
The Word and Creation

The Incarnation was not the novel presence of God in creation

For this reason the incorporeal and incorruptible and immaterial Word of God came to our realm; not that he was previously distant, for no part of creation is left deprived of him, but he fills the universe, being in union with his Father. But in his benevolence [lit. “philanthropy”] towards us he condescended to come and be made manifest.¹

The paradoxical presence of the Word

[In the Incarnation, the Word] was not enclosed in the body, nor was he in the body but nowhere else. Nor did he move the latter while the universe was deprived of his action and providence. But what is most wonderful is that, being the Word, he was not contained by anyone, but rather himself contained everything. And as he is in all creation, he is in essence outside the universe but in everything by his power, ordering everything and extending his providence over everything. And giving life to all, separately and together, he contains the universe and is not contained, but in his Father only he is complete in everything. So also being in a human body and giving it life himself, he accordingly gives life to everything, and was both in all and outside all. And although he was known by his body through his works, yet he was not invisible by his action on the universe.²

The Word imparts cosmic stability

Seeing that all created nature according to its own definition is in a state of flux and dissolution, therefore to prevent this happening and the universe dissolving back into nothing, after making everything by his own eternal Word and bringing creation into existence, [God] did not abandon it to be carried away and suffer through its own nature, lest it run the risk of returning to nothing. But being good, he governs and establishes the whole world through his Word who is himself God, in order that creation, illuminated by the leadership, providence, and ordering of the Word, may be able to remain firm, since it shares in the Word who is truly from the Father and is aided by him to exist, and lest it suffer what would happen, I mean a relapse into non-existence, if it were not protected by the Word. *‘For he is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, because through him and in him subsist all things, visible and invisible, and he is the head of the church’*,³ as the servants of the truth teach in the holy writings.⁴

¹ *DI* 8 (Thomson, p.151)

² *DI* 17 (Thomson, p.175)

³ Colossians 1:15-18

⁴ *CG* 41 (Thomson, p.115)

The life-giving harmonising Word

It is thus the omnipotent and perfectly holy Word of the Father himself who is present in all things and extends his power everywhere, illuminating all things visible and invisible, containing and enclosing them in himself; he leaves nothing deprived of his power, but gives life and protection to everything, everywhere, to each individually and to all together. The principles of all perceptible substance, the hot and cold, the moist and dry, he mixes together, ensuring that they do not oppose each other but produce a single euphonious harmony. Through him and his power fire does not fight with the cold, nor the moist with the dry; but these elements which by themselves are opposed, come together like friends and kin, give life to the visible world, and become the principles of existence for bodies. By obedience to this Word of God things on earth receive life and things in heaven subsist ... And lest I dwell too long by naming each visible entity, there is nothing existing or created which did not come into being and subsist in him and through him, as the theologian says: *'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things were made by him, and without him nothing was made.'*⁵

Just as a musician, tuning his lyre and skilfully combining the bass and the sharp notes, the middle and the others, produces a single melody, so the wisdom of God, holding the universe like a lyre, draws together the things in the air with those on earth, and those in heaven with those in the air, and combines the whole with the parts, linking them by his command and will, thus producing in beauty and harmony a single world and a single order within it, while he himself remains unmoved with the Father but by his intrinsic being moves everything as seems good to the Father.⁶

Creation testified to its creator on the cross

Nor did he cause creation itself to be silent, but, what is most amazing, even at his death - or rather at the victory over death, I mean the cross - the whole of creation was confessing that he who was known and suffered in the body was not simply a man, but the Son of God and Saviour of all. For the sun turned back, and the earth shook, and the mountains were rent, and all were terrified; and these things showed that Christ who was on the cross was God, and that the whole of creation was his handmaid and was witnessing in fear to the coming of her master. So in this way God the Word revealed himself to men through his works.⁷

⁵ John 1:1,3

⁶ CG 42 (Thomson, pp.115-7)

⁷ DI 19 (Thomson, p.181)

Monastic Wisdom from the Life of Antony

Antony's bee-like formation

Now at that time in the neighbouring village there was an old man who had practiced from his youth the solitary life. When Antony saw him, he emulated him in goodness. At first he also began by remaining in places proximate to his village. And going forth from there, if he heard of some zealous person anywhere, he searched him out like the wise bee. He did not go back to his own place unless he had seen him, and as though receiving from him certain supplies for travelling the road to virtue, he returned.

