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The Beauty of the Resurrected Body

- An Orthodox Perspective

The essence of Christianity is undoubtedly the reality of the resurrected body of our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. In other words, Christianity brings a solution to the problem of the immortal body or of the elixir of life, a subject in which many scientists have shown their interest. Some scientific experiments offer us a few hypotheses by means of which the life of the body can be prolonged or its biological functions improved.

THE INVULNERABLE BODY OF JESUS

It is obvious that there is a great deal of research in our contemporary world, out of which we are sure to learn useful things. But as true Christians, it is our duty to consult the basis of our faith in Jesus Christ, namely the Holy Scripture, the works of the Church Fathers, as they are the sources of eternal life (Ps 36:9; Jn 4:14), and the experience of the saints. As a matter of fact, what is the kind of body Jesus proposes to us?

If we search evidence in the New Testament, we find, just after Christ's resurrection, nine references to the kind of body Jesus proposes to us. We understand that Jesus passes with his body through the locked doors (Jn 20:19), eats fish and honey (Lk 24:42), enlightens the minds of the disciples with regards to their understanding of the Scripture (Lk 24:45), and prepares them for clothing with power from on high (Lk 24:49), and implicitly for the mission of preaching His resurrection.

In other words, Jesus Christ proves the existence of an invulnerable body that cannot be harmed, either by people or by fire, by water or by death. Unfortunately, for the majority of our contemporaries such a body is neither credible nor possible. However, the words of Saint GREGORY of Sinai should give us food for thought: "If we do not know ourselves as God created us, we will not know what sin has made of us." (Apophthegmata, cap. 50.)

ADAM, THE MASTERPIECE OF CREATION

Starting from these two premises, that of the reality of Christ's body and that of the creation of humanity, we must understand the primary creation of humanity by God (ie the creation of Adam). If we were to characterize Adam's condition in Eden, we could mention the words of Saint SERAPHIM of Sarov: "Adam was made to be unharmed by the action of any of the natural elements that God also created, so that he could not get drowned in water or burnt by fire, swallowed by the ground or harmed by the wind.

All the natural forces were in his power, as he was one chosen by God to be emperor and master of the living world. And all admired him as a perfect masterpiece of God's creation. When God asked him to give names to the other living creatures he gave each, in turn, such a name that it comprised all its gifts, all its power and all the particular features that they possessed, each according to what God endowed them with in the very moment of their creation.

Only owing to this supernatural gift of divine grace given to him when God blew life over him could Adam see and realise

God wandering around the Paradise, understand God's words and at the same time those of the angels and the language of all animals, birds and reptiles, creatures living on earth and all those things that are hidden for us nowadays because of the loss of divine grace and our wretchedness but which were so familiar to Adam before his fall. The Lord our God bestowed Eve the same wisdom, the same strength and almightiness, together with all the rest of sacred and noble qualities." (The Life and Teaching of Saint Seraphim of Sarov)

THE GIFT OF RESURRECTION

Therefore, Adam possessed the gift of resurrection, which Saint GREGORY of Nyssa characterizes in this way: "The gift of resurrection must be understood mainly as a way of setting the people back into the old condition they had before the fall. Indeed, the gift we hope for is a return to the original life, when human, who had been dropped out of Eden, will be placed there again. Consequently if the life of those resettled resembles to that of the angels, then it is obvious that the life before sin was a sort of angelic life. That is why the return of our life to its old state makes us angel-like." (On Man's Creation, cap. 17.)

SUBMISSION AND FASTING

Certainly, we can re-live the life before the sin and Saint GREGORY of Sinai suggests the solution or the means of doing that: "It is by means of two commandments that those who strive for the old grace come forth, namely by submission and fasting. It was by their contrary that all sins corrupted the human nature. Those who keep the commandments by obedience turn back to God faster than those who keep them by fast and prayer because the former is characteristic only to very few, being difficult even for the most resolute." (Apophthegmata, cap. 18.)

We can notice the unity in conception about the reality of the resurrected body according to Saint GREGORY of Nyssa, Saint GREGORY of Sinai and Saint SERAPHIM of Sarov, although they lived in totally different ages (the 4th, 13-14th and 19th centuries). As we have already mentioned, Saint GREGORY of Nyssa and Saint SERAPHIM of Sarov, we shall remember the words of Saint GREGORY of Sinai about the resurrected body:

"The immortal body is the material body, except its humors and consistence, unfathomable changed from spiritual into resurrected body, so that it is both earthly and heavenly due to the immateriality of its divine appearance. For it is as it was originally created that it will rise out of death to resemble the Son of Man's appearance while fully sharing divine grace." (Apophthegmata, cap. 46.)

HEAVENLY IMMATERIALITY

With a similar point of view, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, Dumitru STANILOAE explains in a note (no. 18.) the above mentioned words of Saint GREGORY of Sinai: "The emphasis is laid on immateriality as the characteristic of

the body become divine and restored to its natural splendor, which does not exclude a certain vigor, both of them implying lack of any alterance. Becoming heavenly, the body remains earthly as well because it does not exclude substance, no matter how transparent it may become by the presence of the Holy Spirit. The body, transformed in this way, attains the structure of God embodied after the Resurrection, and this is the reason why He is named the Son of Man pre-eminently.”

THREE HOLY RELICS

These are only a few testimonies on the reality of the resurrected body from the Holy Scripture and the books of the Church Fathers. It is also necessary to bring evidence from real life—from the liturgical life of the Church. We refer to something characteristic to Orthodoxy, namely the worship of the holy relics. I will mention only three examples which impressed me and which could at least be the subject of some questioning or curiosity for anyone.

1. **MARIA MAGDALENA**, out of whom Jesus exorcised seven demons, is the first person to whom the Redeemer revealed Himself after His Resurrection. One of her arms is at the monastery Simonos Petras in Mount Athos. What is interesting to know is the fact that her arm has constantly the temperature of the human body. Moreover, on the 22 July, every year, when there is a holiday in her honor, the temperature of the arm rises.

2. **Saint SPIRIDON**, a participant in the first ecumenical Synod in Nicea in 325 AD and active maintainer and preacher of the Holy Trinity. His body remains well preserved in the Island of Corfu (Greece) and continues to exhibit significant flexibility.

3. **Saint PARASCHEVA** from Iasi, protector of Moldavia and of

our student association (ASCOR Iasi). At the beginning of the 20th century, her relics were also in Iasi but in another church. During a fire, the greatest part of the inside church was destroyed. The coffin that contained the relics burned to ashes but the relics were found absolutely untouched.

ANGELS WITHIN A BODY

The relics of any saint are sweet smelling, whereas we know that a common corpse after only a few days gives off an unbearable smell. The facts mentioned seem to describe another world, a world of the angels within a body, a world about which Christ assures us. “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world” (Mt 25:34), referring to the Eden prepared for Adam and Eve. I think this verse is suitable to end with. A few years ago someone asked a very old monk, “Father, supposing I do not read the whole Bible, what are my chances to be redeemed?” The old monk answered eloquently, “read and carry out all that is written in Matthew’s Gospel, chapter 25, and we shall meet in Heaven.”

May we also share the joy of the heavenly Kingdom together with wise virgins, and the servants who increased the talents, with the merciful, with the holy angels, with the Holy Virgin and Our Lord Himself, Jesus Christ.

Suggested Readings:

Saint GREGORY of Nyssa, *On Man’s Creation*.

Saint GREGORY of Sinai: *Apophtegmata*.

The Life and Teaching of Saint Seraphim of Sarov.

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