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THE EMBRYO IN ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY AND TRADITION

In a September, 2002 bioethics conference in Chambésy, Switzerland, His Eminence Metropolitan Nikolaos (Hatzinikolaou) of Mesogaia and Lavreotiki, Chairman of the Bioethics Committee for the Church of Greece, gave an incisive and insightful talk entitled, “The Embryo and Its Development in Regards to Its Formation as a Complete Human Being”.¹ Following are short selections from the address by this Harvard and MIT-trained scientist, theologian, and hierarch, linking science, scripture and the Church Fathers in a warm affirmation of the Orthodox view of life before birth.

The unpredictable and rapid progress of human reproductive techniques, in combination with research, has removed the embryo from the security of the maternal womb and placed it before the challenge of unprecedented bioethical dilemmas.... The first basic question that emerges as we examine the embryo is whether and to what degree it is a human being. Some people consider it to be a tissue of the maternal body; others recently named it—at the preimplantation stage—“genital material”². Some believe that its nature

1 Archimandrite Nikolaos (Hatzinikolaou), “The Embryo and Its Development in Regard to Its Formation as a Complete Human Being”, Conference on the Church and Bioethics: The Word of Science and the Word of Religion, Chambésy, Switzerland, 11-15 September 2002. The full version is available online at: <http://www.bioethics.org.gr/en/index.html>

2 Draft bill of the Special Legal Committee of the Greek Ministry of Justice, May 2002.

Opposite: Albazinian Icon of the Mother of God, “The Word Made Flesh,” Hong Kong, courtesy of Rev. Fr. Dionisy Pozdnaev. The icon’s feastday is March 9/22.

and status change depending on its age, and finally, others insist that the embryo, from the very first moment of its existence, has a perfect human identity and, therefore, deserves to be respected as a person.

Despite the fact that according to the Orthodox Christian perception, scientific confirmation is not absolutely necessary to support the relevant teachings of the Church, it is interesting that modern scientific discoveries are compatible with them. Thus, genetics and developmental biology demonstrate that the embryo at all stages of its development is an individual of the human kind at its initial life cycle, and that, after a coordinate, continuous and gradual process, it will become an adult like us, because it is already one of us: “he who will be a human being is already a human being”.³

The Orthodox Christian Church has always believed, with consistency and clarity, that man is created in the image of God from the very beginning of conception. The basic sources from which the Orthodox Christian Church derives her respect towards embryonic life are the Old and New Testaments of the Holy Scriptures, and certain sacred canons and liturgical texts.

The Old and New Testament

In the first chapter of the Gospel of Saint Luke, we encounter the Theotokos going “*with haste*” to Elisabeth, right after the event of the Annunciation, namely right after her conception. During this revealing encounter we see, on the one hand, that the embryo-St. John the Baptist, after “*hearing the greeting of Mary*”, “*leaps in her womb*”; in fact, he leaps “*with joy*”, filling his mother “*with the Holy Spirit*”. At this point, the evangelist refers to him as a “babe”. Moreover, the leaping of the Forerunner reflects the recognition of Jesus as the Lord, when He was a few-days-old embryo. This is why Elisabeth calls the Theotokos “*mother of my Lord*”. These elements indicate distinctly that in no way does the embryonic status question or limit the perfect identity of the Forerunner or of the Lord, despite the fact that He is a few-days-old embryo. The encounter of the Theotokos with Elisabeth and the leaping of the embryo-St. John, after recognizing the embryo-Jesus, refer not only to the embryo’s biological mobility, but also to the perfect spiritual expression of its soul.

The theanthropic life of the Lord does not begin when He reaches maturity, or with His birth, but humbly from the moment of His conception. The

³ Tertullian, Apologia IX, 8 PL, 1:371-3.

Lord was *theanthropos* [God-man] at the moment of His Transfiguration, as a babe in Bethlehem, as well as in the womb of the Theotokos. Respectively, man during all the phases of his biological life, as an old man or young man, as a baby or embryo, is a human being.

Corresponding references in the texts of the Old Testament indicate that the embryonic status constitutes a stage of human evolution during which the grace of God acts upon man. Hence, in the books of Psalms and in the prophetic writings, we come across explicit phrases that confirm that the grace of God is active and that His will is expressed during pregnancy. The embryo is not simply a group of cells, a combination of organs, or even more, a soulless tissue of the maternal body, but it forms a person upon whom the grace of God acts freely, as in every other human being.

It is interesting that Isaiah confesses that he has been a perfect person bearing a name from the time he was in his mother's womb; "*The Lord called me from the womb, from the body of my mother he named my name... And now the Lord says, who formed me from the womb to be his servant...*"⁴

Respectively, Jeremiah becomes the recipient of the sacred prophetic calling since his embryonic age; "*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you; I appointed you a prophet to the nations*"⁵

In the Book of Psalms, David talks about the special providence of God for every human being that begins from conception; "*For thou didst form my inward parts, thou didst knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise thee, for thou art fearful and wonderful. Wonderful are thy works! Thou knowest me right well;*"⁶ Moreover, "*Upon thee was I cast from my birth, and since my mother bore me thou hast been my God*"⁷. The fact that the grace of God acts upon the embryo is a strong indication that the embryo possesses a soul.

Apostle Paul expresses the same notion in his Epistle to the Galatians, where he claims that his calling dates back to the period of his gestation; "*But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace...*"⁸.

4 Is. 49:1, 5.

5 Jer. 1:5.

6 Ps. 139:13.

7 Ps. 22:10.

8 Gal. 1:15.

Therefore, God calls, sanctifies, designates and nominates prophets and apostles ever since their embryonic age. Just as Christ our Lord is found behind the humble “*babe wrapped in swaddling clothes,*”⁹ man, the perfect image of God, is humbly hidden behind every embryo.

