

GOD IS MAN

BRO. FRANCIS VOLLMER, O. P.



IN the ears of many an earnest soul who is eagerly and sincerely looking for the truth, certain statements in Catholic belief have an incongruous, and, what seems to them sometimes, even a blasphemous sound. Such are the expressions, "God was born in Bethlehem," "God died on Calvary," "Mary is the Mother of God," "Christ was from all eternity," and so on. Let us try to understand, sympathetically and uncritically first, the position of these people. They have good will, and let us say for the sake of argument that they believe they are Christians and that they would resent any imputation to the contrary. They hold that Our Lord is both human and divine, but of course are a little hazy as to what they believe to be the exact relation of God and man in Him. In fact, it is just because they do feel that He was really divine that some of these phrases jar, disconcert and shock them; for instance, that Mary is the Mother of God. Perhaps their feeling is, if they have not studied very deeply the doctrine of the Incarnation, that the Blessed Virgin was the mother of only the human element of Christ to which the Word united Himself, and so, to call her the Mother of God seems, to a mind which is not analytical, almost like raising the Blessed Virgin up into the realm of Deity. They cannot seem to get away from the feeling that, when one says "God," it connotes all three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. Of course, they understand that in this case only the Second Person is meant, but even so, they dislike the use of the word God in this expression, "Mary is the Mother of God."

Again, when it is said, "God died for us," they have another difficulty. How can God die? If He is God, He did not really die; if He really died, then He cannot be God. They feel that Our Saviour is divine, they know that He really died; but to say that "God died" seems to them too much. It seems to imply that Deity passed out of existence, which is unthinkable. As

to His birth, it is just the same with the terms reversed. God can no more have a beginning than He can have a death.

This position of our well-disposed non-Catholic brethren is a perfectly natural inherited one. It is part of the heritage of an attempt that was made to separate things which are one, introduced long ages ago, but most effectually crystallized in the Protestant, deist and pragmatist movements. In order to arrive at a sympathetic appreciation of the state of mind of our dissenting friends, we shall trace roughly the origin and evolution of their position by indicating, briefly and in the broadest outlines, the principal currents and cross-currents of thought which have borne upon this question, and which have culminated in the present attitude.

Since all the misunderstanding has its ultimate root in errors about the Incarnation, it is well to go back to the heresies and disputes which arose in the first centuries of the Church. All Christians agreed in assenting to the statement, in reference to Christ, "God is man." They held to this truth, however, in different ways.¹ There were three kinds of errors in this matter, and quite naturally. Some erred about the subject, some about the predicate, and some about the verb, i. e., the predication itself. The Photinians held that Christ was not really God, only God by a participation of grace; others maintained that He was not a real man, but only apparently so—those were the Manicheans; or others again held that He was not a man really, but just figuratively, for certain doctors held that in Him soul and body were not really united. Chief among those who gave a wrong sense to the verb "is" in the sentence "God is man" were the Nestorians. They taught that there was only a moral union between the divine nature and the human nature in Christ; that there were, in fact, two persons in Him, one divine, the other human. This heresy proved to be the most prolific source of later aberrations in regard to the God-man, Jesus Christ, Our Saviour. Each one of the opinions just mentioned had its learned and powerful protagonists and followers, so also did a number of other heterodox tenets in regard to Our Lord which are serious but do not exactly touch our point, and a general council of the Church was necessary in each case firmly to delineate and establish the exact doctrine of the Church and vindicate it as the true teaching of Christ Himself. It was a

¹ *Summa Theologica*, IIIa, q. 16, a. 1.

truth by no means easy to understand, and that is why so many brilliant minds strayed away in trying to twist it to fit their reasonings, but it was the Rock that stood like Gibraltar amid the swirling whirlpools of the thought of the times, for it shone forth indisputably from the sacred text and from tradition; the dogma of the two complete individual natures subsisting in the one Divine Person.

The thing to note in all this is the tendency to make a cleavage, to separate the human and the divine. In various ways, and from different angles, they found it a hard saying that both the nature of an individual man and the nature of God were concentered in this one Person, Who was divine, and that there was no human personality there, although a complete individual human nature. Of course it was a hard saying, for it was a thing entirely unique in the whole history of the world. Nevertheless it is the truth, revealed by God, as proclaimed explicitly and minutely explained by the early oecumenical councils, when one heresiarch after another caused the searchlight of the Church, the official interpreter and custodian of the deposit of Faith, to be focused on his opinion. So the dogma became more clearly defined, but there still continued to be men who insisted on trying to separate, in some way or another, the God from the man.

