

Confessing Christ Yesterday and Today: A Christological Exploration

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The second article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed presents to us, as the object of our faith, the second person of the Holy Trinity, the Incarnate Logos, who is expressed, lived and experienced in our Christian faith in the light and inter-relation of the other two persons through the communion of the Holy Trinity. And that upon no lesser authority than that of »the pioneer and perfecter of our faith« (Heb 12:2) who in the persons of the apostles gave this command to us, »Believe in God, believe also in me« (Jn 14:1). Nor is this spoken on behalf of himself, but on behalf of the Father who sent him for »this is his commandment that we should believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ ...« (1 John 3:23).

Therefore, according to the Son's prescription, the Father's injunction and the sacramental institution, we are baptized, which means we believe in the name of the Father and Son by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus Christ is presented here under a threefold prescription: firstly, by his Incarnation in the light of salvation; secondly, Jesus Christ suffering and crucified for us; thirdly, his resurrection which overcomes all evil powers, and the Kingdom will come.

The intention of the reflections is not to enter into a systematic theological development of these three prescriptions because Christology, proper in Christ's Tradition and history, of course, requires time and space for analysis and theological reflection. What is needed for the time being, are some reflections concerning what we might call the Christic mechanism of the Creed's soteriology challenging the world today.

The failure of the »quest for the historical Jesus«, sanctioned by Albert Schweitzer at the beginning of this century, gave rise to an abundance of modern christologies, which, of course, cannot all be reviewed here. Their common goal is to formulate and interpret the Christian confession in such a way as to explain its impact over two thousand years of human history and, at the same time, make it understandable to modern man. Such new christologies can be divided into two broad categories: the christologies which accept as their point of departure, the divine, personal identity of Jesus as Lord (Kyrios); and the christological systems which although they admit that through the life and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth the Second person of the Trinity is revealed, still seek philosophical or psychological reductions of the early Christian belief in the divinity of Christ¹.

¹ As an example of clear classification of Christologies according to that criterion, see *R. Prenter, Connaître Christ*, Delachaux, Neuchâtel, 1966, pp. 12 ff. The author, a Danish Lutheran theologian, considers this French book as something of a »retraction« of his former Christological views expressed in his well-known *Dogmatics*

Christological variety, of course, is not a new phenomenon today. From the 4th–8th century, the identity of Christ was debated both on substantial and terminological grounds. The difference with our times, however, is that both and heretics of ancient times believe in the experience of a visible Church.

Today, much more credibility is given to scientific methodology². This does not mean that the Fathers rejected the science of their time; quite the contrary. Theologians today can and must continue to take any positive insights about Christ's person into account and, in particular, about Christ's full and authentic humanity. These are the key for today's debate on Christology. But where is the *criterion* by which such insights can be approached critically? How to avoid the wholesale modernism or the attractiveness of simple facts without falling into obscurity? It is on this point, it seems, that a distinct cleavage exists between those who take the divinity of Jesus for granted and those who do not.

The Nicene Creed is the most solemn commitment to the divinity of Christ made by the undivided Church since the apostolic times. The Creed itself, and its eventual final triumph at the end of the fourth century, did not result from a debate on Christ's humanity, but from disagreement on the nature of His divinity³.

The Christian faith, as it has been understood until now, stands or falls by the truth and is related to the doctrine of the Incarnation — that Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of the Father, became man and lived and died on earth. Therefore, the Christological starting point of our understanding of truth or rather the identification of our concept of truth with Christ, raises the important and so significant question as to what kind of Christology we have in mind when we make this identification. It is possible to envisage at least two kinds of Christology: firstly, we may understand Christ as an individual, seen objectively and historically, presenting Himself for us as the truth. With this way of understanding Christ, as John Zizioulas affirms⁴, the distance between Him and us is bridged with the help of certain means which serve as vehicles for truth to communicate itself to us; for example, His spoken words incorporated in the Scriptures and perhaps tradition — transmitted, interpreted or even expounded through magisterium — all being realized with the assistance or under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Secondly, it is possible to envisage a type of Christology in which Christ, although a particular person, cannot be conceived in Himself as an individual.

