



WHY THE INCARNATION?

The controversies over the nature of our Lord Jesus Christ that occurred primarily in the early centuries of Christianity were not just intellectual and philosophical debates as to who our Lord Jesus Christ is. On the contrary, the faith that was clarified as a result of defending the heresies that arose about the nature of Christ was of the utmost importance because it relates directly to our salvation and the purpose for which the Son of God took flesh. If our Lord Jesus Christ is not the “One Incarnate Nature of the Divine Logos”, then we in turn were not saved and we are worshipping someone who is not God incarnate. So along with understanding the nature of Christ, we must also understand why the Son of God took flesh and became man.

BACKGROUND

When Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, sin entered into the world and the condemnation of death came upon them as well as all their descendants. “Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (*Gen. 2:16-17*). “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come...by the one man’s offense many died... For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation...by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one...) as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation...one man’s disobedience many were made sinners...sin reigned in death” (*Rom. 5:12-21*).

SACRIFICE

Given the consequences of this sin, there were certain **requirements** that needed to be fulfilled to redeem man who had sin and death reigning over him.

- 1) **Sacrifice** – “The wages of sin is death” (*Rom. 6:23*) and God told Adam, “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (*Gen. 2:17*). Therefore, in order to fulfill the Divine Justice, there needed to be shedding of blood. St. Paul states this clearly when he writes: “And according to the law almost all things are purified with blood, and **without shedding of blood there is no remission**” (*Heb. 9:22*). Tradition declares that God showed this to Adam and Eve before casting them out of the Garden by clothing them with tunics of skin (which must have come from the death of an animal) instead of the sewed fig leaves they had made for themselves (*Gen. 3:7, 21*) and accepted the sacrifice of Abel over Cain’s offering (*Gen. 4:3-4*).
 - The blood of our Lord Jesus Christ fulfills this sacrifice. “The blood of Jesus Christ His Son cleanses us from all sin” (*1 Jn 1:7*). “being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood, through faith, to demonstrate His

righteousness, because in His forbearance God had passed over the sins that were previously committed” (*Rom 3:24-25*). See also *Rev 1:5-6, Phil 2:8, Tit 2:14, 1 Pet 2:24, 1 Tim 2:6, 1 Jn 2:2, Col 1:14* (cf. *Eph 1:14, Heb 9:26*).

2) **Sinless** – The sacrifice needed to be unblemished and without sin. If that sacrifice had committed sin, then it too would need atonement for its sins since it falls under the same condemnation of death.

- Thus, St. Paul writes about our Lord Jesus Christ: “but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin” (*Heb. 4:15*).

3) **Human** – Since it was the human being who disobeyed God, it was necessary that the sinless sacrifice be of the same level by being a human being, yet without sin.

- “Inasmuch then as the children have partaken of flesh and blood, He Himself likewise shared in the same, that through death He might destroy him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and release those who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (*Heb. 2:14-15*). “But when the fullness of the time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, that we might receive the adoption as sons” (*Gal. 4:4-5*). See also *1Tim. 3:16, Col. 2:9, Jn 1:14, Phil. 2:6-8, Heb. 1:1-3, Mic. 5:1-2* (LXX).

St. Athanasius summarizes these first three points when he writes: “No, He took our body, and not only so, but He took it directly from a spotless, stainless virgin, without the agency of human father—a pure body, untainted by intercourse with man. He, the Mighty One, the Artificer of all, Himself prepared this body in the virgin as a temple for Himself, and took it for His very own, as the instrument through which He was known and in which He dwelt. Thus, taking a body like our own, because all our bodies were liable to the corruption of death, He surrendered His body to death in place of all, and offered it to the Father” (*On the Incarnation*, p. 34).

