

April 19, 2009

Pascha

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although the fundamental Christological question remains constant---"What think ye of the Christ? Whose Son is He?"---that question can be framed in various ways. This variety, in fact, is easy to document over the centuries.

For example, during the earlier part of her history, when Holy Church was much preoccupied with the polemics of Christology, great attention was given to such concepts as "person" and "nature." Obligated to refute the Gnostics, Docetists, Sabellians, Arians, Nestorians, Monophysites, and others, Christian thinkers were frequently required to frame their reflections in order to address what might be called the "composition" of the Incarnation. They sought to determine what was the end result---if this expression be allowed---when the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us.

I think it important to remark, however, that such considerations hardly exhaust the theological interest of the Incarnation. Indeed, I think I detect a problem in a Christology devoted exclusively to such considerations. Let me see if I can identify the problem:

To concentrate on the "composition" of the Incarnation is to inquire, "Exactly what was present in the womb of the Virgin Mary at the instance of the Word's conception?" *De facto*, the ancient Christology of the Councils all examined some aspect of that very question. They asked, "How many persons were there in the Word incarnate?" Or, "How many wills were there in the Word incarnate?" Or, "How should we speak of the nature of the Word incarnate?"

In all such questions---the importance of which I certainly appreciate---we are treating the Incarnation according to static categories. These questions address the Incarnation as the "state" of the Word's becoming man. Indeed, we use the predicate "hypo-static" to speak of this mystery.

And here, I suggest, is the nub of a problem: The moment of the Incarnation was not static. The doctrine of the Incarnation does not refer solely to a state, but to a full human life. In the words of St. Irenaeus, *Gloria Dei est vivens homo*. That is to say, the Word did not simply become *human* (as some misguided translations of the Creed have expressed it). Rather, the Word became a specific human being. This is why St. Cyril of Alexandria---manifestly the standard bearer of orthodox Christology---often spoke of Christ as "*one of us*" (*heis ex hemon*).

In other words, the Word assumed, not only our nature---considered abstractly and in general---but the concrete, historical circumstances of an individual human life. He made himself a subjective participant in human history, someone whose existence and experience were circumscribed by the limiting conditions of time and space.

The effect and influence of Jesus (what an embarrassing expression to use!) on history passed through those limiting conditions of time and space. He assumed, not only our flesh, but also a specific human body.

A more adequate Christology, then, should affirm that the Word's becoming flesh refers to more than the single instant of His becoming present in the Virgin's womb. He continued becoming flesh and dwelling among us, in the sense that His assumed body and soul developed and grew through the complex experiences of a particular human life.

It is noteworthy that the four gospels say relatively little about the Son's assumption of human nature (Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:35; John 1:14), whereas on page after page of those gospels we witness His complete assumption of a concrete human life.

During the entire time that the Epistle to the Hebrews calls "the days of His flesh," He continued to become flesh and dwell among us. In fact, we must go further and say that through the experience of His passion and death He "learned obedience by the things that he suffered." At every moment, even as He passed into the realm of the dead, He was becoming flesh and dwelling among us. No human being has ever gone where God's Word was reluctant to go.

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