

ALL BY A WORD

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WHETHER ONE appreciates art or not, he will at least admit that the imagination of the artist is a very fertile, sometimes a very original region. Symbolism plays a leading rôle in the representations of the artist's ideas. The viewer is at times at a complete loss to adequate the idea that an artist is trying to portray with the actual presentation put on the piece of canvas. Church art too has its symbolism. But in the case at hand now, the reason for the particular symbols used has its origin not so much in the artist's idea, as in the works of the individuals portrayed. We speak of the symbolism associated with the four Evangelists.

St. Matthew is usually pictured as a *man* because his version of the gospel begins with the very human fact of the genealogy of Jesus. St. Mark is seen as a *lion* since his account of the gospel opens with the preaching of John the Baptist, "crying in the wilderness." St. Luke is depicted as an *ox* because his gospel starts with the offering of sacrifice in the Temple. But John, the Beloved Disciple, is seen as an *eagle*, lost to the naked eye of man, flying above the far-flung barriers of the heavens. For John begins not with anything relating to earth here below, but opens with the sublime "In the beginning was the Word." He soars beyond the comprehension of our mortal minds and pushes aside the veil surrounding the intimate life of God that we might glimpse its beauty. "In the beginning . . ." The beginning of what? Back to the misty reaches of the moment of creation? Is that what this eagle means? Yes, but even more than that. "The depths were not as yet, and I was already conceived; before the hills, I was brought forth" (Prov. 7, 24). The Word had already had an eternity of existence before the world began! After acquainting us with some of the facts revealed to him about the second Person of the Blessed Trinity, John plunges from the heights of heaven and places this God right in our midst. "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

The Saviour had finally come, clothed in the nature and flesh of one of his creatures, to lift a fallen humanity to the dignity of

children of God. God had already spoken to Man through creation and his voice had gone unheeded. Again He spoke, this time not to mankind in general, but to a particular portion, a special group, a people who were called Chosen. To this people He spoke through prophets, using them as instruments for His voice. But now "when the fulness of time was come, God sent His Son . . ." (Gal. 4, 4). Since Man had disregarded the voice of creation, and spurned the Divine voice echoed by the prophets, God, in that moment of history called by theologians the Incarnation, spoke once more: "And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." The Word of God came to us, to live with us and to show us the way home.

THE DIVINE WORD

Exactly what do we mean when we speak of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity as the Word? Why is He called by St. John the Word rather than the Son? The whole of our knowledge of the Trinity comes to us from the Church and from the Sacred Scriptures. The Old Testament contains vague references to the mystery of the Trinity. It remained for the New Testament to crystallize the dim foreshadowings of the Old Testament. Finally the Church in her statements concerning the Blessed Trinity presents this central mystery of our Faith in precise and well defined terms. By the Blessed Trinity we mean the mystery of three persons in one God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, each subsisting distinct in identically the same divine nature. We are taught that the distinction of these Persons arises from the processions existing within the Trinity itself. The procession with which we are interested now is the procession of the second Person. In speaking of Himself, Our Blessed Lord said, "For from God I proceeded and came" (John 8, 42). This passage has been interpreted by the Fathers to mean that the words "and came" refer to the external, outward manifestation of the second Person in the flesh, accomplished in the Incarnation. The phrase "from God I proceeded" is regarded as the expression of the second Person's eternal origin from the Father. The eternal generation of the Word is of necessity a spiritual process according to the words of St. John, "God is a spirit" (John 4, 24).

Matter of itself has no life. It is cold, inert, sterile. It possesses the quality of extension and therefore can be measured. Something immaterial on the other hand cannot be measured since it does not have any extension, no part outside part. It is

impossible for anything material to completely double back upon itself. For example, a hammer cannot hammer itself, or a blanket cover itself. If part of the hammer is broken off, then the rest of it can hammer the separated part. And the same with a blanket. Part of it may be torn off and the remainder may cover the torn piece. But we are here speaking of the whole hammer and the whole blanket and not parts of them. Yet the human soul can perform such a feat. In a remarkable demonstration of mental gymnastics a man can think of himself, and then can think of himself thinking of himself, all the while recognizing and appreciating the identity of the "himself" that is thought of with the "himself" that is thinking.

