

August 20, 2006

The Feast of the Prophet Samuel

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

In our regular recitation of the Creed that binds us together, we first declare our faith "in one God, the Father almighty, the Maker of heaven and earth, and of all things, visible and invisible" The Church has always understood this declaration to refer to two aspects of God, God in eternity and God in time. From all eternity He is the Father; in realm of time He is the Creator. It is this second aspect that I want to consider now. What does it mean that God is the Creator of "heaven and earth, and of all things visible and invisible"? There are three points to be considered on this subject.

We should reflect, first, that this is a revealed truth. Creation refers to a specific act that cannot be reached by the power of reason. Creation, as the Christian faith understands that term, means the passage from non-being to being. I do not know, nor can I know, by the ability of reason, that all things, visible and invisible, have passed from non-being to being.

My reason tells me, of course, that myself and the world around me have a rational source. The intelligent design that my reason beholds in the universe cannot possibly have come from a series of undirected accidents; my mind cries out that it is utterly irrational to imagine otherwise. Only a fool would affirm it. (In fact, the Bible uses the word "fool" when it mentions this possibility.)

Still, the intelligent design that I see in the world does not tell me that all things, visible and invisible, come from nothing. Science and philosophy have never breathed a word of it. Creation is a truth divinely revealed, which is why it is contained in the Creed. It is not the business of the Creed, after all, to affirm things that can be affirmed apart from the Creed.

How, then, do I know that all things have been created from nothing? To borrow a phrase, "this I know for the Bible tells me so." Typical of the Christian conviction on this point, one may cite St. Hilary of Poitiers: "For all things, as the prophet says, were made out of nothing; it was no transformation of existing things, but the creation of non-being into a perfect form" (*De Trinitate* 4.16).

Who was this "prophet" cited by St. Hilary? In fact, it was a prophetess, because St. Hilary was quoting the mother of the Maccabean martyrs, who said to one of her tortured sons, "I beseech thee, my son, look upon

heaven and earth, and all that is in them: and consider that God made them out of nothing, and mankind also" (2 Maccabees 7:28). This text from 2 Maccabees was the standard biblical proof text for the Christian Church in respect to creation from nothingness. We find the thesis in late Judaism, from which it passed into the Christian faith as an essential teaching.

But it is important to reflect that we believe it as revealed by God, and we have no access to that truth except through divine revelation. Creation is an absolutely unique act of the biblical God. Philosophy and science know nothing of it.

Second, what has been created from nothing? We affirm, "heaven and earth, and all things visible and invisible." Not just earth, we understand, but heaven too. Not just the material world that we see, but also the invisible world that we cannot see. Not just the chemical substances of things, but also the mathematical theorems and physical laws that give them coherence. Everything that is not God has been created from nothingness, no matter how high, how metaphysical, how spiritual. Apart from God, there is absolutely nothing that was not made from nothing.

No part of creation, then, is an emanation of the divine being. Nothing of God's essence has passed into what He has made. Not only is the human brain created from nothing, but also the human intellect that uses that brain; and not only the human intellect but also the rational principles by which that intellect functions. The very laws of logic have been created from nothingness. According to a summary of St. Bonaventure, "the world was produced in being, and not only according to itself as a whole, but also according to its intrinsic principles (*sed etiam secundum sua intrinseca principia*), which were not produced from other things but from nothing" (*On the Sentences* 2.1.1.1).

Third, God's creating act is the only thing that separates all things from nothing. No creature is adequately considered, then, if it is considered only *in se*, in itself. Creatures do not have their being *a se*, of themselves. They are held in existence only because an immense and continuing act of love holds them in existence. All things that endure, endure because the Creator's hand sustains them in being.

Each of us is held in existence by this same act of unspeakable love. We depend utterly on the sustained activity of the Creator, in whom we live and move and have our being. Even when I disobey God and stray from Him, God holds me in existence. Even when I insult Him and spit in His face, God's creating love preserves me in being. His hands ever fashion me and sustain me.

Under this consideration, who is the wise man? The wise man is the one that knows this truth and lives on the basis of it. He does not pretend that he has an independent existence, which is a mirage and a deception. If the doctrine of creation is true, the wise man is the one who finds that place in his being where God touches him and holds him in existence. The wise man does not pretend that he is anything *in se*, in himself. His very existence is a created existence, and the Holy Scriptures give him the wisdom to know this.

This, then, is the first declaration contained in our Creed, and it is a declaration of dependence. This is the wisdom handed down in the Holy Scriptures and affirmed in our faith.

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