

The Letter of the Month

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St. Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons (c. 115-202) *On the Incarnation*

Introduction: The Life of St. Irenaeus

St. Irenaeus was born at Smyrna, in Asia Minor, where he learned Johannine theology from Bishop Polycarp. He seems to have lived for a time at Rome before settling by 177 in Lyons, where he succeeded Pothinus as bishop of a Greek-speaking Christian community. His major writing, Against Heresies, describes and refutes the teachings of Gnostics, who claimed to have secret teachings unknown to most Christians. Irenaeus replies that the four Gospels, especially as interpreted by the bishops who succeeded the apostles in major cities such as Rome, constitute a valid and public witness to Christ, who, as Paul taught, "sums up all things." Secret traditions and private revelations are to be rejected. His influence on later theologians has gained him recognition as the first great theologian of the postbiblical universal church.

The following passages are taken from St. Irenaeus' two major writings, Against Heresies and Proof of the Apostolic Preaching.

The Birth of Christ and the New Birth of Man

How shall man pass into God, unless God has first passed into man? And how shall men escape from the generation subject to death, if not by means of a new generation through faith in that generation given in a wonderful manner by God, as a sign of salvation (cf Isa 7:14); I mean that which was from the Virgin? Or how shall

they receive adoption from God if they remain in this kind of generation, which is naturally possessed by man in this world?

It was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and he who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God.¹

The End for which the Word of God was Made Man

Being ignorant of Him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of His gift, which is eternal life; and not receiving the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh, and are debtors to death, not obtaining the antidote of life... For it was for this end that the Word of God was made man, and He who was the Son of God became the Son of man, that man, having been taken into the Word, and receiving the adoption, might become the son of God. For by no other means could we have attained to incorruptibility and immortality, unless we had been united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be joined to incorruptibility and immortality, unless, first, incorruptibility and immortality had become that which we also are, so that the corruptible might be swallowed up by incorruptibility, and the mortal by immortality, that we might receive the adoption of sons?²

The Exchange Between God and Man

The Son of God became the Son of Man, so that through Him we might receive adoption. This takes place when man receives and bears and embraces the Son of God.³

He became the Son of Man to accustom man to receive God and God to dwell in man.⁴

In His immeasurable love, he became what we are in order to make us what He is.⁵

The proclamation of the Church alone is true, namely that God's own creation, which depends for its existence on God's power and art and wisdom, has borne God. In an invisible way, the creation is borne by the Father, but in a visible way, it does indeed bear the Word. And this is the truth.⁶

Spiritual though it was (cf Rom. 7:14), the law only manifested sin; it did not suppress it, for sin did not hold sway just over the spirit, but over the [whole] man. It was necessary, therefore, that the One who came to slay sin, and to redeem man deserving of death, should become precisely what man is, namely, man. It was man who was dragged by sin into slavery and held fast by death, and so it had to be a man by whom sin was slain, a man who went forth from death.⁷

There was no other way for us to receive incorruptibility and immortality than to be united to incorruptibility and immortality. But how could we be united to incorruptibility and immortality without incorruptibility and immortality first becoming what we are, the perishable putting on imperishability, the mortal putting on immortality (cf 1 Cor. 15:54), 'so that we might receive adoption as sons' (Gal. 4:5)?⁸

The Mystery of the Virgin

The first formed man, Adam, received his substance from the untilled and still virgin earth ('for God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was no man to till the ground', Gen. 2:5) and was

fashioned by the hand of God, that is, the Word of God (for 'all things were made through Him', John 1:3, and 'God took dust from the earth and formed man', Gen. 2:7). Similarly, the Word, recapitulating Adam in Himself, very fittingly received from Mary, who was still a virgin, the birth which made recapitulation possible ... Why did God not take dust again? Why did He make the formation come from Mary? Precisely so that there was not some different formation, that it was not some different handiwork which was saved, that it was the very same one which was recapitulated, the likeness being preserved.⁹

[The prophets] who proclaimed Him as Emmanuel, born of the Virgin, were showing forth the union of the Word of God with His own handiwork. They were announcing that the Word would be made flesh, that the Son of God would become the Son of Man, that the Pure One, in a pure way, would open that pure womb which regenerates men in God, that pure womb which He Himself made to be pure.¹⁰

Consequently, the Virgin Mary is found to be obedient, when she says, 'Behold the handmaid of the Lord. Be it done unto me according to thy word' (Luke 1:38). Eve was disobedient; while still a virgin, she did not obey. She had Adam for a husband, but she was nonetheless still a virgin, for in Paradise 'they were both naked and not ashamed' (Gen. 2:25). The reason for this was that they had only been created a short time before and so had no understanding of the procreation of children. They had first of all to grow up; only then could they multiply. Just as Eve, by disobeying, became the cause of death for herself and the whole human race, so Mary, betrothed to a predestined man and yet a virgin, by obeying, became the cause of salvation for herself and the whole human race. This is why the law gives the name 'wife' to a woman who is betrothed to a man but still a virgin, thereby indicating the circular movement from Mary back to Eve. What was bound could not be untied

without a reversal of the process of entanglement. The first bonds had to be untied by the second, so that the second might free the first. And, in fact, this is what happened: the first entanglement was untied by the second bond, the second bond playing the role of loosener of the first. This is why the Lord said that the first would be last and the last first (cf Matt. 19:30; 20:16). And the prophet made the same point when he said: 'Instead of fathers sons shall be born to you' (Ps. 44:17). For the Lord, born as 'the first-born from the dead' (Col. 1:18), took to His bosom the ancient 'fathers' and regenerated them into the life of God. He became the beginning of those who live, as Adam had been the beginning of those who die. St. Luke, therefore, begins his genealogy with the Lord and then takes it back to Adam, thereby showing that it was not the fathers who gave life to the Lord but the Lord who gave them rebirth in the Gospel of life. Similarly, the knot of Eve's disobedience was untied through the obedience of Mary. For what the virgin Eve tied through unbelief, the Virgin Mary set free through faith.¹¹

