

The Essence of Christ's Sacrifice

By Professor Alexei Osipov

Understanding this question is impossible without first explaining what happened to our Forefathers (Adam and Eve) as a result of their fall into sin. There are, in general, two points of view concerning Ancestral Sin—the Catholic one and the Orthodox one. The former insists that the sin of our first parents “offended God and His Providence.”¹ Also, “all men,” according to a contemporary Catholic catechism, “are implicated in Adam’s sin,”² meaning that they are also guilty with him in this sin. This guilt is so great that to restore justice, the sacrifice of the Son of God was required. Christ took upon Himself the guilt of Adam’s sin, and through His sufferings, he gave satisfaction to the Father’s justice, bringing a full payment to the righteousness of God. In the aforementioned Catholic catechism, we read the following: “Jesus atoned for our guilt and brought satisfaction to the Father for our sins.” “By His holy Passion on the wood of the Cross, He won for us our justification,” as the Tridentine Council taught.³

But what reasons do they have to insist that Adam eternally offended God? And is it even possible to offend God, Who is immutable? The Gospel insists that He is

¹ Biffi, Giacomo. *Io Credo: breve esposizione della dottrina cattolica. [I believe: A Short Summary of the Catholic Faith.]* Jaca Book, 1993.

² “Catechism of the Catholic Church.” *The Holy See*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 11 Apr. 2003, www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_P1C.HTM#170.

³ *Ibid.*

good to those who are ungrateful and evil (Luke 6:35). St. John Chrysostom said, “If you demand fairness, then according to the law of righteousness, we should have been immediately destroyed, even at the beginning.”⁴ St. Isaac the Syrian even wrote, “Don’t call God just, for His justice is not manifest in the things concerning you... His Son revealed to us that He is good and kind.”⁵

Is God’s eternal anger for Adam’s sin, for the justification of which and for the satisfaction of Whose justice the Cross was required, truly the reason for all the tragedies of human existence? Where did they find such a horrid teaching concerning God, transformed into the pagan god Moloch? St. John Cassian of Rome wrote that “it is impossible to ascribe to Him any anger or fury without blasphemy.”⁶ St. John Chrysostom says, “When you hear the words ‘anger and fury’ with reference to God, do not think anything human concerning this. These are words of condescension. All this is foreign to the divine. We speak thus only to make the subject more understandable to the ignorant,”⁷ that is, the common people. But in Catholicism, this is the official teaching of the Church!

As for St. Cyril of Alexandria, he directly answers the question of Adam’s descendants “sharing his guilt.” He says, “Many people became sinful not because

⁴ Saint John Chrysostom. *The Complete Works of Saint John Chrysostom*. Amazon Digital Services LLC , 2011.

⁵ Isaac, et al. *Mystic Treatises by Isaac of Nineveh*. Gorgias Press, 2011.

⁶ Makarios, et al. *The Philokalia: a Second Volume of Selected Readings: Writings of Holy Mystic Fathers in Which Is Explained How the Mind Is Purified, Illumined, and Perfected through Practical and Contemplative Ethical Philosophy*. Institute for Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies, 2009.

⁷ Saint John Chrysostom. *The Complete Works of Saint John Chrysostom*. Amazon Digital Services LLC , 2011.

they shared the guilt of Adam—after all, they were not there then! —but because they participated in his nature.”⁸

I am amazed by the farfetched nature of this, the crude juridical thinking, and the frankly accusatory character with which this theory refers to God. Unfortunately, it has found its way even into some of our own theological primers and books (such as the Metropolitan Makarius’s book on Orthodox dogmatic theology and some others).

After all, if we follow this logic to its conclusion, then the one who is at fault for man’s transgression against so-called divine righteousness is God Himself, Who, knowing even before He created man that Man would sin, did everything to make it happen—He planted the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, He allowed the seducer-serpent to end up in paradise, and He gave him the chance to entice Eve. But since God knew and acted, then, consequently, who is at fault? And for the justification of this situation, the sacrifice of Christ Himself was required?! This is the logical conclusion of the theory of Adam’s guilt and the necessity to satisfy God’s so-called justice.

Is not this primitive idea, which profoundly perverts the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice, simply taken from Roman law and the medieval conception of chivalric honour, instead of Divine Revelation?

⁸ Saint Cyril Patriarch of Alexandria. *The Commentaries of Saint Cyril on the Epistles of St. Paul and on the Psalms, with Some Minor Fragments, with a Latin Translation and with Notes*. Romae, 1845.

