

July 17, 2011

The Fathers of Chalcedon

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

To appreciate Paul's introduction of Adam in order to elucidate the mystery of the Resurrection (1 Corinthians 15:22), it is important not to lose sight of the immediate setting of his argument: He was addressing the denial---on the part of some Corinthians---that the dead can be raised. Their denial was a *general* proposition; they contended that a bodily resurrection was impossible for *all* human beings. They affirmed, "there is no resurrection of the dead" (15:12). Such an expectation, they claimed, was not part of the human inheritance.

We observe that the denial made by those Corinthians did not specifically address the Resurrection of Jesus (to which, apparently, they had given little thought), but the resurrection of human beings as such. Consequently, it was Paul's task to take the Resurrection of Jesus as a premise---antecedently established by apostolic testimony (15: 3-8)---in order to make his case for a universal resurrection.

This was the reason Paul introduced Adam into the discussion. Adam, whose very name means "human being," was not just an individual; he was the father of the human race, the "universal man" in the sense that he bequeathed to humanity the full inheritance of what it meant to be human. That universal inheritance, Paul promptly observed, included the experience of death: "In Adam, all died" (15:22). Fallen Adam was the cause and exemplar of universal death. Adam's Fall was the final word.

An underlying theological proposition prompted Paul to argue this way---namely, the thesis that Christ "rose on the third day *according to the Scriptures*." In the light of that reference---"according to the Scriptures"---it was a plain fact that Christ's Resurrection stood in defiance of Adam's Fall. Since Christ rose from the dead, Adam no longer had the final word about the human expectation.

On the contrary, a new order had been introduced, an order in which death was no longer the last chapter of history. That is to say, the risen Christ was not simply an exception to the Adamic curse but the initiator of a new order; his Resurrection was the cause and exemplar of what could be expected. It radically remodeled human iconography and changed the content of man's inheritance. With respect to our ultimate destiny, Christ replaced Adam.

Paul elaborated the contrast between Adam and his replacement: "And so it is written, 'The first man Adam became a living being.' The last Adam, a life-giving spirit" (15: 45).

The first Adam had been formed from that very element to which the Fall reduced him: "The first man was of the earth, of dust" (15:47). Inasmuch as we are descended from that fallen Adam, we are heirs of that reduction: "As was the man of dust, so also are those who are made of dust" (15:48). That is our expectation as children of Adam. But our lot is changed by reason of Christ's Resurrection. The human iconography has been altered: "And as we have borne the icon of the 'dustly,' we will also bear the icon of the heavenly" (15:49).

The word chosen by Paul to express the universal significance of Christ's Resurrection was *aparche*, properly translated as "first fruits" (15:20, 23). This term, derived from Israel's theology of sacrifice, referred to the practice of giving back to God---by way of oblation---the initial yield of the harvest.

Even before Paul's use of the term, it already served as a metaphor, signifying an initial portion of any kind, but it conveyed, as well, the implication that more was expected. That is to say, the *aparche* represented, by way of guarantee, the harvest as a whole. This was the sense Paul had in mind when he spoke of the risen Christ as "the first fruits of those who have fallen asleep": His Resurrection was the "first act," the pledge and assurance of what lay in store for the rest of humanity.

Accordingly, Paul viewed the mystery of the Resurrection in distinct stages, or, more accurately, "groups" (*tagma*): First comes "the first fruits, Christ," in whom the Resurrection begins. Next, there are "those who belong to Christ, who will arise at his appearance [*parousia*]." These will have priority with respect to rising from the dead (15:3; compare 1 Thessalonians 4:16-18; Philippians 3:20-21). Finally arrives "the end [*telos*], when he hands over the kingdom to God the Father" (15:24).

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