

## **11: Incarnation**

The previous lecture concluded our examination of Aquinas's theological anthropology, or the our final section of this course, we will examine two aspects of Thomas Aquinas's philosophical study of human nature, with a focus on human free will and the nature of human knowledge. In theology. Specifically, we will be looking at the doctrine of the Incarnation in this lecture. The final lecture will conclude by looking at the Atonement.

**I. The Council of Chalcedon:** To properly understand the Incarnation, and Thomas Aquinas's theology thereof, we must first go back to the Council of Chalcedon in 451 AD. This council was called to iron out the details of what Christians believe about the nature of Jesus. The creedal formula that came out of the Council specifies the basic understanding of Christ's nature. Christ is one person with two natures, one fully human and one fully divine.

The exact interpretation of this short but difficult sentence has been slowly worked out over the centuries since the Council of Chalcedon concluded, which is why it is relevant to investigate the issue today.

**II. The Divine and Human Natures of Christ:** The divine nature of Christ is a concept with which we are familiar, and which causes little in the way of discomfort. The one person of Christ is the second person of the Trinity. Consequently, what is true of God is true of Christ. That means that the power, knowledge, and goodness of Christ are not limited. Christ's divine nature is also outside of time (eternal). As the person of Christ is the second person of the Trinity, divine nature is necessarily the nature of that person (Christ).

The human nature of Christ is somewhat more troublesome to reconcile and understand, but it is no less important in the Chalcedonian formula. Christ's human nature is in time (a requisite of what it is to be human). He is limited in knowledge and power, he gets hungry, he suffers, and ultimately he dies. In Christ's human nature, Christ has a human body and a soul. In Christ's death his human body and soul are separated (as with any death), yet the person of Christ remains united with each of those separated parts of Christ's human nature.

This results in a complicated picture: Christ has two natures, one fully human and one fully divine. Christ's divine nature cannot suffer or die. Christ's human nature can suffer and can die. As Christ is fully human, the person who does the suffering and dying is in fact the second person of the Trinity. It follows that God suffers and dies. However, it is not true that God suffers and dies in God's divine nature (rather

in the human nature of the second person of the Trinity). Nonetheless, it is accurate to say that God suffers and dies.

Another complicating factor is that when we take into account all that is incumbent with divine nature, the divine nature has an intellect and a will. As humans are made in the image of God, resultantly, the human nature has an intellect and a will as well. Christ then has two intellects and two wills, one divine and one human, in.

**III. Questions and Answers:** This sounds confusing and even contradictory. Nothing else has two natures, and the result is that we have seemingly contradictory properties associated with the same person. Christ is limited in power and not limited in power. Christ is limited in knowledge and not limited in knowledge (and so forth).

The reduplicative strategy is what makes this concept coherent, and it again points to Christ's unique case of having two natures. Omniscience is only attributed to Christ's divine nature. Limited knowledge on the other hand is only attributed to Christ's human nature. The incompatible traits of Christ's person are inherent only in the different natures of Christ, so they are not being attributed to the "same thing." One must then ask how this can function at a psychological level (particularly when one is unlimited and the other is not).

Then answer is that human nature is added on over the divine nature (the divine nature always operating in the background). Nonetheless, the limited capacity of the human nature can overlay the divine nature. All analogies are imperfect, but in order to understand this idea, think of the way that putting on contacts affects one's vision and perception. Christ is able to look at the world with his human cognitive capacities, as well as with God's, and when he does look through the finite and limited capacity of the human nature, that which would be otherwise available is obscured to the human nature. Christ as the eternal second person of the Trinity can simultaneously see the world through both natures. In his divine nature he does see and know everything. At the same time when looking through his human nature as an overlay he can see the world through the limited human mind in order to see things as we humans do.

Two final points must be made about the Incarnation as the concept is affected by God's eternity (which we looked at previously). God, not being bound by time, always was, is, and will be incarnate. Within time, we think of concepts such as the era before Christ, and the idea that God would not have been incarnate then. This is not true, because God is eternal - outside of time - and so there never was a point

when God was not incarnate. Likewise, it has been suggested that Aquinas's God is cold and aloof, and cannot understand our suffering because the divine nature cannot suffer. This is an inaccurate understanding, because it is precisely God who suffers in Christ, in Christ's human nature. The very human suffering of Christ is always with God.

### **Reflection Questions**

1. How do you understand Christ's two natures in one person?
2. How is the Incarnation affected by God's eternity?