

The Life of the Spirit

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THE IMAGE OF GOD IN MAN ACCORDING TO ST IRENAEUS

By

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In a recent work M. Denis Saurat claims that reality is rendered comprehensible only by the "complete life of Christ". Christ, Logos and Man, is the centre from which all life flows, unfolding "into the past and into the future". No doubt M. Saurat's thesis is expressed in pantheistic thought forms, but this does not detract from the value of the imaginatively expressed intuition by which he has discovered that it is Christ alone who gives meaning and reality to the time process, and that it is the Incarnation that makes history intelligible.

Whatever reservations a Catholic is called upon to make regarding the details of M. Saurat's vision, we are able to recognise that he is attempting to bring home to us a darkly seen variant of St Irenaeus's doctrine of the recapitulation of all things in Christ. For by recapitulation St Irenaeus meant a re-commencement in the opposite direction by which God, reversing as it were the process whereby sin infected the earth, gathers together and reunites all creation, including matter, but specially man, in a new economy of salvation. He gathers up his entire work from the beginning to purify and sanctify it in his Incarnate Son, who in turn becomes for us a second Adam." (E. Mersch, S.J.: *The Whole Christ*: p. 280).

Creation points to the Incarnation, and this Christocentric pre-occupation of St Irenaeus has important repercussions on his doctrine of man. M. Saurat, arguing from the same premise, has also described man in terms of Christ. "They tell you, he writes, "that man was made in the image of God. How could you understand? You believed that somewhere around 4000 B.C. there lived a sort of Huge Man called God who had made a much smaller man in his own image. Not at all. Man was made in the

image of Christ." The "real" centre is found in the Incarnation, not in anthropomorphic thinking.

How closely this resembles St Irenaeus's 'teaching'. He too distrusted any attempt to describe the divine in terms drawn from human psychology—for he associated thinking of that type with Gnostic use of Stoic and Platonic terminology (*Adversus Haereses* II 13, 8). At the same time he has none of Tertullian's contempt for the achievement of man, none of his restless moralism, and can reach out with balanced charity to appreciate man's place in the scheme of Creation.

St Irenaeus's doctrine of man, and of the image of God in man, is therefore expressed in Incarnationalist terms and finds its meaning in Christ, the Word made flesh. So far we have M. Saurat with us, but we must leave him now and follow St Irenaeus as he elaborates and explains what he means by the phrase "man is made in the image of Christ."

"Man," he writes, "is a living being composed of soul and flesh" (*Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching*, 2), and he makes it clear that he is not talking of "some spiritual and invisible man," but of "an actual man consisting of flesh, nerves and bones". Soul is the rational principle or life of the body which is connected with some fluid substance which is either the soul itself or inseparable from it.

The gathering up of all things in Christ includes matter, and the man, graced by Christ is the whole existent man we perceive. Thus the very starting point of St Irenaeus is different from that of the classical expositors of the image doctrine whose whole treatment is coloured by what A. H. Armstrong describes as the interiority or psychological character of St Augustine's thought, which seeks to attain God inwards through the soul by the light of inward contemplation.

St. Irenaeus, much less self-conscious, begins with the historical man created in substance by the Word and formed and shaped by the Spirit to the likeness of God (*Demonst.* 4-5). This doctrine is fundamental. The creation of all things by the Word and their perfecting by the Spirit is a parallelism underlying all creation which becomes explicit in the distinction between the first creation in Adam and our recreation in Christ. This will appear more clearly at a later stage.

"As at the beginning of our formation in Adam, that breath of life which proceeded from God, having been united to what had been fashioned, animated the man, and manifested him as a being endowed with reason: so in the end, the Word of the Father and the Spirit of God, having become united with the ancient substance of Adam's formation, rendered man living and perfect" (*Adv. Haer* V, 11,3). The restoration of man by Christ in the Spirit is the key to St Irenaeus's teaching, but his emphasis on the reformation should not lead us to forget that it is

the "original handiwork," the man of flesh, that is restored.

"By the hands of the Father, that is, by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man and not merely part of man was made in the likeness of God. Now the soul and the spirit ⁽¹⁾ are certainly a part of man, but certainly not the man; for the perfect man consists in the commingling of the union of the soul receiving the Spirit of the Father, and the admixture of the fleshly nature, which was moulded after the likeness of God" (*Adv. Haer.* V., 6:1).

We can see, even at this point, how for St Irenaeus the image in man must primarily refer to Christ, God and Man, as its prototype. If we continue our investigation we shall feel the tension between image and prototype even more strongly.

"By his hand he formed man, taking the purest and finest particles from the earth, mixing a determined portion of his power with the dust. Moreover he gave his image to the creature that even what is visible might have the divine form, because created man was placed upon the earth as one having the divine image" (*Demonst.* 11). Man by the Spirit is like God.