The Prophets

Hither the prophets were sent from God; by the Holy Spirit they admonished the people and returned [them] to the God of the patriarchs, the Almighty, [and] were made heralds of the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, announcing that his flesh would blossom from the seed of David (cf Is. 11:1), that he would be, according to the flesh, son of David, who was the son of Abraham, through a long succession (cf Mt 1:1), while, according to the Spirit, Son of God, being at first with the Father, born before all creation, and being revealed to all the world at the close of the age as man, "recapitulating all things" in Himself, the Word of God, "things in heaven and things on earth" (cf Eph. 1:10).¹²

The Incarnation, Uniting God and Man

So He united man with God and wrought a communion of God and man, we being unable to have any participation in incorruptibility if it were not for his coming to us, for incorruptibility, whilst being invisible, benefitted us nothing: so He became visible, that we might, in all ways, obtain a participation in incorruptibility. And because all are implicated in the first-formation of Adam, we were bound to death through the disobedience, it was fitting, [therefore], by means of the obedience of the One, who on our account became man, to be loosed <from> death. Since death reigned over the flesh, it was necessary that, abolished through flesh, it release man from its oppression. So, "the Word became flesh" (cf John 1:14) that by means of the flesh which sin had mastered and seized and dominated, by this, it might be abolished and no longer be in us. And for this reason our Lord received that same embodiment as the first-formed, that He might fight for the fathers and vanquish in Adam that which had struck us in Adam.¹³

The Aim of the Incarnation: the Universal Recapitulation

Thus there is one God the Father, as we have shown, and one Christ Jesus our Lord, who came by a universal dispensation and recapitulated all things in Himself. But in "all things" man also is comprised, a creature of God; therefore he recapitulated man in Himself. The invisible is become visible, the incomprehensible is become comprehensible, and the impassible passible; and the Logos is become man, recapitulating all things in Himself. Thus, just as He is first among heavenly and spiritual and invisible beings, so also is He the first among visible and corporal beings. He takes the primacy to Himself and by making Himself the head of the Church, He will draw all things to Himself at the appointed time.¹⁴

The Aim of the Incarnation: To Be Seen by Men and Vivify them

In respect to His greatness, and His wonderful glory, "no man shall see God and live" (Ex 33:20), for the Father is incomprehensible; but in regard to His love, and kindness, and as to His infinite power, even this He grants to those who love Him, that is, to see God ...

As those who see the light are within the light, and partake of its brilliancy; even so, those who see God are in God, and receive of His splendor. But [His] splendor vivifies them; those, therefore, who see God, do receive life. And for this reason, He, [although] boundless and beyond comprehension and invisible, rendered Himself visible, and comprehensible, and within the capacity of those who believe, that He might vivify those who receive and behold Him by faith.¹⁵

The Aim of the Incarnation

For this reason, He, [although] boundless and beyond comprehension and invisible, rendered Himself visible, and comprehensible, and within the capacity of those who believe, that He might vivify those who receive and behold Him by faith. For as His greatness is past finding out, so also His goodness is beyond expression; by which having been seen, He bestows life upon those who see Him. It is not possible to live apart from life, and the means of life is found in fellowship with God; but fellowship with God is to see God, and to enjoy His goodness.

Men therefore shall see God, that

they may live, being made immortal by that sight, and attaining even unto God.¹⁶

Communion with God

Therefore, as I have already said, He (Christ) caused man to cleave to and to become one with God. For unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. For it was incumbent upon the Mediator between God and men, by His relationship to both, to bring both to friendship and concord, and cause God to welcome man, and man to present himself to God. For, in what way could we be partakers of the adoption of sons, unless we had received from Him through the Son that fellowship which refers to Himself, unless His Word, having been made flesh, had entered into communion with us? Wherefore also he passed through every stage of life, restoring to all communion with God.¹⁷

¹ *Against Heresies*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Volume I, edited by Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (1867). Book IV, 33, 4; III, 19, 1; p. 507, 448

² *Against Heresies* III, 19, 1; p. 448-449

³ *Against Heresies* III, 16, 3

⁴ *Against Heresies* III, 20, 2

⁵ *Against Heresies* V, preface

⁶ *Against Heresies* V, 18, 1

⁷ *Against Heresies* III, 18, 7

⁸ *Against Heresies* III, 22, 4

⁹ *Against Heresies* III, 21, 10

¹⁰ *Against Heresies* IV, 33, 11

¹¹ *Against Heresies* III, 19, 1

¹² *On the Apostolic Preaching*, translated by John Behr SVS Press (1997), 30, p. 60

¹³ *On the Apostolic Preaching*, 31, p. 61

¹⁴ *Against Heresies* III, 16, 6

¹⁵ *Against Heresies* IV, 20, 5; p. 489

¹⁶ *Against Heresies* IV, 20, 5-6; p. 489

¹⁷ *Against Heresies* III, 18, 7; p. 448

*Happy New Year and Merry Christmas to you from
Fr. Athanasius Farag and Fr. Bishop Mikhail. May God bless you.*



St. Antonious and St. Mina Coptic Orthodox Church

147 Park Avenue, PO Box 66
East Rutherford, NJ 07073
Telephone: 201.933.2226

www.stantoniousstmina.org

Christian Education Center
220 Montross Avenue
Rutherford, NJ 07070

St.AntoniousSt.MinaChurch@gmail.com

