

THE CHRISTOLOGY OF ST. ATHANASIUS*

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As always stated by H.H. Pope Shenouda III, «St. Athanasius defended equally both the divinity and humanity of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ».

St. Cyril of Alexandria based his Christological teaching on the Christology of St. Athanasius and offered the letter of St. Athanasius to Epictetus as a primary reference to the correct Christological teaching of the Church, calling it «the letter of our blessed father Athanasius to Epictetus»¹.

St. Athanasius, defending the perfect humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ, refused the wrong ideas that «the body born of Mary is coessential with the Godhead of the Word, or that the Word has changed into flesh, bones, hair, and the whole body, and alterea from its own nature».

He stated clearly «the body in which the Word was is not coessential with the Godhead, but was truly born of Mary, while the Word Himself was not changed into bones and flesh, but came in the flesh. For what John said: “The Word was made flesh”, has this meaning, as we may see by a similar passage; for it is written in Paul: “Christ has become a curse for us”². And just as He has not Himself become a curse, but He is said to have done so because He took upon Him the curse on our behalf, so also He has become flesh not by being changed into flesh, but because He assumed on our behalf living flesh, and has become man»³.

St. Athanasius also was clear in his teaching about the living flesh

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1. Letter of St. Cyril to Eulogius, the priest, at Constantinople, *The Fathers of the Church*, CUA press, p. 189.

2. *Gal.* iii.13.

3. Letter to Epictetus, par. 8., *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct 1987, Vol. IV, p. 573.

assumed by the Word of God that it meant a whole humanity, i.e. the body and the rational soul together.

He wrote: «But truly our salvation is not merely apparent, nor does it extend to the body only, but the whole man, body and soul alike, has truly obtained salvation in the Word Himself»⁴. Also he said, «For to say “The Word became flesh”, is equivalent to saying “the Word has become man”; according to what is said in Joel: “I will pour forth of My Spirit upon all flesh”⁵; for the promise did not extend to the irrational animals, but to men, on whose account the Lord is become Man»⁶.

St. Athanasius also denied that the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ existed before the incarnation of the Word from the Holy Virgin. He wrote, «They all will reasonably condemn themselves who have thought that the flesh derived from Mary existed before her, and that the Word, prior to her, had a human soul, and existed in it always even before His coming»⁷. It is very clear that St. Athanasius was never affected by the teaching of Origen about the pre-existence of the souls.

St. Athanasius' teachings against Nestorianism:

Although Nestorius came later than St. Athanasius, yet St. Athanasius offered a rigid teaching against Nestorian heresy.

He wrote, «How did men called Christians venture even to doubt whether the Lord, who proceeded from Mary, while Son of God by Essence and Nature, is “of the seed of David according to the flesh”⁸, and of the flesh of the Holy Mary? Or who have seen so venture some as to say that Christ who suffered in the flesh and was crucified is not Lord, Saviour, God, and Son of the Father? Or how can they wish to be called Christians who say that the Word has descended upon a holy man as upon one of the prophets, and has not Himself become man, taking the body from Mary; but that Christ is one person, while the Word of God, Who before Mary and before the ages was Son of the Father, is another? Or how can they be Christians who

4. *Ibid.*, par. 7, p. 572.

5. *Joel* II.28.

6. Letter to Epictetus, par. 8, *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct. 1987, IV, p. 573.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Rom.* I. 14.

say that the Son is one, and the Word of God another?»⁹. He wrote also, «The Word of God came in His own Person, because it was He alone, the image of the Father, Who could recreate man made after the Image»¹⁰.

Contrary to the orthodox teaching of St. Athanasius, Nestorius taught as follows:

«For this reason also Christ is named God the Word, because he has an uninterrupted conjoining to the Christ»¹¹. And again, «Accordingly, let us safeguard the unconfused conjoining of natures, for let us admit God in man and because of the divine conjoining let us reverence the man worshipped together with the almighty God»¹². Nestorius also said, «God is inseparable from **the one** who is visible, because of this, I do not separate the honor of the one not separated. I separate the natures; but I unite the adoration»¹³.

On this last passage St. Cyril of Alexandria, in his letter to Acacius, commented as follows: «Not having known the meaning of the incarnation, he names two natures but separates them from one another, putting God apart and likewise man in turn, conjoined to God by an external relationship only according to the equality of honor or at least sovereign power» (paragraph 16 of the letter).

St. Athanasius rejected any separation between the divinity and the humanity of our Lord Jesus Christ. He wrote, «The others, dividing what is indivisible, denied the truth that “the Word was made Flesh, and dwelt among us”»^{14,15}. He also wrote, «We do not worship a creature. Far be the thought. For such an error belongs to heathens and Arians. But we worship the Lord of Creation, Incarnate, the Word of God. For if the flesh also is in itself a part of the created world, yet it has become God’s body. And we neither divide the body, being such, from the Word, and worship it by itself, nor when we wish to worship the Word do we set Him apart from the flesh, but knowing as we said above, after having come in the flesh. Who, accordingly, is so senseless, as to say to the Lord: “Leave the body that I may

9. Letter to Epictetus, par. 2, *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct. 1987, Vol. IV, p. 571.

10. *On the Incarnation*, chap. III, par 13, SVS Press, 1982, p. 41.

11. *Letter of St. Cyril to Acacius, Bishop of Melitene*, CUA press, 1987, p. 159, p. 160, p. 162. See Loofs, *Nestoriana*, 275.9-11, 249.1-4, 262.4-6.

12. *Ibid.*

13. *Ibid.*

14. *John I.* 14.

15. Letter to Adelphius, par. 2, *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct. 1987, Vol. IV, p. 575.

worship thee”, or so impious as to join the senseless Jews in saying, on account of the Body, “why dost Thou, being a man, make Thyself God?”¹⁶. But the leper was not one of this sort, for he worshipped God in the Body, and recognised that He was God, saying, “Lord if Thou wilt, Thou canst make me clean”^{17,18}.

St. Athanasius explained how the Word of God made the properties of the Body His own and wrote, «the incorporeal Word made His own the properties of the Body, as being His own Body. Why, when the Body was struck by the attendant, as suffering Himself He asked, “Why smittest thou Me?”¹⁹. And being by nature intangible, the Word yet said, “I gave My back to the stripes, and My cheeks to blows, and did not turn My face from shame and spitting”²⁰. For what the Human Body of the Word suffered, this the Word, dwelling in the Body, ascribed to Himself... And verily it is strange that He it was Who suffered and yet suffered not. Suffered, because His own Body suffered; suffered not, because the Word, being by nature God, is impassible»²¹.

On the other hand St. Athanasius explained how the Body of our Lord Jesus Christ was glorified beyond its own properties of the nature. He wrote, «But the Body itself being of mortal nature, beyond its own nature rose again by reason of the Word which was in it; and it has ceased from natural corruption, and having put on the Word which is above man, has become incorruptible»²².

16. *John* X. 23.

17. *John* X. 33.

18. Letter to Adelphius, par. 3, *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct. 1987, Vol. IV, p. 575.

19. *John* XVIII. 23.

20. *Isaiah* 50.6.

21. Letter to Epictetus, par. 6, *N. & P.N. Fathers*, Oct. 1987, Vol. IV, p. 572.

22. *Ibid.*, par. 10, p. 574.