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Blast From the Past: Arius & The Blogosphere

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Distinctly Catholic

There is a seemingly natural tendency to yearn for an earlier, simpler Golden Age in the life of the Church. But, this passage from Eamon Duffy's history of the papacy shows how perennial are some of the methods in intra-ecclesiastical controversies. They did not have the blogosphere in the early 4th Century, but that didn't stop them. And, the tale is a caution to those who blithely equate polling results and popularity with the *sensus fidelum*.

Constantine's dismay at the divisions of Christian North Africa was to be redoubled when, having overthrown the pagan rival Emperor in the East, Licinius, he moved to his new Christian capital, "New Rome," Constantinople. For the divisions of Africa were as nothing compared to the deep rift in the Christian imagination which had opened in the East. It was begun in Egypt, by a presbyter of Alexandria, Arius, famed for his personal austerities and his following among the nuns of the city. Arius had been deposed by his Bishop for teaching that the Logos, the Word of God which had been made flesh in Jesus, was not God himself, but a creature, infinitely higher than the angels, though like them created out of nothing before the world began. Arius saw his teaching as a means of reconciling the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation with the equally fundamental belief in the unity of God. In fact, it emptied Christianity of its central affirmation, that the life and death of Jesus had power to redeem because they were God's very own actions. But the full implications of Arianism were not at first grasped, and Arius attracted widespread support. A master-publicist, Arius rallied grass-roots support by composing theological sea-shanties to be sung by the sailors and stevedores on the docks of Alexandria. Theological debate erupted out of the lecture-halls and into the taverns and bars of the eastern Mediterranean.

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