

## On the Beauty of Salvation

In the midst of the 4<sup>th</sup> century Arian crisis, it was St. Athanasius who first formulated a central thesis of Catholic thought: It is only because Jesus Christ is both true God and true man that he can unite humanity with God, and in doing so save the human race. If he were not truly God, but only a creature, he would not have the capacity to save us. If he were not truly human, it is not our humanity that he would save. (c.f. *Against the Arians*, II, 70) This soteriological argument invites one to think about the final purpose of human existence. It is only because God takes the initiative to invite us by grace to know him in himself and love him in eternal life that we come to understand what we are made for. At the same time, St. Athanasius' argument tells us something about who God is: in Christ we encounter the human visage of the Father, one who unveils to us who God is in himself. This constellation of ideas was developed in defense of the Council of Nicaea in the fourth and fifth centuries by great figures like Gregory of Nazianzus, Hilary of Poitiers, and Augustine of Hippo, who formulated the first systematic reflections on the mystery of the Holy Trinity. This same complex of ideas is also presented with theological acumen and spiritual profundity by the recent work of the International Theological Commission, *Gesù Cristo, Figlio di Dio, Salvatore. 1700° anniversario del Concilio Ecumenico di Nicea (325-2025)*.

One of the great strengths of this document — and there are many — is located in its reflection on the Trinitarian implications of the Incarnation of God in history. If God has become human, then we can come to know who God truly is eternally. What can we say, then, about the mystery of the Holy Trinity and the inner life of God? And what “novelty” does this revelation of God import for an interpretation of human existence, so as to shine a light upon the whole of creation, especially the human person made in the image of God? Here the theologians of the ITC follow a classical pathway by commenting upon the Creed article by article, to trace out the shape of various mysteries of the faith as they relate to one another: the Trinity, creation, the human person, and salvation. In these reflections they harken continually to the central mystery of the Catholic faith, that pertaining to God in himself as Triune. The constellation of truths that emerge from God, and that reveal God, in turn evoke in us an appreciation of the inner beauty of the Trinity.

A central theme that emerges in this regard in relation to the Christian conception of God is that of relationality or relational personhood. If Christ is truly God and is the eternal Son of the Father, then there is paternity in God that is eternal. “God has always been a Father, and has never been a ‘solitary’ God.” (n. 9) The Son proceeds from the Father by eternal generation, as his Logos, and the Spirit proceeds from the Father by eternal spiration, as his Spirit of holiness and love (*agape*). Here the idea is not that the Father exists before the Son and the Holy Spirit, as if he first possesses the divine nature in exclusivity. Rather, the Father eternally communicates to the Son and to the Holy Spirit all that he has and is as God. He is an eternal font of trinitarian life. The Son is equally God, even as he personally derives from the Father, “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God.” On this view, then, the Father is personally relational in all he is, as he is forever the paternal origin of the Word and the Spirit. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are forever in personal relation to one another, a relation of communion, of *Logos* and of *Agape*. Understood in this light, the human community can be said to consist also of relationships of persons. Of course, our relationality is not constitutive of our identity in the same way as that of the Trinitarian mystery. We can fail to discover or even refuse ways of being perfectly personal and relational, such as when we fail to live in rational truthfulness and love, *logos* and *agape*. God in himself is ever greater than our truth or personal perfection, and is a reality we can only come

to resemble by analogy. Nevertheless, the uncreated communion of persons who is Triune has called us into existence so as to commune with God in the grace of Christ and so too with one another in the Eucharistic communion of the Church.

Equally important here is the notion of consubstantiality. The ITC document helpfully notes that conciliar teaching underscores a double consubstantiality in Christ. Christ is “homousios” with the Father as true God. This means that there is only one God, since all that is found in the Father as Lord and God is found in the Son, and vice versa. So then in Jesus Christ we truly possess the real presence of God in history. Even in the mystery of his agony, crucifixion, and death, Christ is “Emmanuel,” God with us. God reveals that he is with us even in human suffering. Indeed God has made manifest precisely in the mystery of the Cross his capacity to endure and overcome human suffering, through kenotic humility, truth, and love. At the same time, Christ is also consubstantial with us, having the same essential human nature as all other human beings. He lived a genuine historical life in both body and soul, one marked by both real human development and natural limitations. Here again we see God’s profound solidarity with us. Even as God remains incomprehensible to us, ever greater than our conceptions, God has also lived out a truly human life among us so as to make himself intelligible to us, and so as to introduce to us the mystery of his own inner-trinitarian communion. In so doing God has opened our human experience outward toward eternal vistas, even from within the historical conditions of our finite manner of being. Understanding things in this light, one can only admire the inner beauty and profundity of the Incarnation, as a manifestation of God’s eternal identity, and of human salvation, simultaneously.

St. John Henry Newman remarked that a religion is not true merely because it professes a creed, but at the same time, if any religion really is true, then it must indeed profess a creed. To seek the truth about God is to seek to think in about the common truth of the Church, and thus in a credal fashion. The International Theological Commission has provided a great service to the Catholic Church in this 1700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Council of Nicaea. In doing so, its theologians have also reminded us of a core truth regarding credal statements. They not only introduce us into a greater understanding of the mystery of God, by a search for understanding. They also promote union with God, since we can only come to love intensively what we first come to know and contemplation with wonder. Rightly interpreted, the deepest Christian mysticism is not at odds with the study of the Church’s dogmatic symbols. Rather, the two aspirations go together and should always complement one another. Those who study this new document in greater theological perspicuity may in turn realistically aspire toward a deeper union with God.

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