4) **Free Will** – Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden of their own free will and by submitting their rational mind under the subjection of their own desires. St. Basil writes concerning this: “Because of this he also sinned through wicked free choice, and he died through the sin. ‘For the wages of sin is death’ (*Rom. 6:23*). For to the extent that he withdrew from life, he likewise drew near to death. For God is life, and the privation of life is death. Therefore Adam prepared death for himself through his withdrawal from God, in accord with what is written, ‘Behold, those who remove themselves from you are destroyed’ (*Pss 72:27*). Thus God did not create death, but we brought it upon ourselves by a wicked intention. To be sure, for the reason stated above, he did not prevent our dissolution, so that our weakness might not remain as immortal. It is like someone not allowing a leaky clay pot to be placed in fire (and hardened) until the weakness present in it has been completely mended through refashioning.” (*On the Human Condition*, pp. 74-75).

- Therefore, that human, sinless sacrifice had to be with a rational soul and overcome every temptation (*Heb. 4:15*). He also had to offer Himself of His own free will. This is as mentioned above in *Jn 10:15, 17, and 18*: “And I lay down my life for the sheep... I lay down My life that I may

take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again.” Also as St. Paul writes: “And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” (*Phil.* 2:8). “For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous” (*Rom.* 5:19). “Though He was a Son, yet He learned obedience by the things which He suffered. And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (*Heb.* 5:8-9).

5) Eternal and Everlasting – Since death and sin spread to all men, then that sacrifice had to be an eternal and everlasting sacrifice that would atone for the entire world over all generations.

- “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death **for everyone**” (*Heb.* 2:9). “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that **whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life**. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved” (*Jn* 3:16-17). “And having been perfected, He became the **author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him**” (*Heb.* 5:9). “But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man’s offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, **abounded to many**... For if by the one man’s offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ. Therefore, as through one man’s offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so **through one Man’s righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life**. For as by one man’s disobedience many were made sinners, so also **by one Man’s obedience many will be made righteous**... as sin reigned in death, **even so grace might reign through righteousness to eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord**” (*Rom.* 5:15,17-19, 21). See also *Heb.* 9:12, 15; 10:10, 12, 14.

St. Athanasius summarizes these requirements when he writes: “The Word perceived that corruption could not be got rid of otherwise than through death; yet He Himself, as the Word, being immortal and the Father’s Son, was such as could not die. For this reason, therefore, He assumed a body capable of death, in order that it, through belonging to the Word Who is above all, and, itself remaining incorruptible through His indwelling, might thereafter put an end to corruption for all others as well, by the grace of the resurrection. It was by surrendering to death the body which He had taken, as an offering and sacrifice free from every stain, that He forthwith abolished death for His human brethren by the offering of the equivalent. For naturally, since the Word of God was above all, when He offered His own temple and bodily instrument as a substitute for the life of all, He fulfilled in death all that was required. Naturally also, through this union of the immortal Son of God with our human nature, all men were clothed with incorruption in the promise of the resurrection. For the solidarity of mankind is such that,

by virtue of the Word's indwelling in a single human body, the corruption which goes with death has lost its power over all" (*On the Incarnation*, p. 35).

One Sacrifice, Offered Once:

It is only in our Lord Jesus Christ that this one sacrifice is fulfilled as God Incarnate. St. Paul writes: "By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ **once for all**" (*Heb. 10:10*). This is also shown clearly in the Adam-Christ typology of *Romans 5* mentioned above. Furthermore, "Nor is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved" (*Acts 4:12*). See also *Eph 2:14-19*. "Who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's for this **He did once for all when He offered up Himself**" (*Heb 7:27*). "But with His own blood He entered the Most Holy Place **once for all**, having obtained eternal redemption" (*Heb 9:12*). "So **Christ was offered once** to bear the sins of many" (*Heb 9:28*).

