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GOD'S CHILDREN IN HIS KINGDOM

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We are all familiar with the incident of the children approaching Christ and being rebuked by the Apostles, who “spoke sternly to those who brought them” (*Mt 19. 13, Mk 10.13, Lk 18. 15*). We are also aware of another incident involving the Canaanite woman and the disciples being annoyed by her presence, urging Christ to “send her away, for she keeps shouting after us” (*Mt 15. 23, Mk 7. 23*). There are several passages in the Gospels where the vulnerable and the weak are not easily admitted in their teacher’s presence by the disciples. The two incidents mentioned above underline the Jewish attitude to children and women, the two most vulnerable members of a typical Mediterranean society in ancient times. This is repeatedly stated in all its severity in Matthew, since his gospel was mainly addressed to Jews, while it is expressed in more subdued terms by Mark and Luke, who addressed their Gospel mainly to the Roman and Greek proselytes to Christianity.

Children were never endowed with innocence in Judaism. They were the bearers of the curse of Adam, brought into the world in pain and suffering as the natural consequence of the fall. The Augustinian motif of the original sin can be traced back to Judaism. Some rabbinical schools did not hesitate in affirming that infants were already sinning in their mother’s womb, an echo of which is found in the 50th Psalm, verse 5, “Lo, I was born in iniquity and in sin did my mother conceive me”. Children also shared Eve’s curse; needless to say, the inferior position of women in Jewish society is inextricably linked to the fate of their offspring. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that both children and women, naturally linked to each other by the fall, were not highly regarded by the Jews in Jesus’s time. This also explains the attitude of his disciples in both instances, who are often faced with an embarrassing situation whenever women are involved in a public incident.

This is highlighted in the case of the woman who suffered from haemorrhages and touched Christ’s cloak in order to be healed; at Jesus immediately questioning “Who touched my clothes”, we see the disciples trying to conceal the unlawful act of the ailing woman -and to add insult to injury, of a woman with an issue of blood- touching a rabbi,

and their attempt to cover up the scandal by refusing to answer his question, saying in a matter of fact way, "You see the crowd pressing in on you; how can you say, 'Who touched me?'" (*Mk 5. 30, Lk 8. 40-56*). Christ, indifferent to Jewish conventions, does not ignore the incident until the woman is exposed and instead of being chastised, she is blessed and healed from her disease. The incidents involving women are emphasized on purpose in order to manifest the new understanding of a new order of things that Christ brings into a world that is made new, recreated by grace, renewed by His saving presence and His death and resurrection.

The motif of the children, therefore, of their innocence, of the new place and importance they are given in the history and process of salvation, of the eschatological aspect of childhood, that unless we become like children we shall not enter the Kingdom of heaven (*Mt 18. 3, Mk 9. 42*), is emphasized repeatedly because this new theme of childhood is inextricably linked by Jesus to the new understanding that he is introducing in our relationship with the Father. His sonship to the Father, his appearance in the world as the Son of man, his coming into this world as a newborn child, the circumcision of Jesus and his presentation in the temple, the slaughter of the children by Herod, his teaching at the temple as a twelve years old child, and finally, our adoption by the Father ($\nu\iota\omicron\theta\epsilon\sigma\acute{\iota}\alpha$) as His children through our association with the Son, are all new motifs introduced by Christ that are radically changing the motif of childhood by placing it in an entirely new setting, correcting the old Jewish concept of sin and presenting childhood as a blessing rather than as a curse.

