

THE FITNESS OF THE INCARNATION

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To explore the fitness of the Incarnation is ultimately to journey into the great mystery of Divine Love. As Saint John Paul II wrote, “The Incarnation is the fruit of an immense love, which spurred God willingly to share our human condition to the full.”¹ It is this immense love that led the Evangelist John to proclaim so succinctly, “God so loved the world that He



gave His only Son” (John 3:16 NAB). Laying this “mystery-reason” aside, however, there are several “traditional” reasons that the Church has taught throughout the centuries to explain the fitness of the Incarnation. This paper shall explore four of these reasons as articulated by the Catechism of the Catholic Church, which echo the teaching found centuries earlier of St. Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*.² The Catechism teaches that the Word became flesh: (1) to save us by reconciling us with God; (2) so that we might know God’s love; (3) to be our model of holiness; (4) to make us partakers of the divine nature.³ Before we explore these reasons, let us first consider why it was fitting that the Word would become flesh.

In his classic work *On the Incarnation*, St. Athanasius writes, “You must understand why it is that the Word of the Father, so great and so high, has been made manifest in bodily form. He has not assumed a body as proper to His own nature, far from it, for as the Word He is without body. He has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of His Father, for the salvation of us men.”⁴ Here, he clearly explains why the question of the fitness of the Incarnation must be considered. It is because corporeality—possessing a body—does not belong to God’s nature at all. However, what does belong to His nature is goodness. As St. Athanasius describes, He is the “fountainhead” of all goodness.⁵ St. Thomas affirms this as he teaches, “The very nature of God is goodness;” thus, “it belongs to the essence of goodness to communicate itself to others.”⁶ Just as the essence of goodness is to communicate itself, the highest good, by essence, would necessarily communicate itself to its creatures in the highest manner. Between God and man, this “highest manner” would be nothing less than the joining of man’s created nature to the immaterial, immortal, omnipotent Divine Essence. “Hence,” concludes St. Thomas, “it is manifest that it was fitting that God should become incarnate”⁷—because it is the highest manifestation of His goodness.

The Incarnation can also be said to be the necessary consequence of God’s goodness. Before we consider this, an important distinction must be made regarding the way that “necessity” is used when speaking of the Incarnation. St. Thomas teaches that anything can be considered necessary for a certain end in two ways: either absolutely, as when the end cannot be without it, or relatively, as when the end is attained better and more conveniently. Because God is omnipotent, it cannot be said that anything is absolutely necessary for Him, since He can do anything in any way that He wills. However, it can be said that it was necessary (relatively) for Him to redeem the human race by becoming man, since it was the most efficacious way to man’s salvation.⁸ It is in this light that we can understand what St. Athanasius says when he describes how the goodness of God necessitates, so to speak, the Incarnation. It does so for the first of the reasons that the Catechism lists: to save man by reconciling him to God. He writes,

It was unworthy of the goodness of God that creatures made by Him should be brought to nothing through the deceit wrought upon man by the devil; and it was supremely unfitting that the work of God in mankind should disappear, either through their own negligence or through the deceit of evil spirits. As, then, the creatures whom He had created reasonable [. . .] were in fact perishing, and [. . .] on the road to ruin, what then was God, being Good, to do? Was He to let corruption and death have their way with them?⁹

In response to his question, St. John Paul II offers words from his first Encyclical Letter: "The God of creation is revealed as the God of redemption, as the God who is 'faithful to himself' and faithful to his love for man and the world, which he revealed on the day of creation. His is a love that does not draw back before anything that justice requires in him. Therefore 'for our sake (God) made him (the Son) to be sin who knew no sin.'"¹⁰ By virtue of His goodness, God would not allow the deceit of the devil and man's negligence destroy the eternal beatitude and perfection for which they were created. For this reason, His goodness can be seen as the foundation of the traditional teaching of the Church that God "loved us and sent His Son as expiation for our sins" (1 John 4:10).

We have now reached the first of the reasons that the Catechism proposes for the Incarnation: that the Word became flesh to save us by reconciling us to God. Besides being an act that flows from His goodness and upholds the faithfulness of God towards His creation, the Incarnation was also necessary for man's redemption because of the infinite debt which mankind owed to God because of its sin, a debt that could only be atoned by One who was Himself infinite—God alone.¹¹ Furthermore, the universal death which the Fall had brought about affected all of man—in his body, his mind, his soul. Therefore, the redemption of mankind had to heal the totality of man; as St. Gregory Nazianzen said, "That which [God] has not assumed He has not healed."¹² Explaining this famous quote regarding the Incarnation, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI writes, "Gregory gave great prominence to Christ's full humanity: to redeem man in the totality of his body, soul and spirit, Christ assumed all the elements of human nature, otherwise man would not have been saved."¹³ Thus, the Word's assumption of human nature was the only way to redeem the totality of man. As we shall see later, this assumption of human nature was also the shining way to reveal to man his dignity and show him the path to holiness, his destiny as a child of God.

