

Who is This “Jesus”?:

A Brief Treatment of Christological Controversies in the Early Church

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Luke 22:39-44, 23:33-37, 44-46

Then going out, he went, as was his custom, to the Mount of Olives, and the disciples followed him.

When he arrived at the place he said to them,

“Pray that you may not undergo the test.”

After withdrawing about a stone’s throw from them and kneeling,

he prayed, saying, “Father, if you are willing,

take this cup away from me;

still, not my will but yours be done.”

And to strengthen him an angel from heaven appeared to him.

He was in such agony and he prayed so fervently

that his sweat became like drops of blood

falling on the ground...

...When they came to the place called the Skull,

they crucified him and the criminals there,

one on his right, the other on his left.

Then Jesus said,

“Father, forgive them, they know not what they do.”

They divided his garments by casting lots.

The people stood by and watched;

the rulers, meanwhile, sneered at him and said,

“He saved others, let him save himself

if he is the chosen one, the Christ of God.”

Even the soldiers jeered at him.

As they approached to offer him wine they called out,

“If you are King of the Jews, save yourself.”...

...It was now about noon and darkness came over the whole land

until three in the afternoon

because of an eclipse of the sun.

Then the veil of the temple was torn down the middle.

Jesus cried out in a loud voice,

“Father, into your hands I commend my spirit”;

and when he had said this he breathed his last.

Luke’s account of the Agony in the Garden (perhaps my favorite of the synoptics) and the passion and death of Christ are richly saturated with all sorts of Christological questions. Why does Jesus seem to have a different will from the Father as he asks that the cup of his passion be taken away? What does it mean to be the Christ of God? The King of the Jews? The “Son”

calling on His Father? How is it that Christ seems so powerless on the cross and allows himself to be mocked?

Sometimes I am tempted to envy the early Church because they were so close to Christ, to his disciples and apostles—not just physically close, or even proximate in time, but they also lived in the same culture he did and had so many insights into his teaching that are lost on our modern ears. Yet the early Church struggled hardest with some of the most basic questions of all: who exactly *was* this Jesus?

Today, we are going to briefly touch on some of the major Christological controversies that occurred within the first seven centuries of Church history, so that we can better understand how, why and what the Church came to officially pronounce about the identity of Jesus of Nazareth.

What Does it Mean to be the Son of God?

One of the more attractive and simple ways people tried to understand Christ's identity as the Son of God was known as "adoptionism," which gained popularity at the end of the second century. The idea is pretty much summed up in the name: adherents believed that while Jesus was born a mere human, at his baptism he was "adopted" as Son by God. Mark's gospel especially lines up with this idea because while John's gospel has the prologue ("the Word was with God and the Word was God" Jn 1:1b), and Matthew and Luke have infancy narratives that point to Jesus' divinity even as a baby, Mark's Gospel simply begins with John the Baptist, the baptism in the Jordan and the commencement of Jesus's preaching ministry (cf. Mk 1:1-15). In our own baptism, we are said to become "adopted" sons and daughters of God, so why wouldn't that also be true of Jesus? Adoptionism makes sense, but only in that isolated treatment of scripture. In other gospels, Jesus' identity as God's Son is very clear from the beginning (think about Luke's account of the boy Jesus in the Temple—"Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" Lk 2:49b). So, attractive as it may seem in some ways, adoptionism was deemed heretical and the Church realized she needed to assert Christ's Sonship throughout His entire life.

What is the Nature of the Son?

