

THE SON AS IMAGE AND EXACT REPRESENTATION OF THE FATHER

The epistle for today includes the sentence, “The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of His being” (Heb 1:3).

A mirror or a good reflection in water is one of the best ways to know what we look like. No one has seen the Father at any time (In 1:18; 1 Jn 4:12). The incarnate Son has revealed the Father. He who has seen Him has seen the Father. The Son is in the Father, and the Father is in Him (J 14:9-10). God has always been a God who speaks, and in the Old Testament also, when God spoke, as at the burning bush, the “I _m” who spoke was the Second person of the Trinity (In 8:58). The Son reflects the Father in the world.

The first expression in the Nicene Creed that speaks about the nature of the Son, after “God of God” (which means “God derived from God”) is “Light of Light” (which means “Light derived from Light”). Paul had used the word “Image” similarly: “He is the image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15).

When God created the world, two words were used to set Adam and Eve apart from the rest of the creatures, “image” and “likeness” (Gn 1:26). However, the Christians in the fourth century found that the word “like” for the relationship of the Son to the Father could be a trap. Some left-wing theologians objected to the expression “of one substance”, which had been put into the Creed in AD 325 at Nicea. By AD 360 a creed was produced that even backed away from “like in substance” to simply “like” that Father. (The out-and-out Arians Aetius and Eunomius, said “unlike the Father.”) The difficulty is that for something to be like something else, it needs to be similar in only one respect. Snow is like milk. Both are white. An aeroplane is like a bird. Both can fly. In spite of a similarity, there are many differences in both sets. Burns wrote, “My love is like a red, red rose.” The point of comparison was beauty. They were more different than alike. The Creed at Constantinople in AD 381 went back to “of one substance” with the Father. However, even at Chalcedon in AD 451 the word “like” was still used to explain “of one substance”, as generic rather than specific identity. However, it added an expression from Hebrews to guard against ambiguity, “like in all respects” (Compare Hb 2: 17). If something is like in all respects, including nature, it is identical.

At the time of Nicea, the Creed merely wanted to affirm that the Son is also what the Father is, in His eternal being. Even the terms for threeness and oneness, “person” and “substance” had not yet been universally accepted. The relationship had been clearly expressed in the first verse of the Gospel of John. The Word was with the Father. That meant that He was a distinct person from the Father. However, there was also identity. He was God (In 1:1).

Even the word “same” is not always used without ambiguity. Ask Brock, “Is this the same car that won at Bathurst?” and he might reply, “Do you mean the same model or the same machine?” If you say at the bar, “The same again, please”, a smart attendant might reply, “I cannot give you what you have just drunk.” You had simply meant, “as close as possible to what I have just had, in brand name and quality.”

Christians confess that the Father has one single divine Son, and that He is the Image of Him, as the full expression of His being throughout eternity, and the complete revelation of His deity in the world. Some early Christians found the example of light or radiance useful. If you light a second candle from an already lit one, you can say that the fire is the same fire on the second candle, although it is derived from the first one, even though there are two distinct flames. Tertullian used the concept of light in his attempts to express both sameness and distinctness. The sun, the radiance of light from the sun, and an illumination point on the ground are all the same light, but the three are distinct. Of course, there was a difficulty in terms of their equality. There was a good deal of subordinationism in much discussion of God at that time. .

Reflection” is a more difficult concept. No one would dare to say that the reflection of himself in a mirror was equal to himself. When he walks away, the reflection has disappeared. Some early Christians argued that, in the case of God, the Son, as the reflection of the Father’s being, can be, and is, fully equal to the Father in being. Put crudely, they argued that, because God is perfect, the reflection of Him in the Son is also perfect. They wanted to say that the being of the Son is a second complete presentation of exactly the same reality as the Father. That was what the supporters of Arius objected to, and why they deposed Eustathius, the bishop of Antioch, shortly after Nicea. However, it was not a question of logic. That is what John had affirmed about the incarnate Son. When the Word was with His disciples, they saw “His glory, the glory of the Father’s only Son.” “The only Son, who is God, who is in the lap of the Father, made Him known” (In 1: 14, 18). Hebrews said that the Father has spoken to us by His Son (Hb 1:2).

The Son’s “exact representation” of the Father’s being and the radiance of His glory” is crucial for our salvation. He who kept God’s commandments for us and suffered the penalty for our sin by His one, complete sacrifice is no less than fully divine. What He has done for us is fully valid for our place with God as members of

His people in eternal life.

An important emphasis that came from the theologians like Theodoret connected with Antioch in the time leading up to the Councils of Ephesus (431 AD) and Chalcedon (AD 451) was the double- “homoousios.” The Son, who is of one substance with the Father, like Him in all respects, is also of one substance with us, like us in all respects, except for sin (Hb 2:17). Here we observe the grand sweep of God’s plan for us from eternity. God made human beings to be like Himself in holiness, righteousness, and knowledge (Eph 4:24; Col 3: 10). That likeness to God was lost in the fall into sin. Sin and death had no part in the image of God. However, When Paul called Jesus Christ “the image of the invisible God”, He went on to explain His relationship both to creation and to redemption. He used concepts from Genesis 1, “in the beginning” to affirm His headship, His pre-eminence and His priority both to creation and to the church. The image of the invisible God summarises and embraces His creatures and His redeemed creatures (Col. 1:15-18).

Not only is the Son the full likeness of the Father, but He has recreated us like Himself. “We shall be like Him” (1 Jn 3:2). When Paul wrote about God’s eternal election of grace, he said, “For He also predestined those whom He had foreknown, to be conformed to the likeness of His Son, so that He might be the Firstborn among many brothers” (Rm 8:28). “Conformed” means “made like.” Earlier Paul had used the word “likeness” when he explained what baptism has done. “If we have been planted together with Him, in the likeness of His death, then we shall be planted together with Him also in the likeness of His resurrection” (Rm 6:5). Christians are people who, in baptism, have been joined to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection (Rm 6:3-4; Col 2:12). This is union with Christ. One has died for all. That is equivalent to saying that all have died with Him (2 Cor 5:14). Christians have died, and their lives are hidden with Christ in God (Col 3:3-4).

Romans 8 reminds us that being confirmed to Christ’s image looks back to His suffering, and looks forward to His glory. According to Paul’s understanding, as Jesus Christ suffered, was crucified, died, was buried, rose, was glorified, sat at the Father’s right hand, and reigns over all, we suffer with Him, we are crucified with Him, we have, in baptism, died, been buried, and risen, with Him. Paul can write that God (the Father) has “raised us with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly realms” (Eph 2:6). His redeemed already reign with Him (Rv 20:4). However, we shall also reign with Him in glory (Rm 8:12; 2 Tm 2:11-12). That is why we suffer patiently with Him, as He suffered, and why we confess Him with our mouths and lives, as He will one day take up His confession of us. He is the image of God. Our destiny, from eternity, is to be conformed to the likeness of God’s Son.