

Christ Assumed Our Fallen Humanity In Order To Heal It

A friend from the Latin Church stated:

“In either case, Orthodox and Armenian, regarding the Immaculate Conception and Original Sin there seems to be some flaws in the theology. In the Orthodox case, if Original Sin means death was brought into the world and by virtue of her death (Dormition) Mary must have had Original Sin, then because Jesus died (regardless of His Resurrection -He still died) He must have had Original Sin too.”

My reply:

If we consider the maxim of the great Cappadocian Father, St. Gregory the Theologian (called "Nazianzus" by the West), “Whatever is not assumed by Christ is not healed,” then I think in the Orthodox Christian understanding, what you write above of Christ can be affirmed. That is, Christ took on our fallen humanity in order to heal it and render it once again capable of everlasting life.

The Armenian Catholicos-Patriarch St. Sahag (Isaac) the Great (389-439 AD), wrote to Proclus Patriarch of Constantinople:

“For our Lord Jesus Christ, through the will of the Father, had mercy upon humanity. The Word, who proceeds from the heart of the Father, willed through the protection of the Holy Spirit, to take on flesh in the holy womb of the Virgin and accepted the corrupted body, which was corrupted by the deception of Satan, to renew it by body, spirit and soul, for without corruption the first creature can participate in the resurrection of the dead. He took upon Himself true body for us and planted in us the seeds of the worship of God.”¹

Historically there emerged two extremist theological camps in explaining Christ’s humanity: the Corruptionists and Incorruptionists. Since both views had elements of truth in them, both the Armenian Church² and the Church catholic had to separate “the wheat from the chaff” and discern what was the received Tradition and faith of the Holy Church. The Armenian Catholicos-Patriarch, St. Hovhannes (John) III of Otsoon (717-728), explains what the Church, avoiding both extremes, ultimately decided was the faith passed down from the Apostles of our Lord. St. John writes:

¹ “Book of Letters,” second edition, published in Armenian by Bogharian, Arch. Norayr, (Jerusalem: St. James Press, 1994), translated into English by Michael Navasart Mardoyan in his Master Thesis, “The Christological Development of the Armenian Orthodox Church (480-728).”

² For background see “Armenian Church Historical Studies,” pgs. 73, 140-141; by Abp. Tiran Nersoyan.

“The noun ‘corruptibility’ distinguishes two kinds of corruptibility. First, it is called the lack of corruptibility, as hunger, thirst, fatigue, pain, and death, which belong to the body. The body of the Lord was corruptible in this sense, for He willingly underwent all these.

“The second kind of corruptibility is the complete disappearance of the body, as David said, ‘You will not abandon me to the grave, no will you let your Holy One see corruptibility’ (Ps. 15:10 LXX).

“Therefore, saying that the Lord’s body is incorrupt, as [the heretic] Julian says, according to the first kind is not true, for He underwent all until death, for if He did not, He is not homoousios [of like nature] with us. [The Incorruptionists] say that all, fatigue, suffering and death, were [merely] in appearance to the eye, and if He was [merely] an appearance to the eye, in that case all economia, miracles and mystery of salvation were in vain. If He became man in semblance and not truly, then man was not saved and the call of salvation was in vain.

“And according to the second kind of corruptibility, the body of the Lord is incorrupt, that is, it was incorrupt and remained so in death and after death, as the God-bearing holy Fathers taught us. And after the resurrection of the dead, we call the body of the Lord incorrupt according to the first kind also, for the Lord gave to our bodies after the resurrection of the dead and eternal life the same incorruptibility as His body, when He became the first of the resurrection and the incorruptibility and the strength of us, for ‘the perishable has been clothed with the imperishable’ (1 Cor. 15. 53).”³

It is written in the Holy Scriptures:

³ “On the Incarnation of the Word,” by St. John of Otsoon, published in Armenian by Mkhitarist Father Nersess Aginian and translated into English by Michael Navasart Mardoyan in his above mentioned Master Thesis. Compare this with the identical teaching of the Byzantine Orthodox Father, St. John of Damascus in his “Exact Exposition of the Orthodox Faith,” Book 3, chapter 28. St. John writes:

“The word corruption has two meanings. For it signifies all the human sufferings, such as hunger, thirst, weariness, the piercing with nails, death, that is, the separation of the soul and body, and so forth. In this sense we say our Lord’s body was subject to corruption. For He voluntarily accepted all these things. But corruption means also the complete dissolution of the body and its reduction to the elements of which it was composed. ...The body of our Lord did not experience this form of corruption, as the prophet David says, ‘For Thou wilt not abandon my soul in hades, nor wilt Thou suffer Thy Holy One to see corruption’ (Ps 15:10 LXX).

