



INCARNATION & REDEMPTION

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“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld His glory, glory as of the only-begotten Son from the Father.”

-John 1:14

“Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows, yet we esteemed him stricken, struck down by God and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and by his stripes we are healed.”

-Isa. 53:4-5

“This work [of redemption] can only be accomplished if there is someone who pays to God, for man's sin, something greater than every existing thing besides God...moreover, whoever can give to God something of his own which surpasses everything that is less than God must be greater than everything that is not God...now, nothing except God surpasses everything that is not God. Therefore, only God can make this satisfaction. But only a man ought to make this satisfaction. For in any other case it would not be man who makes it...and if only God can make this satisfaction and only a man ought to make it: it is necessary that a God-man make it.”

-St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo?* Book II, 6

Mankind after the Fall: Dead in his sins.

From the time of Adam on throughout history, mankind progressed in wickedness and sin: obscuring the image of God by the sins of idolatry and polytheism, perverting the meaning of marriage by polygamy and concubinage, and committing many other offenses against God and man. In short, human history is nothing but a mind-numbing string of murders, slaughters, conquests, pillages, toil, sicknesses, rapine, thefts and blasphemies until man, worn down by years of labor and worry, in death returns to the dust from which he was taken (Gen. 3:19). Man is desperately corrupted by sin. Because of original sin, his concupiscence causes him to commit actual sin, from which he is unable to free himself. Even the best exemplars of faith in the Old Testament (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David) still find themselves entangled in sin.

Promise of a New Covenant

Beginning with His promise to Eve in Genesis 3:15, God consistently held out to His people of the Old Testament the promise of a coming redeemer, a Messiah, who would deliver them from sin and reconcile them with the Father. This redeemer would in Himself fulfill all of the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament and transform mankind, giving them “new hearts” to love God and fulfill His commandments in righteousness.

“Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers when I took

them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt...But this is the covenant which I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it upon their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people. And no longer shall each man teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know Me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sins no more."

-Jer. 31:31-34

"I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances...and you shall be My people, and I will be your God."

-Ezk. 36:25-28

In the fullness of time

"But in the fullness of time, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons," St. Paul teaches in Galatians 4:4-5. Christ came to earth to redeem us from sin and to make us sons of God, or as St. Peter calls it, "partakers of the divine nature" (2 Pet. 1:4). But who is this Jesus Christ who has done this? In our earlier lesson, we discussed the proofs that Christ was divine. Now let us examine what is implied by saying things like Christ is "divine," the "Son of God," and "the Word made flesh."

The Incarnation

In theology, we call the act of God becoming man the "Incarnation," from the Latin *incarnationem* (the act of being made flesh).¹ The Incarnation is the act of the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity assuming human nature in the womb of Mary and coming to the earth as a true man. As man, He loses none of His divinity but rather chooses to cloak it, or as St. Paul says, he "emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant" (Phil. 2:7).

"The unique and altogether singular event of the Incarnation of the Son of God does not mean that Jesus Christ is part God and part man, nor does it imply that he is the result of a confused mixture of the divine and the human. He became truly man while remaining truly God. Jesus Christ is true God and true man. During the first centuries, the Church had to defend and clarify this truth of faith against the heresies that falsified it."

-CCC 464

In order to explain the person of Christ, one has to speak with precision. In the first few centuries of the Church, the great ecumenical councils developed a very specialized language to speak about the mysteries of the Incarnation. The standard definition of what Christ was formulated at the Councils of Nicaea (325), Constantinople (381), Ephesus (431) and

¹ *In + caro* = in the flesh

Chalcedon (451). The traditional formula is that Christ is one Person with two Natures, one human and one divine. Each nature has its own will (a human will and a divine will), both of which are in perfect harmony. He is neither part-God, part-man, nor is His manhood lost in His divinity, nor did His divinity come upon Him later in life and take up His humanity. Rather, He is fully-God and fully-man from the first moment of His conception in the womb and remains so even now at the right hand of the Father.

It is important to get it right on who Christ is, or else none of the rest of the Church's dogmas will make sense. Let's define out terms:

- Understanding what Christ *is* – in so far as a beginning of understanding may be made here below – is essential to understanding what He *does*.
- Christ is one Person in two natures (Trinity is three Persons in one Nature).
 - Nature: What are you? – Nature determines realm of possible actions.
 - Person: Who are you? – Person does the actions.
- Example: As to my nature, I am a human being and everything natural to humanity is natural to me, because I myself am a human. That human being which is me is not just a nature (i.e., my mother did not give birth to a nature, but to a person) but an individual person who is conscious and subject of his own actions. The person is my individuality, the “I” that thinks, feels, acts and makes decisions. It is what I refer to when I say “me,” “myself,” and “I.”