(German edition, *Schöpfung und Erlösung*, Göttingen, 1958–1960). This opinion is shared also by *J. Meyendorff*, see his article, *Christ's Humanity: The Paschal Mystery*, *St. Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 1 (1987), pp. 6–7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 6.

³ Cf. the excellent article of *J. Romanides*, *St. Cyril's »One Physis or Hypostasis of God, the Logos Incarnate«* and Chalcedon, in: *Christ in East and West*, ed. by *Paul R. Fries and Tiran Nersoyan*, Mercer University Press, Macon, USA, 1987, pp. 15f. Fr. J. Romanides presents the whole Cyrillian Christological debate in the period of the Chalcedon Council.

⁴ Cf. *J. Zizioulas*, *Being as Communion*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1985, pp. 110–111.

God's Revelation as I am that I am

The human spirit hungers for knowledge — for entire, integral knowledge. Nothing can destroy our longing to know and, naturally, our ultimate craving is for knowledge of primordial Being, of Whom or What actually exists. All through the ages man has paid instinctive homage to this first principle. God is our only means of access to this higher knowledge if He will reveal Himself. But there is a fundamental difference between the people of the Old Testament and Christians on the conception of knowledge and the interpretation of all the life according to the new message that Jesus gave through his coming.

So for all Christians the focus of the universe and the ultimate meaning of the entire history of the world is Jesus' coming and only this coming which did not repudiate the archetypes of the Old Testament but vindicated them, unfolding to us their real significance and bringing new dimensions to all things — infinite, eternal dimensions. Christ's new covenant announces the beginning of a new era in the history of humankind. Now the divine sphere was reflected in the unfathomable grandeur of the love and humility of God, the Father. With the coming of Christ all was changed: the new revelation affected the »destiny« of the whole created world⁵.

It was given to Moses to know that the absolute primordial being is not some general entity, some impersonal cosmic process or supra-personal, all trans-cending »non-being«. It was proved to him that this being had a *personal* character and was a *living* and life-giving God. Moses, however, did not receive a clear vision: he did not see God in light as the apostles saw him on Mount Tabor — »Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was« (Ex 20:21). This can be interpreted differently, but the stress lies on the incognizable character of God, though in what sense and in what connection we cannot be certain.

The world continues to flounder in the vicious circle of its material problems — economic, class, nationalistic and the like — because people refuse to follow Christ. We have no wish to become like Him in all things: to become His brothers and sisters and through Him the beloved children of the Father and the chosen habitation of the Holy Spirit. In God's pre-eternal providence for humankind we are meant to participate in His Being — to be like Him in all things. As Christians we must never renounce our goal or we lose the inspiration to storm the Kingdom of heaven. Experience shows all too clearly that once Christians start reducing the scope of the revelation given to us by Christ and the Holy Spirit, we gradually cease to be attracted by the Light manifest to us. If we are to preserve our saving hope, we must hold to our faith. Christ said: »Be of good cheer, I have overcome the world« (Jn 18:33). He had overcome the world in this instance not so much as God, but as Man for He did in truth become man.

It is a fact that Christian life is lived »in spirit and in truth« (Jn 4:23) and can be continued in all spaces and at all times since the commandments of Christ possess an absolute character. In other words, there are and can be no circumstances anywhere on earth

⁵ Cf. *M.M. Thomas*, *Risking Christ for Christ's Sake. Towards an Ecumenical Theology of pluralism*, WCC, Geneva 1987, pp. 113–114.

which could make observance of the commandments impossible. In Christ and in the coming of the Holy Spirit God gave us the full and final revelation of Himself. His being now is for us the first reality, incomparably more evident than all the transient phenomena of this world. We sense, as Christians, His divine presence both inside of us and outside of us: in the supreme majesty of the universe in the human face, in the lightning flash of thought. He opens our eyes that we may behold and delight in the beauty of His creation. He fills our souls with love towards all humankind. His indescribably gentle touch pierces our heart. Here are our challenges to identify our life with His life, and to live a life in Christ, a life which is illuminated by his presence and His Spirit since the Spirit Himself bears within us.

