

October 14, 2007

## The Fathers of the Seventh Ecumenical Council

### Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

It seems significant that the covenants of God with Abraham and David are each ushered into biblical historiography by an account of a barren woman. Thus, Holy Scripture introduces the covenant with Abraham by telling of the barrenness of Sarah, and the narrative of the Davidic covenant is introduced by the story of barren Hannah. It is not surprising, then, that Luke uses the account of another barren woman, Elizabeth, to introduce the story of the Incarnation. Jesus Christ is, after all, "the Son of David, the Son of Abraham" (Matthew 1:1).

St. Paul explicitly appeals to the story of barren Sarah in order to illustrate the Christian covenant. He writes, "it is written that Abraham had two sons: the one by a bondwoman, the other by a freewoman. But he who was of the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and he of the freewoman through promise, which things are symbolic" (verses 22-24).

The Greek word translated by the NKJV as "symbolic" is *allegoroumena*, which literally means "things said in allegory." This is our first instance of the work "allegory" in Christian thought, where it properly means the New Testament meaning of the Old Testament text. Indeed, this is why Paul brings up the subject of barren Sarah—her historical and symbolic relevance to the Christian covenant.

Paul's insertion of Sarah into his exposition of the Christian covenant prompts us to reflect more in detail on what the story of our ancient matriarch means to the Christian mind. Perhaps we may summarize these reflections under three headings: frustration, humor, and faith.

First, we recall Sarah's frustration. She wanted a son, and she was willing to do just about anything to get one. We all know the story of her attempt to use ancient Middle Eastern adoption laws to have her handmaid act as her surrogate. We recall how she urged Abraham to father a child with that servant, Hagar. We also remember that the arrangement did not work out very well.

This is hardly surprising. God alone gives life, and human life in particular is not just a matter of biology. Sarah stands in history as a helpful example of those who try to take the place of God with respect to their offspring. In the case of Hagar's conception, this was very much a "planned pregnancy." Forgetting that children are a gift and a blessing from God, Sarah contrived to impose her own will in order to achieve what she wanted. She clearly believed in "planned parenthood," which is really a bad way to start raising children, because it treats those children as the products of a human strategy instead as precious gifts from the creating hand of God.

With respect to Ishmael, he was by any standard an "abused child," as well as a "planned child."

Sarah also stands as an early illustration of all attempts to produce human life by unnatural contrivances, to overcome human barrenness through artificial insemination, *in vitro* fertilization, surrogate motherhood, and all other mechanical attempts to *produce* a baby, to make a child as a *product*, something other than a pure gift from God.

In Sarah's case, the entire enterprise backfired, of course, and after the birth of Ishmael her life became more frustrated than ever. Eventually Hagar and her baby were driven out into the desert, where Ishmael became the father of the Arabs. That is to say, things did not turn out exactly as the mother of the Jews had in mind. The God that brings good out of evil, however, had His own plans, and this consideration brings us to our second point.

Second, the humor of Sarah. We recall the famous scene where Abraham and his wife showed hospitality to the Three Strangers in Genesis 18. We remember well the promise that God made to them at that time: "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son." Sarah, 89 years old at the time, was listening to this conversation behind the flap of the family's tent, and when she heard the divine promise, says Holy Scripture, she laughed.

The Lord, however, was very serious on the matter, so He inquired of Abraham, ""Why did Sarah laugh, saying, 'Shall I surely bear a child, since I am old?' Is anything too hard for the Lord?"

Sarah herself was rather embarrassed by the whole episode, and not a little frightened, so much so that she denied having laughed. The Lord, however, who knows all things, even a giggle behind a tent flap, answered her, ""No, but you did laugh!"

For all that, there is nothing in the Sacred Text to suggest that the laughter of Sarah was really a moral failing. She was reprimanded, not so much for laughing, but for denying that she had laughed. One suspects that her laughter was in some measure a sign of her humility. It probably indicated that she did not take herself too seriously. Perhaps it is the case that Sarah should have laughed more often than she did. If she had laughed at herself at earlier periods in her life, perhaps she would not have been so hard and cruel on Hagar and Ishmael. Perhaps she would have been less critical of Abraham himself.

Third, the faith of Sarah. If we had only the Old Testament by which to reflect on this point, we might doubt that Sarah had much faith. Fortunately, however, we have the testimony of the Epistle to the Hebrews: "By faith Sarah herself also received strength to conceive seed, and she bore a child when she was past the age, because she judged Him faithful who had promised" (11:11).

Indeed, the faith of Sarah illustrates something truly essential to the very nature of faith—it accomplishes what is humanly impossible. Sarah did not regard the prospects of bearing a child at age 90. On the contrary, "she judged Him faithful who had promised." That is to say, she trusted the fidelity of God to do what He has promised to do. She illustrates faith as personal trust.

Hagar's childbearing was a physical thing, says Paul. It was "according to the flesh." Sarah's, on the other hand, was "according to promise." Faith is always "according to promise." It is beyond all human guarantees, because it is rooted in God's fidelity to His word. He is the God that keeps His promises. Thus Paul concludes his argument in Galatians, "Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are children of promise." Like Sarah, we live in the expectation that God, in fidelity to His word, will always keep His promises.

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