Hypostatic Union

While certain actions and sayings of Christ reflect one or the other of the two natures (when Christ says He is thirsty or hungry, this clearly reflects the human nature while His saying that He is “one with the Father” reflects the divine nature), the natures are joined in such a way that whatever Christ did by virtue of His divinity is also asserted of His humanity and what He does by virtue of His humanity is also asserted of His divinity². This reality is called the “hypostatic union”, which means the union of the two natures in one person. Thus, because Christ is God, it is right to say that God worked as a carpenter in Nazareth 2,000 years ago or to say that God died on the Cross. Likewise, because Christ is also man, it is right to say that a man atoned for sin and rightfully receives divine worship. Nevertheless, when we make these statements, we do not separate the two natures but always realize and acknowledge that it is not as God alone that He works miracles nor as man alone that He works as a carpenter in Nazareth (as if His natures could be separated), but that all He does He does as the God-Man by virtue of the hypostatic union.

“Following the holy Fathers, we unanimously teach and confess one and the same Son, our Lord Jesus Christ: the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man, composed of rational soul and body; consubstantial with the Father as to his divinity and consubstantial with us as to his humanity; “like us in all things but sin”. He was begotten from the Father before all ages as to his divinity and in these last days, for us and for our salvation, was born as to his humanity of the Virgin

² In Latin, this reality is called “Communicatio Idiomata.”

Mary, the Mother of God. We confess that one and the same Christ, Lord, and only-begotten Son, is to be acknowledged in two natures without confusion, change, division or separation. The distinction between the natures was never abolished by their union, but rather the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (prosopon) and one hypostasis.”
-Council of Chalcedon (c. 451)

Manhood

In the early Church, it was not Christ's divinity that was challenged but His manhood. This was the case with one of the earliest heresies, Gnostic Docetism, which was condemned by St. John the Apostle in I John 4:1-3: "Beloved, test the spirits to see whether they are of God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, and every spirit which does not confess Jesus is not of God." The Docetists, while acknowledging Jesus as God, denied that He was also true man (i.e., that He had "come in the flesh") and believed that He only appeared to be a man.³

It is important to note that the human nature was not absorbed by the divine (the error many sects influenced by the New Age movement make today). The Monophysites thought the humanity of Christ was absorbed by His divinity, like a drop of water is lost in the sea. This, too, is false: Christ retained His manhood and still retains it even now; indeed, without His manhood, His death on the cross would have been to no avail, as we will show.

Divinity

Many heresies also denied Christ's true divinity, the most famous of which was the heresy of the Arians, which raged in the Church for over two hundred years (c. 300-500). Arianism denied that Christ was truly God in the same way as God the Father, and instead posited Him as a lesser being, a sort of demi-God who was created. "There was a time when the Son was not" was the creed of the Arians. This view was condemned by the Councils of Nicaea (325) and Constantinople (381).

Arianism, however, has again reared its ugly head in the modern world. Jehovah's Witnesses, Mormons (two of the fastest growing sects in the world) and liberal Protestantism all assert a kind of modified Arianism where the divinity of Christ and His equality in nature with the Father are denied.

Principles of the Atonement

Now that we understand who Christ *is*, we can understand what He *does*. The sacrificial death of Christ on the cross is referred to as the Atonement. It is by this Atonement that man has been redeemed. Before looking at the Atonement itself, we must clarify some principles first:

³ Islam believes just this with reference to the death of Christ. According to them, Christ did not really die on the cross; it was only in appearance that He died. This belief is founded on the old Jewish notion that it would not be fitting for the true Messiah to suffer, especially such an ignominious death.

- Atonement refers to the satisfaction of a demand. In the narrower sense it is taken to mean the reparation of an insult. This occurs through a voluntary performance that outweighs the injustice done.
- Reparation must be made by the one who committed the outrage, or at least one who can legitimately act on behalf of the one who has committed the insult.
- The gravity of the insult is relative to the majesty of the one insulted. It is nothing at all to kick a stone; it can be wrong to kick a dog; kick a person hard enough, you may be fined, sued or imprisoned; attack a policeman, you will definitely go to jail; attack the President, you may go to prison for life. What happens to us if we, through our sins, offend and outrage God?
- Because God is infinitely majestic, good, holy and powerful, a sin against Him is infinite in magnitude.
- It follows, therefore, that because men are finite beings, we cannot adequately repay this debt we owe God because the debt of sin is infinite.
- Because the debt is infinite, only God can pay it.
- Because it is man's debt, man must pay it.
- Therefore, the only one who can adequately atone for sin is a God-Man.

