

**December 23, 2012**

Sunday Before the Lord's Nativity

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

### **Theologies of Salvation**

Adult converts to the Orthodox Church often remark on the sense of relief---not to say liberation---they felt when they became acquainted with Orthodoxy's teaching on Salvation. I have heard testimonies on this point times out of mind.

These folks, coming mainly from Western Christian backgrounds, had thought about Salvation chiefly in forensic terms. They were accustomed to hearing the word "merit" a lot with respect to the Cross. Their former Soteriology might be summarized in Archbishop Cranmer's lines in The Book of Common Prayer, which declare that on the Cross Jesus Christ, "by his one oblation of himself once offered," made "a full, perfect, and sufficient sacrifice, oblation, and satisfaction, for the sins of the whole world."

Not all these newcomers would attach an identical meaning to such formulas. In some cases their ideas had been formed in the tradition of an earlier Archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Anselm, who taught that the sacrificial death of Jesus satisfied the requirements of God's infinite honor, which was offended by sin. Others, more simply, would have described the work of Salvation as answering the ontological standards of justice; Jesus "corrected" man's relationship to God within the structure of reality. In a majority of cases, if I am not mistaken, these new converts to the Orthodox Church had formerly believed that Jesus, by his sufferings and death, had propitiated the divine wrath. (If their foundational predicate for God was "angry," it is hardly a wonder they were relieved to discover the Orthodox Church.)

In all these cases, however, our newcomers soon noticed that expressions like these---satisfaction, merit, and so on---are largely absent from Orthodox prayers and hymns. Nor is an Orthodox Christian likely to hear expressions of this sort from the pulpit. As I mentioned, many converts have borne personal testimony to me on this matter; when they joined the Orthodox Church, they gave up thinking about Salvation in terms of justice, honor, and, especially, the propitiation of wrath.

Let me confess that I am not among those Orthodox converts for whom this was the case. Not for a very long time had I conceived of Salvation in purely

forensic terms. Words like "merit" and "satisfaction" were long-gone from my vocabulary when my family and I joined the Orthodox Church in 1988.

In my earliest theological studies, it is true, I had been content with the "satisfaction theory" of St. Anselm. I remember reading in Saint Thomas Aquinas, during my early twenties, that the Lord's death on the Cross was the "efficient and sufficient cause" (*causa efficax et sufficiens*) of our salvation.

When I specifically thought about our Redemption in those days, however, it was mainly in connection with classical patristic theology, in which an absolute premise of our Redemption was the integrity of the humanity assumed by the Incarnate Word. The Church Fathers insisted that the "full humanity" of Jesus Christ was essential to man's Salvation, because "whatever was not assumed was not redeemed." This principle was the foundation of most of the dogmatic work of the Ecumenical Councils.

I read widely in both the Greek and the Latin Fathers---the complete works of Saint Basil, for instance, and all the sermons of Saint Leo of Rome---where Salvation was rooted in the Incarnation itself. That is to say, Soteriology was part of Christology; what Jesus accomplishes on our behalf, and for our benefit, depends entirely on who he is. Somehow, nonetheless, this patristic perspective on the Incarnation still left room in my mind for Saint Anselm's "satisfaction theory" of Redemption.

My perspective on this matter began to change in my mid-twenties. In 1963, the year of its publication, I read with great profit the English translation of F. X. Durwell's book, *The Resurrection: A Biblical Study*. This reading was, I think, my first recognized exposure to the thesis that the Resurrection of Christ was essential to the "causality" of Redemption. That is to say, for our eternal Salvation the Resurrection of Jesus was just as essential as his death on the Cross. Indeed, no other explanation would fit Saint Paul's declaration that Christ "was delivered up because of our offenses, and was raised because of our justification" (Romans 4:25). (To this day I am amazed that I had failed to observe this teaching in my extensive reading of Saint Augustine of Hippo, in whose writings the soteriological causality of the Lord's Resurrection is a pervasive theme.)

In 1965 I went away for further theological studies in Italy, where, in due course, I became a student of Stanislas Lyonnet, to whom my personal debt is immense. In recent years Lyonnet's major work, *Sin, Redemption, and Sacrifice*, has been translated into English, but in those days his theology of

Redemption was little known in this country. For me, the major value of Lyonnet's lectures came from his exegesis of the Apostle Paul in the context of the Old Testament theology of sacrifice. I came to see the serious deficiencies in my understanding of sacrifice in the Bible.

In particular Lyonnet demonstrated that the theme of "God's wrath" was not part of the theology of Israel's sacrificial system. Indeed, it was a concept alien to Israel's understanding of blood sacrifice. For example, although the Hebrew Scriptures have a great deal to say about the divine wrath in connection with sin, they say nothing about the divine wrath in connection with the "sin offering." And if the "sin offering" was not related to the wrath of God, how much less the other sacrifices prescribed in the Torah? When the Lord becomes angry in the Old Testament, the anger may be turned away by the offering of incense (a symbol of prayer) but not by blood sacrifice. (Once again, how had I failed to notice something so obvious throughout the Torah?)

I narrate this account of my experience by way of explaining how, when my family and I joined the Orthodox Church, we had no sense of discovering something different new and different with regard to Redemption. With respect to the theology of Salvation, the transition was absolutely seamless. Although I had never read any modern study of Orthodox Soteriology, on entering the Orthodox Church I found her teaching on Salvation identical to what I had already believed for more than forty years. My former study of Soteriology was informed from modern Western sources---Durwell, Lyonnet, Albert Vanhoye, David Stanley, and others---but it prepared me to feel completely at home in the Orthodox Church.

Let me mention that my personal history causes me to wonder if, in fact, the experience of many Orthodox converts---respecting their former beliefs about Salvation---does not represent something of an aberration. I puzzle over this. That is to say, it is not clear to me that my ideas about Redemption were unusual for a Western Christian. I mean, do most non-Orthodox Christians actually believe the soteriological teachings that recent Orthodox converts (to say nothing of Orthodox apologists) ascribe to them? I wonder.

In fact, I can think of a reason to doubt it. Over the past quarter-century I have had frequent occasions to speak to non-Orthodox groups about Orthodox teaching on Salvation. When I thread them through the Soteriology of standard Orthodox teachers---such as Saint Maximus the Confessor, Saint Nicholas Cabasilas, and Vladimir Lossky---my audiences appear to be perfectly comfortable with what they hear. There are almost never expressions of

amazement, as though the listeners were learning something wild and unfamiliar.

This causes me to wonder if the alleged chasm between Western and Orthodox teachings on Redemption is not a tad exaggerated. I don't know, and perhaps I need further instruction on the point. I mention it only in the hope of sparing Orthodox apologists the embarrassment of indiscriminately ascribing to all Western Christians certain views to which they do not, in fact, adhere. (Truth to tell, I have been distressed on more than one occasion to hear Orthodox apologists ascribe the theory of "penal substitutionary atonement" to Saint Anselm himself. This is so wrong.)

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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](mailto:phrii@touchstonemag.com)

Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)

Pastoral Ponderings:  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)