

The Incarnation: Theological Foundations and Christological Implications

Introduction:

The Incarnation is a central mystery of the Christian faith, affirming that the eternal Word of God took on human flesh for the salvation of humanity. This doctrine safeguards the reality of Christ's divinity and humanity, ensuring the integrity of His redemptive work.

I. The Reason for the Incarnation: St. Athanasius' Teaching

St. Athanasius, in his work *On the Incarnation*, explains that the Son of God became man to restore humanity to its original state and to defeat death. Since humanity had fallen into corruption through sin, only God Himself could restore His creation. Christ took on flesh to renew the image of God in man, to destroy death by His own death, and to bring humanity back to life.

Key Teachings from St. Athanasius:

- **Restoration of the Divine Image** – Humanity, created in the image of God, had become corrupted. Through the Incarnation, Christ restored this image.
- **Defeat of Death** – As God, Christ could not die; as man, He could die in our place. By His death, He conquered death itself.
- **The Divine Dilemma** – If God allowed humanity to perish in corruption, it would contradict His goodness. If He simply forgave without addressing the consequences of sin, it would undermine His justice. The Incarnation solves this dilemma by both restoring creation and upholding divine justice.
- **Because Sin Brought Corruption and Death, Simply Repentance Was Not Enough** – Sin had corrupted human nature and subjected humanity to death. A mere act of repentance could not undo the ontological effects of sin. Only through the Incarnation and Christ's victory over death could humanity be truly restored.
- **To Make Himself Known to the World** – By becoming man, Christ revealed God to humanity in a direct and tangible way, fulfilling the purpose of divine self-revelation and drawing all people to Himself.

II. The Paradoxical Nature of the Incarnation

The Incarnation presents a profound paradox: Christ became man while remaining God. He took flesh from the undefiled Theotokos while still being in perfect unity with the Father. This mystery holds many paradoxical truths:

- **He Became Man but Still God** – The eternal Word assumed human nature without ceasing to be divine.
- **Taking Flesh from the Undefiled Theotokos but Still Remaining God** – He was truly born of Mary yet remained ever-existing as God.
- **Limited and Unlimited** – As man, He experienced human limitations; as God, He remained omnipotent.
- **All-Knowing and Limited Knowledge** – In His divine nature, He possessed all knowledge, but in His human nature, He grew in wisdom (Luke 2:52).
- **Sustaining Life and Being Sustained** – He upheld the universe while, at the same time, relying on His mother for nourishment.

These paradoxes reveal the mystery of Christ's of two nature origin —fully divine and fully human—without contradiction.

However, it is important to note that this paradox is **not** a contradiction, nor does it violate the law of non-contradiction. Christ became fully human while still remaining fully divine in one composite nature, without change, confusion, separation, or alteration. If we were to say He was both human and divine in a single nature, it would indeed be a contradiction, as that would imply a fundamental inconsistency or logical impossibility. The Incarnation, however, maintains that the divine and human natures are united in Christ without becoming one single, contradictory nature. Thus, the unity of these natures remains a profound mystery that does not break the principles of logical coherence.

Kenosis: The Self-Emptying of Christ

The concept of *kenosis* (Greek: κένωσις) is derived from Philippians 2:7, where it is said that Christ "emptied Himself" by taking on human nature. This does not mean Christ ceased to be divine but that He voluntarily set aside the independent exercise of divine attributes in order to live as a true human.

Theological Implications:

- **Voluntary Humility** – Christ's assumption of flesh was a deliberate act of divine love, not a necessity.
- **True Humanity** – Christ did not merely appear human but truly experienced the full range of human existence, including suffering and death.
- **Exemplar of Obedience** – His self-emptying serves as the model for Christian humility and self-sacrifice.

III. Theotokos: Mary as the Mother of God

The title *Theotokos* (Greek: "God-bearer") is a fundamental affirmation of Christ's identity. The Church declares that Mary bore not a mere man, nor a composite being separate in divinity and humanity, but the very person of the Son of God, fully divine and fully human. This was confirmed at the Council of Ephesus (431), opposing Nestorianism, which sought to divide Christ's personhood.

Theological Significance:

- **Christological Affirmation** – By calling Mary *Theotokos*, we affirm the unity of Christ's person as the God-Man.
- **Salvific Implication** – Since Christ's humanity is truly divine, His redemptive work is efficacious for humanity.
- **Defender of Orthodoxy** – The title safeguards against any doctrine that separates Christ's divine and human natures.

- **Clarification on the Meaning of Theotokos** – It is important to understand that the title *Theotokos* does not imply that Mary is the originator of Christ’s divinity. Rather, it signifies that she gave birth to the one who is *already* divine. Christ is one person, and that person is the eternal, divine Word, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity. Mary, therefore, gave birth to the incarnate Word, who is both fully divine and fully human, but she did not initiate or create His divinity.

12 Anathemas of Cyril

1. If anyone will not confess that the Emmanuel is very God, and that therefore the Holy Virgin is the Mother of God, inasmuch as in the flesh she bore the Word of God made flesh [as it is written, “The Word was made flesh”] let him be anathema.
2. If anyone shall not confess that the Word of God the Father is united hypostatically to flesh, and that with that flesh of his own, he is one only Christ both God and man at the same time: let him be anathema.
3. If anyone shall after the [hypostatic] union divide the hypostases in the one Christ, joining them by that connexion alone, which happens according to worthiness, or even authority and power, and not rather by a coming together, which is made by natural union: let him be anathema.
4. If anyone shall divide between two persons or subsistences those expressions which are contained in the Evangelical and Apostolical writings, or which have been said concerning Christ by the Saints, or by himself, and shall apply some to him as to a man separate from the Word of God, and shall apply others to the only Word of God the Father, on the ground that they are fit to be applied to God: let him be anathema.
5. If anyone shall dare to say that the Christ is a Theophorus [that is, God-bearing] man and not rather that he is very God, as an only Son through nature, because “the Word was made flesh,” and “hath a share in flesh and blood as we do:” let him be anathema.