This wonder of reflexion is characteristic of a spiritual agent and his essential activities. These activities pertain to one of the two purely spiritual faculties, the intellect or the will. Since God is a spirit and indeed the purest and supreme spirit, He possesses thought and volition in their fullest and highest perfection. By revelation we know that there are two processions which are internal and intrinsic to the divine nature. One of these processions is according to the operation of the intellect and the other according to the operation of the will. Even the names supplied by Sacred Scripture imply this when speaking of the second and third Persons of the Trinity. The second Person is called the Logos or Word, i.e. something arising from an intellectual operation. The third Person is called the Holy Spirit from the Latin word to breathe, after the fashion in which we emit a deep sigh as expressive of the attraction of our will to some object which it loves.

When John chose to write the term, "the Word," he probably did so deliberately. He was using a term much in vogue among the philosophers of his day. Ephesus, where early Tradition tells us the gospel of St. John was written, was one of the intellectual centers of the Roman Empire. Scholars met there to discuss and exchange ideas and theories. A favorite topic of discussion must have been the precise nature of the intermediary between God and man which all the systems of philosophy postulated. For Plato and his followers, the Logos was an intermediary between God and the material world. The Stoics endowed this Logos with intelligence and consciousness. A contemporary of St. John, Philo, personified the Logos in much the same way that his ancestors personified Wisdom in the Old Testament. St. John's doctrine must have struck these philosophers like a thunderbolt. He raised

the curtain beyond which human reason could not penetrate and told the disciples of the various systems of philosophy that the Logos of their discussions was the Eternal Son of God. As if this were not enough, he then completely overwhelmed them by declaring that this Logos was also Man. He was a God, made Man!

An entirely new doctrine of the nature of the Logos was thus presented by St. John. That the Logos was made man was beyond the wildest imaginings of any of the thinkers of the day, since matter which is a necessary part of man, was regarded as something impure and evil. And that this Logos, even if it be conceded that he be man, was at the same time of the identical nature as God, the Supreme Being, was utterly fantastic, absolutely ridiculous. How could a man conceive such an idea? Had they but known it, these philosophers had the seed of the answer in their very question. No man could conceive such a doctrine. A teaching as lofty, as noble as the one enunciated by John of necessity demanded a divine source. In short it had to be revealed. And yet such was the attraction of the doctrine of the Logos, that St. Basil could write "many men, unsympathetic to our beliefs and proud of their worldly wisdom, admired the Prologue of St. John and did not hesitate to use it to embellish their own works."¹ The thing that repelled them was not the Word, but the "Word made flesh."

DIVINE GENERATION

The very name Logos, which means word or concept, gives us an insight into the manner in which the second Person of the Blessed Trinity proceeds from the Father, namely by generation. "There is a remarkable analogy between the way in which the mental word or idea of some external object is conceived in our minds and the ordinary biological process of generation. For instance, I look at some object outside myself, say an oak tree. Thereupon there is formed in my imagination a visual image or phantasm of that oak tree. The active intellect now proceeds to strip that image of its pictorial or sensory elements until there is left only the nude impression of the oak tree, and this purified image then penetrates of its own accord into the womb of the passive understanding, where it is assimilated and brought forth as the concept or logos of the oak tree. In this rough and ready account of the Aristotelian—Thomistic concept of intellection,

¹ St. Basil, Homilies.

it will be noticed that the external object, the oak tree, plays the part of the father; the purified image, the part of the fruitful seed; and the passive understanding, the part of the matrix or womb. Moreover, the concept resembles both its parents, for the concept of the oak tree is indeed like the oak tree, but each individual concept of the oak tree is modified somewhat and molded by the particular intellect in which it is formed."²

St. Thomas teaches that God the Father, contemplating the divine essence, generates therein the concept, the Logos, the Word of the divine essence. This Word is not merely like to the divine essence, but absolutely identical with it in nature. It is not something accidental like the concept formed in a human mind. Since the divine essence is necessarily one and indivisible, whatever proceeds within that essence must be identical with it. The Eternal Word, begotten of the Father, proceeds consubstantial with the Father. This means that the Word is of the same divine nature as the Father. And yet, the Logos is really distinct from the Father in personality, just as every son is distinct from the father who begets him. In summation then, the Logos or Word proceeds from the divine essence, is identical with it in substance, but is also distinct from the divine essence because of the relationship of filiation or sonship which is something personal, something private as it were, to the Logos.

