

June 28, 2009

The Eve of Saints Peter and Paul

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Saint Anselm, as we have seen, begins his reflections on soteriology---the theology of salvation---by addressing the question: What is sin? This he identifies as the affront to the honor of God. He then goes on to inquire: What is required to satisfy the offended honor of God. This move from apologetics to theology is known as St. Anselm's "theory of satisfaction."

In the history of the theology of salvation, few developments have been more significant than the introduction of "satisfaction" as a category of study. Few likewise, I believe, have proved more troubling.

I concede that some notion of satisfaction was always implicit when Christians thought about "being saved." That is to say, the very concept of salvation carries with it, at least tacitly, the question, "What was *required* for us to be saved?"

In fact, that question was raised explicitly in the great Christological controversies of the early Church. For example, a major premise of the orthodox faith affirmed, "Whatever was not assumed was not healed." This thesis declared that God's Son, in the Incarnation, took on our full humanity, not selected parts of it. In other words, only the Word's full assumption of our human nature could *satisfy* what was needed for human beings to be saved.

This principle, enunciated explicitly at the Council of Chalcedon in 451, was later applied to the question of Christ's human will by the Third Council of Constantinople in 670. According to this latter council, the work of salvation *required* a complete agreement of the divine and human wills in Christ. Hence, said the council, a full human will in Christ was *required* for our salvation. Nothing less would *satisfy*.

The new component in St. Anselm's soteriology seems to be this: He introduces the idea that some aspect of *God* required "satisfaction" by the work of Christ. Specifically, it was the offended honor of God. This was the "debt" that only God's Son could pay.

I have long suspected that Anselm's inspiration for this theory may have been a Resurrection chant entitled the *Praeconium Paschale*. Our earliest extant copy of this text, commonly called (from its first word) the *Exultet*, is contained in "The Bobbio Missal," the seventh century manuscript of a Gallican

sacramentary. This beautiful and venerable text, which may have been composed two centuries earlier, refers to the salvific work of Christ, "who for us remitted to the eternal Father the debt of Adam"---*qui pro nobis aetero Patri Adae debitum solvit*.

Although I am familiar with no earlier liturgical text in which the work of salvation was so described, another liturgical hymn, roughly contemporary to "The Bobbio Missal," spoke of Christ's work as the remission of a debt, This akathist of Sergius of Constantinople (a monothelete, alas) described Christ as "He that remits the debt of all men"---*Ho panton chreolytes ton anthropon* (*Hymnus Acahistus* 266).

This image of a "debt" owed to God is, of course, perfectly biblical. Jesus spoke of God as "a certain creditor who had two debtors" (Luke 7:41). He described the judgment of God as the summoning of the master's debtors (16:1-12). In the Bible, however, and as understood by the Church Fathers (for instance, Hippolytus, *Psalm Titles* 4, and Augustine, *Enarrationes in Psalmos* 110.3), these texts refer to the mercy of God and to man's obligation to imitate that mercy. The image was not used in reference to the work of Christ.

It is generally conceded that St. Anselm was the first to think of the burden of sin as a "debt of honor": *Hunc honorem debitum qui Deo non reddit, aufert Deo quod suum est, et Deum exhonorat, et hoc est peccare*---"He that does not render to God this honor that is His debt, takes away from God that which is His, and dishonors God, and this is to sin" (*Cur Deus Homo* 11). And nothing, he went on, "is less tolerable in the order of things than that the creature should take away this debt of honor [*debitum honorem*] to the Creator, and not render what he owes" (op. cit. 13).

Anselm does not, strictly speaking, find salvation's "necessity" in God's will, nor in man. He finds it, rather, in what he calls "the order of things"---*in rerum ordine*. His references to the Creator and the creature indicate that he means, by this, the order of Creation. Salvation must rectify a problem in the created order.

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