6. If anyone shall dare say that the Word of God the Father is the God of Christ or the Lord of Christ, and shall not rather confess him as at the same time both God and Man, since according to the Scriptures, “The Word was made flesh”: let him be anathema.

7. If anyone shall say that Jesus as man is only energized by the Word of God, and that the glory of the Only-begotten is attributed to him as something not properly his: let him be anathema.

8. If anyone shall dare to say that the assumed man ought to be worshipped together with God the Word, and glorified together with him, and recognised together with him as God, and yet as two different things, the one with the other (for this “Together with” is added [i.e., by the Nestorians] to convey this meaning); and shall not rather with one adoration worship the Emmanuel and pay to him one glorification, as [it is written] “The Word was made flesh”: let him be anathema.

9. If any man shall say that the one Lord Jesus Christ was glorified by the Holy Ghost, so that he used through him a power not his own and from him received power against unclean spirits and power to work miracles before men and shall not rather confess that it was his own Spirit through which he worked these divine signs; let him be anathema.

10. Divine Scripture says, that Christ became High Priest and Apostle of our confession, and that he offered himself for us a sweet-smelling savour to God the Father. Whosoever shall say that it is not the divine Word himself, when he was made flesh and had become man as we are, but another than he, a man born of a woman, yet different from him, who is become our Great High Priest and Apostle; or if any man shall say that he offered himself in sacrifice for himself and not rather for us, whereas, being without sin, he had no need of offering or sacrifice: let him be anathema.

11. Whosoever shall not confess that the flesh of the Lord giveth life and that it pertains to the Word of God the Father as his very own, but shall pretend that it belongs to another person who is united to him [i.e., the Word] only according to honour, and who has served as a dwelling for the divinity; and shall not rather confess, as we say, that that flesh giveth life because it is that of

the Word who giveth life to all: let him be anathema.

12. Whosoever shall not recognize that the Word of God suffered in the flesh, that he was crucified in the flesh, and that likewise in that same flesh he tasted death and that he is become the first-begotten of the dead, for, as he is God, he is the life and it is he that giveth life: let him be anathema.

V. Double Consubstantiality: Christ's Full Divinity and Humanity

The Incarnation maintains that Christ is fully divine and fully human, being consubstantial (*homoousios*) with both the Father and with us.

Key Aspects:

- **Consubstantial with the Father** – Christ is eternally begotten, sharing the same divine essence (οὐσία) as the Father.
- **Consubstantial with Humanity** – By assuming human nature from Mary, He became truly human while remaining truly God.
- **Necessity for Salvation** – If Christ were not fully God, He could not save; if He were not fully man, He could not represent us.

VI. Hypostatic Union vs. Prosopic Union

1. Hypostatic Union:

The hypostatic union refers to the real and essential union of the divine and human natures in the one composite hypostasis (nature) of Christ. This concept is central to Orthodox Christology; it shows the complete, intrinsic unity of the divine and human in Christ.

Key Features of the Hypostatic Union:

- **Real and Inward Union:** The union of the divine and human natures is not superficial or merely outward. It is an intrinsic, natural, and essential union within the one composite hypostasis of Christ.

- **Assumption of Human Nature:** The divine hypostasis (the Logos, the Word) assumes human hypostasis, resulting in a single composite hypostasis.
- **No Confusion, Change, Division, or Separation:** In the hypostatic union, the divine and human aspects of Christ's nature coexist perfectly without any confusion, change in their essential properties, division between them, or separation.
- **Real Union, Not Just a Relation:** The union is not a mere external relationship but a deep, ontological union. Christ is truly both fully divine and fully human.

2. Prosopic Union:

The prosopic union refers to the idea that Christ's divine and human natures are united in His outward appearance or prosopon (person). This view suggests that while Christ's divine and human natures remain separate, they appear as one person outwardly, but it does not affirm the deep, real, and essential union that is described by the hypostatic union.

Key Features of the Prosopic Union:

- **Separation of Hypostases:** In this view, the divine and human hypostases remain distinct and separate, merely appearing to be united in one person. This implies a more relational or external union, rather than an internal, ontological one.
- **Rejection of External Union:** The prosopic union is rejected by the Orthodox Church because it undermines the reality of the union between the divine and human natures. It suggests a mere appearance of unity rather than an actual union of the two natures in one person.
- **Composite Prosopon:** it suggests that Christ has assumed a human prosopon.

VII. Miaphysitism: One United Nature of the Incarnate Word

Unlike *Dyophysitism*, which speaks of two natures in one person, *Miaphysitism* ("one united nature") affirms that after the union, Christ exists in a single, united nature that is fully divine and fully human. This view, held by the Oriental Orthodox Churches, rejects both Nestorian separation and Eutychian confusion.

Key Clarifications:

- **One Incarnate Nature** – Christ is not two beings but one divine-human entity.
- **Against Confusion** – His humanity is not absorbed into divinity but is truly present.
- **Faithfulness to the Fathers** – The phrase *μία φύσις τοῦ θεοῦ λόγου σεσαρκωμένη* ("one nature of the incarnate Word of God") comes from St. Cyril of Alexandria.