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THE SEPARATION OF DEATH AND THE COMMUNION OF CHRIST

On June 18, 2020, Stephanie DePrez rushed into her family home. In the three hours since she had left the house, everything had changed. Her father was there, as he had been. Her brother was there, as he had been. Her mother's hospice bed was where it had been, with her mother's wounded, tumor-ridden body still pressing upon the mattress. But Susie DePrez was not there; Stephanie's mother was gone.

> I walked into the room . . . and there she is in her favorite shirt, and she's not there at all. I crawled in the bed and I held her, and it was a shell. She wasn't there. The thing that animated her—her soul—was no longer tied to this body. . . . I was holding her body—waxy skin, totally lifeless—and I just knew that she wasn't there. She's not here.[1]

Stephanie was touching her mother's absence. She knew her mother wasn't there because she tried to hold her and her mother

did not hold her back; she told her she loved her and her mother didn't say it back. Her mother's dead body was now a point of separation.

In this breath of time, what had been separated? As Stephanie felt quite viscerally, she had been separated from her mother. Her mother, who had been so present in that room not three hours earlier, was now separated from all who gathered there.

But Stephanie also felt another separation, related to the first. With her own hands she grasped that the life that had animated this body was now separated from it. Stephanie could not feel the life, only the lifeless body.

Stephanie knew that the lifeless body that remained was not her mother. She also knew that the life that had animated this body was not her mother. She had only known the *bodily life* of Susie DePrez as her mother. Stephanie wants to encounter her mother's body, but not just her body; she wants to feel her mother's soul, but not just her soul. Stephanie wants it all: she wants her mother—to feel her mother hug her, to feel her mother kiss her, to hear her mother say she loves her, and to know her mother as she has always known her: alive, bodily.

No matter how sophisticated our science and medicine become, we will never be able to give a better account of death than this: Death is separation. The lifeless body is the presence of absence. What ought to be, is not.

What happened? Words like "She died" are just placeholders, catchalls. When it is your loved one who is no longer present, the question of "What is death?" ceases to be merely philosophical. The question now concerns the source of your grief. What does Christianity say in response?

And what of the desire for reunion with the one who has died? The matter of "life after death" is in no way speculative when it is your loved one's life you desire after their death. This is now what you, personally, hope for. Your heart aches for a reunion you cannot even imagine. How does Christianity respond to this desire?

The questions proliferate: "What is death?" is tied up in the question of "What is the human being?" And that question hides questions about what the body is and what the soul is, which themselves lead to more questions: What does it mean for the body and soul to be in union, or to be separated? If you seek new life for your loved one, what exactly are you hoping for? Is it the same life they had or a different life, or does that miss the point? How could you be united with them? Is union possible now while you live, or only after you die, or not at all? (These are not questions anyone asks while grieving. In grief, we just bluntly encounter the seemingly inexplicable as pain and longing.)

Christians must ask Christ the crucial questions of what death is, what the human being is, and what it is we long for. He alone can show us the answers by showing us who he is and what he promises. We must seek the meaning of life and death in him who died and rose again, while remembering the pain of being separated from—and the longing to be united with—those we love. Our task in this chapter is to pay attention to the Passion, Death, and Resurrection of Christ. First, though, we have to learn the basics of biblical anthropology—of what a human being fundamentally is.

INTO THE DUST

Mary sinks into the dust beneath the Cross, the weight of her son's lifeless body pressing down upon her lap. I imagine her raising her eyes toward the city of Jerusalem, where all the people who drove her son out go about their day at a callous distance from her sorrow. The soldiers run through their motions, scoffing at this routine work. The friends who followed her son to this city have scattered, nowhere to be found. She alone holds her son, whom they killed.

No one else has known sorrow like this. There was never a time when Mary did not know him whom they killed as both her son and the life of the world. She held and guarded this mystery most tenderly, giving her own heart time and again to be pierced for love of him.

More than any other, Mary knows the depth of the offense. She knows that when they drove him out of the city, they were driving the Word of God out of human flesh. His body now upon her lap, she beholds his absence: the absence of God. She sits upon the dust, earth without water, clay without breath.

This is how God swallows up death: he succumbs to it. The mystery of Christian hope is secured here—and in what comes before and after. The one, undivided Son of God undergoes the separation of our death. *The undivided Son undergoes separation*. That is the last Sorrowful Mystery, and the first Glorious Mystery of our hope.

