



Theology Corner

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Theological Reflections by Paul Chutikorn - Director of Faith Formation

“What Does it Mean to Be Created in the Image of Christ?”

In the last volume, we talked about what it means to be created in the image of God. This week, we will now shift to an understanding of what it means to be made in the image of Christ. If you recall, to be made in the image of God is to speak of the nature of human beings as *rational* and endowed with an intellect and a will so as to know and love God, and by extension, to love our neighbor. But in Catholic doctrine, there is also another image that is spoken of as it relates to a life of grace – to be made into the image of Christ. To understand what this means, it is essential to have a basic knowledge of Christology. At the very least, we must understand that Christ himself as the Second Person of the Trinity, is the *perfect* image of God. In order for us to be perfected as images of God, we must be “conformed to the image of his Son...” (Rom 8:29). Why specifically does this perfect us? Well, first we have to consider the fact that we were created in grace in the beginning. After the Fall when humanity quite literally fell from grace, this did not change the nature of human beings (i.e., being made in the image of God). Rather, the Fall destroyed the *friendship* between God and man and deprived him of his original justice and holiness in which he was made (CCC, 404).

So, while we all remain images of God even without baptism, this “image” remains imperfect in the sense that we are not conformed to the image of Christ who is Lord over sin and death. In other words, all human beings have a *natural mark* of God, but the *spiritual mark* is lost due to Original Sin. The natural mark of God is what we properly refer to as the image of God, and the spiritual mark is what we refer to as the image of Christ. Theologians often consider the relationship between being an image of God and an image of Christ as something imperfect to perfect. What this means is that being an image of God (i.e., an intellectual creature) is brought to its consummation by being united to God in grace as it was in the beginning of creation. This is what happens in baptism when the old man dies, and the new man is reborn in Christ. It is in baptism when man receives the image of Christ on their soul as they are brought back up into a friendship with him through sanctifying grace. It is this image of Christ that disposes man to grace and makes us an adopted son or daughter of God.

To be given a spiritual mark as an image of Christ through baptism does not make baptism the end goal of the Christian. Baptism is the beginning of the Christian life when the soul is gifted with the theological virtues in seed form. Taking this into consideration, the image of Christ in our soul is made more perfect as we are conformed to Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit in the sacraments. It begins at Baptism, is strengthened at Confirmation, and reaches its highest point in the Eucharist where man is united physically with the whole Christ and spiritually with his mystical body.

To be made in the image of Christ is to be changed ontologically as the soul receives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, making us partakers of the divine nature. To be ever more conformed to Christ, we must partake regularly of the sacraments so as to remain in a state of grace in which we are made pleasing to God, and we must continue to seek further purification by allowing God to cleanse our hearts and minds so that our soul can be made perfect just as our heavenly father is perfect (Matt 5:48). It is then that we may be deemed worthy to enter into eternal beatitude with God in heaven. This worthiness does not come principally from our own worthiness but comes by way of a participation in the work that was completed by Jesus Christ on the cross at Calvary. Let us all strive to continuously cooperate with the grace of Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit which brings us to a perfection in charity as perfect images of Christ claiming the victory over sin and death which Christ meritoriously won for us by his Death and Resurrection.