... He was sincerely obedient to those men of zeal he visited, and he considered carefully the advantage in zeal and in ascetic living that each held in relation to him. He observed the graciousness of one, the eagerness for prayers in another; he took careful note of one's freedom from anger, and the human concern of another. And he paid attention to one while he lived a watchful life, or one who pursued studies, as also he admired one for patience, and another for fastings and sleeping on the ground. The gentleness of one and the long-suffering of yet another he watched closely. He marked, likewise, the piety toward Christ and the mutual love of them all. And having been filled in this manner, he returned to his own place of discipline, from that time gathering the attributes of each in himself, and striving to manifest in himself what was best from all.¹

The way of virtue is not measured by time - each day is a new beginning

And this tenet of (Antony's) was also truly wonderful, that neither the way of virtue nor separation from the world for its sake ought to be measured in terms of time spent, but by the aspirant's desire and purposefulness. He, indeed, did not hold time passed in his memory, but day by day, as if making a beginning of his asceticism, increased his exertion for advance, saying continually to himself Paul's word about *forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead*,² and recalling also the passage in which Elijah the prophet says, *the Lord ... lives, before whom I stand today*.³ He observed that in saying *today* he was not counting the time passed, but as one always establishing a beginning, he endeavoured each day to present himself as the sort of person ready to appear before God - that is, pure of heart and prepared to obey his will, and no other. And he used to tell himself that from the career of the great Elijah, as from a mirror, the ascetic must always acquire knowledge of his own life.⁴

¹ *Life of Antony* 3-4 (Gregg, pp.32-3)

² Philippians 3:13

³ A paraphrase of 3 Kings 17:1 and 18:15 in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament

⁴ *Life of Antony* 7 (Gregg, pp.36-7)

The life of virtue is natural

[Antony said...] Do not be afraid to hear about virtue, and do not be a stranger to the term. For it is not distant from us, nor does it stand external to us, but its realization lies in us, and the task is easy if only we shall will it. Now the Greeks leave home and traverse the sea in order to gain an education, but there is no need for us to go abroad on account of the Kingdom of heaven, nor to cross the sea for virtue. For the Lord has told us before, *the Kingdom of God is within you*.⁵ All virtue needs, then, is our willing, since it is in us, and arises from us. For virtue exists when the soul maintains its intellectual part according to nature. It holds fast according to nature when it remains as it was made - and it was made beautiful and perfectly straight ... But when it turns from its course and is twisted away from what it naturally is, then we speak of the vice of the soul. So the task is not difficult, for if we remain as we were made, we are in virtue, but if we turn our thoughts toward contemptible things, we are condemned as evil.⁶

The wisdom of Antony

Antony was also extremely wise. It was a marvel that although he had not learned letters, he was a shrewd and intelligent man. For example, once two Greek philosophers visited him, thinking they would be able to put him to the test. He was in the outer mountain at the time, and knowing what the men were from their appearance, he went out to them and said through an interpreter, "Why did you go to so much trouble, you philosophers, to visit a foolish man?" When they responded that he was not foolish, but quite wise, he said to them, "If you came to a foolish man, your toil is superfluous, but if you consider me wise, become as I am, for we must imitate what is good. If I had come to you I would have imitated you; but since you came to me, become as I am; for I am a Christian." In amazement they withdrew, for they saw that even demons feared Antony.⁷

"A monk away from the mountain is like a fish on dry land"

Another time [Antony] was subjected to this kind of pressure from people in need, and the military commander, through many messengers, asked him to come. And after he came and delivered a few statements about salvation and remarks pertaining to those who required help, he hastened to return. When the one called the duke implored him to stay, he replied that it was impossible to spend time with them, and by a graceful illustration he persuaded the duke, saying, "Just as fish perish when they lie exposed for a while on the dry land, so also the monks relax their discipline when they linger and pass time with you. Therefore, we must rush back to the mountain, like the fish to the sea - so that we might not, by remaining among you, forget the things within us."⁸

⁵ Luke 17:21

⁶ *Life of Antony* 20 (Gregg, p.46)

⁷ *Life of Antony* 72 (Gregg, pp.83-4)

⁸ *Life of Antony* 85 (Gregg, pp.92-3)

