

Sunday, December 30, 2012

Distinct Characteristics of the Christian Faith (3) Love

God is Love. This phrase was mentioned twice in one chapter in the New Testament (1 John 4: 8, 16) and has been the embodiment of the Christian faith as a whole. It has also been a distinct identity for Christians and for the Christian faith. Perhaps one would need to research the history books to uncover how and when this phrase was chosen as a symbol to Christianity and Christians. Who chose this phrase? Where it was first used? How did it spread? In any case, this short phrase is indeed the most powerful and most representative of the Christian faith as a doctrine, on the one hand, and a way of life and a code of conduct on the other.

Love and fundamental doctrines of Christianity.

The fundamental doctrines that distinguish the Christian faith: The Holy Trinity, Incarnation, Crucifixion and redemption are impossible to properly comprehend in isolation of love.

The three hypostases of the Holy Trinity exchange love amongst themselves: *“For the Father loves the Son, and shows Him all things that He Himself does...”* (John 5:20). *“As the Father loved Me, I also have loved you; abide in My love.”* (John 15:9). *“I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me”* (John 17:23). *“But that the world may know that I love the Father, and as the Father gave Me commandment, so I do. Arise, let us go from here”* (John 17:23). These verses emphasize the mutual love between the Hypostases of the Father and the Son.

Many find it difficult to accept the concept of incarnation, the idea that God was incarnated and took the form of the servant! Many find it inappropriate that the Creator takes the form of the servant. The concept of incarnation cannot be comprehended without the notion of “God is Love.” And this is what we pray in the daily midnight praise (Monday Theotokia, Part 5) “For He has been overcome by His mercy and sent unto us His mighty arm. He shone in the flesh, taken from the Virgin, without the seed of man in order to save us.” Also in this regard, St Athanasius in his famous book “On the Incarnation,” says: “He has not assumed a body as proper to His own nature, far from it, for as the Word He is without body. He has been manifested in a human body for this reason only, out of the love and goodness of His Father, for the salvation of us men.” St. Cyril the great also says: “Because of his compassion and love of mankind, He took our form and subjected Himself to suffering and the humiliation of the Jews that befell on Him.”

As to Crucifixion and redemption, they are the ultimate expression of the love of God towards mankind. Outside this love, man cannot believe that God appears in the flesh and is crucified in dishonor. Nonetheless, we understand, accept, believe, and rejoice with this God when we recognize that he accepted all that because of His love to mankind. As a Father, He wanted to restore His children from the grip of the devil. St. John the Evangelist records the words of the Lord Jesus: *“For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”* (John 3:16), *“Greater love has no one than this, than to lay down one’s life for his friends.”* (John 15:13). St. Paul the Apostle also says: *“For when we were still without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly. For scarcely for a righteous man will one die; yet perhaps for a good man someone would even dare to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”* (Romans 5:6-8).

Therefore, we can see that all fundamental doctrines of Christianity cannot be understood, accepted, or comprehended in their depth except from the perspective of “God is Love.” He loves mankind to the extent that He gave his only begotten Son to purchase us from the world with the blood of His Son. Thus, we became His sons through adoption, and our relationship with Him is based on mutual love which He initiated in its perfect form in His incarnation and redemption. Let’s repay Him with love according to the words of St. John the Apostle in his first epistle: *“We love Him because He first loved us.”* (1 John 4:19). This will be our discussion in the article of next week, God willing..

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