“Therefore it is impious to say... that before the Resurrection the Lord’s body was incorruptible in the first sense. For if it was thus incorruptible, then it was not consubstantial with us, and the things such as hunger, the thirst, the nails, the piercing of the side, and death which the Gospel says happened did not really happen, but only seemed to. But, if they only seemed to happen, then the mystery of the Incarnation is a hoax and a stage trick; it was in appearance and not in truth that He was made man and in appearance and not in truth that we have been saved. But far be it, and let those who say this have no part in salvation. We, however, have gained and shall obtain the true salvation.

“Moreover, in the second sense of the word, corruption, we confess that the Lord’s body was incorruptible, that is, indestructible, even as it has been handed down to us by the inspired Fathers. Nevertheless, we do say that after the Savior’s Resurrection the body of the Lord is incorruptible in the first sense, too. And through His body the Lord has granted the resurrection and consequent incorruptibility to our body, also, Himself becoming the first fruits of the resurrection and incorruptibility and impassability.”

“Surely He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows;” (St. Isaiah 53:5).

“Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise partook of the same nature, that through death He might destroy him who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong bondage” (St. Paul to the Hebrews 2:14-15).

This last Scriptural reference, in its mention of the “fear of death” subjecting us to “lifelong bondage,” is the basis for the Orthodox doctrine of Ancestral Sin.⁴ It is further expressed in the Orthodox understanding of the following verse of St. Paul's Epistle to the Church of Rome:

“Therefore as sin came into the world through one man and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, *because of which* all sinned” (Romans 5:12 -emphasis added).

This understood very differently by the Latin West.⁵

For Orthodox this text teaches that since “death” has spread to all men, it is the fear of it which compels all to sin. As St. Paul states, “the sting of death is sin” (1 Corinthians 15:56). In other words, Death's sting leads man to sin. In his work, “The Ecclesiology of St. Ignatius of Antioch,” the Greek Orthodox theologian John Romanides explains how the fear of death causes us to sin:

“Because of the tyrant death man is unable to live according to his original destiny of selfless love. He now has the instinct of self-preservation firmly rooted within him from birth. Because he lives constantly under the fear of death he continuously seeks bodily and psychological security, and thus becomes individualistically inclined and utilitarian in attitude. Sin is the failure of man to live according to his original destiny of selfless love which seeks not its own and this failure is rooted in the disease of death.”⁶

It is further explained by the Greek Orthodox Metropolitan of Nafpaktos Hierotheos:

⁴ The doctrine of Ancestral Sin (also referred to as “the Sin of Adam” in Tradition) does not carry the same connotations as the Latin Church's doctrine of Original Sin. One important difference is that the Orthodox Tradition does not teach that we all inherit guilt for Adam's Sin. See the essay “Ancestral Sin vs. Original Sin” on my webpage: <http://www.looys.net/tradition.html>

⁵ In the Latin Vulgate this was mistranslated to say “Wherefore as by one man sin entered into this world, and by sin death; and so death passed upon all men, *in whom* all have sinned.” Thus the Latins saw in this an affirmation that all of mankind had sinned in Adam and were thus guilty from conception. The effects of this mistranslating and misunderstanding is still being felt in the Latin West. A modern day example is the mistranslation of Psalm 50:5 (LXX) where the Latin Catholic Church's *New Jerusalem Bible* states, “Remember I was born guilty, a sinner from the moment of conception” -a gross distortion of Orthodox doctrine. This verse rather states in the Septuagint, “Behold I was conceived in iniquities and in sins did my mother conceive me” -a statement about our received fallen condition -through no fault of our own- rather than an affirmation of an inherited guilt as the Latin Church came to teach.

