

The Path Towards Salvation

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The following text is from a talk I delivered on January 11, 2024, for a Catholic-Orthodox dialogue in Duluth, MN, known as 'Theology Uncapped.' The discussion, titled 'Salvation and Redemption,' focused on the concept of salvation in both our traditions. This talk marked the second in a series of three conversations.

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1) Introduction

As some of you know, I grew up Protestant, and, in this world, there seems to be one question that not only dominates all conversations, but also drives evangelism: “Are you saved?”

A few years ago, I wondered, how would someone who’s only Christian experience has been the Orthodox Church answer this question? To see, I decided to ask a few of my parishioners.

I found a few—who had been born in Greece, moved to American, and still practiced the ancient Christian faith—and asked them, “If I came to you and asked, ‘Are you saved?’ what would you say?”

“Father,” they said, “we don’t understand your question. What exactly are you asking? Saved from what? Are you asking if we’re Christian?”

After few attempts of trying to reword the question, I finally gave up and explained to them the Protestant view of salvation and what the question meant. “Oh,” they said, “What an odd way to think about it.”

This experience brought home a point that many books on Orthodox Christianity kept saying: The Orthodox Church, like the ancient church, has a completely different mindset than we do as modern, western Americans. So different, in fact, that even salvation is thought of differently.

(2) A Look at the West

But before we try to understand the mindset of the original church, let’s take a look at how salvation and redemption is typically thought of in the west.

Here I offer my brief apologies. With a topic as vast as salvation and redemption, I’ll only be able to paint with broad brush strokes. While I may not be able to dig into the nuances of the topic, I hope it’ll at least give us some common ground.

Typically, when Western Christians talk about salvation, they begin with sin. Since this is an Orthodox-Catholic dialogue, the elephant in the room is, of course, Original Sin.

According to the official Catechism of the Catholic Church, “All men are implicated in Adam’s sin” (section 402 and 404). This means that all of us—you and me—are guilty of Adam’s original sin. The result is that the devil now has dominion over us (section 407).

According to the Catholic theologian Anselm of Canterbury, this offended God's honor, it's a debt that must be repaid. Sometimes, in other Western Christian traditions, this is compared to a court case. We've been found guilty, and, now, we need to endure the punishment.

However, according to the Catholic Catechism (section 614-15), Christ's death on the cross is an offering " ... to his Father through the Holy Spirit in reparation for our disobedience." It is a "substitution" that "... atoned for our faults and made satisfaction for our sins to the Father."

(Updated: in Catholic Theology, this is called the Satisfaction Theory of Atonement. The idea is that human sin had defrauded the Father of the honor he is due. Christ's death, which is an act of obedience, brings God great honor, so much so that it's a surplus and can therefore repay our deficit. Hence Christ's death is substitutionary; he pays the honor due to the Father instead of us. This is slightly different than the Protestant view of Penal Substitution, which is the idea that because we were disobedient, justice needed to be satisfied, so Christ is punished in the place of sinners.)

To me, as an Orthodox Christian, in either case, it sounds like what we need saved from is an angry God—angry because his honor was offended or angry because we've transgressed his wrath through our disobedience.

I don't know about you, but I don't know if I can worship that God ... maybe out of fear, but never out of love.

(3) Where the West Goes Wrong

Besides the horror of thinking that we need saved from a punitive God, the problem with this perspective is that it isn't biblical!

The idea of Original Sin comes from Augustine, which some Orthodox Christians refuse to call a saint. Augustine, as well as the Catholic Catechism (section 402), relies on Romans 5:12. The Catechism translates that verse in this way,

"By one man's disobedience many (that is, all men) were made sinners ... sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men because all men sinned."

Now, it's true that's also how the Latin reads; the problem, however, is that Jerome mistranslated this verse in the Latin. You see, Paul wrote in Greek, and Augustine's Greek was horrible. What Paul actually wrote was,

"Διὰ τοῦτο ὡςπερ δι' ἑνὸς ἀνθρώπου ἡ ἁμαρτία εἰς τὸν κόσμον εἰσῆλθεν καὶ διὰ τῆς ἁμαρτίας ὁ θάνατος, καὶ οὕτως εἰς πάντα ἀνθρώπους ὁ θάνατος διήλθεν, ἐφ' ᾧ πάντες ἥμαρτον."

Which, correctly translated, reads,

"As sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, so death spread to all men; and because of death, all men have sinned" (Fr. John Meyendorff's translation).

Notice the difference. The Latin says, "so death spread because all men sinned." However, listen to the Greek again, "and because of death, all men have sinned." In other words, it's death that's the ultimate problem, not sin.

Most of the Fathers of the Church, especially those fluent in Greek, have stayed with a biblical understanding, and, so, they've seen death as a cosmic disease, which holds us under its sway, both physically and spiritually. It's death that drives us to sin and corrupts our nature.

