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Images and Likenesses

Wm. J. Duhigg, M.D.

The author comments on the keynote address given at the annual NFCPG meeting at Notre Dame.

At a recent meeting I attended, Father Michael J. Himes of the Department of Theology at Notre Dame presented a most unusual reflection on the possible meaning of the Genesis account of the creation of man "in the image and likeness of God". In a charming hypothesis he suggested that the first man's first sin, which lost him Paradise, was not so much pride as it was despair. He had been persuaded that he was not really special and unique, as being in the image and likeness of God, and needed more. Fr. Himes proposed that the temptation of the first parents was discouragement or depression, believing that they were not really special as God had told them but rather ordinary creatures as Satan had proposed. Sin in effect followed the loss of the belief that they were specially made in the image of God. The effects of this were, of course, devastating and not at all what they expected.

In the fullness of time and in fulfillment of the scriptures and the prophets, God became man! In the person of Jesus, God became human; "like us in all things except sin".

What is the meaning of these phrases — "in the image and likeness of God" and "like us in all things save sin"? Father Himes suggests that it must mean that being human is something very special! Indeed, the fact that God became man should convince us of this. The speaker went on to elaborate on the significance of this concept, and how it might affect our thoughts and actions.

The idea that depression as the lack of hope, and the loss of hope, or despair, contribute more prominently to man's problems and to his sinning than most people realize, has been an ever increasing conviction of mine. A few years ago I wrote a piece about the contribution of depression in youth as an underlying cause of many of their behavioral aberrations. I have always been very much aware of how it has effected my sinfulness.

Father Himes spent some considerable time in reflecting on the fact that the resurrected God-man Jesus Christ, ascended as a flesh and blood human to be forever at God's right hand to represent us and to judge us.

Since he was like us in all things except sin, He knew of the discomfort of heat and cold; of hunger and thirst; of fatigue and discouragement, of just anger, anxiety and fear. I think what pleased me most was the possibility that in His mind Jesus agonized over the proper timing, the best parable to convey his meaning, the most suitable action. The whole idea that the processes of the mind in their complexity are not only human but also pleasing to God is most gratifying. The notion that my near constant consternation with weighing one diagnosis against another, or one therapy as opposed to another, is pleasing to God; or that the whirling of the mind of all those who grapple with the complexities of our modern moral issues gives great pleasure to God, is most satisfying.

I know that all of this is mystery, that it always will be; but reflecting on these mysteries of God constitutes the highest level of human spiritual activity. I also know that unless such reflection results in a change for the better in behavior and in action that it is, in all likelihood, unconvincing. Though it is too early to recognize any significant change in myself, I think that there cannot help but be a change for the better in any person's life who believes that they are truly made in God's image and likeness, and who believes that there must be something extraordinary about being human for God to have become one like us!

Add to this the mystery of the Eucharist as the body and blood of Jesus the Christ received and incorporated into our very substance — God in a way continuously “becoming human” — His reason for coming to us — His way of restoring us to the original likeness. Is it possible? What an undertaking! What a phenomenal restoration!

I believe that this restoration is possible because Jesus said so. I also know from Him that it will not be accomplished by pious thoughts and saying “Lord, Lord”, but by caring for others. The love that prompts this sacrifice of caring and serving of others is to be my response to the recognized image of God in others. This must begin, however, with something of the recognition of God's image in the mirror.

Just as truly as we cannot both love God Whom we do not see and not love our neighbor whom we do see, so it is quite improbable that we can love another unless we first love ourself. This love is the kind which cares unconditionally for, is generous with, hospitable towards, and infinitely forgiving of self and others.

Is this the image that was Adam's and Eve's — the image of God in them? Is this the image that is to be restored in us? The image of one in love — with God — with others — and with self.