Another important correction also takes place by the new understanding of childhood that is brought by Jesus in his teachings, which elevates the position of women in Jewish society. Since women are naturally related to childhood by giving birth to children, they are all potential bearers of the New child, of the Messiah who will save the world. The stigma attached to sterility in the Old Testament, which was explained by the fact that women who do not bear children were not participating in the history of salvation by not contributing to the birth of the child who will deliver the world from the finality of death, is put now into a new perspective and becomes a joyful occasion confirming the coming of the Messiah. The incident of the Virgin Mary's visit to her cousin Elizabeth as related by Luke, is full of these allusions, which could be easily

grasped by his contemporaries, familiar with the motif of the expectation of the Messiah. The last sterile woman contributing to the coming of the Messiah by giving birth to the last prophet, who will recognize Christ as the Lamb of God, and who will baptize Jesus as the voice of God announcing him as His beloved Son (*Mt. 3. 17*) is heard over the waters, is Elizabeth, and for this reason “the child in her womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (*Lk 1, 43-44*). When Mary breaks into a Song of Praise, the joyous *Magnificat* is the final completion and the fulfillment of the Song of Praise that began a very long time ago with Hannah, who could not conceive a child, recited upon the birth of Samuel.

From now on, not only the birth and childhood of Christ are celebrated in joy, but also the childhood of his Mother, the model and prototype of womanhood, as the iconography in the church of Chora in Constantinople, known today as Kariye, depicts. There are several mosaics representing scenes from Mary’s childhood: the prayer of Joachim her father as he pleads God to grant them a child, the birth of the Virgin Mary, the affectionate fondling she receives as a little girl caressed by her parents, as she is watched taking her first seven steps, her presentation in the temple, as she is being blessed by the priests, as she receives a skein of wool.

Childhood and childbirth are celebrated and blessed by the Church in all instances, be they scriptural or liturgical, visually through iconography and poetically through hymnology. A good number of petitions in the sacrament of matrimony pray for the fertility of the couple, the joy of raising children and the enjoyment of a blessed family life with the children sprouting as olive branches round about the dinner table. Several prayers are addressed to the newborn and to the mother on the first, the eighth and the fortieth day of the infant’s coming into the world and of its integration into the community of the faithful. Indeed, since marriage and childbearing are so closely related, it may not be without significance that the first miracle of Christ takes place in the joyous occasion of a wedding at Cana. The turning of the water into wine does not only point to the announcement of the Eucharistic community but it is also a cause for joy and merriment and marks Jesus’s determination to celebrate the new life that he is infusing

into the world, in this case into a community of poor villagers that cannot afford a respectable quantity of wine to celebrate a memorable event.

There is also another dimension in this event, as recorded in the gospel of Saint John, that points to the significance of his mother as the mother of the children who have been adopted by His Father, through their association with the Son of man. The gospel according to Saint John records the singular two occasions in which Jesus calls his mother 'Woman'. The first occurs at the Wedding at Cana (*Jn* 2. 4) and the second at the Crucifixion, when he is referring her to her new son, his beloved disciple John: "Woman, behold, your son." (*Jn* 19. 26-27). Here the evocation 'Woman' takes an altogether different meaning, referring to her as the Woman par excellence, as representing womanhood in a generic sense, and to be more precise, maternity. Jesus had no father in this world in his conception by his mother through the Holy Spirit, and he had no mother in his being begotten by the Father before all ages. The Church Fathers call his conception by the Virgin Mary as being fatherless, (ἀπάτωρ), and his begetting by the Father as motherless (ἀμήτωρ). As Justinian so clearly states in his *Confession*, "Christ has a mother only on earth, and we have a Father only in Heaven. (Jesus) Having received the mortal father of mankind, Adam, he gave to all humans his own immortal Father." (*Patrologia Gr.* 86. 999A). From the moment of his Crucifixion, however, the human race does not only have a Father by its adoption through the Son, but also a mother, thanks to its adoption by his mother through John the Evangelist.

