance, would go on to play a central role in later Christian (and particularly Latin) theology and anthropology, the roots of Hilary’s novel use of this term have rarely been examined. In this essay, therefore, I attempt to situate Hilary’s use of the term *aequalitas* in the larger context of Latin literature and philosophy. As I will argue, Hilary’s metaphysical construction of “equality” as a middle ground between “similar” (*similis*) and “the same” (*idem*) is rooted not merely in the previous, relatively marginal metaphysical uses of *aequalitas*, but even more so in the term’s immediate social and political valences. In Roman authors of the Republic and early Empire such as Cicero, Tacitus, and Pliny, the concept of *aequalitas* was principally used to explicate the complex relationships among Roman citizens, elites, and the incipient office of Emperor. Hilary’s appeal to *aequalitas* in the context of divine relations is therefore grounded not just in a theological, but also a social and political, appeal. It is this appeal, more than strict metaphysical

considerations, that justifies Hilary's understanding of the term as negating any hint of either true inferiority or singular solitude in the relationship of Father and Son.

By making the Father and Son in the proper sense *aequales*, Hilary is not only attempting to find a metaphysical compromise between similarity and identity of essence, but also seeking to make central the Father and Son's shared attributes of power, honor, and "age," attributes key to Hilary's presentation of the Church as a means of divine action and unity in the world. These closely-related concepts of equality in power and honor and unity in diversity are also employed by Hilary in the explication of the complex relationships among the bishops of the Christian Church, who, like the Roman elites of old, are in Hilary's judgment in desperate need of doctrinal and moral unity in order to resist the encroachments of Imperial power. This unity, like that of divine Father and Son, is to be grounded on both an identity in divine faith and a socio-political equality of honor and power, in clear opposition to any claim of superiority made by the Roman Emperor.