Orthodoxy sees Ancestral Sin not as an offence against God, nor does it acknowledge the need to satisfy His righteousness. Instead, it admits Ancestral Sin to be a profound twisting or damage of human nature. It became, as St. Maximus the Confessor writes, “a passionate, fleeting, and mortal nature.”⁹

From here, we get a completely different teaching concerning the meaning of Christ’s sacrifice. Christ did not satisfy God’s justice, nor did he remove the guilt from man and justify it before the Accuser-Father. Instead, He healed and resurrected the nature of sinful man through His sufferings, for He accepted that nature in the Incarnation! St. John of Damascus wrote, “Since He gave us the best [at creation], but we did not preserve it, so He accepts the worst—I mean our nature—so that, through Himself and in Himself He could raise up that which was according to the image and likeness.”¹⁰

Apostle Paul writes about this in his epistle to the Hebrews: “For it was fitting for Him, for whom are all things and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” (Hebrews 2:10)

Does that mean that Christ was not already perfect? According to His human nature, yes and no. Christ is unique. On the one hand, He, born of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, did not inherit in his human nature any sinful passions, failings, or

⁹ St Maximus the Confessor, et al. *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings (Classics of Western Spirituality)*. Paulist Press, 1985.

¹⁰ John of Damascus, et al. *An Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith*. Vol. 4, Veritatis Splendor, 2012.

other spiritual damage with which all other people are born. His human nature was pure of all this, just as Adam's was. And in His earthly life He, in spite of all temptations, never sinned: "The ruler of this world is coming, and he has nothing in Me." (John 14:30)

On the other hand, Christ accepted mortal and perishable human nature, which was capable of being wounded by any sufferings (or "passion"), and in this incompleteness, He was similar to all the descendants of fallen Adam. The Gospels speak of this, as well as many Holy Fathers. St. Gregory Palamas, for example, expressed this very clearly: "The Logos of God accepted the same flesh as we have, and though it was completely pure, it was still susceptible to pain and death."¹¹

What did the Lord accomplish? What does His sacrifice mean?

Apostle Paul, in his epistle to the Hebrews, clearly writes that through His sufferings, He made damaged human nature, which He had taken on Himself in the Incarnation, perfect (that is, He healed it and resurrected it). The Fathers write about this. St. Athanasius the Great: "The Only-begotten became man so that He could recover human nature in Himself."¹² St. Gregory of Nyssa: "Having accepted our impurity in Himself, He Himself is not defiled by impurity, but in Himself purifies this impurity."¹³

¹¹ Saint Gregory Palamas. *The Homilies of Saint Gregory Palamas, Vol. 1*. St Tikhons Seminary Press, 2002.

¹² Athanasius the Great. "Athanasius: Select Works and Letters." *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, 2005, www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf204.toc.html.

¹³ Gregory of Nyssa. *Anti-Apollinarian Writings*. The Catholic University of America Press, 2015.

Why did God not simply heal us? Why were His sufferings necessary? God cannot change the laws of creation, since they are a reflection of His qualities. St. Gregory Palamas indicates this: “God is and is called the nature of all that is.” “God arranged this visible world as a certain reflection of the world beyond this world.”¹⁴ One of these laws is the fact that any action, especially healing, requires labor, endurance, suffering, and sometimes even death, for example, at war. This is an unchangeable law, as unchangeable as the Creator of that law. And we see its action in the Cross of Christ.

The willing death of the God-Man Christ was a victory over the passion, perishability, and mortality of human nature. As St. Maximus the Confessor wrote, “The immutability of the will in Christ once again returned to this nature, through the Resurrection, passionlessness, incorruptibility, and immortality.”¹⁵

But if this healing occurred in Christ, what did it give to man?

Apostle Paul calls Christ the last Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). If, because of the first Adam, man unwittingly is born with a damaged nature, then, because of the last Adam, everyone may spiritually be born again and wittingly believe in Him as Savior, for “that which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.” (John 3:6) This occurs through the sacrament of Baptism, in which the believer receives the seed of an immortal, imperishable, passionless nature that was

¹⁴ Kern, Archimandrite Kiprian. *Antropologia Sviatogo Grigoriia Palamy [The Anthropology of Saint Gregory Palamas]*. Palomnik, 1996.

¹⁵ St Maximus the Confessor, et al. *Maximus Confessor: Selected Writings (Classics of Western Spirituality)*. Paulist Press, 1985.

reborn in Christ. As St. Simeon the New Theologian says, “He who has believed in the Son of God... repents... of his former sins and is purified of them in the sacrament of baptism. Then God the Word enters into the baptized one as into the womb of the Ever-virgin and remains within him as a seed.”¹⁶ This is the beginning of his spiritual growth into the complete man, “to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.” (Ephesians 4:13)

Thus it becomes clear why the Lord, while creating, planted the tree of knowledge in the garden, though He knew that man would sin. Not so that He could then accuse man of offending Himself and demand satisfaction, but so that man, having tasted of the forbidden fruit of self-deification (“you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5), could experientially come to know the full tragedy of his so-called independence from God. Then he could receive, without stumbling, the eternal kingdom promised him from the beginning.

¹⁶ “Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate.” *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate*, no. 3, 1980, p. 67.