WHO DO YOU SAY THAT I AM?

The question of Jesus's identity is the primary question of the Gospel. Everything else points to and depends on who he is.

This question is not simply answered in various verses here and there; rather, each gospel is an answer to that question. In their distinct but harmonious ways, the gospels all testify and proclaim that this man is the Son of the Father. He is the Christ. He is the Word made flesh. He is our Lord and our God. This human being comes from God, goes to God, and is God, with us.

This is basic Christian stuff. But it is terribly difficult to hold to this fundamental confession when we see what becomes of Jesus. He appears weak in the face of power. He is vulnerable to betrayal. He suffers under the will of others. He dies. It is tempting to say or think, "That is the human part, not the divine part." But the testimony and proclamation remain unanimous among his witnesses: *this* is the Son of God—this man, Jesus.

One of the early church fathers, St. Irenaeus of Lyons, confronted teachers and preachers in his time who proposed alternative versions of the basic Christian stuff. After showing in his writings how all the gospels, one epistle after another, and every testimony of the Lord's chosen witnesses attest that the man Jesus was himself the Son of God, Irenaeus rebukes any who claim that the humanity of Jesus was some mere receptacle from which the Word of God was separable. That might sound like a silly theological squabble, but everything is at stake.

Did the Word of God *use* our humanity, or did this Word become *wedded* to our humanity? Was this union temporary or permanent? Was there an escape plan, or was God all in? It is easier to say that "Christ" drifted away from "Jesus" when the Passion began, or upon the Cross, or certainly by the moment of his death. It is easier to say that the lifeless body upon Mary's lap was *not* the Son of God, was *not* the Word Incarnate, was *not*

the Christ. It is tempting to separate the "true Son" from this appearance.

Irenaeus, however, is conclusive: "The Gospel knew of no other son of man but him who was of Mary, who also suffered; and no Christ who flew away from Jesus before the passion; but him who was born it knew as Jesus Christ the Son of God, and that this same suffered and rose again."[2] Irenaeus refuses to excuse the Son of God from suffering the human condition because the Son of God did not excuse himself. "He passed through every stage of life," Irenaeus continues, and by doing so restores all to "communion with God."[3] The Son of God was not absent from what the man Jesus suffered: there are not two persons, but one Person who is the union of the human and the divine. "What he did appear, that he also was: God recapitulated the ancient formation of man."[4]

Difficult as it is to see, the dead body upon Mary's lap is the Son of God, the Word Incarnate, Jesus Christ. Mary holds the absence of absolute presence; this corpse is the point of separation of the inseparable God-man.

This is not a riddle; this is the heart of mystery at the fulcrum of sorrow and glory. As Irenaeus puts it, "God recapitulated the ancient formation of man" in this man, Jesus. The Son of God became what we are: the union of body and soul. And in his death, he endured what we suffer: the breakdown of that union.

This is the mystery we have to plumb: What does it mean for Jesus Christ, the permanent union of God and man, to undergo the utter disunion of human death?

THE CREATION OF THE HUMAN BEING

In the first two chapters of the book of Genesis, the creation of the human being is described three times, establishing the basis for what we may call a biblical anthropology. In our own day, as the meaning of a human being is obscured by technological incursions, gender ideologies, and a move toward individualization and "self-creation," a return to these fundamental claims is all the more important. When Irenaeus, writing in the second century, says that in Christ "God recapitulated the ancient formation of man," it is to this biblical anthropology that he is appealing.

THE IMAGE OF GOD

The first description of the creation of the human being comes on the sixth day of the first creation account in Genesis 1. God speaks these words to bring forth the last of his creatures:

> "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth." So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion. . . ." (Gn 1:26–28)

In this first creation account, God is presented as both supreme monarch and priest, and obliquely as prophet. As monarch, God secures order and dispels chaos, not through any violent means but solely through the efficacious power of his Word: "God said . . ." (Gn 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). As priest, God constructs a macrocosmic temple, with the sanctuary being the seventh day—the Sabbath—where his holy presence is all in all. Everything created in the six days of creation is directed to and intended for the fullness of worship on the seventh day. God blesses what he creates and calls his creation "good" (Gn 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21–22, 25, 28, 31). As prophet, God separates things (light from darkness, water from land, birds from fish, animals from humans, etc.) and speaks them into their proper places. When God creates human beings in his image, then, he creates them to do as he does: to give order and dispel chaos; to direct all things to worship of God and offer blessings; and to separate things into their proper places. Human beings must thus become cocreators (or subcreators), exercising our creativity and reason to draw all things toward God's wisdom and glory. That exercise of freedom and agency is the "dominion" Genesis 1:26 and 1:28 name. God exercises absolute dominion and creates human beings to exercise dominion after his pattern.