The Way Towards Deification ...

In Scripture we are faced with the mystery of Jesus Christ presented as a historical personality (born of the Virgin Mary), being human in the full sense, taken by many as an ordinary man who eventually suffered and died on the cross. The common picture of our Lord is one of a fully human being, displaying a glory which is a mystery. The true image of our Lord can only be depicted in a supra-historical vision in an act of faith. The mystery is described in the New Testament as a history of *kenosis* using a Cyrilline term. It is the mystery of humiliation. In the early Church the main concern was with the full and true humanity of our Lord and this is started in the epistles of St. John, who combines his emphasis as to the superhuman character of Christ in the beginning of his Gospel, that is the divine logos becoming flesh, with his challenge in the first epistle to those who would not believe that the logos became flesh.

A distinction should be made between the *kerygma* of the Church and the philosophical terminology in terms of which it is apprehended. The concern of the *kerygma* is with the message of salvation announced in the saving person of Christ. The christological problem is thus integral to the message of salvation and should always be considered in that context.

The christological dispute in the early Church was concerned mainly with the message of salvation. When we turn to early christological conceptions, we always find them in a soteriological perspective. There are two different concepts of salvation linked with two different anthropological dispositions.

By dying with Christ and being raised up with Him, humankind returns to its natural state and resumes the way which leads to God. This change from evil to good is accomplished by redirecting humankind's spiritual powers from the non-natural to the natural, and by substituting divine love by evil passion⁶. Released from the power of sin by the grace of God and their own personal assent, and dissolving all links with Satan, they conform to God's plan through the practice of virtue, which is the natural energy of human-

⁶ An interesting development of this theme can be found in: *St Maximus the Confessor*, Chapters 1, 75: PG 90, 1209 C. See also Questions to Thalassius 22, PG 90, 324 A.

kind created in God's image and likeness and regenerated in Christ; and they offer themselves to »undergo« deification.

Humankind's participation in Christ's death and resurrection is not confined to certain ages of life only, but extends dynamically to cover all the phases and forms of human existence. The crucified body of Christ, says St Gregory Palamas, which is given to the faithful to be their nourishment does not only nourish, but teaches them how to share in the virtues and sufferings of Him who was crucified; it shows them the way of love, humility, obedience and, in general, of life according to God's will⁷. Thus communion in the Church's sacraments and moral life together compose the sacrament of Christian living.

The Christian way of life is challenged, it originates and develops through and with the grace of God. Christ Himself lives and operates in the believer. The work and preaching of Christ's disciples are essentially the manifestation and expression of His power through them⁸.

The Christian's sinlessness is then a consequence and a continuation of his regeneration in Christ and of his communion in the Church of the »Church of the firstborn«⁹.

The Incarnation is an act of God's *philanthropia*, of His loving kindness towards humankind. Many Eastern writers, looking at the Incarnation from this point of view, have argued that even if man had never fallen, God in His love for humanity would still have become man: the Incarnation must be seen as part of the eternal purpose of God and not simply as an answer to the fall. The view of St Maximus the Confessor and of St Isaac the Syrian has also been the view of certain Western writers, most notably Duns Scotus.

But because man fell, the Incarnation is not only an act of love but an act of salvation. Jesus Christ, by uniting man and God in His own person, reopened for man the path to union with God. In His own person Christ showed what the true »likeness« of God is, and through His redeeming and victorious sacrifice He once again set that likeness within man's reach. Christ, the Second Adam, came to earth and reversed the effects of the First Adam's disobedience.

»But who do you say I am? ... You are the Christ, the Son of the living God« (Mt 16:15, 16).

