

January 6, 2013
Theophany

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

John of Damascus

An existential Soteriology should start, I believe, by asking, "What did Jesus think he was doing when he devoted himself to the work of man's Salvation?" It is less clear, perhaps, how to go about answering that question, particularly where to begin the inquiry. An obvious place to start is with the Gospels. For my part, however, I would prefer a bit of preamble.

The reason is simple: I did not discover the Gospels on my own, and my effort to understand them has never been, over the years, a private endeavor. Even before I was able to read, I was first "catechized" in the Christian faith, so that I would properly understand the Gospels when the time came to read them. Catechesis, a process of oral instruction, literally means "according to the echo." It consists in deliberate memorization, and from the very beginning it has been a common form of instruction in the Christian Church.

In short, I feel the need for at least a brief indication of what to expect in the Gospels relative to Salvation; I crave an initial summary of the thing.

For that summary, I have chosen a text from an eighth century Christian writer who is, as far as I can tell, universally recognized as "a scribe in Israel," the sort of man Holy Church refers to as an "ecumenical teacher." His name was Yuḥannā Mansour, but most Christians remember him from the place of his birth: Saint John of Damascus.

In his Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith, John of Damaskos thus speaks of the salvific intention of Jesus:

Whereas our Lord Jesus Christ was without sin---for he that took away the sin of the world committed no sin, nor was there any guile found in his mouth---he was not subject to death, and death came into the world through sin. He dies, therefore, because he took on himself death on our behalf, and

he makes himself an offering to the Father for our sakes, for we had sinned against Him. And it was proper that He should receive the ransom for us, and that we should thus be delivered from condemnation (De Fide Orthodoxa 3.26).

In this dense text, John Damascene speaks to the faith of the Church on several points:

First, the goal of Christ's redemptive work was our deliverance from the death we deserve as sinners.

Second, Jesus accomplished this deliverance by dying "for our sakes."

Third, his death was a sacrificial offering made to God the Father. In context, his oblation is conceived in the biblical category of the sin offering.

Fourth, this offering of Christ for the removal of our sins was received by the Father as a "ransom" (antilytron) for us.

Fifth, because of this ransom we are delivered from condemnation. In the context, this condemnation is the death we deserve as sinners.

In addition to these points, we observe the author's allusions to biblical texts by way of explanation. Thus, we observe his assertion that Jesus "committed no sin, nor was there any guile found in his mouth." This portrayal comes from 1 Peter 2:22 and Isaiah 53:9. The description of Jesus as taking away the sins of the world is based on the words of John the Baptist in John 1:29.

Earlier in the same work, this author more explicitly contrasted the obedient Jesus with our disobedient first parent. Unlike Adam, St. John writes,

he who is like us becomes obedient to the Father and finds a remedy for our disobedience in what he had assumed from us, and he became a pattern of obedience to us without which it is not possible to obtain salvation (3.1).

This text, by introducing the Incarnation itself into the structure of Salvation, steps beyond the explicit intention in the human mind of Jesus.

Nonetheless, this consideration, essential to a full Soteriology, is derived from the Nicene Creed, on which John Damascene bases his schema.

According to the Creed three things happened “for us men and for our Salvation”: First, God’s Son came down from heaven . . . and was made man.” Second, “he was crucified under Pontius Pilate, suffered, and was buried.” Third, he “rose again on the third day according to the Scriptures.” These three components to our Salvation—Incarnation, sacrifice on the Cross, and Resurrection—will provide the outline for a systematic treatment of Salvation. But let us begin with “the mind of Christ.”

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All Saints Orthodox Church
Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America

4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641

Church Office: (773) 777-0749

<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor

phrii@touchstonemag.com

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:

www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html

Pastoral Ponderings:

http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php