⁶ The Ecclesiology of St. Ignatius of Antioch, John S. Romanides

“The certainty and strength of the feeling of death, manifested, as we have pointed out, in pain, illnesses, etc. cause great anxiety and uncertainty. Man becomes selfish in such a condition and out of selfishness, which is the source of every sin, other passions of course are born and grow, such as love of sensual pleasure, ambition, avarice, etc. In view of the approach of death, which is also experienced by the presence of illnesses, man accumulates a lot of earthly goods in order to cope with these unfamiliar moments of his life. Avarice is also a result of the fear of death existing inside us. The same is true of lust and ambition by which man tries to overcome the problem he is facing, namely death.”⁷

It should be noted that this “fear of death” does not necessarily involve a conscious, deliberate decision. In fact, most don't even realize that they are affected by it. Any intimation of it man usually attempts to suppress through sin. Therefore, most times man does not realize it is the fear of death which is compelling him to sin. It is the Holy Scriptures, elucidated by the Holy Fathers of the Orthodox Church, which opens our eyes to this truth. It is Christ our Lord who enables us to combat and eventually overcome this compelling fear.

The “fear of death” plays out differently throughout man's life. As a child it's shown in selfishness: a “me, me, me” perspective. In a young adult it is often characterized by reckless living and indulgence in lustful immorality. In older age it is expressed in quests for luxury and excessive financial security. Although it is not likely at any one of these points that a person actually stops and thinks about his mortality, yet his actions betray this subconscious fear. Its much like a dark cloud which hangs over one's whole life. Thus we try to block out and stifle this fear through sin. Men seek to leave monuments to themselves in hope of making a lasting mark on the world. Why? Because they know that very soon they will be leaving this world and this haunts them. Sin can be attributed to many influences, but the point of the Orthodox doctrine is that it all boils down to the fact that unregenerate man is death-bound and held captive by the power of Death.

Therefore Christ assumed our mortality in order to enable us to "put on immortality" (1 Cor. 15:54). He assumed our broken attributes in order that we could partake of His divine ones (2 Cor. 5:21 & 2 St. Pet. 1:4).

"...Therefore He had to be made like His brethren in every respect, so that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make expiation for the sins of the people. For because He Himself has suffered and been tempted, He is able to help those who are tempted." (St. Paul to the Hebrews 2:17-18).

⁷ Taken from the Greek Orthodox Theological Review, Volume 44, Spring-Winter 1999, Numbers 1-4. Published by Holy Cross Greek Orthodox School of Theology Hellenic College. See http://www.parembasis.gr/0000/00_88_05.htm

"For it was fitting that He, for Whom and by Whom all things exist, in bringing many sons to glory, should make the Pioneer of their salvation perfect through suffering" (Hebrews 2:10).

Thus assuming our broken nature, Christ healed it.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning." (Hebrews 4:15).

"God has made Him who knew no sin to be sin for our sake, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God" (St. Paul's 2nd Epistle to the Corinthians 5:21).

As St. Athanasius of Alexandria wrote,

"The body of the Word, then, being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies, liable to death."⁸

As the canonical "Hymn of the Days of Creation," by the great Armenian Catholicos-Patriarch Saint Nerses the Grace-filled (1166-1173), states:

"The Father of glory made haste to abolish the record of our debt of transgressions/ therefore the merciful Son in the sixth age *took upon Himself the body of sin*/ according to the good pleasure of the Father He came willingly to the death of the Cross on Friday/ the Lamb was slain on the old Passover, instead of the lambs that prefigured Him."⁹ (emphasis mine)

St. Nerses the Grace-filled explains,

"The Virgin Mary, from whom He took flesh , was of the peccable nature of Adam, and that nature being united with the divine nature of God, the peccable became impeccable."

According to the 15th century Armenian Father, St. Gregory of Datev,

⁸ On the Incarnation, par. 20. For further explanation, see Bp. Kallistos Ware's, *The Orthodox Way*, p. 75 Chapter "God as Man," and my essay "Why Did Jesus Have to Die" at my webpage address above.

⁹ Taken from the English *Book of Hours of the Order of Common Prayers of the Armenian Apostolic Orthodox Church*, Ouzonian House, 1964.

