

## BEING HUMAN - BEING THE IMAGE OF GOD

---

Absolutely central to the way in which the Fathers understand the nature of humanity is the notion that human beings are created in the *image* and *likeness* of God. This doctrine is central not only to the Fathers' understanding of human nature, but also to their theology as a whole. In a little-known article, written over half a century ago, the Dominican theologian Pere Camelot, remarked:

Now this theme of the image is, in the theology of the Fathers, above all the Greek Fathers, truly central: there one sees at the same time the meeting of Christology and Trinitarian theology, of anthropology and psychology, of the theology of creation and that of grace, of the problem of nature and the supernatural, the mystery of divinization, the theology of the spiritual life, the laws of its development of its progress.

The foundation of the doctrine of the image is to be found in the creation narrative of Genesis. There we read:

And God said, Let us make human kind according to our image and according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and the cattle and all the earth and all the creeping things that creep upon the earth. And God made human kind, according to his image God made him; male and female he made them. And God blessed them, and said, Increase and multiply and fill the earth and rule over it (Genesis 1:26-28a)

However, in the rest of the Bible little is made of this doctrine. In chapter 5 of Genesis, the events of the creation of man are summarized: 'In the day that God made Adam, he made him in the image of God; male and female he made them, and he blessed them'. In the next verse, we are told that 'Adam begat a child according to his form and according to his image; and he names his name Seth'. Thereafter, there is no mention of the doctrine of the image until the Wisdom literature, where we read that God 'made human kind an image of his own self or eternity' (Wisdom 2:23) and that God 'made them according to his image' (Sirach 17:3). Wisdom itself is said to be 'an image of his goodness' (Wisdom 7:26).

In the New Testament we are told that man

(not woman) is 'the image and glory of God (1 Corinthians 11.7), but it is Christ, too, who is said to be the image of God (2 Corinthians 4.4; Colossians 1:15). Language of the image is used of our relationship to Christ: we are to be 'conformed to the image of his Son' (Romans 8.29); in 1 Corinthians it is said that 'just as we have borne the image of the earthly, so we shall bear the image of the heavenly' (1 Corinthians 15.49), and in 2 Corinthians that 'we all, reflecting with unveiled face the glory of the Lord, are being changed into the same image from glory to glory' (2 Corinthians 3.18). Colossians, too, speaks of our being 'clothed with the new man) who is being renewed in knowledge according to the image of him who created him' (Colossians 3.20); which is not entirely clear, but certainly sees the new creation as the restoration of the image in man.

The image of God in the Fathers may not seem very much, but the influence of ideas may be less in accordance with their frequency than with their resonance. And the notion that human kind was created according to the image of God found an enormous resonance in the hearts and minds of the Fathers.

There seem to be several converging reasons for this. First of all is the importance of the doctrine of creation. We are what we are because God created us. He created us out of nothing; everything that we are is from God. Then, as many of the Fathers remark, there seems to be something special about the creation of human kind: for the rest of creation, God simply said, let something happen (i.e., 'Let there be light'). But in the case of human kind, God seems to consider; 'Let us make human kind...' in verse 26 and then in the next verse, 'And God made human kind...' There seems some special act of deliberation about the creation of human kind. Not only that, humans are made 'according to [God's] image, according to [his] likeness'; being in God's image and likeness is at the heart of what it is to be human - humans are 'according to his image', they are like God in some way they reflect who God is in some way; they are something of what God is.

The Greek Fathers read Genesis in Greek and the Greek, to an educated ear, makes two

further suggestions. First, 'according to the image,' *kat' eikona*: *kata* is quite a strong proposition; it would suggest the question, "according to what image?" The English 'in the image' just suggests that man was created as the image of God; the Greek raises the possibility of something more complex: man created according to the image of God. The New Testament suggests Christ, the image of God, is the one who images forth God in his incarnate state. So maybe there is here, for the Christian Greek ear, the idea that human kind was created according to Christ, who is the image of the Father. This may remind one of the depiction of creation in the north portal of Chartres Cathedral, where the cruciform halo makes it evident that it is Christ who is the Creator (as the Nicene Creed affirms: 'through whom [that is, the Son] all things were made'), and in making man he makes one who is like him, who is in accordance with - *kata* - him. So our very creation entails a relationship, not just to God as Creator, but to Christ, the Son of God Incarnate.

But there is another point to note: verse 26 adds - 'and according to likeness'. The word translated 'likeness', *homoiosis*, suggests something more precise in Greek. The word *homoiosis* would moreover have very definite resonances for anyone, according to the Fathers, who had read Plato, who envisages the goal of the human life as *homoiosis* - likening, assimilation - to the divine. So, to be created according to the image of God and according to his likeness suggests that we have been created with some kind of affinity for God which makes possible a process of assimilation to God, which is, presumably, the point of human existence.

This idea chimes in very well with the few uses of the language of image in the New Testament, for it is in the context of saying something about the goal of our being disciples of Christ, that the New Testament resorts to such language: we are being changed into his image from glory to glory. Even without using the language of image, there are passages in the New Testament that suggest much the same idea or mystery: for instance, in the first epistle of John we read, "Beloved, we are "God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he

is' (1 John 3.2). The language of image is the language of sight; the suggestion of these passages is that being in the image means there is a likeness between human kind and God that enables us to see, to know, God - it is a kind of principle of ancient philosophy that only "like knows like": to know something is to discover an affinity. It suggests what can be called a contemplative understanding of what it is to be human, though there is nothing new in that - both Plato and Aristotle thought the same, and something similar is implied in Isaiah's vision of the Lord in the Temple (Isaiah 6).