So if Jesus wasn't adopted as a Son, and has always been the Son, what does that mean? Is the Son divine, or human, or something else? One attempt to understand Christ's nature as the Son was put forward by the bishop Arius—who taught that that Jesus was not God, but that He was a created being... not a human, but some unique creation known as the 'Son' that later became incarnate. If you talk with Jehovah's Witnesses today, this is what they believe as well, so you can see that forms of Arianism have been around and will continue to be around for a very long time. Part of the reason this system is so attractive is because it emphasizes the unity and singularity of God. There is no Trinity to contend with: God is One, perfect and whole, completely undivided. It maintains the distinction between God and the Son, so we can answer the question of why Jesus seemed to want to avoid the passion: he and God didn't share a will. Jesus wasn't God. This belief was condemned at the Council of Nicea in 325 (where we have the famous story of St. Nicholas punching Arius during a heated conciliar debate). In many ways, we should be thankful to Arius and his multitude of adherents, because incorrect teachings are most

often the impetus for the Church to clarify and solidify true teaching. Without someone to push us on the point of the Son's Divinity, our Christology would be severely hindered. Thus, after Arius the Church formally declared the Father and the Son are "consubstantial," that is—homoousious (of the same stuff). But as soon as you assert that, a new question arises: now you have to figure out how that divine substance of the Son was able to mix with humanity.

How Does the Divine Son Mix with Humanity?

A popular way to deal with that question was simply to say: not at all. Or rather, that the incarnation was nothing more than an illusion and that God never actually *became* man. He just appeared as a man. This was a common belief among many different Gnostic sects (I use this term very loosely) in the first few centuries and the idea became known as "Docetism" from the Greek word 'dokein,' "to seem to be." We as Dominicans should be familiar with this heresy (which was also unequivocally condemned at Nicea), because it was taught by the famous Mani, of the self-titled Manicheans, who held so much influence over St. Augustine in his early life. It was this exact same heresy, with its consequent rejection of all material as evil, which resurfaced in southern France in the 12th century, just with a different name: Albigensianism, or Catharism. The Albigenses believed that the only way to make sense of something as horrific as the crucifixion was to say that God never hung on that cross. They believed that YHWH of the Old Testament was nothing but a demi-god, who polluted Pure Creation by mixing it with matter. The Father of Jesus, therefore, was understood to be the Real God, who stood against YHWH and all his attachment to matter. Thus, the incarnation and the crucifixion were just an elaborate illusion, because God would never actually mix with matter; he just "put on" a body like we would put on a new outfit.

As we have just read Luke's passion and on Friday we will read John's account of the death of Jesus, it would do us well to sit and contemplate exactly what it means for the Catholic Church to reject Docetism, to stand firmly and proclaim that God did not merely *appear* as a man, He actually became man. He sacrificed Himself for us, He who could not die became death for us. He who could not suffer in His own divine nature, took on human nature precisely in order to suffer, to feel the blows of Pilate's whip, to wince at the piercing crown of thorns, to buckle under the weight of His cross and to experience the pain of being nailed, and suffocating under the weight of his own assumed body. This inexhaustible fount of love, mercy and grace cannot admit a God who merely *appeared* in flesh. Our Sacramental life could not exist if God was not willing to sanctify matter. What would the point of Easter Sunday be, if God just *appeared* to die and then *appeared* to come back to life? You see what is at stake here—Docetism may be attractive because it eliminates some tricky questions about Jesus, but in order to achieve that goal you have to reject a whole lot else.

So if the Church says that the Son must be consubstantial (homoousious) with the Father, and that the Son actually *became* man and didn't just appear to be a human, what do we make of this relationship between his Divine and Human natures?

How Do the Two Natures Interact?

Well, that problem was tackled in a few different ways. After Nicea, Nestorius (the patriarch of Constantinople) tried to explain Christ' dual nature by positing that the Son was one being who was Divine, Jesus was a human, and that the Son dwelt in the same body as Jesus, but they were two totally different people. So Nestorius said: two natures, two persons, one body. This seems to make a lot of sense when you read the agony in the Garden because you can see how two people sharing the same body could have different wills. But the logical next step is to say that God didn't die on the cross because obviously his nature can't die and since it's separate from the human nature, only Jesus the human died on the cross. Also: Mary can't be "Theotokos" (the God-bearer) because she was a human and couldn't have been God's mother, just the mother of the human part of Jesus... you see the problems, here. Nestorius was rejected first at the Council of Ephesus in 431 and again at Chalcedon in 451.