The Achievements of the Incarnation

The achievements of the Incarnation are more than the waves of the sea

The achievements of the Saviour effected through his incarnation are of such a kind and so great that if anyone wished to expound them he would be like those who gaze at the vast expanse of the sea and wish to count the number of its waves. For as one cannot grasp all the waves with his eyes, since the successive waves elude the perception of him who tries to count them; so also he who tries to comprehend all the accomplishments of Christ in the body is unable to grasp them all in his reckoning, for those that pass before his mind are more than he thinks he has grasped. So it is better not to view or speak of all of which one cannot even express a part, but to recall one part, leaving you to wonder at the whole. For they are all equally amazing, and wherever anyone looks, there to his exceeding wonder he sees the divinity of the Word.¹

The Incarnation as supreme revelation

For as a good teacher who cares for his pupils always condescends to teach by simpler means those who cannot profit by more advanced things, so does the Word of God ... For because men had turned away from the contemplation of God, and were sunk as it were in an abyss with their eyes cast down, and they were seeking God in creation and sensible things, and had set up mortal men and demons as gods for themselves; for this reason the merciful and universal Saviour, the Word of God, took to himself a body and lived as a man among men ... For since men's reason had descended to sensible things, the Word submitted to being revealed through a body, in order that he might bring men to himself as a man and turn their senses to himself, and that thenceforth, although they saw him as a man, he might persuade them through the works he did that he was not merely a man but God, and the Word and Wisdom of the true God.²

Renewal of the image

For as when a figure which has been painted on wood is spoilt by dirt, it is necessary for him whose portrait it is to come again so that the picture can be renewed in the same material - for because of his portrait the material on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the portrait is redone on it - even so the all-holy Son of the Father, who is the image of the Father, came to our realms to renew man who had been made in his likeness, and, as one lost, to find him through the forgiveness of sins.³

¹ *DI* 54 (Thomson, pp.269-71)

² *DI* 15-16 (Thomson, p.169-73)

³ *DI* 14 (Thomson, p.167)

The annihilation of death

So the Word of God came in his own person, in order that, as he is the image of his Father, he might be able to restore man who is in the image. In any other way it could not have been done, without the destruction of death and corruption. So he was justified in taking a mortal body, in order that in it death could be destroyed and men might be again renewed in the image. For this, then, none other than the image of the Father was required.⁴

Effective Solidarity... with universal impact

As when a great king has entered some great city and dwelt in one of the houses in it, such a city is then greatly honoured, and no longer does any enemy or bandit come against it, but it is rather treated with regard because of the king who has taken up residence in one of its houses; so also is the case with the King of all. For since he has come to our realm and has dwelt in a body similar to ours, now every machination of the enemy against men has ceased and the corruption of death, which formerly had power over them, has been destroyed.⁵

The “internalisation” of grace

If he had spoken and undone the curse, merely in accordance with his capacity to do so, the power of he who thus issued the command would have been displayed but humanity would nevertheless have remained as Adam was before the transgression, receiving grace externally and not having it mingled with the body. For such was Adam when he was placed in paradise. In fact, perhaps humanity would have become worse because it had by now learned to transgress. So, this being the situation with humanity, if it were again deceived by the serpent, there would be again a need for God to command and undo the curse. The need would then become limitless, and humanity would remain none the less in slavery and liability to sin. Forever sinning, it would be forever in need of pardon and it would be never freed. Being, on its own, mere flesh, it would be forever defeated by the law through the weakness of the flesh.⁶

Union of God with humanity

If the Son was a creature, humanity would have remained none the less mortal and not united to God. It was not a creature that united creatures to God, for in that case this creature would be itself in search of one to unite it to God.⁷

⁴ *DI* 13 (Thomson, p.167)

⁵ *DI* 9 (Thomson, p.155)

⁶ *CA* 2.68 (Anatolios, p.162)

⁷ *CA* 2.69 (Anatolios, p.162)

An act of reciprocity

He suffered to prepare freedom from suffering for those who suffer in him. He descended so that he may raise us up. He took upon himself the ordeal of being born that we might love him who is unbegotten; He went down to corruption that corruption might put on immortality. He became weak for us that we might rise with power. He descended to death that He might grant us immortality and give life to the dead. Finally he became human that we who die as human beings might live again and that death may no longer have sovereignty over us; for the apostolic word proclaims, “Death shall not have dominion over us.”⁸

The Incarnation was required to enable us to become children of God and to “make humanity receptive of divinity”