The second point that the Catechism makes regarding the fitness of the Incarnation is that through the Incarnation, man came to know God's love. It is precisely through encountering the life, death, and resurrection of Christ that one is able to exclaim with St. Paul, "I live by faith in the Son of God who has loved me and given himself up for me" (Galatians 2:20). Saint John Paul II draws this connection between Christ dying for mankind and the revelation of God's love, as he writes,

If [God] 'made to be sin' [Christ] who was without any sin whatever, it was to reveal the love that is always greater than the whole of creation, the love that is he himself [. . .] Above all, love is greater than sin, than weakness, than the "futility of creation," it is stronger than death; it is a love always ready to raise up and forgive [. . .] always looking for "the revealing of the sons of God" who are called to the "glory that is to be revealed."¹⁴

Following these beautiful words, Saint John Paul II teaches that man cannot love without love. Without it, he is incomprehensible to himself; his life has no meaning.¹⁵ When the Word became flesh, the mystery of man and his life now could be understood,¹⁶ for not only did the true face of God become clear—the God who is love and mercy—but so did the true face of man. As St. John Paul II exclaims, "How precious must man be in the eyes of the Creator, if he 'gained so great a Redeemer'?"¹⁷

As was seen in the previous point, the love revealed in the Incarnation and Redemption leads man to understand his identity and dignity as a son or daughter of God, and the glory to be revealed in him by assenting to this identity. This leads us to the third reason that the Catechism makes for the fitness of the Incarnation: so that the Word Incarnate could become man's model of holiness. It takes on very specific dimensions in Him. The perfection which Christ calls His disciples to in the Sermon on the Mount—"Be perfect, just as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Matthew 5:48)—is not a vague or amorphous perfection, because He Himself reveals to man what this perfection looks like! He is the mold, so to speak, of our holiness—for He is the only "way" to the Father (John 14:6). The Second Vatican Council teaches, "By suffering for us [Christ] not only provided us with an example for our imitation, He blazed a trail, and if we follow it, life and death are made holy and take on a new meaning."¹⁸ However, it was not only in His suffering that Christ blazed this trail and revealed Himself as the example for man to follow; it was in the

entirety of His life that He sanctified the entirety of man's life. The Council continues, "By His incarnation the Son of God has united Himself in some fashion with every man. He worked with human hands, He thought with a human mind, acted by human choice and loved with a human heart. Born of the Virgin Mary, He has truly been made one of us, like us in all things except sin."¹⁹ The more closely one conforms his life to Christ—the more closely he learns how to work, think, act, and love as He did—he grows more and more into the "glorious freedom of the children of God" (Romans 8:21), the holiness to which he is called from birth.

Finally, let us consider the last point that the Catechism makes about the Incarnation: that Christ became man to make us partakers in the divine nature. This flows from the previous point, the call to holiness in imitation of the Word Incarnate. If, through His Incarnation, Christ has united Himself to every man in some way, then it can be said that every man (especially when he embraces the gift of God given to him in Christ), is united to the divine nature. Blessed Columba Marmion explains that this is because Jesus is not only infinite Holiness, but He has also been given to man to be his holiness, for Jesus "became for us wisdom from God, as well as righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" (1 Corinthians 1:30, emphasis added). He writes,

In Jesus the divine nature and the human nature are united in oneness of Person, and we are united with the Divinity in the measure of our union with the Sacred Humanity of Jesus. It is by sanctifying grace that this union with God is brought about [. . .] In fact this grace, poured forth without measure in the Sacred Humanity, is communicated to His members in the measure of their union with Him by faith and love.²⁰

Saint John Paul affirms this teaching of one's union with God through Christ. He writes, "[Man] must, so to speak, enter into [Christ] with all his own self, he must "appropriate" and assimilate the whole of the reality of the Incarnation and Redemption in order to find himself."²¹ This "appropriating" and "assimilating" of Christ's merits and virtues by union with Him, as John Paul says, is the crowning of the work of the Incarnation. For, by allowing oneself to grow in union with Christ, the Incarnation does not simply remain an event of past history; rather, it becomes the point of transformation of the human person in his personal history into the redeemed beauty of holiness.

The fitness of the Incarnation cannot be explained or understood outside of the love and goodness of God. Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, is man's greatest gift to receive and contemplate; in so doing, man truly realizes who he is in Christ, the greatness of the love of God, and thus, embarks upon the greatest journey one can make: that of ever-closer union with God. In so doing, the Precious Blood of Jesus realizes its infinite potency; it "bear[s] much fruit" (John 15:8) in a life of discipleship that shines before men, in order that they "may see [one's] good deeds and glorify [the] heavenly Father" (Matthew 5:16).

1 Pope John Paul II, General Audience, Time Itself is Now Pervaded by Eternity (10 December 1997).

1 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, III, q. 1, a. 2, Second and Revised Edition, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (1920), at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

1 Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2 ed. (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 2000), 457-460.

1 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 1, at Christian Classics Ethereal Library, <http://www.ccel.org>, emphasis added.

1 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 3.

1 ST, III, q. 1, a. 1, trans. English Dominican Province.

1 *Ibid.*

1 ST, III, q. 1, a. 2, trans. English Dominican Province.

1 Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, 6.

1 Pope John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor Hominis* (4 March 1979), §9.

1 ST, III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2, trans. English Dominican Province.

1 Gregory Nazianzen, Epistle 101, at New Advent, www.newadvent.org.

1 Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience on St. Gregory Nazianzen, part 2 (22 August 2007).

1 *Redemptor Hominis*, §9.

1 *Redemptor Hominis*, §10.

1 Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes* (7 December 1965), §22.

1 *Redemptor Hominis*, §10.

1 Gaudium et Spes, §22.

1 Ibid.

1 Blessed Columba Marmion, *Union with God: Letters of Spiritual Direction* by Blessed Columba Marmion (Bethesda: Zaccheus Press, 2006), 31-32.

1 *Redemptor Hominis*, §10.

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