The way in which the word, the concept, the idea in our mind is formed is, strictly speaking, not generation, although it is called so. But the procession of *the Word* within the divine essence is generation, in the strict and literal sense of the term. There is no doubt about the truth of this statement since it is clear from revelation. Even reason based upon revealed truth can show that true generation exists within the divine nature. In explaining this, St. Thomas Aquinas distinguishes two kinds of generation. In the wide sense, generation means a change from non-existence to existence. For instance, we speak of generating love of country within our heart, or begetting fear or hope. Whatever is produced in this fashion is not something akin to creation, which is the production of something from nothing, but rather depends upon some previously existing matter. Thus hope is generated in the heart because of the knowledge that there is some person or some thing in which we may hope. Generation in

² *The Blessed Trinity*. By Most Rev. Richard Downey, Archbishop of Liverpool.

the strict and proper sense, however, belongs only to living things and is defined by St. Thomas as "the origin of a living being from a conjoined principle." He immediately adds though, "Not everything of that kind, however, is called begotten; but strictly speaking, only what proceeds by way of similitude. Nor will any likeness suffice; for a worm which is generated from animals has not the formality of generation and sonship, although it has a generic similitude; for this kind of generation requires that there should be a procession by way of similitude in the same specific nature, as a man proceeds from a man, and a horse from a horse."³

It is seen, therefore, from the words of the Angelic Doctor that the conditions required for generation in its strict meaning are threefold.

1. It must be a vital act which results in the transmission of life.

2. The generator or generating principle must necessarily be really joined to the thing produced or begotten. Part of the substance of the one generating is given and becomes the one generated.

3. The thing begotten must be of the same species as the begetter, precisely because of the operation of generation. Thus there is no surprise evinced when a man begets a son or a horse begets a colt. It is because of this condition too that Eve, although produced from the living substance of Adam, and being of the same species, was not in fact his daughter. She did not come into existence because of the process of generation, but was formed in a very special way by Almighty God.

Now, if the Logos or Word satisfies these three conditions, then real generation is to be found within the Blessed Trinity itself.

1. The Logos as was noted above proceeds according to the operation of the divine intellect. The Father, Eternal God, by contemplating the divine essence, eternally generates the Word. The word or idea which we form in our minds is something accidental, something qualitative or modificative of our intellect. It is not in itself a living being. But the Divine Word, begotten in the divine essence, is no mere accident, since the divine essence, being immutable, cannot be qualified or modified in any way whatsoever. Anything proceeding within God's nature must be

³ S. T. I., q. 27, a. 2.

identical with that nature. Therefore the Word of God is an absolute being, so absolute in fact as to be God Himself. And it is not only a living thing but is the very source of life.

2. Although the idea formed by our intellect is not of our own substance, not of our own nature, but is some kind of mental complement, it is evident from what has already been said, that the Word proceeding from the Father is of the very substance of the Godhead, is of the same divine essence in every respect save the proper relationship of filiation or son-ship as opposed to paternity.

3. Finally, it follows that the Word proceeds not only with the same specific nature, but also with the same identical nature as the Father. This is true because of the mode of procession, that is, according to the act of the divine intellect. Every idea bears the likeness of the intellect that conceives it. The idea in the human mind resembles the object with which it corresponds in reality. Although the resemblance is purely intentional, wholly something in the mind itself, nevertheless it is still a resemblance. In such a case though, the resemblance is not even a specific one. In the instance of the Divine Word, however, the situation is entirely different. Since the Logos is not an accident of the divine intellect, but is a being absolute and substantial, He must proceed with the same identical nature as the Father who begets Him. And because the essence of God is simple, is indivisible and undivided, the Word which is generated and begotten within that essence, must itself be identified with it. This identification must be so close and intimate as to result in exact identity.

