

June 21, 2009

Second Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

I have suggested that the discipline of apologetics, the reasoned defense of the Christian faith, is sometimes troublesome to the pursuit of theology. It seems to me that the history of soteriology, the theology of salvation, manifests a singular case in point.

When it starts from apologetics, soteriology is somewhat compelled to commence outside itself, to begin with the state of not-being-saved. Apologetics obliges soteriology to inquire, "*From what* are we saved?" The answer, of course, is "sin."

Now if we inquire about sin from the perspective of apologetics---particularly if we ask what sin is---the conditions of the inquiry force us to think about it without the light of revelation. The contractual terms of his craft oblige the apologist to abandon the single adequate foundation for interpreting sin: the life in Christ.

In other words, the nature of apologetic discourse limits the assessment of sin to what philosophy, psychology, and other non-theological disciplines are qualified to pronounce on the subject. In short, in order to speak coherently about sin to those outside the Christian faith, the apologist is prohibited from speaking of sin as a properly *theological* dilemma.

I believe a major difference between St. Paul and many of his interpreters is related to this problem. Paul approaches sin---as all human experiences---from within the light of revelation. He writes of fallen man from the perspective of man in Christ.

Thus, when he contrasts Christ and Adam, Paul starts with Christ. Because of what God accomplished in Christ, Paul deeply understands the bondage imposed through Adam's sin. For Paul, the Cross alone takes the full measure of the Fall, as only the Resurrection illumines the ultimate meaning of death.

My problem with the history of soteriology is an impression that much of it begins, rather, with Adam. In order to defend the doctrine of our redemption on the Cross---to demonstrate to the unbeliever how the death of God's Son was "both reasonable and necessary" (*rationabilis et necessaria*)---apologetics has felt compelled to define sin in a way intelligible and convincing to the unbeliever. The apologist has been obliged to speak of the Fall, not from within

an adequate theological understanding of sin (that is, relying on the light of revelation), but along lines persuasive to those outside the faith. Unbelievers determined the theological task!

Near the end of the eleventh century, a very significant theological effort was based on such an apologetic approach, when St. Anselm (whose Latin I quoted above) described sin as an offense against the honor due to God.

Now this was an easily understood way to speak of sin: On the hypothesis that God really exists---Anselm elsewhere offered an intriguing way to prove this hypothesis!---God deserves the full loyalty and devotion of men. Hence, disobedience to God's will is an affront to His honor, and this affront requires adequate satisfaction.

Anselm placed this very inadequate understanding of sin at the base of his "satisfaction theory," which became widespread, and sometimes dominant, in the history of soteriology.

Now, not for a minute do I challenge Anselm's reasoning here. Much less do I think it heretical. Indeed, Anselm's theory was not repugnant to better theologians---among them St. Nicholas Cabasilas---whose soteriology was much richer and more clearly biblical.

My problem with Anselm's theory is not his reasoning, but his starting point in apologetics, his resolve to begin the study of salvation, as he says, *remoto Christo, quasi numquam aliquid fuerat de Illo*---"apart from Christ, as though there had been nothing of Him." This *quasi*---"as though"---is bothersome, because it does not embrace a truly theological assessment of sin.

To think of sin as an offense to God's honor makes perfect sense without an ounce of faith, but that, I think, is exactly the problem. Unbelievers, in particular, can hardly begin to understand what is meant by sin. *Remoto Christo*, how is there an adequate assessment of sin? Even in the full light of divine revelation, after all, sin is deeply mysterious. In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, "It remains a mystery of darkness, of night."

Anselm's "satisfaction theory," then, though surely comprehensible, is scarcely comprehensive. Indeed, *salva ei reverentia*, is it really theological?

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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
phrii@touchstonemag.com

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

Pastoral Ponderings:
http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php