

Why Did God Become Man?

The Unconditionality of the Divine Incarnation



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THE MYSTERY of the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God effects the deification of man. The Holy Fathers emphasize the truth that God became man in order to make man God. Only through the Incarnate Son and Word of God can one attain to deification.

There is a debate among contemporary theologians about the unconditionality or conditionality of the Incarnation; that is, whether the Incarnation presupposes the Fall of Adam or does not presuppose it, which means that it would have happened independently of the Fall of man. This debate goes on because there are certain passages of the Holy Fathers of the Church that bear on the issue.

It should be noted, to begin with, that the Holy Fathers do not deal with this question in a scholastic manner; that is, they do not speak about it in hypothetical terms. They never addressed the issue of whether Christ *would have* [emphasis that of the translator] become incarnate in the event that the Fall of Adam had not occurred. Such questions presuppose an excessive application of logic in an attempt to understand the mysteries of God through reason, something distinctive of scholastic theology, not of Orthodox theology. The theology of the Orthodox Church treats of events which

actually occurred, its primary concern being the cure of human nature. With an eye to fallen human nature, it occupies itself with how to cure human nature so that it might attain to deification, which came to pass through the Incarnation of God.

According to Patristic teaching, through the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God, the Divine nature was hypostatically united with human nature in the Person of the Word and human nature was deified; thus, the Incarnation was the only real medicine for the salvation and deification of man. Through Holy Baptism man can become a member of the Body of Christ, and through Divine Communion he can commune of the actual deified Body of Christ, which He assumed from His All-Holy Mother. Deification could not have taken place had it not been for this hypostatic union between the Divine and human natures. For this reason, the Incarnation was the ultimate purpose of the creation of man. Joined to this purpose, through the Fall of Adam, were the Suffering and Cross of Christ.

St. Maximos underscores this point when he says:

“The Incarnation took place for the salvation of nature; [Christ’s] suffering was for the redemption of those held fast by death on account of sin.”

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ST. NIKODEMOS THE HAGIORITE also treats of this issue and, naturally, in analyzing the teaching of the Fathers, he arrives at the conclusion that the Incarnation of Christ was not a consequence of the Fall of man, but the original purpose of his creation (unconditional), because in this way man was required, and was able, to attain to deification.

This appears to be correct, when we reflect that it was not possible for the Fall of Adam to “compel” God to become incarnate; that is, it was not possible for Christ to assume human nature eternally, because of the Fall of man. In that case, we would end up with the conclusion that the Fall had to happen in order to compel God to

become incarnate and that, ultimately, the Fall was not a bad thing, but a blessing!

St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite expounds this theological issue in an outstanding treatise, which he entitles: “*A Defense of My Annotation Concerning Our Lady, the Theotokos, in the Book Unseen Warfare.*” This treatise is a model of theological discourse. St. Nikodemos was a great theologian of the Church, because he assimilated the teaching of the Fathers to a great extent and he expresses it effectively and fruitfully.

The occasion for the composition of his “*Apologia*” was a sentence in the book *Unseen Warfare* that he published.

He wrote:

The entire noetic and sensible world was created for this end, that is, for the sake of our Lady, the Theotokos, and our Lady, the Theotokos, was, in turn, created for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This statement surprised certain theologians of his day, who expressed doubts about it. For this reason, St. Nikodemos writes at the beginning of his “*Apologia*”:

Since certain savants, who devote themselves, in particular, to sacred theology, upon reading my annotation concerning our Lady, the Theotokos..., have raised doubts, ... I will here present a brief defense in order to resolve their perplexity.

Especially impressive is the fact that the Saint begins his “*Apologia*” with great humility, without maligning or truculently criticizing the theologians of his day who criticized him. He does not offer his clarification with bitterness, but with sobriety and equanimity. Indeed, theological issues require serious dialogue, because otherwise the All-Holy Spirit cannot act.

After setting forth all of his theological arguments, which we will look at subsequently, he concludes by writing the following:

I reckon that these few comments constitute an adequate defense for judicious arbiters and readers of my aforementioned annotation concerning our Lady, the Theotokos, and

I beg them not to slander me imprudently; for I did not write this annotation on the basis of my own opinion and teaching, but following the teaching of the aforementioned theologians. If there are any who, motivated perhaps by rancor (which I hope it is not the case), censure me, let them rather censure the God-bearing Maximos, Gregory of Thessalonica, the great Andrew [of Crete], and the others, from whom I have derived this teaching.

