

December 21, 2008

The Sunday of the Genealogy

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Few themes, I suppose, are more pronounced in the teaching of Jesus than that of God's invitation. Whether to a banquet or a wedding, Jesus sees man as invited by God. I believe this divine invitation implies many considerations of anthropology, but I limit myself here to one: human dignity. God invites man for pretty much the same reason we send invitations to one another--- friendship. Orthodox Christian theology has always insisted that His motive is friendship.

It is difficult, it is bewildering, and it is more than slightly frightening to assimilate the notion that God finds us loveable. It is among the most astounding truths in Holy Scripture. What could God possibly find loveable in us?

Indeed, even some Christians are so bewildered by this idea that they resort to subtleties to parse away the paradox of it. They may explain, for example, that God, being love, cannot help loving us, even though He finds nothing intrinsically loveable in us. It is taken for granted, in certain Christian circles, that God could not possibly find human beings desirable. It is assumed as obvious that there is nothing in us that would attract Him. It is impossible for God to love us for our own sake, we are told, but only because of His loving nature. He is forced to love us, as it were, because love is His definition.

Let me suggest that theories like this are difficult to reconcile with what God has told us about Himself---and us. In Holy Scripture He describes Himself as a bridegroom rejoicing over a bride, who is the apple of His eye. He speaks of Himself as a father who celebrates the return of a faithless son, in whom He recognizes His own image. Surely, these are the teachings that justify that beautiful adjective by which Holy Church addresses God: *philanthropos*.

When the Church calls God the "lover of mankind," She affirms an important truth about the human race: God finds man attractive. Indeed, when God made man, He put into his composition a radical point of attraction that man is incapable of destroying.

This favorable and loving attitude of God toward human beings perhaps justifies our speaking of a divine anthropotropism. God shows every sign of being drawn to man. It is hard for us to fathom this. It is as though the sun felt for the sunflower the same powerful attraction the sunflower feels for the sun. We would have to imagine a solar anthetropism prompting the sun to rush its rising each morning for another glimpse of the jonquil, the iris and the buttercup.

Holy Scripture, however, says no less of God's feelings for man. Numerous times Jeremiah, that most tenderhearted of poets, speaks of God "rising up early" to speak to the human soul (7:13,25; 11:7; 25:3,4; 26:5; 29:19; 32:33; 35:14,15; 44:4).

It is arguable, indeed, that Jeremiah was the prophet who best understood this aspect of God—and of man. It was in Israel's supremely dark hour, the dreadful day of Nebuchadnezzar and the destruction of the First Temple, that this philanthropic God declared through the lips of Jeremiah, " I have loved thee with an everlasting love: therefore have I drawn thee with mercy" (31:3). It is this everlasting love of God that summons humanity; it is His undying mercy that prompts the invitation He dispatches to human beings throughout the ages.

God loves us and desires us because He formed us in His own image, which is essential to---and inalienable from---the very definition of human nature. God's love for us is His response to the attraction He has made intrinsic to our being. There is absolutely nothing we can do to make God stop desiring us. Even the souls in hell are the object of His relentless affection, because they are formed in His image, the same image He saw on the day His hands gave them shape.

The truth is that God is drawn to us by love---that He has forcefully thrown in His lot with us, to the point of become one of us. This act of God---His deliberate assumption of our historical experience in order to make it His own---is what theology calls Divine Revelation, and its defining manifestation is the Mystery of the Incarnation. In the person of His Son, God has united humanity to Himself by an indissoluble bond that theology calls the Hypostatic Union. Human theotropism and divine anthropotropism are both fulfilled. Perhaps we make think of it as the mutual joy of the sunflower and the sun.

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