All these perennial attempts led nowhere until the end of the fifteenth century,² when we find the Socinians, the first theological rationalists, attempting to cut the revealed Christian truths to fit certain arbitrarily assumed principles of reason. One of their principles was that there cannot be two natures in one person; they said that with the finite and the infinite there could be nothing in common, and Christ was therefore not the *Logos*, the Word of God, but simply a person on whom God looked with favor. See again the same old attempt to alienate divinity from humanity in Our Lord. This movement really was the beginning of the modern phase of this attempted severance, which is still in vogue. The Socinians said they wanted to keep Sacred Scripture, but they distorted its supernatural realities with their false natural philosophy. Luther followed with his doctrine that we are all a lost lump, that divine grace is not a perfection of our nature, and that the merits of Christ were only externally imputed to us. In France, René Descartes enunciated

²In reference to the brief summary herein attempted, consult Rev. Fulton Sheen's forthcoming book, *Religion without God*.

his principle of accepting only what was clear and distinct, the germ of the later edition of rationalism. Although Descartes himself refused to apply his method to religion, ethics, or social questions, it did not take his followers long to do so, and it but remained for the English deists, the rationalists and sceptics of both England and France, French impiety under Voltaire and Rousseau, and German Wulfianism, to combine in giving the death blow to the union of God and man in Our Lord, according to the current thought of the age. Particularly in England were these naturalistic and sceptical teachings widely diffused and propagated, and became the common talk, not alone of scientists and philosophers, but of all those who read. This deadly scepticism greatly troubled the pietistic sage of Regensburg, Immanuel Kant, and in his sincere attempt to save religion, in the form of pietism, he was inspired by the romanticism in Rousseau, and the salvation that he believed to be impossible by way of the intellect, he was confident of effecting by the will and sentiment. One of his last works, *Religion within the Limits of Pure Reason*, propounded the famous categorical imperative in religious form, a blind will to believe, and proved Kant the progenitor of pragmatism. Other elements entered in to confirm the anti-intellectual trend of religious thought outside the Church, currents which are not of enough moment to detain us here. Enough has been said to show the reason for the "No dogmas!" cry of recent, and indeed of present, times in religion outside the Catholic Church.

Now the sum of all these forces, flavored by the individual leanings of the Protestant theologians and professors, acts on the mind of the non-Catholic of today. Is it any wonder then that he balks a little at: "God is man," "God died," or "Mary, the Mother of God"?

The explanation, of course, is radicated in the Personal Union. If we look at the question, however, through ordinary logical spectacles, it may help us to see it more clearly. That is what St. Thomas does.³

We see around us men, individuals. Our intelligence abstracts and fastens upon the essential nature of these creatures, and we call it "human nature." Peter is an individualization, or concretion, of humanity, and it is a law of logic and of common sense alike that "man" in the concrete may be predicated of

³ IIIa, q. 16, a. 1.

him, a person of human nature. Also any property of that nature may be predicated of him in the concrete. We cannot say "Peter is humanity," or "human nature," but we can say, "he is a man;" likewise we can say, "he was born," "he died," and so on. He is a person having human nature. But Christ is a person having human nature, having a body and soul like ours, and, therefore, although the person be divine, still Christ is a Person having an individual human nature, and so human nature in the concrete, and all its essential properties, may be predicated of Him. Thus we speak properly when we say regarding Christ, "God was born," "God died," and so on.

What is born is the person, and a mother is the mother of a person, not merely of an individual nature,⁴ and in the case of Christ this Person is also divine, is God, so it is perfectly correct to say, "Mary is the Mother of God." This was defined at the Council of Ephesus⁵ in 431 A. D.

Nor is there any need to be concerned about the other two Persons of the Blessed Trinity in these questions. As Cardinal Cajetan points out,⁶ it is sufficient for the truth of this proposition, "God is man," that one Person of the Trinity be man; just as when I say, "Man is an animal that can laugh," all that is needed to justify that statement is to show that one man is an animal that can laugh; it is not necessary to show the whole human race can laugh.

We may conclude, then, that since the Person of Whom we speak is a divine person, and since also an individual human nature is concreted in Him, it is legitimate to say, "God was born," for He truly was. So also with the other expressions. Mary really is the Mother of God. God really died on Calvary. Moreover, this mode of expression brings home very forcibly the true nature of the union of God and man in Christ. It may take a little effort to grasp the character of that union, nay it takes more, it takes supernatural faith; but once that light dawns on us, the expressions of which we have been speaking in this paper become, instead of silly self-contradictions, the terse and accurate statements of a mystery of supernal beauty, the central mystery of the whole Christian religion: "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us."

⁴ IIIa, q. 35, a. 4 ad 2m.

⁵ Denz., 113.

⁶ Comm. in IIIam, q. 16, a. 1.