The love of God for humanity is such that by grace he becomes Father of those in relation to whom he had previously only been Maker. He becomes their Father when created human beings receive “into their hearts the Spirit of the Son, crying out, ‘Abba, Father’” (Gal 4:6), as the apostle says. These are the ones who, by receiving the Word, receive authority from him “to become children of God” (Jn 1:12). Being creatures by nature, they would not become “sons” except by receiving the Spirit of the natural and true Son. So it was in order to bring this about and to make humanity receptive of divinity that “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14).⁹

The Incarnation did not diminish the divinity of the Word but elevated humanity

For the flesh did not detract from the glory of the Word. Far from it! Rather, it is the flesh which was glorified by the Word. Nor was the Son’s divinity diminished because he who is in the form of God received the form of a servant (cf. Phil 2:6-7). Rather, he became the Liberator of all flesh and of all creation (cf. Rom 8:21). And if God sent his Son born of a woman (cf. Gal 4:4), this is not a deed that brings shame but glory and great grace. He became a human being that we might be divinized in him; he came to be in a woman and was begotten of a virgin in order to transport our errant race into himself and in order that from then on we may become a holy race and “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet 1:4), as the blessed Peter has written.¹⁰

Deification

He was made man that we might be made God.¹¹

⁸ *Festal Letter* 10.8 (Anatolios, p.70)

⁹ *CA* 2.59 (Anatolios, p.153)

¹⁰ *Letter to Adelphius* 4 (Anatolios, p.238)

¹¹ *DI* 54 (NPNF², Vol.4, p.65b)

The Trinity

The incomprehensibility of God

The more I wanted to write, and forced myself to understand the divine nature of the Word, the further the knowledge drew away from me; and the more I thought I understood it, the more I knew I failed to do so. Furthermore, I could not express in writing what I seemed to understand; what I wrote was unequal to the foreshadowing of the truth that existed in my mind ... But lest I should cause you pain, or by my silence lead into godlessness the argumentative people who have consulted you, I forced myself to write the few things that I have now sent ... For although a perfect understanding of the truth is at present far away from us because of the infirmity of the flesh, yet it is possible, as the Preacher himself has said, to know the madness of the godless and, having found it, to say that it is more bitter than death (Eccles. 7:26) ... For though it is impossible to comprehend what God is, yet it is possible to say what he is not.¹

The Holy Spirit must be God as he deifies by participation

Moreover, all things are said to be participants of God through the Spirit. For it says, “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys the temple of God, God will destroy that one. For the temple of God, which you are, is holy” (1 Cor 3:16,17). But if the Holy Spirit were a creature, there would not be for us any participation of God in the Spirit. Indeed, if we were merely united to a creature, we would still be foreigners to the divine nature, having no participation in it... But if we become sharers in the divine nature through participation in the Spirit, one would have to be crazy to say that the Spirit is of a created nature and not of the nature of God, for that is how those in whom the Spirit is become divinized. But if the Spirit divinizes, it is not to be doubted that it is of the nature of God himself.²

The unity of action of the three persons indicates their shared nature

[Let us] consider the tradition and teaching and faith of the Catholic Church from the beginning, that which the Lord has given, the apostles preached, and the fathers guarded ... The Trinity is holy and perfect, confessed as God in Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, having nothing foreign or extrinsic mingled with it, nor compounded of creator and created, but is wholly Creator and Maker. It is identical with itself and indivisible in nature, and its activity is one. For the Father does all things through the Word and in the Holy Spirit. Thus the oneness of the Holy Trinity is preserved and thus is the one God “who is over all and through all and in all” (Eph 4:6) preached in the Church – “over all,” as Father, who is beginning and fountain; “through all,” through the Son; and “in all” in the Holy Spirit.³

¹ *First Letter to the Monks* (Barnard, pp.10-11)

² *ad Serap.* 1.24 (Anatolios, p.223)

³ *ad Serap.* 1.28 (Anatolios, p.227)

References

Texts by St Athanasius

Abbreviation	Full title	English
<i>ad Serap.</i>	<i>Epistulae ad Serapion</i>	Letters to Serapion
CA	<i>Contra Arianos</i>	(Orations) against the Arians
CG	<i>Contra Gentes</i>	Against the Pagans
DI	<i>De Incarnatione</i>	On the Incarnation

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NPNF² = The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, second series (P. Schaff & H. Wace, eds., 1890 ff.)