

May 27, 2007

Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Jesus, as He appears in the Gospels, resists man's efforts to comprehend Him. There is a sense in which this is true of all human beings, I concede, but in the singular case of Jesus this resistance to interpretation is marked in a unique and special way. The "who" of Jesus, which He pointedly put in question form, remains utterly elusive apart from a special revelation (Matthew 16:15-17).

With respect to other men, we have at least some chance of understanding them "from within," by recourse to what epistemologists call the principle of intersubjectivity. That is to say, psychologists commence with the assumption of the common structure of self-awareness in all human souls. Each of us goes inside himself and finds a "self," nor does the experience differ essentially from person to person. This presumption of intersubjectivity is the premise of all rational discourse, the implicit starting point of all conversation, the necessary basis of all argument.

Thus, no one attempts to convince me of anything except by first supposing that his consciousness and mine share an identical shape, a radical "who," of which to be "self-aware." No matter how separate we are, we have at least this much in common--that we can be self-conscious in the same way. Hence, no matter how individual the two of us remain, another person is able to enter into his own soul, examine his own experience, and through a process of analogy (which I suggest we call the "analogy of subjectivity") gain some idea of what is going on in *my* soul. What is human and therefore native to him is also human and native to me. He can interpret me by self-reflection.

Biographical efforts proceed along this path. These studies presume that the inner content of their chosen subject--that is to say, the person's subjectivity--is in some measure accessible by a consideration of what makes any human soul "tick." It is probably impossible to write biography without this process of analogy, producing in some cases a psychoanalytic biography.

Now a great deal of contemporary biblical scholarship believes that it is possible to do the same thing with Jesus. Exegetes of this persuasion, basing their efforts on the analogy of subjectivity, attempt to understand Jesus by recourse to the same sorts of internal information that are used to interpret other individuals in history. They study the social, environmental, and educational influences by which they believe the man Jesus can be rendered intelligible. Psychology provides a foundation for exegesis.

These scholars go on to explain Jesus in various ways, depending on what influences they think made Jesus "tick." Observing His compassion, for instance, they perceive in His soul the impact of the social prophets of the eighth century. Or, taking note of the marked apocalyptic element in Jesus' preaching, they feel safe in explaining that phenomenon as part of the general apocalyptic atmosphere of first century Judaism. At His baptism, they

claim, Jesus fell under the influence of John the Baptist and thus became aware of His own historical destiny. And so on.

Moreover, they justify these psycho-biographical efforts by appealing to the testimony of the Gospel that Jesus "increased in wisdom" (Luke 2:52). That is to say, the soul of Jesus grew and matured like the soul of any other human being. Therefore, His "self," His "who," can be analyzed like that of any other person. Those that take this approach believe that the doctrine of the Incarnation is ample warrant for analyzing the soul, the subjectivity, the self-consciousness, of Jesus.

Indeed, these scholars are often so confident of this method that if someone objects to their effort or expresses a mild reserve about its validity, he is likely to be accused of questioning the very doctrine of the Incarnation. He may find himself indicted as a Docetist.

Nonetheless, it must be said that these modern efforts to interpret Jesus through the analogy of subjectivity are problematic at best. The reason is simply this: the "subject" in the subjectivity of Jesus is the eternal Son of God. According to the established theology of the Hypostatic Union, there is no human person in Jesus distinct from the Divine Person. The soul of Jesus, His *psyche* that these historians want to analyze and interpret, is the human soul of the eternal Son. The "self" of Jesus' self-awareness is not someone distinct from the divine "who." The saddened subject that weeps at the tomb of Lazarus is God. The weary person who sits at the well and sleeps on the stern sheets of the fishing boat is the Creator of the universe.

What is there in Jesus that renders Him so impossible to analyze? He tells us: "I and the Father are one." Again, "All things have been delivered to Me by My Father, and no one knows the Son except the Father. Nor does anyone know the Father except the Son." The identity of the man Jesus is rooted in this eternal relationship of the Son to the Father. Self-awareness in Jesus is the consciousness of His eternal relationship to the Father. He has no personal identity apart from that relationship.

Now I submit that there is nothing else in any human soul even remotely analogous, and this is the reason why psychoanalysis, based on the analogy of subjectivity, is an inadequate and even misleading path to the interpretation of Jesus. Jesus transcends psychology for the same reason that He transcends metaphysics.

Surely, Jesus' human awareness of this relationship to the Father grew and developed as He came "of age." Otherwise, it is not true that the Word became flesh. However, the lines of this conscious development in Jesus are quite impossible to trace, for the simple reason that there is nothing analogous to it inside our own consciousness, nothing within us that affords us even the slightest hint of what it means for a human being to be conscious of Himself as God's eternal Son. The "subject," the self, of Jesus' consciousness is not a human being who is personally distinct from the consubstantial Son. We have not the foggiest idea how this self-awareness of Jesus took form in His soul, and speculation on the matter is an exercise in either futility or heresy.

Conciliar theology teaches that the man Jesus and the Son of God are the same person. They are "one reality" (*mia physis*), said St. Cyril of Alexandria, and St. Leo of Rome spoke of *una persona, divina et humana*. This respect for the "mystery" of the Incarnation has always been the orthodox approach of the Church. Not until the early decades of the nineteenth century, as far as I know, did Christians attempt to psychoanalyze Jesus, to get "inside" Him by the analogy of subjectivity.

For my part, I believe such efforts to be Nestorian at best but often enough only a species of Arianism. On this matter of the subjectivity of Jesus, I believe, theology must be resolutely apophatic in order to remain orthodox.

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