The way to deification, planned for the first man, will be impossible until human nature triumphs over sin and death. The way to union will henceforth be presented to fallen humanity as *salvation*. This negative term stands for the removal of an obstacle: one is saved from something — from death and from sin — one's roots. The divine plan was not fulfilled by Adam; instead of the straight line of ascent towards God, the will of the first man followed a path contrary to nature and ending in death. God alone can endow men with the possibility of deification, by liberating him at one and the same time from death and from captivity in sin. What man ought to have attained by raising himself up to God,

⁷ Cf. *S. Oikonomos*, Twenty-two Homilies of St Gregory Palamas, Archbishop of Thessaloniki, Athens 1861, pp. 211–212 (in Greek): Homily 56, 10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, Homily 33, PG 151, 4416D.

⁹ Cf. *G. Mantzaridis*, The Deification of Man, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1984, pp. 60–64.

God achieved by descending to man. That is why the triple barrier which separates us from God — death, sin, nature — is impassable for men and is broken through by God in the inverse order, beginning with the union of the separated natures and ending with victory over death.

Nicholas Cabasilas, a Byzantine theologian of the fourteenth century, said: »The Lord allowed men (ἄνθρωπος), separated from God by the triple barrier of nature, sin and death, to be fully possessed of Him and to be directly united to Him by the fact he has set aside each barrier in turn: that of nature by His Incarnation, that of sin by His death, and that of death by His Resurrection.« This is the reason why St Paul writes: »The last enemy to be destroyed is death« (1 Cor 15:26)¹⁰. For St Maximus the Incarnation and deification correspond to one another; they mutually imply each other. God descends to the world and becomes man because this union of two natures, the divine and the human, has been determined in the eternal counsel of God, and because it is the final end for which the world has been created out of nothing¹¹.

One would suppose from some modern critics that St Maximus held a doctrine similar to that of Duns Scotus: if original sin had not taken place, Christ would have become incarnate in any event in order to unite created being and the divine nature in Himself¹².

Resurrection and Salvation

Jesus was not a figure or a personality of mythology, but of history. The events of his life belong to a definite, established period in human history. As the Gospels chronicled the events of his life leading up to his passion and crucifixion, so they recorded his death and resurrection. His passion, death and resurrection were three decisive moments of his life. Without the narratives of the suffering and death, the accounts of the resurrection in the Gospels cannot be understood. They are meant to be read and reflected on together, not in isolation from one another. The light of the resurrection illumines the utter limits of his suffering and the depths of his humiliation. The suffering of Jesus is told without emotion.

Jesus is sinless, and he was unjustly treated. He proclaimed who he was both before the Jewish and the Roman authorities (Mk 16:61f; 15:2). His sufferings are those of the promised Messiah and the Incarnate Son of God. »Obedient unto death, even death on a cross« (Phil 2:8), he put himself in the hands of his Father.

The primitive Church, in its proclamation, the *kerygma*, taught that his death was for the salvation of man. He died »for our sins in accordance with the scriptures« (1 Cor 15:3). The resurrection demonstrated this destruction of death. »How could the destruction of death have been manifested at all, had not the Lord's body been raised«, asks St

¹⁰ N. Cabasilas, *The Life in Christ III*, PG 150, 350; see also G. Limouris, *Nicholas Cabasilas, Theology and Spirituality*, Strasbourg 1983, p. 460.

¹¹ *St Maximus the Confessor, Quaestiones ad Thalassium*: PG 90, 621 AB.

¹² V. Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, trans. by James Clarke, Cambridge & London 1973, pp. 135–136.

Athanasius¹³. The death and resurrection of Christ are for the salvation of man, St Paul asserts, they are two phases of the one decisive event of salvation. He »was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification« (Rom 4:25). The death and resurrection are inseparable as events of salvation. Therefore, Christ's resurrection is the beginning of the new creation. It is not a repetition or rejection of the old, but its fulfilment and transformation; it is in addition the completion of the mystery of Incarnation. »For if the flesh were not in position to be saved, the Word of God would in no way have become flesh«, writes St Irenaeus, faithfully expressing the view of the ancient Church¹⁴. The salvation of the world and the redemption that were promised are manifested in Christ's resurrection¹⁵.