His Body and Blood are the Continuing of that Sacrifice in the Church for Salvation, Forgiveness of Sins, and Eternal Life:

So the New Covenant that was established on Holy Thursday by our Lord Jesus Christ became the continuation of this sacrifice in the Church. This is confirmed by our Lord Jesus Christ in *Jn. 6:53-58*. It is further mentioned by St. Paul when he writes: "The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not the communion of the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not the communion of the body of Christ?" (*1 Cor. 10:16*) And "For I received from the Lord that which I also delivered to you: that the Lord Jesus on the same night in which He was betrayed took bread; when He had given thanks..." (*1 Cor. 11:23-26*). We also confess at the end of the Divine Liturgy that this is same flesh that He took from the Virgin Mary that He made one with His divinity, etc...

HIGH PRIEST AND ALTAR

Since there is a sacrifice, there must also be a priest to offer up the sacrifice and an altar upon which the sacrifice is offered. Our Lord Jesus Christ is not only the sacrifice, but He is also the High Priest Who offered Himself as the Sacrifice and the Altar upon which He offered that Sacrifice. He speaks of this mystery when He is speaking about Himself as the Good Shepherd: "I am the good shepherd; and I know My sheep, and am known by My own. As the Father knows Me, even so I know the Father; and **I lay down My life for the sheep**. And other sheep I have which are not of this fold; them also I must bring, and they will hear My voice; and there will be **one flock and one shepherd**. Therefore My Father loves Me, because **I lay down My life that I may take it again. No one takes it from Me, but I lay it down of Myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again**. This command I have received from My Father" (*Jn. 10:14-18*).

Therefore on Holy Thursday at the Last Supper, He acted as the High Priest in giving His Body and Blood in the form of bread and wine.

St. Paul states the same doctrine in his epistle to the *Hebrews*: "For such a High Priest was fitting for us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and has become higher than the heavens; who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer

up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the people's, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself" (*Heb. 7:26-27*).

It is also expressed in the Sunday Theotokia: "They likened the High Priest to our Savior, the true sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins. He who offered up Himself as an acceptable sacrifice upon the Cross for the salvation of our race."

Thus, our unity with Him relied on the Word of God taking flesh, becoming that High Priest, offering Himself up for our redemption, and uniting us with Him by sanctifying us in Him, as He elaborates in His prayer in *John 17*: "And for their sakes I sanctify Myself, that they also may be sanctified by the truth. I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me" (*Jn. 17:19-21*).

It was necessary that He be the Offerer, the Offering, and the Place of Offering, all of these roles at the same time for the fulfillment of our redemption as St. Paul says: "**For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things**, to whom be glory forever. Amen" (*Rom. 11:36*).

CONCLUSION

Our Lord Jesus Christ is God Incarnate Who created man and also came to save man from sin, death, and corruption by His own death and resurrection in the flesh. Thus, He in so doing became the High Priest Who offered Himself as the Sacrifice for our sins. He also sanctified (dedicated) Himself and became the Altar upon which the Sacrifice was offered on our behalf that we would be sanctified in Him when we offer ourselves to Him and become unified in Him.

St. Athanasius says: "The renewal of creation has been wrought by the Self-same Word Who made it in the beginning. There is thus no inconsistency between creation and salvation; for the One Father has employed the same Agent for both works, effecting the salvation of the world through the same Word Who made it in the beginning" (*On the Incarnation*, p. 26). (See also *Heb. 1:1-4*).

REFERENCES:

- 1) Holy Bible, New King James Version, Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1992.
- 2) St. Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2000.
- 3) St. Basil the Great, *On the Human Condition*, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003.
- 4) *The Stages of Salvation*, Ishak, E.M., Ar., Cairo, 1997.

QUESTIONS:

- 1) How would you explain in a simple, yet comprehensive, way to someone why our Lord Jesus Christ had to offer Himself as a sacrifice?
- 2) Please explain the characteristics/requirements of this Sacrifice.
- 3) How is this Sacrifice continued, i.e. the exact same Sacrifice on the Cross from 2000 years ago, in the Church today? (This will be explained further in coming lessons, by the grace of God.)