The Divine Word then eminently fulfills the conditions necessary for the strict meaning of generation. The Word of God is in fact the perfect example of perfect generation.

FAITH, HOPE, AND CHARITY

Although the procession of the Word is of its very nature an intellectual operation, this does not for one moment mean that our consideration of it is to be only intellectual. God never intended that such a doctrine should be as it were placed on a pedestal out of the reach of the average man. The Word is not someone Whom we only acknowledge like a chance acquaintance, but is a Friend Who demands love. We increase and strengthen that gift which has been called the "God's eye-view of the world and all the things in it," namely our faith, by making the Word of God a very real part of us, by incorporating Him into our own

lives. We may think of the second Person of the Blessed Trinity as the Word proceeding from the Father, or as the Word Incarnate. Considering the Word as proceeding from God, we learn that, since He is God, He is by that very fact all truth. He is the exemplar, the image of our faith. The faith with which a merciful God has gifted us is a partial sharing of His eternal truth. The Word is the perfect model for our faith. And as He proceeds eternally, without any interruption from the Father, so our faith should be more and more activated. Everything we do or say or think should be a reflection of that belief we have in the Word of God.

We may also consider the Word as Incarnate, as the Son of Mary, living among us. The ancient Jews had a very great problem concerning the prophets, which has been solved for us. For the Jews had to make sure when a man called a prophet rose among them, that he really was a prophet, and that what he said was indeed God's teaching. But our teacher is a divine One, One Who is Truth itself. Wisdom Incarnate now speaks to us. This makes faith a much easier thing for us. First, because we can now immediately assent to whatever Our Lord says. We do not have to investigate. He does not have to show His credentials to teach, He needs no commission or proof of commission as the prophets of old did. Secondly, it is God Himself Who speaks to us. And so magnetic, so overpowering is the attraction of the personality of Christ that our wills, our hearts leap from our very person to attach themselves to Him. Faith is not something springing only from the intellect, but demands a motion on the part of our will. The more eagerly and vehemently the will embraces an object believed, the more perfect is our faith.

Our hope is carried to breath-taking heights. Think of why the Son of God came to us and the thought is enough to stagger even the strongest. God did not take our flesh for any small or petty reason. In a very real sense, He made a contract with us, a sort of heavenly trade agreement. The priest at Mass expresses this thought, when pouring wine and water into the chalice, he prays that "we may be made partakers of His Divinity who vouchsafed to become partaker of our humanity, Jesus Christ, Thy Son, Our Lord." St. Thomas succinctly phrases this same idea—"He became Man that He might make Man divine." God became man like us, that we might become like Him!

Our charity is enkindled and fanned to a red hot fire. That God Who created all things, should Himself become a creature

and be subject to His own handiwork is the clearest proof we have of divine charity. He had given man all he possesses, but because man was weighed down by pride, God stooped from heaven to help him. Because man was so disobedient, God would give him an example of perfect obedience. And since the minds of men are shackled by the chains of ignorance and error, God would become a Teacher to guide him, to lead him on. All this was accomplished at the Incarnation, when God, as if he had not already done enough for man, now gave him His only-begotten. St. John might well have written that the "word became man," rather than that the "Word became flesh." But perhaps he was trying to give us some idea of the infinite contrast between the Word—true God, eternal, infinite, merciful—and flesh, the symbol of everything in us that is perishable and weak and feeble. Our hearts, considering the extent of the divine love for us, should burst into flame, consuming all those trivial things which would separate us from such Goodness.

These are but a few thoughts proposed for this season of the year when we celebrate the birth in the flesh of the Word. When you bend your knee at these words of God, "and the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us," let it be an outward sign of the humbling of your soul before such a mystery. Let there spring from deep within the wells of your heart, a sincere Thank You. A Thank You which will fly to the very court of heaven itself, there to be a witness of that faith, hope, and charity that is in you, and all by a Word.