

July 22, 2007

The Feast of St. Mary Magdalene

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Every year, on a Sunday in July, Holy Church sets aside a day to reflect yet again on an event that transpired in the year 451, when our bishops gathered at Chalcedon, a city of Bithynia, across the channel from Constantinople. Those 600 or so bishops, who were convened from October 8 to November 1, 451, did not assemble to enjoy a sunny vacation on the shores of the Bosphorus. There was business to attend to.

They had to deal with a highly respected monk named Eutyches, a very ascetical man, who had for thirty years served as the abbot of a monastery near the capital. Renowned for his piety, Eutyches was a highly influential monk, with a large following in the theological world. This influence was unfortunate, because the popularity of Eutyches was supported by neither an adequate education nor an ability to think straight. The German historian Albert Hauck described Eutyches as "unfamiliar with the laws of thought."

Twenty years earlier the Council of Ephesus had declared that Jesus of Nazareth was a "single being," *mia physis*, and Eutyches had interpreted that conciliar declaration to mean that Jesus, because He is a divine being, is not a "human being" in our usual sense. His humanity was different from ours, Eutyches taught, the body of Jesus was not *homoousios*, or "of the same being," with the bodies of other men. He is not fully at one with us in our humanity.

Guided by an official letter of Pope Leo I of Rome, the fathers meeting at Chalcedon adopted a formulation of the Christian faith concerning Jesus of Nazareth. In response to the question, "what think ye of the Christ?" the bishops of Chalcedon solemnly proclaimed, "Therefore, following the holy fathers, we all with one accord teach men to acknowledge one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, at once complete in Godhead and complete in manhood, truly God and truly man, consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father as regards his divinity, and at the same time of one being (*homoousios*) with us as regards his humanity; like us in all respects apart from sin; as regards his divinity, begotten of the Father before the ages, but yet as regards his humanity begotten, for us men and for our salvation, of Mary the Virgin, the Theotokos; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, Only-begotten, recognized in two natures, without confusion, without change, without division, without separation; the distinction of natures being in no way annulled by the union, but rather the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence, not as parted or separated into two persons, but one and the same Son and Only-begotten God the Word, Lord Jesus Christ; even as the prophets from earliest times spoke of him, and our Lord Jesus Christ himself taught us, and the creed of the fathers has handed down to us."

Three points are suggested by this proclamation of the Fathers of Chalcedon:

First, the intent of the council was soteriological; the fathers at Chalcedon were concerned with human salvation. In this respect they quoted the council of Nicaea: "for us men and for our salvation." They reasoned that the eternal Son's assumption of our full humanity was essential to our salvation--Christ had to suffer, die, and rise again in total solidarity with the human race.

On this point the reasoning of the Council followed that of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham. Therefore, in all things He had to be made like His brethren, that He might be a merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For in that He Himself has suffered, being tempted, He is able to aid those who are tempted" (2: 14-18).

The Chalcedonian Fathers went on to reason that in the Incarnation all of the constitutive parts of a human being had to be assumed, because whatever was not assumed was not redeemed. This became a rallying principle for all orthodox Christology.

Second, our attention is also drawn to the Council's use of the expression "at the same time." In Jesus, that is to say, there is a constant "simultaneity." He is the only person in heaven or on earth that can at the same time relate to God as man, and to man as God. Once again, the inspiration for Chalcedon on this point was the Epistle to the Hebrews, which speaks of Jesus as the "Go-between," *mesites*--"mediator" (8:6; 9:15; 12:24; 1 Timothy 2:5).

The mediation of Jesus is not primarily an activity but a condition of being. That is to say, Jesus is not our Mediator because He intercedes for us; He intercedes for us, rather, *because* He is our Mediator. The very condition of the Incarnation is that of mediation.

Chalcedon did not deny that Jesus is "one being," as the Council of Ephesus had proclaimed. In its own way it reaffirmed that proclamation. But Chalcedon went on to insist that this oneness of Jesus' being makes Him, not only fully divine, but also fully human. The council used the Nicene word, *homoousios*, to speak of both aspects: "consisting also of a reasonable soul and body; of one being (*homoousios*) with the Father as regards his divinity, and *at the same time* of one being (*homoousios*) with us as regards his humanity."

How should one express this union of divinity and humanity? An earlier bishop, Methodios of Olympus, had spoken of our Lord's "God-manhood" (*theandria*--*Sermon on Simeon and Anna* 11), and Gregory of Nyssa had described Him as

"God-manly" (*theandrikos*--*Homilies on John* 3.80), an adjective that became common after Chalcedon. The expression "God-Man" (in Russian *Bogochelovek*) has long been normal among Chalcedonian Christians.

These latter are also careful not to define the manner of this union of divinity and humanity in the Incarnation, except to speak of "the characteristics of each nature being preserved and coming together to form one person and subsistence." All the descriptions of this union are apophatic, or negative: "without confusion, without change, without division, without separation."

Third, this annual liturgical commemoration of the Council of Chalcedon each July prepares the Church for the feast of the Transfiguration, which falls about three weeks later on August 6. That event of the Lord's Transfiguration, recorded in 2 Peter and three of the Gospels, was a supreme manifestation of this God-manhood of the Savior, the glory of His divinity shining forth through the very flesh of His humanity. Chalcedon was a conciliar, dogmatic expression of the Lord's Transfiguration.

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641
Church Office: (773) 777-0749
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor
phri@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:
www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html
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