

**August 23, 2009**

Eleventh Sunday After Pentecost

### **Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings**

When we affirm that the Word incarnate redeemed the human race, it is instructive to reflect how the subject and its adjective function in that statement.

First, the Redeemer is the Word himself, the single subject of the verb. This affirmation was the intent of Cyril of Alexandria's expression, *mia physis*---"a single reality," when he spoke of our Redeemer. Cyril had in mind to deny (against Nestorius) that the divinity and humanity in Christ constituted two personal or grammatical subjects. On the contrary, there is in Christ a single acting subject---one thinker, one feeler, one speaker, one doer---a single "I," a single "You," a single "He." This affirmation of "single subject Christology" was proclaimed as dogma at the Council of Ephesus in 431.

Second, the adjective "incarnate" identifies the means through which the Word redeemed us---the deeds done in His full human existence. The dogma of the Incarnation affirms that we were redeemed through the personal experiences of God's Son in human history---the very things that the Word underwent---from the instant of His conception, through His birth and infancy, through the events and phases of His life, through His tears and laughter, through His teaching and ministry of mercy, through His obedient sufferings and death on the cross, through His Resurrection and entry into eternal glory. Human redemption "happened" in the humanity of the eternal Word---the Christological moments--as He passed through, transformed, and deified our existence.

Although various Christological heresies have obliged the Church to defend the dogma of the Incarnation by recourse to abstract concepts like "nature" and "essence," in the Four Gospels we find a more dynamic and existential way to speak of this same Mystery. It is a narrative style, which better corresponds to the actual historical experience of the Word incarnate.

For this reason, no Christology should attempt to supercede the translucence of the Gospel stories---as though to point a puny hand-held flashlight at the blazing sun. Nor should any theory of dogmatic development pretend that the Incarnation has ever attained an expression superior to, or more transparent than, that of the Gospels---as though later generations of Christians could grasp the Mystery of Christ more clearly than the four Evangelists. The fathers of the ecumenical councils would have been horrified by such a suggestion! On the contrary, we judge later expressions of Christology by the standard of the

Gospels, not vice-versa.

Indeed, we may say that the purpose of the Church's Christological dogmas is to provide a protective hedge around the narrative presentation of the Mystery proclaimed in the Gospels. The creeds and dogmatic formulations are exegetical illustrations of the Gospels. Thus, before we recite the Nicene Creed (which also has a narrative structure) at the Holy Eucharist, we first attend to a living word proclaimed from a page of the Gospel book. This is the book held high in liturgical processions. This is the book laid open---pages down---on the heads of our bishops as the Church presses ordaining hands upon them.

In the narrative transitions of the Gospel stories, we encounter the literary replica---the rhetorical icon---of the unique incarnational history: the living experience of the Word as He assumed and sanctified the passing phases of our humanity.

Cyril of Alexandria loved to reflect on this appearance of the eternal in the Christological moments of history. "We affirm," he wrote, "that God's Son, while visible to the eyes, a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, nestled at the breast of His Virgin Mother, filled all creation as God, and was seated at the Father's right hand" (*Letters* 17.3).

This truth was equally clear to Cyril's Latin contemporary, Augustine of Hippo. "Imagine," Augustine wrote of Jesus, "that the Almighty did not create this Man---however He was formed---from the womb of His mother, but abruptly introduced Him before our eyes. Suppose He passed through no ages from infancy to youth, or that He neither ate nor slept. Would that not have proved the heretics correct? . . . But now a Mediator has appeared between God and men, so that, binding both natures in the unity of His person, He might elevate the ordinary to the sublime, and temper the sublime to the ordinary" (*Letters* 137 [to Volusianus].3.9).

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