The New Testament witnesses to this link between the Incarnation and the Resurrection, between the birth at the beginning and the birth at the end, and it is for this reason that the Fathers of the Church always insisted on the bodily resurrection of Christ for they saw clearly that the incarnation is completed in the resurrection. The resurrection of Christ is a new beginning, but it is also the end. The Risen Christ is the source of the new life and also the goal to be reached. The Risen Christ has made known to humanity the mystery of the future. The Christ whom the Church knows and in whom it believes and the Christ of the »parousia« are the same, the resurrected and ascended Jesus of Nazareth.

Everything is realized and completed in Christ, but not yet in those who belong to him. As St Paul writes to the Christians in Ephesus, »we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ« (4:15). The Church lives in and by the power of the Risen Christ, and at the same time it moves towards the future, towards the full realization of him and his resurrection¹⁶. Then salvation shall be consummated — the new creation will be completed at the time of his parousia.

Today, the Risen Christ challenges the world from beyond as well as from within history. He ascended to the Father, yet he »abides with his disciples forever«¹⁷. He has promised to be with them »always, to the close of the age« (Mt 28:20)¹⁸. He is the transcending presence which brings together the past and the future. The Church »remembers« his Resurrection which occurred in the past, and makes it present in its life and in the life of its members. But, paradoxically, the Church also »remembers« the future, the Christ of the parousia. In the Liturgy of St John Chrysostom, after the words of the institution of the Eucharist, the celebrant says: »Remembering this saving commandment and all those

¹³ *St Athanasius*, On the Incarnation, tr. and ed. A. Peligous of C.S.M.V., Introduction by C.S. Lewis, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1980, p. 80; cf. *G. Dragas*, *Ecclesiasticus*, Darlington 1984, pp. 107–110.

¹⁴ *St Irenaeus*, Against Heresies, 5, 14, 1, in: *A. Roberts, J. Donaldson and A.C. Coxe*, eds., Ante-Nicene Fathers (ANF), 10 vols., New York 1885–1897, 1:54.

¹⁵ *D.O. Rousseau*, Incarnation et Anthropologie en Orient et en Occident, *Irenikon* 26 (1953), p. 366.

¹⁶ The relationship between the Resurrection and the Parousia is fully discussed in *F.X. Durrwell*, The Resurrection: A Biblical Study. Durrwell writes that the Church »is moving toward an event which historically happened before she existed, the event of Easter«, p. 279. A movement toward the »Parousia« is a movement toward Christ's Resurrection, p. 282; see also *V. Kesich*, The First Day of the New Creation. The Resurrection and the Christian Faith, St Vladimir's Seminary Press, New York 1982, pp. 178–179.

¹⁷ Hymn of the Feast of the Ascension (kontakion).

¹⁸ Cf. *G.E. Gaird*, A Commentary on the Revelation of St John the Divine, Harper & Row, New York 1966, p. 24f.

things which have come to pass for us: the Cross, the Tomb, the Resurrection on the third day, the Ascension into heaven, the sitting at the right hand and the second and glorious coming ...». »The resurrection of Christ, in the life and mind of the Church, is not merely of the past and neither is the second coming only of the future«¹⁹.

The Christ of Easter and of the parousia is the chief cornerstone of the new temple. »It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end« (Rev 21:6). Christ dwells in the body of the Church, and yet the Church with all its members patiently waits and unceasingly prays for the coming of the »Lord Jesus« and his Kingdom. The new creation continues. It has begun with Christ of the »eighth day« and points to the Christ of the Parousia.

¹⁹ Cf. J. Zizioulas speaks about the Church's »memory of the future« in connection with the liturgy and stresses that history can no longer be understood simply as past, in: *Apostolic Community and Orthodox Theology: Towards a Synthesis of Two Perspectives*, *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, 19/2 (1975), p. 83; see also C.H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York 1961, p. 164, note 1.