The Monophysites thought that all of this was ridiculous and said that Jesus had one nature: divine. It didn't make any sense to posit that Jesus had a human nature, because two natures in one body didn't make sense. So they put forward the general idea that at the incarnation, Divine nature took on human flesh, but that there was no human nature left in Jesus. So: one nature, one person, one body.

Apollinaris was a monophysite, who taught that Jesus had one single nature (which was divine), but that nature was like a hybrid man/God mashup. Jesus' nature was divine, his body was human and he had some sort of lower soul which was human, but his mind was divine. So at a base level, maybe the Agony in the Garden could make sense for Apollinarians because what was talking was not really Jesus' will (which is divine and can't be different from the Father's), but his human soul expressing its lower nature, that is—emotions. Jesus was afraid, so his human voice came out, but this apparent problem is resolved when he subjects that emotion of fear to his divine will. I hope you see, that critics of Apollinaris charged him with conjuring up a Jesus who effectively wasn't fully God or fully Man, which doesn't sit well with the rest of our Christology.

Eutyches, another monophysite with a different approach, posited that the divine and human natures had blended: one person, one body, mixed nature. The Theotokos is preserved, we can say that God died on the cross, but what of the Agony in the Garden? These complicating and conflicting explanations led to the condemnation of Monophysitism at Chalcedon.

So we have: the Son is consubstantial with the Father, the Son actually *became* man, and that union was two natures in a single person (the word that we use is *hypostasis*)—but this begs a further question: does Jesus Christ, who is one person, fully God and fully human, have two wills or one?

How Many Wills Does Christ Have?

Monothelitism, a teaching that came out of Syria and Armenia in the first half of the seventh century, posited that even though the Son was homoousious with the Father and had a divine will, because of the hypostatic union (two natures in Christ), we have to say that Jesus could not have had a human will. For how could a single person with two wills act at all? In order for Jesus Christ to act, his person (which is singular) needed to be moved by a singular will. And since it

was fitting that the lower (human) should be subjected to the higher (divine), Jesus Christ had a single, Divine Will.

But hear our brother Thomas:

Summa Theologica: Tertia Pars, Q 18, Art 1:

Obj. 1: It would seem that in Christ there are not two wills...

Sed contra: Our Lord says, 'Father if thou wilt, remove this chalice from Me. But yet not My will but Thine be done' And Ambrose, quoting this to the Emperor Gratian says: "As He assumed my will, He assumed my sorrow; and on Luke he says: "His will, He refers to the Man—the Father's, to the Godhead. For the will of man is temporal, and the will of God is eternal."

We find ourselves right back at Luke—at the first sorrowful mystery. We humans can talk around in circles all we want about natures and hypostases and the philosophical necessity for singular wills, but in the end: the answer comes from the most authoritative source—the Word Himself. Jesus Christ had to possess two wills: one human and one divine. Thomas says in his reply to Objection 1: "Whatever was in the human nature of Christ was moved at the bidding of the Divine will; yet it does not follow that there was no movement of the will proper to human nature, for the good wills of other saints are moved by God's will... for although the will cannot be inwardly moved by any creature, yet it can be inwardly moved by God."

We can never know what it is like for Jesus Christ, the Son of God who is homoousious/consubstantial with the Father, to be perfectly united in one person with his Divine and human natures—we can never imitate that. Yet this insistence of the Church upon two wills in Christ, this is something we can and should try to imitate, even if imperfectly. For St. Paul says in Galatians: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me." (Gal 2:20) We should try to unite our will with that of God, so that even in our hour of distress, when we rightly approach God with our fears and our sufferings, we can imitate Christ in sincerely praying: "Not my will, but yours be done."

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