It seems quite certain then that the image of God is in the flesh for St. Irenaeus, as Dr. Darwell Stone has pointed out. The question however remains, in what else does it consist? The power is mingled with the dust, and the visible has, in some sense; the divine form. Lipsius writes on this point: "The earthy material composite cannot be the image of that which is spiritual without drawing down the spiritual into its own sphere of materialism." This is indeed true, but it does not sufficiently emphasise the point that both the material and the spiritual are necessary to the image in question, since these two elements reflect the nature of that which is imaged, the Word made flesh.

Nor are we helped by the suggestion, true though it is, that the distinction between vestige and image had not yet been drawn and that therefore there is a latent confusion in the saint's thought, for his emphasis on the image in the flesh, in the whole man, is surely intended to point to Christ the second Adam in a much more explicit way than that in which any merely corporeal vestige mirrors God.

From St. Irenaeus's writings we may conclude that the flesh and the soul are the image, but what then of the similitude or likeness that comes through the Holy Spirit? "If the spirit be wanting to soul," man is "an imperfect being, possessing the image in his formation, but not receiving the similitude through the Spirit" (*Adv. Haer.*, V. 6:1).

Quite clearly man even without the spirit and no longer innocent is still in the image of God. Why? Because "man being endowed with reason" was in that "respect like to God." And

(1) Spirit, here used in the sense of the breath of life, is for St. Irenaeus the grace of the Holy Spirit.

even though he lives irrationally, he is still a rational being. (*Adv. Haer.*, IV:3).

There is then what we may call a "natural" image of God in man, in so far as he is a free rational being. This image is impaired at the Fall, but is not lost, for man is still like God in that he is free, and though opposed to his righteousness, cannot escape his hands.

In this connection Dr. Brunner writes: "The Imago means the human nature which cannot be lost, the Similitudo means man's original relation to God which may be lost, and since Adam has been lost. This is mediated through the divine Spirit" (*Man in Revolt*, Appendix I, p. 505). This expresses St. Irenaeus's position, though care should be used lest the distinction be made too rigorous, as in many texts the words 'image' and 'likeness' are used as synonyms. It is safe to say, however, that St. Irenaeus for the most part conceived of the likeness as a spirit-given grace perfecting the image, and that it is a grace lost by sin and restored in Christ.

Dr. Brunner proceeds to infer that the image for St. Irenaeus refers to a natural state, while the likeness describes a supernatural one. He is no doubt correct in pointing out that the germs of this latter distinction are contained in the saint's works, and in one text we do find the two terms opposed as natural and supernatural. We must, however, not force this argument too far. The term "natural" for St. Irenaeus can mean what we have by right, as opposed to what we have by grace, but it usually means what is originally present or given at birth. Any distinction between nature and supernature in an absolute sense is quite unknown to him, and any attempt to force his terminology to conform to later categories only leads to misrepresentation. In whatever sense, one thing is quite certain; both image and likeness only have meaning and only are revealed as such in Christ. "For in times long past it was said that man was created after the image of God, but it was not actually shown for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image was man created" (*Adv. Haer.* V. 16:2, cf. IV. 37:1-2).

The image is then a reality which points beyond itself to the humanity of Christ and cannot be understood without reference to what later writers have called the supernatural.

The recreation of man by Christ in the Spirit, as a doctrine peculiar to Irenaeus, can only be understood if we pay some attention to his teaching on the Primitive State. This will make clear the distinctions between the first image, the image in man fallen, and the image in man re-created.

Man was made "master of the earth and of all in it." Though all things on the earth "were in their perfection," the lord, that is man, was a little one, a child. And as it was necessary and proper that he should grow up and so come to perfection, and that

his nourishment and growth might be pleasant and easy, He (God) prepared for him a better place than this earth and its name was Paradise." Man was taught and prepared for the future in this garden by the Word of God. "But man was a child, not yet having his understanding perfected, and for that reason he was easily deceived by the deceiver" (*Demonst.* 12). Man, then, in the beginning, had the "sinless feeling" of childhood and did not comprehend "any of those things which are born through evil in the soul through concupiscence," because he had kept his nature sound, still possessing the breath of life (the spirit)" (*Demonst.* 14-16).

The first man was a child and in that sense imperfect. Why did God not "exhibit man perfect from the beginning"? It is true that all things are possible for God, yet "created things must be inferior to him who created them; from the very fact of their later origin it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated," and thus they "come short of the perfect." So much is true of the distinction between Creator and Creature, but St. Irenaeus pushes the argument further. "Because as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline. For as it certainly is in the power of a mother to give strong food to her infant, yet she does not do so as the child is not yet fit to receive more substantial nourishment, so also it was possible for God himself to have made man perfect from the beginning but man could not yet receive this (perfection), being yet an infant" (*Adv. Haer.* IV., 38:1).

The first man was a child, innocent and docile to the spirit, but one who was not yet fully self-conscious and in that respect imperfect. This is the first imperfect image—man graced by the spirit, but not yet fully grasping it, since all his potentialities have not yet been awakened—he has not yet grown up.

