

July 5, 2009

Fourth Sunday After Pentecost

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

St. Anselm, as we have seen, began his treatment of soteriology with apologetics. Presuming only what any rational person ought to know---namely, sin is an offense against God's honor---he inquired, "What is needed to satisfy that honor?" That is to say, Anselm started with "fallen man." Generally speaking, in the West fallen man has been the starting point for most reflection on soteriology for the past thousand years.

For earlier Church History, however, this was not the case, nor has it ever been in the East. The older and more traditional approach begins, not with fallen man, but with man in his Christian fulfillment. It commences, not with man as sinner, but with man as sharer in the life of God. It gazes, first, at the goal of redemption, which is man's participation in the divine nature.

Thus, when the Church Fathers asked, "Why Incarnation?" they invariably answered "deification." Already in the second century, Irenaeus of Lyons wrote of "our Lord Jesus Christ, who by His supreme love became what we are, in order to bring us to what He himself is" (*Against the Heresies* 5, Preface). More boldly Athanasius of Alexandria, two centuries later, wrote of God's Son that "He became man that we might become God" (*Avtos gar enenthropesen hina hemeis theopoethomen*---*On the Incarnation of the Word* 54).

This persuasion---and even this mode of expressing it---became standard during the period of the great Christological controversies (cf. Gregory Nazianzen, *Dogmatic Poems* 10.5-9; Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Orations* 25; Diodoch of Photike, *Sermon on the Ascension*).

St. Maximus the Confessor (580-662) was the heir to this tradition. Pursuing the question of why God became man, Maximus wrote of God's eternal purpose, "the mystery according to Christ" (*kata Christon mysterion*). Relying on the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians, he appealed to the "mystery revealing the great counsel of God" (*megalen tou Theou boulen ekphainon mysterion*), hidden from all previous generations but manifest in the Word's assumption of our flesh---namely, the plan to confer His own nature on the human race. For Maximus there was a radical correspondence between the Incarnation (*sarkosis* or *ensomatosis*) and deification (*theosis*).

For Maximus, this plan of divine Providence (*pronoia*) was no afterthought. In Creation itself the Word's Incarnation and man's deification were already

determined: "Looking toward this very goal, God brought forth the essences of things that exist" (*pros touto to telos aphoron tas ton onton ho Theos paregagen ousias*---*Questions to Thalassius* 60).

For Maximus this relationship between Incarnation and deification lay at the root, not only of Creation, but also the whole of Sacred Scripture. It is revealed, he said, to those initiated into the Cross and Resurrection of the Savior. In a very dense reflection Maximus wrote, "The mystery of the Word's Incarnation [*ensomatosis*] has the power [*dynamis*] of all enigmas and types in the Scriptures, and understanding [*episteme*] of creatures, whether visible or perceived with the mind. And he that knows the mystery of the Cross and grave also knows the defining reasons [*logoi*] of these things. But he that is initiated [*myetheis*] into the unspeakable power of the Resurrection knows the goal [*skopos*] that God established even as He brought forth all things" (*Theological Centuries* 1.66).

For Maximus this understanding of Redemption is not based on some pre-baptismal evaluation of sin, but on the fullness of the Christian revelation, "the mystery according to Christ." For him, the *rerum ordo* is not established---as it was for Anselm---*remoto Christo*. A theologically adequate answer to the question "Why Incarnation?" is given to the Church, not as a point determined by apologetics, but by the sacramental initiation into the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. It is inseparable, therefore, from the Christian understanding of Creation and the Sacred Scriptures.

Before proceeding to examine Maximus more at length, it is useful, I think, to mention that he seems not to have been interested in the later speculative question, "Would the Word have become incarnate apart from man's fall?" Whatever that question's value, Maximus is silent on the subject.

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