

September 9, 2007

## Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Although Church dogma did not define, until the Council of Chalcedon in 451, that Jesus Christ is one person "confessed in two natures," versions of that formula had long been standard in theology, especially in the West. For example, decades prior to Chalcedon, St. Augustine of Hippo had spoken of Jesus as "one person in each nature" (*una persona in utraque natura*--*Sermons* 294.9) and had affirmed, "he who is God is the very one who is man, not by the confusion of nature but by unity of person" (*Sermons* 186.1; cf. *Enchiridion* 10.35; *De Trinitate* 1.7.14; 13.17.22). Jesus Christ, said Augustine, is "all God and all man" (*totus Deus et totus homo*--*Sermons* 293.7; cf. 130.3; *Tractatus in Joannem* 19.15; 47.12). Summing up his Christology near the end of his life (in 430), Augustine wrote that God's Son assumed our humanity "in an incomparable union in such wise that He who assumed and that which was assumed is one person in the heart of the Trinity" (*de Predestinatione Sanctorum* 24.67).

If Augustine was a precursor to Chalcedon, however, he was also an heir of Nicaea. After spending his youth imagining Jesus "only as a man of excellent wisdom that no one could equal," Augustine at last learned the correct Nicene Christology during the catechumenate that preceded his baptism in 387 (*Confessions* 7.19.25). We also know that he had begun to read St. Athanasius about that time (8.6.14-15; 10.23.50).

Like Athanasius (cf. *On the Incarnation* 7-9, 22-23; *Against the Arians* 1.44), Augustine approached the mystery of the Incarnation under the perspective of soteriology, specifically man's deliverance from mortality and his liberation to immortality, his movement from death to life.

We see this in Augustine's analysis of the mediation of Christ. When he treats of Jesus as our Mediator, he does so, like Athanasius, in terms of man's passage from death to life. That is to say, God's Son is the distributed middle, the *medium* between mortality and immortality. He assumed the first from us, wrote Augustine, in order to give us the second (*de Consensu Evangelistarum* 1.35.53). God's Son took away our mortality through His death (*Enchiridion* 33; *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 103.8) and conferred His immortality upon us through His resurrection (*The City of God* 9.15; 10.24). "In His passion," wrote Augustine, Christ "became the sacrifice, and in His resurrection He restored (*innovavit*) what had been killed and offered it as a first fruit to God" (*Enarrationes in Psalmos* 129.3.7). In the Incarnation, that is to say, He was born in our flesh in order to die and rise in our flesh.

Augustine returned to this theme repeatedly. "We need a Mediator," he wrote, "who, united to us here below by the mortality of His body, should at the same time be able to give us truly divine help in cleansing and liberating us by means of the immortal righteousness of His spirit, whereby He remained heavenly even while here on earth" (*The City of God* 9.17).

For Augustine, then, the mediation of Christ was enacted, not in the single event of the cross, but in the full Christian mystery, from the first moment of the Incarnation until the final glorification of the risen Lord (*Against Cresconius the Donatist* 4.54,64). Augustine's perspective on this matter was historical. For him, the mediation between God and man was effected in all those historical events--Christ's birth, His crucifixion, His death, and His resurrection--by which He, in our flesh, took away our sinful mortality and conferred on us His godly immortality (*Tractatus in Joannem* 23.15).

Indeed, Augustine viewed all of human history under the perspective of those things that the incarnate Word accomplished in the flesh (*The City of God* 18.46).

Because he thought of salvation as the attainment of immortality, nonetheless, Augustine believed that it was ultimately with a view to our resurrection that God's Son assumed our flesh. The "Christian doctrine and religion," Augustine wrote, "was defined in the resurrection of Christ" (18.54). Hence he called Christ's resurrection, "the salvation of Christians"--*salus Christianorum*, apparently in the sense that resurrection is what Christians mean by salvation (*Sermons* 361.3). The risen Christ, he wrote, is the cause and the exemplar of our own final rising (*Letters* 102.1.5)

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