So, we don't need saved from an angry God; after all, St. John says that God is love, not retribution and punishment. What we actually need saved from is our enslavement to death. God isn't the problem.

(4) Finding the Eastern Path

Now, if the Western Christian's understanding of salvation has been built entirely upon a mistranslation—which I find very troubling—how did the original Church, following scripture, and the eastern Fathers understand salvation?

In a nutshell, the full Orthodox Christian's understanding of salvation was summed up by St. Athanasios in the 4th century:

“For (Christ) was enfleshed that we might be made god; and he manifested himself through a body that we might receive an idea of the invisible Father; and he endured the insults of human beings, that we might inherit incorruptibility.”

In other words, the Word of God became human voluntarily and out of love for us. He was crucified because we rejected him, yet, out of love, he allows us to nail him to the cross.

But, why did God have to become enfleshed? So that he could die, and, through this, enter into death to destroy it completely. Once death had been destroyed, all things, even death, is now filled with the presence, love, and life of the living God. And, because death could not hold Christ, Christ rises from the dead so that we also might rise with him. Our Paschal—Easter—hymn sums this up nicely:

“Christ is risen from the dead, by death trampling down upon death, and to those in the tombs He has granted life.”

It's because death is the problem and because Christ destroys it that St. Paul writes in Corinthians,

“Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, death, is your victory? Where, death, is your sting?” (I Co 15:54-55).

Now we're speaking biblically and starting to understand Paul properly.

(5) Cosmic Implications

This understanding of salvation is much more than “accept Christ as your personal Lord and Savior and be saved,” which typically sees salvation as simply dying and then going to heaven.

(By the way, according to the Bible, Christians don't go to heaven, but that's the topic of our next discussion.)

Thinking of salvation by looking at Christ's death and resurrection as a victory over death actually has cosmic significance! Through Christ all things will be remade. This is what Paul is getting at in Romans, chapter 8:

“For the earnest expectation of creation anxiously awaits the revelation of the sons of God. For creation was made subordinate to pointlessness, not willingly but because of the one who subordinated it, in the hope That creation itself will also be liberated from decay into the freedom of the glory of God’s children. For we know that all creation groans together and labors together in birth pangs, up to this moment; Not only this, but even we ourselves, having the first-fruits of the spirit, groan within ourselves as well, anxiously awaiting adoption, emancipation of our body.” (Rm 8:19-23)

Though we still live in a fallen world, the seed of New Creation has been planted. Salvation is the process of all things being reborn.

(6) Living Salvation out

But, where do we fit in?

Well, through our baptism. Though many Western Christians may see baptism as simply a “remission of sins” or a “sign of inward faith,” for us, as Orthodox Christians, baptism is a dying and rising with Christ. For as St. Paul says, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ” (Gal 3:27).

Putting on Christ is to be united with Christ; it’s what Orthodox Christians call theosis or deification. It means becoming like God, participating in his life, having full communion with the Holy Trinity. It’s a liberation from death, an entrance into the Kingdom, and a bestowal of new and ever-lasting life.

Because it’s so much more than just a “removal of sin,” Orthodox Christians, in following the ancient practice, have always baptized babies, welcoming them into the Church as full members and communing them moments after their baptism.

Because Orthodox Christians are united with Christ through baptism, we no longer fear death. In fact, for us, death is welcomed because it’s now simply a threshold we pass through on our way to our resurrection in New Creation.

(7) What shall I do?

Now that we’ve been freed from the necessity of struggling for existence, we seek to live in a new sort of way. We know that earthly governments are doomed to ultimately fail, so we live as citizens of God’s Kingdom, here and now.

This means living by the law of love: turning the other cheek, going the extra mile, and blessing those who curse us. It also means regular confession to free ourselves from the passions that may continue to enslave us.

(The Fathers teach that Pride and Greed lead to all the other passions. You see, greed unleashes debauchery as an expression of sexuality. Together, to satisfy themselves, they breed avarice. Avarice produces depression—grief at not possessing everything—and envy—of those who possess. Thus arises anger, against anyone who threatens my goods, or who forestalls me in securing something that I covet. Pride, in its turn, begets ‘vain glory,’ the display of riches and temptations, followed by anger and depression when the sought-for

admiration and approval is lacking. So we come back, through the deep desire to monopolize, to greed. The two circles meet and form an ellipse with two poles.¹)

But knowing that Christ has destroyed death gives us the courage to stand up for God's justice in a world that cozies up to wealth, power, and prestige.

And it means we are able to pick up our crosses and follow Christ so that we can be "united with him in a death like his" and, like manner, we, "shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his."

This is what it means to "be saved."

Thank you.

¹ Adapted from *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* by Olivier Clément.