This passage is astonishing, and it shows us how to deal with similar instances. In the first place, St. Nikodemos speaks with great courtesy. He characterizes his critics as judicious readers and begs them not to slander him imprudently. He hopes that they are not motivated by rancor. Although he knows that they are, in fact, possessed of rancor, he nonetheless refrains from mentioning this explicitly and categorically. He then emphasizes that he is not expressing his own opinions, but setting forth the teaching of the Holy Fathers of the Church, from whom he derived this wording.

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LET US now take a closer look at the theological viewpoint of St. Nikodemos, according to which “the entire noetic and sensible world was created for this end, that is, for the sake of our Lady, the *Theotokos*, and our Lady, the *Theotokos*, was, in turn, created for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ,” that is, that the Incarnation of Christ was the original purpose and end of creation. In other words, this is the way in which the union of man with God would have taken place. Consequently, the Incarnation was independent of the Fall of Adam.

In order to support this viewpoint, he uses passages from Holy Scripture and the Holy Fathers of the Church.

From Holy Scripture he uses mainly three passages. The first is from Proverbs, where it is said: “*The Lord made Me the beginning of His ways, for His works. He established Me before time was, in the beginning, before He made the earth*” (Proverbs 8:22-23). The other passage is from the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Colossians, in

which he calls Christ *“the Firstborn of all creation”*: *“Who is the image of the invisible God, the Firstborn of all creation”* (Colossians 1:15). He also mentions a passage from the Epistle of the Apostle Paul to the Romans, in which he says: *“For whom He did foreknow, He also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the Firstborn among many brethren”* (Romans 8:29).

When he interprets these passages on the basis of the teaching of the Holy Fathers, he says that they do not refer to the Godhead—because the Word was neither created by God, nor is He first among creatures, as Arios said—but to the humanity of Christ, which

“God foresaw before any other thing as the beginning of His Divine and eternal decrees, the first of all created things.”

Thus, the mystery of the Incarnate Economy of the Son and Word of God is the beginning of all the ways of the Lord; it is the first of all created things

“and is foreordained before the foreordination of everyone who is being saved.”

The passage of St. Maximos the Confessor which supports this viewpoint is striking. We will quote a large portion of this passage, because it has great significance and importance.

This is the great and hidden mystery (viz., the mystery of the Divine Incarnation); this is the blessed end for which all things were created.

The incarnation of Christ is the great and hidden mystery for the sake of which the Triune God created the entire world.

And St. Maximos continues:

[T]his is the foreordained Divine purpose of the origin of existing things, defining which we call it the foreordained end, for the sake of which all things exist, though it itself exists for the sake of nothing else.

This sentence is also astounding, because it shows that the mystery of the Incarnation is the Divine purpose that was foreordained

from the origin of the creation of existing things and, of course, everything came about for this purpose, while it did not come about for the sake of anything else. That is to say, the decree concerning the Incarnation is anterior. This should, of course, be understood from the standpoint that in God there is no time.

St. Maximos goes on to say quite explicitly:

[W]ith this end in view, God created the essences of existing things; this, properly, is the consummation of Providence and of what is foreordained, whereby the things created by God are recapitulated in Him.

This passage from St. Maximos is most astonishing and altogether characteristic of his thinking, and it cannot be disputed or interpreted differently. For, if one puts this passage in the context of the entire theological teaching of St. Maximos, he will discover that the deification of man indeed takes place through the hypostatic union of the Divine and human natures in the Person of the Word of God.

Thus, the *Panagia*, from whom Christ assumed flesh, was the culmination of the entire creation of the world, noetic and sensible. Man is the summation of the entire creation, the microcosm within the macrocosm. The healthy and perfect fruit of man is the *Panagia*, who gave her flesh to Christ. That is why it is only through Christ that the recapitulation of the entire creation occurs.