The Son descends from Heaven and enters into the world not only to make known to us his Father, to show us who His Father is, but to reveal Him as 'our' Father as well. As Clement of Alexandria states in his *Pedagogue*, "the Father becomes known through the Son" (δι' υἱοῦ ὁ Πατήρ γνωρίζεται), and as Jesus himself has said, "no one comes to the Father but by me... he who has seen me has seen the Father" (*Jn* 14. 6, 9). The Father sends him to the world because He loves the world and wants to reveal Himself to us through His Son, and adopt us as His children. "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn* 3. 16). This is possible only through the elevation of our mortal nature to a direct association with God the Eternal Father through His Son as adopted children of our common Father. God loves His children in the world as much as He loves His only

begotten Son, he loves all in the self-emptying, unconditional love that every father has for all his children. When Christ is revealing himself in the garden as the resurrected Lord to Mary Magdalene, he is asking her to go and announce to his brothers, that is his disciples, implying that brothers share a common father, that he is ascending “to *my* Father and *your* Father, to *my* God and *your* God” (*Jn* 20. 17). How could it be otherwise with the Son who taught us the Lord’s prayer, beginning his doxological address to God with the words ‘Our Father’.

The Father sends him in order to accomplish a mission. His mission is to reveal His Father not only through teachings and miracles, but through his birth, his Crucifixion and his Resurrection, as is clearly stated in our Creed as being born and incarnate of the Virgin Mary and the Holy Spirit, crucified for us under Pontius Pilate, and raised on the third day according to the Scriptures. Jesus fulfilled this mission given to him by His Father because he wanted to reveal to the world the glory of the Father. The glory of the Father is His love for the world, since His real nature is love, for love is not an abstract altruistic concept, as practised in our age as a general humanistic idea, but the real nature of God, coming from God, “for love is of God... for God is love.” (*1 Jn* 4. 7-8). The Father is glorified because the Son is revealed to the world on the Cross as the glory of the Father. His accomplished mission is confirmed on the Cross by one single word: “It is finished.” (*Jn* 19. 30). The glory of the Father is manifested as the glory of the Son. This is the only way we can understand the saying of Jesus in his prayer to the Father before his Crucifixion. When he had spoken to his mother at the wedding at Cana, he had told her that his hour had not yet come. Now he is addressing His Father in prayer: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you... I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work which you gave me to do; and now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with You before the world was made.” (*Jn* 17 1-5).

Christ completes the work that his Father sent him to accomplish by renewing the fallen, broken creation, restoring it to the unity that it had when God created it and offering it back to the Father, healed and restored. The most important part of this work was to reveal the Father’s name to the world. Christ’s mission is to correct the erroneous and false name that mankind attributed to the person of the father. Both Jews and

Greeks, as well as the Romans conceived the nature of the father deeply rooted in the concept of either a legal or mythological authority. The reality of a binding covenant between God and the people of Israel, rooted in the Mosaic law, contributed in a negative way to the cultivation of the concept of the father. The pagan nations that surrounded Israel, the Sumerians and Babylonians, as well as the Greeks and the Romans attributed the idea of the father to the Father of all gods; Jupiter is Zeus pater. Homer calls Zeus father of men and gods (Ζεὺς πατὴρ ἀνδρῶν τε θεῶν τε). In a legal context, the figure of the Father for the Romans was invested with absolute authority. The *pater familias* represented total power, the *patria potestas*. He had the right to expose his children, he could marry and divorce his children as he saw fit, and of course he could totally disown them at his will. The Jews who lived under Roman authority adopted the Roman custom of *patria potestas* and Jewish fathers laid claim to this authority, which Philo the Jewish philosopher, who is writing in Greek, calls hegemony and despotic rule (ἡγεμονία, δεσποτεία).

What Jesus does with the person of the father is entirely new, even radical for his time. For the first time in the relationship of the father to his children and of the human beings to God a new concept is introduced. In this new relationship the name of God is revealed for the first time in history. God has a name, the name that was not even revealed to Moses when he asked God in Mount Sinai to declare His name. Jesus is revealing this name not as a legal or ethical concept, not even as a name, 'Father' in a general sense, but as "my Father". He is a Father because He has a Son. The Son also has a name, or rather, two names, one for either of his two natures. As man he is known as Yohua, Jesus. As incarnate God he is the Christ, the Messiah, the anointed one. I am the Son of my Father, says Jesus, and he is also telling us that 'I, as the Son of the Father will lead those who are united with me to the Father'. Jesus makes this plain because he knows that according to the Scriptures, the Jews are familiar with the concept of the Father and they can recognize it as a sure sign of the coming of the Messiah, but they do not as yet dare to call upon Him as Father. The prophets have announced this repeatedly. Hosea had already declared that "only in the last days it shall be said to them 'Children of the living God'." (1. 10). The same can be said about the adoption of mankind by the new Eve, the Virgin Mary, through her adopted son John the Evangelist, which