The "image of God" is stressed twice in verse 1:27, which describes the creation of human beings as "male and female," the two distinct ways of being a human being. With the assistance of later Christian trinitarian theology, we come to understand God as "three Persons, one God": the Father and Son are distinct, yet in eternal communion: the Holy Spirit. Communion means not sameness but the union of distinct Persons. This communion amid distinction is the image of God in which human beings

are created and essential to what it means to be a human being. The basic distinction among human beings is between male and female, and their union—principally in marriage—manifests God's image.

From the Genesis 1 creation account, we discern that the human being is created in God's image in four ways. After God's kingly character, human beings are created and called upon to bring order and govern wisely. After God's priestly character, human beings are created and called upon to orient all things toward worship and offer blessings. After God's prophetic character, human beings are created and called upon to separate into their proper places what is otherwise confused. And after God's triunity, human beings are created distinctly for the sake of communion.

By the Incarnation, when the Word of God comes to dwell in human flesh, God enters into union with what he created in his image, after his own likeness.

THE UNION OF BODY AND SOUL

The second description of the creation of the human being occurs at the outset of the creation account in Genesis 2. In this account, God is the LORD God, which is a more personal name and indicative of his intimate relations with human beings. (By the way, the serpent changes the LORD God's name when he first speaks to the woman, which shows that sin begins, in part, by making God impersonal—see Genesis 3:1–3.) The LORD God is a potter, who shapes his creature with his own hands. The LORD God is the intimate life-giver, who donates his own breath to his creature. We hear of the creation of the first human being in this manner:

"The Lord God formed man from the dust of the earth. He blew into his nostrils the breath of life, and man became a living being" (Gn 2:7, JPS).

On the basis of this single but crucial verse, we may say that the human being is intentionally formed "earth stuff" that is given breath. The formed earth stuff alone is not a human being, nor is the given breath alone a human being. The human being lives only through the union of these two. The human being is in fact a living union.

The verse in translation conceals one very important detail regarding the formation of "man." Were we reading this in Hebrew we would see that the word translated here as "man" would be *'adam*, while the word "earth" would be *'adamah*. *'Adam* is not yet a proper name but rather a word of relation: *'adam* is the one who is from the *'adamah*. To capture this more literally in English, we might say that the "earth creature" is intentionally formed from the "earth." Thus the "man" whom the Lord God forms is created in harmony with the earth from the beginning.

When we look upon the breath of life given directly from the Lord God to his creature, there is not something hidden in translation here but instead something we ought to pause to consider more fully. This is the most intimate act imaginable. This Creator gives his own breath for his creature to breathe as his own. We see here the deep harmony between the human being and the Lord God.

The union of intentionally formed earth stuff and the breath intimately given is what makes man "a living being." It is not difficult to think of the intentionally formed earth stuff as the body and the breath intimately given as the soul, so that the second creation account begins with the description of the human being

as the living union of body and soul. Over and over again, St. Irenaeus will speak of the human being as "the whole man," by which he means not just the body, not just the soul, but indeed the union of the body and soul. The body and soul are created in harmony, and by their union there is a living human being.[5]

By the Incarnation, when the Word of God comes to dwell in human flesh, God unites himself not just to body and not just to soul but indeed to his creature who is the union of body and soul.[6]

ONE FLESH

The third and final description of the creation of the human being in the opening chapters of Genesis occurs at the end of the second creation account. Having found no suitable partner for the "man"—*'adam*—in all creation, the LORD God creates a suitable partner so that the man will not be alone, because, as the LORD God says, being alone "is not good" (Gn 2:18).

> So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh; and the rib which the LORD God had taken from the man he made into a woman and brought her to the man. Then the man said,
>
> "This at last is bone of my bones
> and flesh of my flesh;
> she shall be called Woman [*'ishshah*],
> because she was taken out of Man [*'ish*]."