When St. Gregory Palamas mentions the confirmation by the Father at the time of Christ's Baptism in the River Jordan, "*This is my beloved Son,*" he says that this utterance shows that all of the events that took place in the Old Testament, the lawgivings, the promises, and the adoptions into sonship,¹ were imperfect

"and were not uttered or performed in accordance with the antecedent will of God, but were directed towards the present end; and through what has now been accomplished, they, too, have found fulfillment."

In what follows, he says that not only the events of the Old Testament, but also the foundation and creation of the world were directed towards Christ.

He goes on to emphasize that the very creation of man was also directed towards this purpose. **Man was formed in the image of God** “*so that he might be able at some point to contain the Archetype.*” Here, St. Gregory Palamas makes a clear distinction between the antecedent will of God, which is His good pleasure, the good and perfect will—and this is the Incarnation of the Word of God—and the concessive will of God, which is the legislation of the Old Testament. **The Incarnation of Christ is the antecedent Divine will and is therefore independent of the Fall of man.**

In his discussion of these passages, St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite concludes:

Do you understand that God made man in His image for this reason, that he might be able, through the Incarnation, to contain the Archetype? Hence, God created man as the link between the noetic and the sensible world and as the recapitulation and epitome of all creatures for this purpose, that, in being united with man, He might be united with all creatures and that things in Heaven and things on earth might be recapitulated in Christ, as Paul says; and that Creator and creation might become hypostatically one, according to the God-bearing Maximos.

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THAT THE Divine Economy, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son and Word of God, is the antecedent will of God is evident also from the fact that it benefitted the Angelic Orders, too. We know full well that man sinned, but not the Angels, who unceasingly glorify God. Since the Angels benefitted from the Incarnation, this means that it really is the antecedent good and perfect will of God, and not His concessive will.

According to the holy Niketas Stethatos, the Angels were not easily moved towards evil, but, after the Incarnation, and especially after the Resurrection of Christ, they became unmoved towards evil, not “*by nature, but by Grace.*” They acquired moral stability, accord-

ing to St. John of Damascus, and they received immutability, according to St. Gregory Palamas.

Thus, man, too, would have received deification, by Grace, through the Incarnation of Christ, even if the Fall had not occurred.

We should, of course, say once again that the Fathers did not deal with this issue in hypothetical terms, since such a way of thinking is characteristic of scholastic theology; but we used this hypothetical proposition in order to emphasize, in particular, the positive aspect of the matter, that the deification of man comes about through Christ.

Through the Incarnation of Christ, apart from achieving moral stability, the Angels become more receptive to the illumination of the mysteries.

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ST. NIKODEMOS employs another argument to show that the Incarnation is the ancient counsel, as the Prophet Isaiah terms it, since it is the original and first of all the other counsels of God.

In God there exist **essence**, **hypostases**, and **energy**. The energy by which God communicates with creatures is more **external**, the hypostasis is more **internal**, and the essence is most **internal**.

“In accordance with these three aspects, God possesses three general relationships from all eternity.”

The Father communicates from all eternity, according to essence, with the Son and the Spirit, begetting the Son and causing the Holy Spirit to proceed.

“The Son possesses the relationship of communicating with humanity according to hypostasis, and through this relationship He foreknew and foreordained His actual union with humanity in time.”

As well,

“God possesses, from all eternity, the relationship... of communicating according to energy with the other creatures, and through this relationship He foreknew all noetic and sensible creatures and foreordained that they would come into being.”

Since the relationship according to hypostasis is more internal than the relationship according to energy, for this reason, foreknowledge of the union according to hypostasis of Divine and human nature that would come about at the appropriate time is prior to, and causative of, the union according to energy.

This is evident also from the words of the Holy Fathers to the *Panagia*, who is the person that served the mystery of the Incarnation, by giving her flesh in order that this hypostatic union of Divine and human nature might come about.

That is why St. Andrew of Crete, in referring to the *Panagia*, says, among other things: The *Theotokos* is

[t]he consummation of the covenants that God has made with us; this is the disclosure of the hidden depths of Divine incomprehensibility; this is the purpose foreordained from all ages by the Creator of the ages; this is the fulfillment of the Divine oracles; this is the ineffable and supremely unknowable counsel of God's preëternal solicitude for man.