“Christ, taking body from the Holy Virgin, took the original sin of mankind on himself and took it with him onto the cross. ‘He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness (1 St. Pt. 2:24).’”¹⁰

Finally, the second century bishop, St. Melitos of Sardis, sums this up in his *Paschal Homily* stating,

“For the sake of suffering humanity he came down from heaven to earth, clothed himself in that humanity in the Virgin's womb, and was born a man. Having then a body capable of suffering, **he took the pain of fallen man upon himself**; he triumphed over the disease of soul and body that were its cause, and by his Spirit, which was incapable of dying, he dealt man's destroyer, death, a fatal blow.”

Although we were created in His image and according to His likeness, this became marred in us through our sin. Christ thus had to take on our fallenness “being born in the likeness of sin,” in order to heal our nature and restore to us the possibility of regaining His glorious likeness. By putting on our humanity he enabled us to “put on immortality.” Therefore only through Christ are we delivered from the life-long bondage to sin which directly results from the "fear of death" that St. Paul writes of. It is in view of this deliverance that St. Paul, in his First Epistle to the Corinthian Church, exclaimed in reference to our anticipated Resurrection:

“When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: ‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ Where, O death, is thy victory? Where, O death, is thy sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Trusting in Christ's Light,
Sub-Deacon Lazarus Der-Ghazarian

¹⁰ Both quotes (Sts. Nerses & Datev) taken from Frequently Asked Questions about the Armenian Church, p. 89

Appendix: Discourse On the Nativity of Christ
St. Gregory Thaumaturgos, Bishop of Neo-Caesarea

On the present great day He is born of the Virgin, having overcome the natural order of things. He is higher than wedlock and free from defilement. It sufficed that He the preceptor of purity should shine forth gloriously, to emerge from a pure and undefiled womb. For He -- is That Same, Who in the beginning did create Adam from the virgin soil, and from Adam without wedlock did bring forth for him his wife Eve. And as Adam was without wife before that he had a wife, and the first woman then was brought into the world, so likewise on the present day the Virgin without man giveth birth to That One, about Whom spake the prophet: "He -- is Man, who is he that doth know Him?" The Man Christ, clearly seen by mankind, born of God, is such that womankind was needed to perfect that of mankind, so that perfectly would be born man for woman. And just as from Adam was taken woman, without impairment and without diminishing of his masculine nature, so also from woman without man was needed to bring forth a man, similar to the bringing forth of Eve, so that Adam be not extolled in that without his means woman should bring forth woman. Therefore the Virgin without cohabitation with man gave birth to God the Word, made Man, so that in equal measure it was by the same miracle to bestow equal honour to both the one and the other half -- man and woman. And just as from Adam was taken woman without his diminishing, so likewise from the Virgin was taken the body (Born of Her), wherein also the Virgin did not undergo diminishing, and Her virginity did not suffer harm. Adam dwelt well and unharmed, when the rib was taken from him: and so without defilement dwelt the Virgin, when from Her was brought forth God the Word. For this sort of reason particularly the Word assumed of the Virgin Her flesh and Her (corporeal) garb, so that He be not accounted innocent of the sin of Adam. Since man stung by sin had become a vessel and instrument of evil, Christ took upon Himself this receptacle of sin into His Own flesh so that, the Creator having been co-united with the body, it should thus be freed from the foulness of the enemy, and man thus be clothed in an eternal body, which be neither perished nor destroyed for all eternity. Moreover, He that is become the God-Man is born, not as ordinarily man is born -- He is born as God made Man, manifest of this by His Own Divine power, since if He were born according to the general laws of nature, the Word would seem something imperfect. Therefore, He was born of the Virgin and shone forth; therefore, having been born, He preserved unharmed the virginal womb, so that the hitherto unheard of manner of the Nativity should be for us a sign of great mystery. Is Christ God? Christ is God by nature, but not by the order of nature did He become Man. Thus we declare and in truth believe, calling to witness the seal of intact virginity: as Almighty Creator of the womb and virginity, He chose an unshameful manner of birth and was made Man, as He did will.

-Taken from the website:

http://www.oca.org/pages/orth_chri/Feasts-and-Saints/Sermons/On-the-Nativity-of-Christ.html