corresponds to Isaiah's saying "as a man's mother comforts him, so will I comfort you." (*Is.* 66.13). For this reason Jesus calls his disciples children, and little children (*Mk* 10. 24, *Jn* 13. 33), and Paul calls Timothy 'child... beloved child'.

Nowhere else is this relationship between Father and Son more vivid than in the chapters 14-17 of the Gospel according to John the Evangelist, especially in the segment known as the Archpriestly or High priestly prayer. In the opening words of chapter 15 we have the revelation of the name of God as 'my Father' and a few verses later we are told that "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit... As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love." (*Jn* 15, 1-10). Jesus has declared that he is the true vine and His Father is the vinedresser. He is the vine and we are the branches, but the one who is tending to the vine, keeps it healthy, cultivates it and prunes it in order to bear fruit abundantly is the Father Himself. Any branch that does not abide in the vine-Jesus withers, falls from the vine as a dead branch and is thrown into the fire and burned. If we abide in Jesus we bear much fruit and we glorify the Father. It is only by grafting ourselves to the vine-Jesus, the Son of the Father, and becoming thus the Father's sons as well, that we may be productive and bear much fruit.

What holds the vine together and acts as a fertilizer for its growth is love. The Father tends the vine out of love and the Son grafts unto the vine its branches, only if the branches abide in the Son's love by keeping his commandments, just as he has kept his Father's commandments, by accomplishing the work for which he was sent to the world out of the love of the Father for the world. The only commandment to keep is love. "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you... This I command you, to love one another." (*Jn* 15. 12-17). The vine is held together by love, and no branch can survive unless it abides in the vine, since by not being an integral part of the vine it can neither live, nor do anything at all, "for apart from me you can do nothing." (*Jn* 15. 5). Israel was the original vineyard of the Father. Isaiah tells us in chapter 5 of his prophesy how his beloved Lord built this vineyard. He cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines and expected it to grow and bear fruit, but it yielded wild grapes. "For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his

pleasant planting”. Jeremiah adds that the choice vine that God planted has turned degenerate and become a wild vine (*Jer. 2. 21*). The 79th (80) Psalm implores God to restore the desolate wild vineyard with the broken walls, which has fallen a prey to the beasts that ravage it, to “Look down from heaven and see; have regard for this vine the stock which your right hand planted.” (*Ps 79. 14*). Christ is basing his teaching on the vine on these Old Testament foundations and transforms the old image of the degenerate and deserted vine into a new dynamic reality of the fertile, abundantly fruit bearing stock with many branches represented by the little children of God, grafted into himself in unity with his Father, united and bonded by love, which holds the vine together. This healthy, fertile vine is the living body of Christ, his Church in this world. It is for this reason that Christ is using the fruit of the vine, the grape, in the Mystical supper, in the mystagogical union of his disciples with him. Let us remind ourselves of the hymn of the Holy Week that stresses the mystagogical nature of his teaching; Μυσταγωγῶν σου Κύριε τοὺς μαθητὰς ἐδίδασκες λέγων... His living body, the Church, composed of this loving union between the Father, the Son and his children, is the restored new Israel that the Psalmist had prayed for, and it is for this reason that the Archpriest prays in the Liturgy that this unity holding the vine together is preserved by the Father. “Lord, Oh lord, look down from heaven and see and visit this vineyard and watch over that which your right hand has planted.” The Church is nothing else but this love in unity with the Father and the Son, revealed in her sacraments through the Holy Spirit.

