

July 12, 2009

Fifth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Starting with the premise that the goal of both Creation and Redemption is man's deification in Christ---his participation in the divine nature---St. Maximus the Confessor speaks of three stages in the attainment of this goal. Regarding existence, he writes, "those who understand the things of God say there are three modes [*treis gar phasi tropous hoi ton theon epistemones*]: to be [*einaï*], to be well [*eu einaï*], and to be forever [*aei einaï*]." Accordingly, he says, salvation is accomplished through these three stages (*The Enigmas*).

First, there is man's existence itself, effected by Creation. Man is a finite being, for whom God plans an infinite destiny. Consequently, there was something incomplete in man's created nature, inasmuch as God intended for him a sharing in His own nature. In order, therefore, that human beings could participate in the divine nature, God's Son assumed human nature. Thus, the first step toward *theosis* was *sarkosis*: man deification is based on the Word's Incarnation.

Second, there is man's "existing well." Whereas his created existence requires only the will of God, man's "existing well" requires the cooperation of the human will. Man's will, however, turned away from God in sin, which constitutes a second impediment to his deification. For this reason, the incarnate Word submitted His human will in obedience to the Father. By Christ's obedient death on the Cross, man's sinful existence---his not "existing well"---was remedied. God's Son healed us, saved us from our transgressions, by His obedience unto death.

Third, man is called "to exist forever"; his authentic destiny, that is to say, is incorruptibility. Nonetheless, because death entered the world through the sin of Adam, fallen man was left only with a corruptible existence. So, to remedy this state of corruption---eternal death---God raised His obedient Son from the dead.

Thus, the threefold impediment (*kolyma*) to man's deification was removed according to three ways (*tropoi*): the Word's Incarnation, His sacrificial death on the Cross, and His Resurrection from the dead. Maximus sums up in this way the classical triadic understanding of the Creed: "For us men and for our salvation, He came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Spirit of the virgin Mary, and was made man; and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate; He suffered and was buried; and the third day He rose again."

According to this formulation, the entire "event" of Jesus Christ was redemptive, beginning with His personal and permanent assumption of our flesh.

Thus, everything about Jesus has soteriological significance:

First, when we speak of the Word's Incarnation, we must consider not only His assumption of our nature, but also His assumption of our whole existence. That is to say, the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, not simply at the moment of Our Lady's *fiat*, but at every moment of our Lord's earthly life. The Word's incarnate existence took place in time and through the normal processes of human growth. All the stories in the Gospels, then, and not just their opening chapters, are revelatory of the Incarnation.

Second, when we speak of the death of Christ on the Cross, we should consider that this reference embraces, not just the moment when He bowed His head and handed over the Spirit (John 19:30), but also His manifold sufferings and the sacrificial outpouring of His blood, whereby God washed away the sins of the world. Indeed, the Bible's chief image of the reconciliation on the cross is the blood of Jesus, poured out in libation for the sins of the world. The New Covenant is established by this redemptive shedding of His blood (Matthew 26:28; Mark 14:24).

Third, when we speak of the Resurrection of Christ, we should include His passing into glory and His seating at the right hand of God. These mysteries pertain to the fullness of His Resurrection, as do the gift of the Holy Spirit and Christ's triumphal return to judge at the end of time.

Each year, in the spring, Holy Church devotes special times of prayer, reflection, and observance to these three *tropoi* of our redemption: the Incarnation on March 25, our Lord's sufferings and atoning death in Holy Week, and His Resurrection during the fifty days of Pascha. This theological triad provides the proper structure for a full soteriology.

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