Because Christ was divine, the voluntary sacrifice of His blood was of infinite merit, enough to atone for every sin that has ever been committed and every sin that ever will be committed until the end of time. Because He was a man, and a perfect Man at that, He was able to offer the sacrifice of Himself on behalf of the entire human race (vicarious atonement), just as Adam by virtue of his fatherhood of the human race sinned on behalf of the entire race. Thus man is reconciled to God and enabled to become sons and daughters of God, partakers of the divine nature.

For whom did Christ die?

“In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace which he lavished upon us.”

-Eph. 1:7

Though Christ poured out His life on the cross, it is the teaching of the Church that even the smallest drop of Christ's blood would have been enough to redeem all of mankind because, as a Divine Person, it has infinite value (Pope Clement VI, *Unigenitus Dei Filius*, 1343). Therefore, Christ's sacrifice on the cross is not only sufficient to atone for all sin, but is abundantly *more* than sufficient (this is called the “superabundance” of Christ's merit). It is enough to save every

human being who was ever born or will ever be born. Christ's death is thus objectively enough to redeem everybody.

However, wishing to maintain the true freedom of the human race in keeping with God's perfect love, the application of the merits of the death of Christ is *subjective* and depends on the response of man to Christ's saving actions. Christ commands that to receive this forgiveness and sanctification, man must fulfill certain conditions: faith (Eph. 2:8), baptism (Mark 16:16), perseverance in charity (2 Pet. 1:3-11), etc.

Effects of the Atonement

The Atonement is what effects our justification, which the Council of Trent defines “as being a translation from the state in which man is born a child of the first Adam, to the state of grace and of the adoption of the sons of God through the second Adam, Jesus Christ our Savior” (Trent, Session VI, Chap. IV).

“Furthermore, justification is not only a remission of sins but also the sanctification and renewal of the inward man through the voluntary reception of grace and gifts whereby an unjust man becomes just and from being an enemy becomes a friend, that he may be an heir according to hope of life everlasting” (Trent, Session VI, Chap. VII).

The atonement delivers us from sin, makes us sons and daughters of the Father, restores us to a state of friendship with God, elevates us by grace to a state better than that enjoyed by Adam, through grace enables us to keep the commandments and attain true righteousness and holiness and transforms us to be capable of spending eternity in God's presence in heaven.

Heretical Views on Justification

Here are some heretical views on justification. Though they do not often go by these names today, the ideas are still prevalent. Watch out for them!

Heresy

Judaizing: We are saved by keeping the ceremonial prescriptions of the Old Testament.

Pelagianism: We can save ourselves through being good; good people go to heaven regardless of the merits of Christ.

Orthodoxy

While the moral principles of the old law are still binding, the ritual aspects of it were only meant for the Jews of the Old Testament.

Salvation apart from the grace of God is not possible; if it were not for the grace of God, we could not be saved. Our deeds are made meritorious by virtue of the atonement.

Sola Fide: It is faith in Christ alone that saves us; it is not necessary to do good deeds or even to give up sin. Faith alone suffices.

Faith in the Revelation of God plus persevering in charity and abiding in hope save us. This faith is put into action by obeying the commands of Christ and the teaching of the Church.

Calvinism: Christ did not die for all, but only for the Elect.

Christ died for all, regardless of where their eternal destiny is.

Superstition: You can be saved just by going through the external rituals of the Church (baptism, etc.) without the necessity of faith or good works.

The sacraments of the Church are of no profit if not accompanied by the necessary interior dispositions.

Protestant : Justification does not actually make us holy; it is just a judicial declaration by God saying we are holy. In reality, we will always be corrupt (dung covered in snow). Justification is a legal fiction.

Justification truly effects our sanctification and makes us holy not just in name but in fact.

For further reading: Isa. 53:1-12; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezk. 36:16-32; John 1:1-18; St. Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo*; Canons of the Council of Chalcedon (451); Canons of the Council of Trent, Session VI (1547); *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §461-478; *Unigenitus Dei Filius* of Pope Clement VI (1343)