Man, however, could fall and was prone to pride; "that man should not think great things or be exalted on high as if he had no master, by reason of the dominion given him and the intimacy with God his Creator, and that he might not have self-satisfied thoughts against God, a law was given him by God." But "man did not keep the commandment" and was cast out of Paradise. (*Demonst.* 16-18).

The basic idea that St. Irenaeus is trying to express seems to be that man is created an innocent child, who is destined, under Providence, to discover himself and reach a greater appreciation of God's nature by passing through the corruption of sin. Not that the sin reveals God, but man, by falling into sin, discovers his own need of God; his pride defeats itself and, becoming conscious of this, man grows up and becomes capable of receiving divine instruction regarding that which is good.

"How, if he had no knowledge of the contrary, could he have

had instruction in that which is good?" "For it was necessary, at first, that a nature should be exhibited; then after that, that which was mortal should be conquered and swallowed up by immortality . . . and that man should be made after the image and likeness of God, having received the knowledge of good and evil" (*Adv. Haer.* IV, 38:44).

The second imperfect image is verified when man, free and rational, has lost the spirit, and having discovered evil, sees the opposition between it and good, and thus falls under the condemnation of the Law. Man's rational side has, as it were, developed at the expense of his innocence; by a divine paradox it is from the primal sin that culture takes its rise. Man has grown up, and in growing up has shut out God—his self-consciousness has arisen through self-assertion. Yet at the same time this new state of mental and moral being has made him more capable of receiving the revelation to come.

There is much that might be criticised in this presentation of the Doctrine of the Primitive State and the Fall, but many of the difficulties are removed if we remember that St. Irenaeus is not attempting to define the quiddity of the states of man in the abstract, but is giving an interpretation of God's dealing with man in history. The sin of our first parents is only significant for him as in some way preparing for the coming of the fulness of the Spirit in Christ. He is attempting to paint an imaginative picture of the workings of the divine plan, and though many modifications need to be introduced, his teaching on the centrality of the Incarnation, on the greater perfection of grace which it brings in comparison with any other historic situation all may consider with profit. Man at the very moment of his creation, even as sinning and falling under condemnation, is reaching out—in the scheme of divine Providence—towards something hidden, a "something" which is revealed in Christ. No doubt like all attempts to describe the working of the divine mind, the explanation of St. Irenaeus breaks down, but nevertheless it has a charm, and points to a truth too often lacking in accounts of the relation of man's creation to his redemption. He, at least, does not attempt to avoid problems by treating these two terms of the divine plan as revealed in time, as totally separate and unrelated.

There remains only one question. How is the fullness of grace received; whence does the meaning and the perfection of the image that is man come?

"He created man to the image of God, and the image of God is the Son, in whose image was man. And for this he appeared in the end of time that he might show the image to be like himself" (*Demonst.* 22).

This is the vital point for St. Irenaeus. In Christ, the imaged, man the image is recapitulated and restored.

"The Word became flesh that by means of a body, by which

sin had taken hold death might be abolished . . . for this reason our Lord took the same flesh and that of the first created man, so that he . . . might conquer by Adam, that by which Adam had struck us down" (*Demonst.* 31). "To renew man (he) accepted the economy of the Incarnation . . . that he might show an embodiment resembling Adam, and might be, as was written beforehand, man according to the image and likeness of God" (*Demonst.* 32).

Christ in the flesh is the true image, the prototype of man, and he "shows forth the image truly, since he became himself what was the image; and he re-established the similitude after a like manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father by means of the visible Word" (*Adv. Haer.* V., 16:2). "So that what we had lost in Adam . . . we might recover in Christ" (*Adv. Haer.* III. 18:1).

It is thus quite clear that for St. Irenaeus the image includes the flesh as an essential part and that it refers above all to Christ, who came to us "not as he might have come, but as we were capable of beholding him."

It is this significance of Christ as the prototype by whom and in whom man and his history can alone be understood, that links the saint's doctrine with that of M. Saurat. Man and his history can only be interpreted in terms of Jesus Christ, and in that sense it is true that all history flows from Christ.

It remains for some modern theologian to assimilate the teaching of St. Irenaeus to the Augustinian-Thomist tradition, a task which was impossible for the medieval schoolman owing to the somewhat inexplicable lack of the texts of his works in the Middle Ages.

FROM ST. AUGUSTINE

"De Deo loquimur, quid mirum si non comprehendis? Si enim comprehendis, non est Deus." *Sermo CXVII*—3.

Often upon our lips we lightly frame,
 (Dread word) Th' Incommunicable Name:
 Yet mortal notes, how can we comprehend
 The Lord of Life within Whose glow we spend
 Our little day. Frail finite minds, if we
 Could comprehend, no mighty One were He.

JOHN SEARLE.