This theological viewpoint becomes acceptable if we reflect that Christ is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the creation of the world and the deification of man. Only from this perspective can we see that the mystery of the Incarnation is independent of the Fall of man. St. Maximos says that our Lord Jesus Christ

“is the beginning and middle and end of all the ages, of the past and the present and the future.”

In his interpretation, St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite says that this mystery is the **beginning** of creatures, because the foreordination of the mystery was the beginning and cause of the foreordination and creation of all creatures.

It is the **middle** because “*it gave fullness to the foreknowledge of God*” and so gave moral stability to the Angels and immortality, incorruption, and salvation to men.

It is also the **end**, because this mystery “*became both to Angels and to men and to the whole of creation perfection, deification, glory, and blessedness.*”

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AFTER analyzing this theological notion, St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite arrives at two conclusions.

The first:

It was indispensable that the mystery of the Incarnation should come to pass, the first, principal, and intrinsic reason being that this mystery was the antecedent will of God, as we said, along with St. Gregory of Thessalonica, having as its motive cause the infinite, essential, and supremely good goodness of God; or rather, it was the very inmost depth of the Father's goodness, as the God-bearing Maximus said. The second reason is that it was necessary for all creatures, noetic and sensible, as their beginning, middle, and end, as demonstrated.

The second:

Our Lady, the Theotokos, as the most proximate and direct means and the necessary joint cause of such a mystery (for the flesh of Christ is the flesh of Mary, according to the Divine Augustine), was foreknown and foreordained by God before the other creatures, while the other creatures were foreordained and came into existence for her sake; for, this is the foreordained purpose of God, to wit, the end for which the other creatures came into existence, as the Divine Andrew stated above.

It might appear at first sight that what we have set forth here, basing ourselves on the teaching of the Holy Fathers, pertains to theoretical issues which do not have any connection with spiritual

life. This, however, is erroneous, because dogma has a profound and close connection with the spiritual life of man. Such a truth is demonstrated in this theological teaching.

From all that we have seen, it is evident that **the Word of God became incarnate, not in order to propitiate Divine justice, as Western theologians say, but in order to deify human nature, out of charity and love for mankind.** The propitiation of Divine justice adds a legalistic dimension to the spiritual life, since it shows that all of the asceticism that we practice is aimed [supposedly] at propitiating God.

However, God is not in need of healing; rather, it is we who need healing. That is why the Incarnation of Christ was the antecedent will of God, the ultimate purpose of the creation of man. **Man could not attain to communion with God, were it not for the hypostatic union of Divine and human nature in Christ.** For there is a great difference between the created and the Uncreated. The created could not be united with the Uncreated, were it not for this hypostatic union of the created and the Uncreated in the Person of Christ.

What was added to this purpose through the Fall of man were the Suffering, the Cross, and the death of Christ. And these, of course, are to be explained by the fact that Christ, through His Incarnation, assumed absolutely pure, but nonetheless mortal and passible, human nature.

I am bound to conclude that St. Nikodemos the Hagiorite, as is apparent from these few points that we have mentioned, is a great theologian and Father of the Church, who stands within the Patristic and ecclesiastical Tradition. He is an Orthodox theologian who views the salvation of man in terms of healing and on the basis of Orthodox presuppositions.

If there are some who see things differently, it is because they do not know the teaching of St. Nikodemos and read him fragmentarily and through the prism of their own presuppositions.

To them the Saint repeats the words that he directed to the detractors of his own day:

I beg them not to slander me imprudently; for I did not write this annotation on the basis of my own opinion and teaching, but following the teaching of the aforementioned theologians. If there are any who, motivated perhaps by rancor (which I hope it is not the case), censure me, let them rather censure the God-bearing Maximos, Gregory of Thessalonica, the great Andrew [of Crete], and the others, from whom I have derived this teaching.

“To the Bestower of the beginning and the end is due glory.”



*Source: Archimandrite Hierotheos Blachos, “Τὸ Ἀπροϋπόθετο τῆς Θείας Ἐνσαρκώσεως” [The unconditionality of the divine incarnation], *Ἐκκλησιαστικὴ Ἀλήθεια*, No. 355 (16 December 1992).

Note

1. Cf. St. Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit*, §35, *Patrologia Graeca*, Vol. XXXII, col. 128D.