

November 1, 2009

Saints Cosmas and Damien

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Irenaeus of Lyons, in the second century, explicitly joined together two Christological themes from different periods of St. Paul's ministry: Christ as the new Adam (1 Corinthians and Romans) and Christ as Head (Colossians and Ephesians).

Irenaeus took Paul's concept of "the re-heading of all things in Christ" (*anakephalaiosasthai ta panta in Christo*---Ephesians 1:10) and made it the unifying center of his theology. Like Paul, Irenaeus saw the "recapitulation" in Christ as both cosmic and historical.

Since both human existence and all of nature fell in Adam, God sent His Son to be the New Man, who would restore and transform all things. By the Incarnation, "the Word saved that which really existed---the humanity which had perished---effecting by means of Himself that communion which should be held with it, and seeking out its salvation." Because man fell in the flesh, it was proper that he should be redeemed in the flesh: "But the thing which had perished possessed flesh and blood. For the Lord, taking dust from the earth, molded man; and it was upon his behalf that all the dispensation [*oikonomia*] of the Lord's advent took place. He Himself, therefore, had flesh and blood, *recapitulating* in Himself not just anybody, but that original handiwork of the Father, seeking out the very thing which had perished" (*Against the Heresies* 5.14.2).

What humanity lost in Adam, it regained---transformed---in Christ. When God's Son became man, "He commenced afresh the long line of human beings, and furnished us with salvation in a succinct, inclusive manner, so that what we had lost in Adam---namely, to be according to the image and likeness of God---that we might recover in Christ Jesus" (3.18.1).

Among the heresies chiefly refuted by the early Christians (as early as the Johannine literature and Ignatius of Antioch) was Docetism, the heresy which contended that the divine Christ was human only in appearance. Irenaeus continued the refutation of that heresy. Were its thesis true, he explained, Christ could not have saved us, because our restoration had to be effected in the same flesh that fell. That is to say, if God's Word, "not having been made flesh, only appeared to be in the flesh, His work was not a true one. But what He appeared to be is exactly what He was: God *recapitulated* in Himself the ancient formation of man, that He might kill sin, deprive death of its power, and

vivify man; and therefore His works are true."

Irenaeus speaks of three major moments of our redemption: the Word's initial assumption of our humanity, His death to liberate us from sin, and His victory over death by the Resurrection: "For it behoved Him who was to destroy sin, and redeem man from under the power of death, that He should Himself be made that very same thing which he was, that is, man; who had been drawn by sin into bondage, but was held by death, so that sin should be destroyed by man, and man should go forth from death."

For Irenaeus, however, the Word's assumption of our humanity included, not only His initial adoption of human nature, but also His taking up the full process of a concrete human existence, from birth to death. In other words, the recapitulation of humanity was not completed solely in the Word's becoming flesh in the Virgin's womb, but in every moment of Jesus' life and experience. At every point in His earthly existence---and nowhere more than in death---the Word was becoming flesh and dwelling among us. God's Word, Irenaeus wrote, "passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God" (3.18.7).

Hence, Irenaeus described the Incarnation as a biographical sequence: "He came to save all through means of Himself---all, I say, who through Him are born again to God---infants, and children, and boys, and youths, and old men. He therefore passed through every age." The Incarnation, for Irenaeus, was an historical process, a full human growth, in which a concrete human being, Jesus of Nazareth, took obedient possession of His destiny and vocation, as the Father revealed it to Him in the course and arrangement of His life."

The final stage of that human vocation was His death on the Cross, a death from which God raised Him up, utterly victorious: "Then, at the last, He arrived at death itself, that He might be the first-born from the dead, that in all things He might have the pre-eminence, the Prince of life, existing before all, and going before all" (2.24.4).

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