

THE SHACKLES OF THE LATIN CAPTIVITY

or

Chains You Can Believe In

(If You Choose to Ignore the Holy Fathers)

Part Four

By Metropolitan Ephraim of Boston

We hope our "opening salvo" from Saint Isaac of Syria encouraged you. In this part, the counter-attack continues.

The fact is, in contrast to all the irreverent speculations of the Scholastics, the Church's doctrine is clear: God, of His own free will, voluntarily (and not because of Necessity) chose to redeem us the way He did. In no way was He forced or constrained to it. We always speak of the *voluntary* Death and Passion of our Saviour, and the hymns of the Church are replete with this theme:

When the Lord was coming to His *voluntary* Passion. . . .
(A hymn of Monday Matins of Holy Week)

I, the Creator, am, *of Mine own will*, clothed with the form
of impoverished Adam. . .
(First Ode of Monday Matins of Holy Week)

He Who is sinless *willingly* submits to all things, that on all He may
bestow resurrection from the dead.
(A hymn of Friday Vespers of Holy Week)

Thou didst desire to make it known to all that Thou wast *willingly*
betrayed, in order to snatch the world from the enemy....
(Kathisma of Friday Matins of Holy Week)

Furthermore, what are the words intoned by the priest at the end of the Holy Week services, that is, in the week when our Saviour endured the Passion for us? From Vespers on Palm Sunday evening through Holy Wednesday, he says: "He that cometh to the *voluntary* Passion for our salvation, Christ, our true God...." From Holy Friday through Matins of Holy Saturday, he says: "He that for us men and for our salvation accepted the dread Passion, the life-creating Cross, and *voluntary* burial in the flesh, Christ our true God...."

Indeed, how different the thought of the Scriptures and the Fathers is from Anselm's conjectures can be seen clearly from what Saint Gregory the Theologian writes on the same subject. The Saint asks:

To whom was that Blood offered that was shed for us, and why was it shed? I mean the precious and glorious Blood of God, the High Priest and Victim. We were in bondage to the devil and sold under sin,

having purchased injury for ourselves with our voluptuousness. Now, since a ransom is paid to him who holds us in power, I ask to whom such a price was offered and why? If to the devil, fie upon the outrage! The robber receives the ransom, not only from God, but a ransom consisting of God Himself! He demands so exorbitant a payment for his tyranny that it would have been right for him to have freed us altogether. But if the price is offered to the Father, I ask first of all, how? For it was not the Father who held us captive. Why then should the Blood of His Only Begotten Son please the Father, Who would not even receive Isaac when he was offered as a whole burnt offering by Abraham, but replaced the human sacrifice with a ram? *Is it not evident that the Father accepts the sacrifice not because He demanded it or because He felt any need for it, but on account of His loving dispensation:* because man must be sanctified by the humanity of God, and God Himself must deliver us by overcoming the tyrant through His own power, and drawing us to Himself by the mediation of the Son Who effects this all for the honor of God, to Whom He was obedient in everything.

(On the Holy Pascha, 22)

(And really, when one thinks about it, the Blood of the Son of God is, in a very real way, offered to us "unto healing of soul and body and forgiveness of sins.")

So *this* was the purpose of the Incarnation of our Saviour: that He might deliver us from our sins, and from the bonds of death and corruption which ruled as a tyrant unjustly "even over them that had not sinned after the similitude of Adam's transgression," as St. Paul tells the Romans; that He might sanctify our nature; that, by adoption and by grace, He might deify us and make us "gods," for, as Saint Athanasius the Great says, "God became man that man might become god," and *not* because God the Father was thirsting to be satisfied by the Blood of God the Incarnate Son.

Even the terms "offering," "sacrifice" and "ransom," though used in the Scriptures, are inadequate and cannot fully explain the mystery of our salvation. For Saint Gregory the Theologian points this out when he says that a ransom is paid to one who holds the victim in captivity. But the Father of lights was not the one holding us in captivity. A ransom is given to one who asks for it. But our Heavenly Father did not ask for it. What kind of ransom is this?

In Saint Paul's time, slaves were a common commodity, like food, clothing or furniture. Prisoners of war or the citizens of an entire city taken in war, were bought and sold like sheep, oxen, or horses. Slaves could not ever hope to be free again in this life unless someone ransomed them, and set them free. So, Saint Paul uses the image of a "ransom" since his audience — many of them slaves themselves — could easily relate to it, and understand what he was getting at.

The inadequacy of our language makes us all "liars", as the Psalmist declares ("I said in mine ecstasy, every man is a liar." Ps. 115:2); not because we "abhor the truth" but because creaturehood can neither comprehend, nor give adequate utterance to the Uncreated and to His incomprehensible dispensation for us. And so we stumble around, looking for this word and that, attempting to make these "lies" less blatant when we seek to express "the foolishness of preaching."

How to Lose Your Baggage

This brings us to another aspect of the problem of the "Latin Captivity", and it applies especially to those of us who are converts to Orthodoxy from either Roman Catholicism or Protestantism. We must take care not to assume that Orthodoxy and the Western heresies are in agreement on this or that point, when in fact, they are not in agreement at all (as in the matter of "Original Sin" and "Atonement," and as in many other basic matters, such as: the nature of grace, the state of those that are saved and the nature of the very Godhead itself, to mention only a few). We must be careful not to assume that we know the Orthodox viewpoint on any given theological subject, when, in fact, the only viewpoint we know is the non-Orthodox one which we have unwittingly brought with us as "baggage" when we entered Orthodox Catholic Christianity.

Sometimes, converts come to Orthodoxy with no suspicion of what the true doctrine of the Church really is. Perhaps this can be explained by the fact that the various theological terms are the same or similar, and they naturally assume that the theology behind these terms is also the same, when it isn't. How many times we have seen converts who have come to Orthodoxy in good faith and humility be overcome with joy like little children on learning of the Church's true doctrine concerning "Original Sin" and redemption. They become like ones who have been relieved of a heavy and oppressive burden; for, in truth, the thought of a vengeful and wrathful "God" who visits the guilt of the fathers upon the children, who needs to be satisfied with the Blood of his Son before his "Divine Love" can begin to operate, who *demand*s this Blood before he will be reconciled to us, who imposes this act of atonement not only on his own Son, but expects acts of atonement from each of us in addition, can, indeed, be a very oppressive burden.* But this is not the God of the Christians. Fortunately, he is a fabrication, a created "idol" of the Scholastics, and they and their disciples are the ones who have to cope with him and his morbidity. These indeed, are the "chains we can believe in"*** if we choose to ignore the teachings of the Holy Fathers.

But these pernicious doctrines of the Medieval West are yet another reason why Ecumenism is so wrong.

Next episode: Pandemonium Cashes In the Chips

* One eminent Western theologian, Heinrich Emil Brunner, went so far as to say that since Divine Justice had been satisfied by the crucifixion of Christ, he was not interested in whether the body of the Lord truly did arise, or if it decomposed in the grave....

** A pun on Barack Obama's presidential campaign slogan: "Change we can believe in."