The human family is held together and grows out of the loving union of the father, the mother and the children, in the same way that the Father loves the Son and the Holy Spirit makes manifest this bond of love to His children in the Church, the Living Body of the Son. The church, just like the many families of humans that compose it as her members, is nothing but this unity. This is how we begin and end our Anaphora prayers in the Liturgy, which is the manifestation of the loving unity of all in the Father and the Son. First we ask that we love one another, that with one mind we may confess the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, the Trinity one in essence and undivided. Once we asked for this unity we proceed by asking that the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father and the Holy Spirit, which manifests this love as a communion, be with us all. When this unity has been manifested by the living presence of Christ in our

offerings of the gifts of nature, the bread and the wine, and His offering of his body and blood, we conclude by affirming the unity that we had asked for at the beginning:

“Having prayed for the unity of the faith and petitioned for the communion of the Holy Spirit, let us commit ourselves and each other and our whole life unto Christ our God.”

This loving unity of the Father and the Son is the essence of Christ’s Archpriestly prayer. We, his children, must be one, loving one another, in the same way that the Son is one with the Father. The way that God the Father makes himself known to the world is through the Son, that is, He is known to us through the relationship that He has with His Son. He is known to us not as a holy concept, not as a divine idea, not as a Supreme Being ruling over all creation, but in the loving relationship that He has with His Son. His paternity is the special way of His existence, His Being manifested as paternal love towards the world and His Son, His hypostasis, just as His Son’s special way of being is his sonship, his personal way of existence as the Father’s Son. They both have a personal relationship with the Holy Spirit, which is sent to the world by the Son, as it proceeds from the Father. Jesus has accomplished the mission that was given to him by the Father, he is leaving this world and ascending to the Father, but he is promising to his disciples and through them to all those faithful who will succeed them and form his living body, the Church on earth, that he will not leave us orphaned from his grace, but he will send after him the Counselor-Paraclete, “whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth who proceeds from the Father... it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Counselor will not come to you; but if I go, I will send him to you.” (*Jn* 15. 26, 16. 7).

It is this unity that comes from the Kingdom of God, this loving relationship between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit that is reflected on His children on earth, in their loving relationship to one another, in their unity in Christ, as experienced and lived in the Liturgy, the time of the Kingdom of God on earth is realized, through the Sacrament of Holy Communion, when the members are united to the Head and form the living body of Christ. In this unity is achieved our salvation. By being united to the Son we become children of one common Father. The love that binds them in one essence is stressed again and again, and is binding us all to this shared loving relationship. What unites them, the bond of love, unites us with them. “As the Father has loved me so have I

loved you; abide in my love.”(*Jn* 15. 9). This is the greatest commandment because it reveals the relationship of the faithful with the Holy Trinity; “As the Father has loved me” manifests an existential identity within God that points to how we can understand the existence of God, a God that exists as a communion of persons. What constitutes this communion is love. It is not something that can be defined either internally or externally, that can be explained and analyzed, just as when we fall in love we cannot define and analyze our feelings and the inexplicable amazement we are experiencing. It is a way of being that springs from the free way that the three persons, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit exist in their loving communion between them. If this is the way of being of the Trinity, Christ wants to institute the same way of being within the world. What Christ is saying, plainly to us, what ultimately constitutes the way of our salvation, is that ‘I have loved you, His children, in the same way that the Father loves me. I did not love you because I wanted to show you how good I am towards you, or because you have been good to me, I did not love you back because you loved me in a moral or ethical way because I owe it to you or vice versa, but I loved you in a completely free way from conditional love because you have been my friends, my associates in the work of salvation, and this free association with my friends and disciples reveals the free way of my existence, the only way that I can exist as the Son of man and as the Son of my Father’.

The Church Fathers stress the fact that Christ, after his incarnation, cannot exist apart from his disciples, he cannot exist without the faithful who constitute with him his living body, the Church on earth. Since we are fully associated with him neither can we exist without Christ. In the salvation plan of God, the humankind cannot exist without Christ because that would deprive it of existence. Our salvation consists in that we cannot exist apart from his way of being. Just as he cannot exist without being the Son of his Father, neither can we exist nor bear fruit without being the beloved children of God.