What is Man That Thou Art Mindful of Him?
Rev. Fr. Anthony Cook

We have been discussing the Incarnation of the Lord, the central truth of the Christian Faith, that the Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us, that He took upon Himself our human nature and joined Himself with us. In affirming this truth, we find ourselves facing a difficult question. It is fairly easy to say that God became a human being - at least, it is easy to SAY it, if not so much to understand it. Understanding is difficult (or rather, it is impossible), because to truly understand the statement, we would have to understand both Who God Is, and What We Are. As we have said before, to define God is frankly impossible – but the truth is, even to define ourselves is a very dicey enterprise. What, indeed, IS a human being?

We can describe ourselves fairly well, in terms of what we tend to look like, how we tend to act, how we seem to function. We can say more than that about what we are like in comparison to other things. We know that we feel ourselves to be important, even though objectively we don't actually matter very much on a cosmic scale. We know that we are small and weak, both in comparison with the Creation, and still more in comparison with the Creator. We can talk about all that for hours, for days, and for years - indeed, all of human history and literature is basically a long meditation on what human beings are like. But none of that answers the question of what we are.

We don't do much better when we approach the question from a more scientific perspective. Scientists, psychologists, philosophers and ethicists have debated the question for millennia, without reaching any decisive conclusions. There is no reason to think that they are any closer to an answer now than they were when they began, although hope springs eternal.

To return to our own original question, though, the matter of the what the Creed says about the Lord’s becoming a human being and what it means – we have to begin with an understanding of how difficult it really is to say anything on the subject of what a human being is
without immediately exposing ourselves to critique from the many who have undertaken to consider the question across the ages and who know how difficult it is to answer it in a satisfactory way.

Now that we have noted that, the first thing we should observe about how the Creed handles this matter is how careful it is. It makes a simple point, and repeats it multiple times, with different words, all of them rooted firmly in Scripture, and all of them affirming a basic experiential understanding of what we are, and carefully avoiding a cerebral, intellectual approach. It says that the Lord “came down from heaven,” that He “was incarnate (became flesh)” of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and that He “became human.” All of these carefully avoid any debatable definition of what we are as human beings - the Creed simply says that we are on the earth, which is unquestionably “down from heaven”, we all live our lives in our bodies, and we all understand ourselves to be human. The Creed simply affirms that whatever we are, that is what the Lord assumed to Himself when He became human.

The second thing we should observe is that this repetition does, in fact, articulate a basic definition of what a human being is: is a creature of flesh living on earth, or (if we want to be scientifically precise) a creature constrained by the physical matter of the universe, and specifically, by gravity). That is a definition that again, on the face of it, none of us would argue with - we cannot think of any human being that has ever lived that has truly escaped the bonds of flesh, or slipped the bonds of earth. The Creed defines a human being precisely as one who is defined and constrained, both by the body, and by the earth.

The third thing that we should say is that it is not quite correct to say that humankind cannot slip past the bonds of flesh and earth - indeed, it is inevitable that we should do so, for all of us are doomed to die one day. When we die, we understand that we will then shake off the bonds that have constrained and defined us, but we do not rejoice in this, for it seems to us that, however we resent these bonds, to lose them is to lose ourselves, for we do not know what we might be, if we were not creatures of flesh and earth.

The fourth thing we have to observe is that it is jarring to us to speak of human nature as “only” physical, a matter only of flesh and blood, of meat and bones. Our language is full of words for whatever it is that animates human nature, such as the soul, the spirit, the nous, the mind, the heart, or the life. With all of these, however, we have to understand that just because we have a word for something does not mean that it exists apart from the system of which it is a part - these words and their meanings are, fundamentally, matters of speculation, or of experience, or simply
of description. In their essence, the words for soul and spirit are connected with the breath - a creature that is breathing is still alive, and thus we have come to speak of a creature that breathes as possessing a soul, or a spirit, especially if they can use that breath to talk and communicate rational ideas. The same goes for the nous and the mind - they refer to that lived reality of a human being, that he or she experiences the world and can think about those experiences. So we may say too of the heart or the life - when the heart beats, life is present, so we speak of the heart as somehow being the seat of the life and the person. But none of these define what we are APART from the body - they simply describe some part of what human life IN the body looks like. To affirm that a human being has a soul or a spirit is fundamentally tautological - these words only mean, truly, that a human being is breathing.

Put another way, we cannot divorce the soul, or mind, or heart of the human being from the flesh. They are part of it, aspects of it, things that the flesh does or characteristics that are attributed to it. They have no apparent existence apart from the flesh - the flesh seems to be all that anchors them to reality. And the flesh, as we know all too well, is temporary, and fragile, and mortal. It dies, and from everything that we can touch and confirm, when it dies, whatever we are dies with it.

Now, any one of you that is paying attention should be perking up at this point - because you should know that it is NOT, in fact, the tradition of the Church that when we die, whatever we are ceases to exist. So if you are objecting at this point, you’re right to do so. The Church and the Creed and the Scripture affirm that there is more to us than the mere fleshiness of our mortal nature. As it says in the Wisdom of Solomon, “For God created man to be immortal, and made him to be an image of His own eternity” (Wisdom 2:22).

