

MADE IN HIS IMAGE

Many people in the world believe in the one God. But so many of them find it impossible to imagine that God has become man in Jesus Christ. The very idea that God could come to earth and suffer all that we suffer in life is incomprehensible to them.

People who balk at the idea of the incarnation often believe in something which may seem more incredible yet. They embrace the teaching that *“God created man in his image; in the divine image he created him; male and female he created them”*(Genesis 1:27).

How could human beings like us be in God’s image? We know ourselves and our weaknesses. Surely the author of Genesis knew human nature also. How could this author make such a claim? And how could the Spirit of God, who inspires the Scriptures, speak to us through these words?

Yet we know that all creation reflects something of God who is the Source of its being. It is God’s presence which upholds everything that is, so that in some way everything mirrors its Creator. The great forces of nature – the galaxies and planets, the mountains and oceans – suggest to many the power and majesty of God, “charged with the grandeur of God” in the words of poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Others find the wisdom of God evident in the precise arrangement of even the tiniest organism or of the ecosystem. From ancient Greeks to 21st century scientists people have marveled at the “golden ratio” (1.618 or ϕ), which reflects an order underlying things as diverse as atoms, brainwaves, the graphic arts and music. People of all ages have seen this order as pointing to God who has brought together everything in an other-

wise unrivalled precision. Yet in mankind there is something which mirrors God in a way that distinguishes us from the rest of creation.

While the rest of creation reflects God’s wisdom and power, mankind reflects God at the heart of His very being. God is love, we read in the New Testament, and we are the creature that can love and so reflect the love of God. To be human, then, is to be a lover in the image of the One who is love itself.

IMAGE AND LIKENESS

Seeing God as the Holy Trinity, Christians believe that the relationship of Father, Son and Holy Spirit is at the core of God’s very being. God is a communion of love and this communion is not closed in upon itself but is extended to embrace all creation. In a similar way relationship is at the heart of our being. We are made for communion with one another and most importantly for communion with our Creator, God. Not only are human beings created by God, but we are created in God and for Him. In the broadest sense we are made for worship.

“Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.”(Genesis 1:26)

These words introduce the story of our creation in the book of Genesis. Many Church Fathers, like St. Irenaeus, saw in them a distinction between what we already are and what we have the chance to become. From our creation in God’s image we have the innate ability to love. We can know what is good and choose to embrace it. As God’s love is extended freely to His creation, mankind in His image is given the freedom to extend our love or to withhold it.

To be created after God’s likeness means something more. It means that we were created with the fullest possibility of relating to God and to one another already in view. The fully developed human being would be one fully resembling the One who made us.

At mankind’s creation, St Irenaeus wrote, man was a child. Just as infants are born with the potential to develop into adults, mankind was created as a spiritual infant. That he was to develop was clear; the certainty that he would mature fully was not.

WOUNDING THE LIKENESS

The book of Genesis teaches that the relationship of men and women with their Creator was quickly ruptured. Adam and Eve are tempted to become “like God” on their own, despite the warning that they “would surely die” if they did not follow the directions of their Maker. Striking out on their own, they showed a mistrust of God which altered their relationship forever. The image of God in humanity would remain; the likeness was so scarred that it became impossible for men and women to fulfill their potential as God intended. The only One who could perfectly realize human nature was the eternal image of the Father, His only-begotten Son: *“He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation, for by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible... All things were created through him and for Him... For it pleased the Father that in Him all the fullness should dwell”*(Colossians 1:15-19).

And so the Word of God, the icon of the Father, would become human to completely fulfill human nature in Himself. As a Sufi poet once wrote, “When God wanted to see His

face He sent Jesus to the world.” And because He had become one with us, the Son of God could restore the likeness of God in us as well. Created in God’s image, we could re-embark on the journey of fellowship with God in Christ, our *“hope of glory”* (Colossians 1:27).

Only the Lord Jesus truly reflects for us the love of God. But those who have put on Christ in baptism and who sustain their union with Him will be transformed into *“partakers of the divine nature”* (2 Peter 1:4), sharers in His likeness. This transformation, which the Fathers called theosis (deification), is the goal of our life as Christians; but it is also the journey to that goal. What begins here is meant to be completed in the age to come.

RESTORING THE LIKENESS

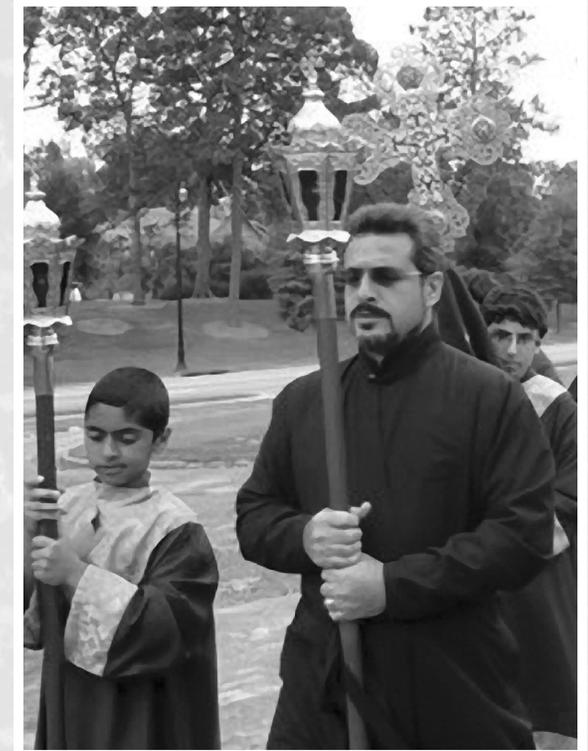
Theosis as a process begins with baptism. We begin allowing the gift of our baptism to impact our life when we make a godly life the main goal of our existence. We try to keep the commandments, to observe the Lord’s precepts on prayer, fasting and almsgiving, and to live the life of the Church. Theosis will grow in us as we become more aware of God’s presence within us and in our life at every moment: an awareness cultivated perhaps by the Jesus Prayer. We discover the meaning of St Gregory of Sinai’s words: “Become what you are. Find Him who is already yours. Listen to Him who never ceases speaking to you. Own Him who already owns you.”

As we begin entrusting our entire life to Christ God, we may understand Christ’s words, *“Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect,”* (Matthew 5:48) in terms of what we do: “If I am accomplishing all this, I am becoming perfect in God’s sight.” A deeper sign that

we are growing in the journey of theosis is when we seek to become more like Jesus the Servant. As St Paul urged, *“Have among yourselves the same attitude that is also yours in Christ Jesus, who – though he was in the form of God – did not regard equality with God something to be grasped. Rather he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, coming in human likeness and found in human appearance, he humbled himself, becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross”* (Philippians 2:5-8).

As Christ’s attitudes of humility, obedience and mutual service become more ingrained in us, we reflect ever more the life of God. Our love for others and for all creation grows as we reflect the mind of Christ in us. We become what we are: people who live by God’s divine life in us and partake in His divine nature.

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