

CATHOLIC BELIEF AND PRACTICE

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CHAPTER 6 - ASCENSION, JUDGEMENT AND THE HOLY SPIRIT

The last two chapters dealt with the Incarnation. First, we saw what it meant and why it happened, and then last time we saw HOW it happened. Now we consider the ASCENSION. The Sixth Article says: "HE ASCENDED INTO HEAVEN AND IS SEATED AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD, THE FATHER ALMIGHTY." The special importance of the Ascension for us is that it demonstrates the indissoluble union between the two natures of Our Lord. St. Mark says "HE WAS TAKEN UP INTO HEAVEN: THERE AT THE RIGHT HAND OF GOD HE TOOK HIS PLACE." The point for us to remember here is that God the Son did not leave his humanity behind: He took it with Him, when He returned to His Father and, since He is the head of the Body which is His Church of which we are all members, we have a guarantee that heaven is within reach of all of us.

The Creed, following St. Mark, says He is seated at the "RIGHT HAND" of the Father - this is, of course, a figurative expression since a Spirit has no hands. It means quite simply that He is in the most important place in heaven.

The Seventh Article says: "FROM THENCE HE SHALL COME TO JUDGE THE LIVING AND THE DEAD". This Article completes the cycle of human history. It started with man's rebellion and fall from grace - the opening of an unbridgeable gap with man powerless to close it and enslaved by sin. Then, with the Incarnation we saw that Jesus Christ, by becoming man was able to bridge that gap - able to make adequate satisfaction and to do so on behalf of men. By His death on the cross Jesus Christ made atonement to God and offered redemption to man. Note He "OFFERED" redemption - God does not save all men WHETHER THEY WANT IT OR NOT. He gave us a free will and we saw that makes us responsible for our acts.

Man is free to accept redemption: he is also free to REFUSE it - either way, we are judged. At the end of this world, Jesus Christ will return to judge all men -that is called the LAST OR GENERAL JUDGEMENT. At the hour of our death each one of us is individually judged - this is usually called the PARTICULAR JUDGEMENT. We see the state that we are in - in relation to God - and that state remains for ever. Every thought, word, deed or omission, good or bad, will be revealed to us. We shall see the justice of our fate and we shall enter it. Since it is God judging us, that judgement will be both infinitely just and infinitely merciful. To put it another way, there will be no possible grounds for complaint or appeal. For those who died before it, the GENERAL judgement will merely confirm the PARTICULAR one. Before leaving the subject of judgement let us be quite clear what it really means. God's laws reflect His infinite goodness. They are there for our good. If we ignore them or break them, we inevitably suffer. Let us use an analogy. A child who deliberately ignores its mother's repeated warnings not to put its hand in the fire and does so cannot then say "Mummy is cruel!" If you put your hand in fire it gets burned. It is in the nature of fire to burn. Well, God's laws are there to PROTECT us.

If we flatly refuse to follow them, we get hurt and if that refusal lasts till death, then the hurt is permanent. We are all sinners. Sometimes those sins are serious and remember only serious sin damages us permanently. Even then the door is never closed. The ever-open door of God's forgiveness is there to the very end. All we have to do is go through the door - ask forgiveness. The only fatal thing to do is to REFUSE to ask forgiveness - that is closing the door, which only God can re-open.

The Eighth Article of the Creed is "I BELIEVE IN THE HOLY SPIRIT" so now we come to consider the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity which I dealt with in the third chapter. I will remind you now what I said then about MYSTERY. A mystery is something ABOVE and BEYOND reason. You cannot ever fully grasp it but, aided by faith - a free gift from God which we can accept or refuse - we can at least grasp that it must be so because it is God, THE TRUTH, who is revealing it. We saw that Our Lord revealed the mystery of the Trinity INDIRECTLY when He talked of Himself as God, talked of the Father as God yet distinct from himself, talked of the Holy Spirit as God yet distinct from the Father and Himself and He revealed it DIRECTLY when He sent the apostles out to baptise "in the NAME of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

So, we have ONE Supreme indivisible Spirit - GOD, yet THREE distinct Persons, each of whom is God yet none of whom is either of the other two. You may remember that I said we must not "grade" them in order of precedence since they are all equal. I then mentioned the scholastics' Analogy - The Father being the eternal MIND and, filling that mind was a thought or WORD no less eternal - the Son. And, proceeding between the two (mind conceiving and thought conceived) was complete identity of WILL and PURPOSE or LOVE -infinite just as the MIND and THOUGHT and so GOD - THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Let me use another analogy - that of the sigh of love between Father and Son Not a bad analogy since the Hebrew word for "BREATH" is the same as for "SPIRIT". We saw that man is made in the "image and likeness of God" because, like God, he has a mind and a will. There was a further resemblance between man and the Trinity, remember, in that in the Trinity there are THREE distinct persons yet making ONE God while in the human soul there are three distinct powers - memory, understanding and will - yet all making up the one person. There is a further similarity between each of us and the Trinity in that none of us is self-sufficient - we need one another: we need to love and be loved - a dim reflection of God who is LOVE ITSELF, eternally so: Father loving Son: Son loving Father and both giving rise to a love which is equal to both yet distinct from both - THE HOLY SPIRIT.

Before we end, I want to try and clarify an apparent contradiction - all three Persons are One God and yet each seems to have a different job to do! Only ONE Person became a man - the Second Person but all three Persons made Him so! All the actions of God outside Himself are the work of all three Persons, but to make things easier for ourselves we ATTRIBUTE certain activities to a certain Person. So, for instance, we associate the Father with CREATION, the Son with REDEMPTION and the Holy Spirit with SANCTIFICATION. With that qualification let us now look at the work of the Holy Spirit. We say that the Holy Spirit came down on the apostles at Pentecost making them individually, and the Church they founded HOLY. We say of those in the state of Grace that they are "Temples of the Holy Spirit" - hence man's dignity. We say that the Holy Spirit dwells in the Church like the soul in a body GUIDING, SANCTIFYING and ENLIVENING it. It is very important to remember this as the Church is made up of VERY HUMAN beings.

Has it ever occurred to you that the presence of so much that is ANYTHING BUT GOOD in the Church is a proof of His presence in it? If He wasn't there it would have sunk without trace years ago! Remember the change that took place in the apostles between the Crucifixion (when they all but one ran out on Him) and Pentecost when all of them fearlessly proclaimed Him - the difference was the work of the Holy Spirit. What He did to them, He can do to us - if we let Him - and that is: He can make each one of us a saint!