What then is it to be in the image of God? Often enough, we find the Fathers giving an answer in terms of human qualities, and these turn out to be qualities of the soul. 'The "according to the image"', says St. John Damascene, 'is manifest in intelligence and free will. Being in the image means being a rational, or intelligent, being with free will. Sometimes the answer is more complex. Athanasios, for instance, talks about God's creating us and our being 'given something more':

Creating human beings not simply like all the irrational animals upon the earth, but making them according to his own image, and giving them a share of the power of his own Word, so that having as it were shadows of the Word and being made rational, they might be able to abide in blessedness, living the true life, which is really that of the holy ones in paradise.

Being in the image, however, is not, for Athanasios, simply a matter of being rational, for otherwise the angels would be in the image, too, something that he denies. Being in the image is a gift to humanity, body and soul, which grants rationality to the human, but must mean more than this. The more for Athanasios is tied up with the fact that the image of God is Christ, the *Word of God*, whom we cannot understand apart from the Incarnation. It is in some way according to the image of God, understood as the Word of God Incarnate, that human kind was fashioned. This more complex notion unfolds in two ways.

First, we need to remember that it was in Greek that these ideas were thought through, and that something of what is meant is lost in translation, whether into Latin or into English.

For the key word here is *logos*, which can be translated as word, or reason, or meaning, or principle (Christ is called the *Logos* or the *Word* of God). The word translated “rational” is, in Greek, *logikos*. So the translation “rational” only preserves part of the meaning of the Greek *logikos*, and disguises the link the Greek suggests between the *Word*, or *Logos*, and *logikos*. The word *logikos* suggests, as its root meaning, participating in the *Logos*, or *Word*. It implies a relationship, rather than simply a property. And there is a parallel to be found here between the relationship *logikos—Logos* and the relationship “being according to the image”-Image, *kat’ eikona-Eikon* (*Remember what you read in the first article*). In passing, it is striking that what is rather a clumsy expression in English, ‘that which is according to the image’, *to kat’ eikona*, is a common term in Byzantine Greek, as, for instance, in the special prayer for St. Mary of Egypt, where we sing:

In you, Mother, was preserved unimpaired that which is according to the image (*to kat’ eikona*); for you took up the cross and followed Christ, and by your deeds you have taught us to despise the flesh, for it passes away, but to care for the soul, which is a thing immortal. And therefore your spirit, holy Mary, rejoices with the Angels.

Limiting being in the image of God to being rational and possessing free will falls short in two respects of what the Greek Fathers generally mean by “being according to God’s image”. First, being *logikos* means more than simply being rational; it means participating in the *Logos*, the *Word*, of God, including rationality, certainly, but also a capacity for recognizing and conveying meaning, for communicating, with one another and with God, and ultimately an affinity with God, that enables us to know Him. Second, possessing “*to kat’ eikona*” means having a relationship to God through His image, that is, the *Word*; it is not just a property or a quality, but a capacity for a relationship, a relationship that is fulfilled in attainment of “*to kath’ omoiosin*”, being according to the likeness, assimilation with God.

To think of the human as ‘according to the image’ in this sense sets up a pattern: we have been created by God the Father in the image of the *Word* through the *Word*, so that, through the *Word* who created us we might come to the

knowledge of God the Father - this whole process takes place by grace, that is, through the Spirit.

To be human is to be in the image, and being in the image, according to the image, entails a relationship to Christ, who is the image. Certainly He is an image in virtue of being the *Word* of God, the *Logos*, God’s self-manifestation. This is something we only fully understand through the Incarnation. Human kind is created according to an image - the *Word* of God - that we only truly know through the Incarnation. It is only through the Incarnation that we can truly understand what it is to be human. It is only in light of Christ that we can grasp what is truly meant by being human. What we know from our experience of being human is limited humanity, but to be in the image is, at the very least, to bear some trace of true humanity and it is unlimited humanity that we see in Christ. For the *Word* of God, in becoming man, became what we were meant to be. To be human is to have a nature with capacities, faculties, that are never properly realized without change and growth. We have a glimpse of these faculties in Christ.

To sum up: being in the image certainly entails being rational and free, but that is not what it means. What being in the image means is having an affinity with God, not a natural affinity, but one granted us through God’s grace, by virtue of which affinity we can know God, have some kind of communion with him. Put more exactly, being in the image of God means being able to pray. One of the aspects of the language of images is that images are not just likenesses or pictures, but that they are derived from an original. An image of God is derived from God. It manifests Him as a kind of theophany and the purpose of an image is to enable others to recognize the original, to draw them to the original. If one understands image in this sense, then the whole of John’s Gospel is concerned with the image: the Son imaging forth the Father, so that Christ can say to Philip, ‘He who has seen me has seen the Father’.

*It is my belief that one of the most important things for us to understand if we want to spiritually grow is that we are made in the Image of God, Jesus Christ, and that we have the*

*potential and capacity to grow in His likeness.*

*This is the work of this earthly existence - to actualize the potential that we have to grow in the likeness we have to God's Image, Christ. When we do this, we begin to have an experience of God Himself - we begin to experience also our connectedness to God but to all other humans and to creation.*

*I would encourage you to pray and think about this. It can help you to grow in your faith and your relationship to God. Then ask yourself questions like: What does it mean to me that I have been created in the "image" of God, as seen in the Person of Jesus, and given the potential to grow in His "likeness" when I cooperate with God's help (grace)? Do I understand that my salvation, that is my true understanding of the meaning and purpose of my life, is a cooperative act between me and God? And, finally, Do I realize that I cannot merit salvation without God's help?*

*Reflect upon this! God loves us so much that He gave us free will to choose our own path in life and He also gives us His help to come to a deeper understanding of our lives, knowing that this is the only thing that can bring us true peace, contentment and happiness in lives.*