

July 1, 2012
Saint Cosmas and Damian

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Reviewing conversations with Christians over the past half-century or so, I am impressed how often I have heard quoted a line from Irenaeus of Lyons: "the glory of God is man fully alive."

I would like to believe all those folks have actually read the works of Irenaeus, but my personal study of the man makes me suspicious. Irenaeus is not easy to read; at least, it isn't for me. The greater part of his largest work, *A Treatise Against the Heresies*, is devoted to the refutation of second-century Gnostic writers, whose philosophical and religious speculations may strike the modern reader---like me---as bizarre beyond consideration. Yet, Irenaeus took those fellows seriously; he studied their writings in depth and refuted them in meticulous and painstaking detail.

On finishing the *Adversus Haereses* some decades ago, my chief sentiment was an admiration for the singular patience and devotion of its author, who so carefully examined and so thoroughly disproved those many ridiculous theories. Irenaeus, regarding Gnosticism as spiritually dangerous to the Christian souls for whom he was responsible, fulfilled that task with self-sacrificing pastoral love.

This made me more aware of my own selfishness. I could not imagine devoting years of my life to the study of the errors of contemporary authors in such fields as Liberation Theology, Process Theology, Situation Ethics, Feminist Theology, Transgender Theology, and so forth.

At about that time, I was reviewing books by a heretic named Norman Pittenger, whose published works fill ninety volumes of raw bilge (most of them mercifully out of print by now). I wrote reviews of three or four of those works and gave the thing up, having discovered the task was driving me batty. I could not endure an ongoing study of manifestly dumb ideas. Unlike Irenaeus, I didn't love my fellow Christians enough to undergo such martyrdom for their sakes.

Because the lunacy of his opponents makes many pages of Irenaeus tedious to plow through---especially in the first half of the work---it has occurred to me to wonder, from time to time, whether all those who quote Irenaeus actually read him. This impression comes with special force when I consider that the alleged quotation---"the glory of God is man fully alive---doesn't appear until fairly late in the *Adversus Haereses*; it is found in the middle of chapter 20 of book 4.

Unfortunately, the original Greek text of that passage was not preserved, so we know it only in ancient translations, the most important being Latin. This is where we have to start. The traditional Latin of the quotation cited above reads, *Gloria Dei est vivens homo*. The literal translation is "the glory of God is a living man."

And here arises a problem. The popular translation, "man fully alive," seems to indicate that God is glorified in what today would be called "human fulfillment." Indeed, whenever I have heard these words, this has always, I believe, been the intended sense of the person citing them. And such an understanding of Irenaeus---I am about to insist---is disingenuous and misleading at best. Irenaeus is not talking about "human fulfillment."

Nonetheless, this translation is so prevalent that we find it in places where its use can only be regarded as deceptive, even mendacious. I cite one example, the English translations of the *Catechismus Catholicae Ecclesiae*. The original Latin of this Vatican document (#294) accurately quotes the traditional text of Irenaeus and then goes on to explain that it refers to the life of the Word Incarnate. That is to say, the "living man" intended by Irenaeus is Christ himself, in whose life we believers contemplate the Father revealed in the Son---*vita hominis visio Dei*, Irenaeus goes on to say, "the life of a man is the vision of God." The Vatican document has it right, but both English versions (1992 and 1997) reflect an unfortunate and skewed reading of Irenaeus.

Is this an important matter? Surely it is. The English expression "man fully alive" conveys an idea radically alien to the teaching of Irenaeus, who declared, "the revelation of the Father, which comes through the Word, conveys life to those who contemplate God." The vague "man fully alive," which can mean almost anything, usually means a quest of self-fulfillment. As commonly quoted, the words have nothing to do with Christ. Now, if Irenaeus were writing today, one suspects he would include this quest self-fulfillment in the heresies he chose to refute. For Irenaeus, the "living man," who is the "glory of God," is the man portrayed in the Gospels, where singular his life reveals "the vision of God."

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