The Orthodox Church underlines her faith in the sacredness and significance of the event of conception by honouring and celebrating the conceptions of the persons involved in the divine economy: at first, on March 25, the secret mystery of the conception of the Lord on the day of the Annunciation of the Theotokos; then on December 9, the conception of the Theotokos, and finally, on September 23, the conception of Saint John the Forerunner.

All of the above indicate that fertilisation constitutes the most significant stage of man’s biological life, because during this stage he acquires both his entity and irrevocable identity. All other stages form phases of his development no matter how important they are. No other moment, not even the moment of implantation, or the 14th day, or the day of the formation of the primitive streak, or of the completion of organogenesis, or the moment that the embryo acquires human form, could be considered as the day of the embryo’s ensoulment. The soul is not placed inside the body at some specific moment, but it is born with it; soul and body are congenital.

From the very first centuries, abortion constituted a serious sin for the Church, similar to homicide, thus implying indirectly that the embryo is a living soul. The tradition of the Church,¹⁰ discerns in the embryo the sanctity of God’s perfect image, a person who struggles to live eternally in the kingdom of God through his survival in this world.

Patristic Tradition and Teaching

The patristic teachings on the embryo are derived basically from texts referring to the bond between body and soul. Actually, Saint Gregory of Nyssa speaks extensively on the simultaneous birth of soul and body, “*But as man is one, the being consisting of soul and body, we are to suppose that the beginning of his existence is one, common to both parts, so that he should not be found to be antecedent and posterior to himself, if the bodily element*

9 Luk. 2:12.

10 Teachings of the Apostles (in Greek—Didachai ton Apostolon) II, 2 VEPES 2, 215.

Epistle to Varnava XIX, 5 VEPES 2, 242. Athinagoras of Athens, Embassy of the Christians (in Greek - Presveia ton Christianon) 35 VEPES 4, 309 (19-20).

11 Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *On the making of man*, EPE 5, 206.

were first in point of time, and the other were a later addition; ...and in the creation of individuals not to place the one element before the other, neither the soul before the body, nor the contrary".¹¹ St. John Damascene has a [comparable] viewpoint, namely that body and soul are created simultaneously¹².

The Fathers of the Church... wishing to refute the theory of Plato and Origen on the pre-existence of souls, proceeded to the writing of the above texts. The belief in the simultaneous birth of the soul and body and the significance of their coexistence is clearly demonstrated in their writings. In this sense, the biological beginning marks the psychosomatic birth of man. Actually, it is interesting that the Fathers do not associate the embryo's soul with the mother's body but with its own body. This means that the term "conception" is not identified with implantation, namely the organic tie between the embryo and its mother's body, but with fertilisation, namely the beginning of human life. This truth is also expressed by Saint Athanasius the Great when he writes that man is known as consisting of noetic soul and physical body; the former not existing apart from the latter; ...the beginning of being occurs in the womb.¹³

This is a generally accepted belief that is not questioned by the Patristic tradition. Moreover, Saint Maximus the Confessor supports that soul and body cannot exist separately,¹⁴ but their relationship is permanent and lasts forever;¹⁵ in fact, it is not optional but mandatory,¹⁶ according to the archetype of the union of the two natures in Christ. In regards to the relationship between soul and body, St. Maximus rejects their "*pre-existence*", or the "*existence of the one before the other*", but accepts their "*coexistence*".¹⁷

If the first element of the Patristic reasoning is the psychosomatic coalescence, the second is that each man is created in the image of God. The roots of Christian anthropology are found in the true Christology. Thus, all knowledge regarding human nature can be derived by divine revelation that informs us about the human nature of Christ. The Logos of God assumed all

¹² Saint John Damascene, *On man*, PG 94.922, EPE 1.210.

¹³ Saint Athanasius the Great, PG 26.1233.

¹⁴ Saint Maximus the Confessor, PG 91.1100D.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, PG 91.1101C.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, PG 91.488D.

¹⁷ *Ibid*, PG 91.1325D. Saint Anastasios of Sinai, PG 89.724D. Saint Meletios of Antioch, PG 64.1081B, 1089B.

human elements except sin, and became “consubstantial” with man as far as human nature is concerned, even if “*his human elements were above all humans*”, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor.

According to Saint Kyrill of Alexandria and the statements of the Third and Fourth Ecumenical Synods, the incarnate Logos of God assumed the entire human nature “*from the womb*” or “*in the womb*”, “*from conception*” or “*from the very beginning of conception*”¹⁸ and “*we confess our Lord Jesus Christ as a perfect human being*” and the Mother of God “*as the Theotokos, for the Logos of God was incarnate, and He united Himself, at the moment of His conception, with the temple (the body) that He received from her*”.¹⁹ ✦

The full address of “The Embryo and Its Development in Regards to Its Formation as a Complete Human Being” may be read online at www.bioethics.org.gr/en/embryoGeneva.doc

A more recent article on “The Greek Orthodox Position on the Ethics of Assisted Reproduction” can be viewed at <http://www.bioethics.org.gr/MMLN%20assisted%20repro.pdf>

18 Mitsopoulos, E.N., *The Teaching of the Church on the Psychosomatic Nature of the Human Embryo and its Christological Foundation*, 2nd ed., Athens, 1986, p. 20, Saint Kyrill of Alexandria, Letter 17, PG 77.109.

19 Karmiris, I., *The Dogmatic and Symbolic Classics of the Orthodox Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., Athens 1960, pp. 154-155.