The problem is that, all too often, we understand this statement that God created humankind to be immortal, an image of His own eternity, to mean that each of us is naturally, automatically, intrinsically and unalterably God-like, possessed in our own individual selves of an eternal existence. But this is an error, and opens the door to many further errors. God intends us to be immortal, an image of His eternity - but that does not mean that we ARE therefore already immortal images of His eternity. And from this error, we begin to think that we don’t need God, that we are self-sufficient, that we are each not only possessed of an eternal soul, but are “sound, substantial flesh & blood.” And in all this, we stray further and further from the Truth. So next time, we will consider the errors that come from the idea that we are intrinsically immortal, and continue to unfold the truth of our nature.

The above is the twenty-ninth installment of Fr. Anthony’s catechetical podcast, updated semi-weekly at http://theruleoffaith.typepad.com. We also have a weekly Bible Study each Tuesday at 6 pm - all are welcome. Please note, as well, that we live stream each Sunday’s Orthros & Divine Liturgy on our parish Youtube channel:  https://www.youtube.com/c/franthonyc-stgeorgesouthgate. A recording of the Sunday Sermons is also posted on the YouTube channel.

As we are speaking of our internet offerings, please remember to check the parish website: http://www.stgeorgesouthgate.org, for announcements, and for an updated calendar of feastdays, readings, services, and events.
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St. George Calendar of Events • September 2019
VOLUNTEER FORM
SEPTEMBER 15, 2019

Please NOTE:
When you sign up, the church and your fellow volunteers are depending on you. Please make sure to arrive on time or early for your shift.

• Water, soda & coffee will be provided to workers free of charge.
• We need help A) Saturday evening, B) Sunday 11-3, C) Sunday 3-7, and D) Sunday 7-9.
• You can pick preferred areas you want to volunteer but you may be assigned elsewhere in order to serve the overall needs of the Church Festival.

Name __________________________________________

Phone # (_____) ______________________________________

E-mail ____________________________________________

Shift(s) you can work: (Circle one or more)  A  B  C  D

We need help with the following jobs/stations. We will assign you as needed according to the shift(s) you selected above. Please note any limitations:

Notes/comments:____________________________________

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FESTIVAL SETUP (Saturday Night)  CHURCH TOURS & OUTREACH  FLOATER HELP & TRASH PICKUP  FESTIVAL CLEANUP (Sunday Night)

Thank you for your help!
The 17th Annual

ST. GEORGE
GREEK FESTIVAL

SUNDAY -
September 15th,
2019

- Enjoy authentic Greek Food in the Park
- Inflatable rides, games, face painting and more!
- Live music and dancing featuring the Southgate High School Marching Band and MYTHOS!
- FREE Parking & Admission
- A portion of proceeds to benefit the Southgate Band Boosters!

16300 Dix-Toledo Hwy, Southgate, MI  (734) 283-8820
Welcome Back! Luncheon

The Ladies Philoptochos invite you to a Welcome Back! Luncheon for the new Church year 2019-2020 on September 22, 2019, following Divine Liturgy at the Grecian Center Parthenon Hall

Make your reservations at the Reservation Table, Church office, or online at stgeorgesouthgate.org.

Adults 12 and up: $15.00/pp
Children 11 and under: Free

Reservation deadline: Wednesday, September 18, 5:00 pm.

During the Luncheon, we’ll have an Organization Fair to highlight the work & ministry of our Parish organizations:

PARISH COUNCIL : LADIES OF PHILOPTOCOS : CHOIR : GREEK SCHOOL : SUNDAY SCHOOL :
DANCE GROUP : ALTAR GROUP :

LADIES OF LYDIA (LOL) : GREEK ORTHODOX YOUTH ASSOCIATION (Goya) : ORTHODOX COLLEGE FELLOWSHIP (OCF) : YOUNG ADULTS (YA) : ORTHODOX PARENTS ASSOCIATION (OPA) : 55 & OVER CLUB :

BAKE SALES : APOKREATIKO : AMERICAN HELLENIC EDUCATIONAL PROGRESSIVE ASSOCIATION (AHEPA) : DAUGHTERS OF PENELope
ST. GEORGE CHURCH
LUNCH/DINNER RESERVATIONS
LADIES PHILOPTOCHOS
WELCOME BACK! LUNCHEON

PLEASE PRINT

PURCHASER NAME:____________________________________________

PURCHASER PHONE: _(_____)____________________________________

HOW MANY TICKETS?

12 YEARS & UP _____ ($15/pp)   11 YRS & UNDER FREE _____

PAYMENT METHOD:
Make Checks Payable to: St. George Church
CASH _____   CHECK _____   CREDIT CARD _____
Credit Card Number: ____________________________ Exp. _____/______
3 Digit: ____   Billing Zip Code _______   MO. / YEAR

NAMES OF INDIVIDUALS AT YOUR TABLE YOU ARE PURCHASING TICKETS FOR INCLUDING YOURSELF:

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PLEASE MAKE RESERVATIONS BY WED., SEPT. 18, 2019

WELCOME BACK LUNCHEON! SPONSORSHIP – Year 2019
I would like to be a Sponsor for the Welcome Back Luncheon: ___Yes ___No
If Yes, enclosed is my check for $25 payable to St George Ladies Philoptochoes
Sponsor’s Name: ________________________________________(print)