

**DOCETISM:  
NUMBER ONE ENEMY OF CHRISTMAS.**

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*One of the indispensable tasks of any .... formulation [of Christology] will surely have to be a convincing vindication of the thoroughgoing humanness of Jesus, a humanness which the classical Christology formally and officially defended, but practically and effectively undermined.*

[Donald P. Gray, "The Incarnation: God's Giving and Man's Receiving," *Horizons*, 1 (1974), 1]



In our search for possible factors within the Catholic system that might have had some bearing on the incidence of sexual abuse and the poor way it was handling, we turn now to the question of belief and, more specifically, how we think of Jesus Christ.

As a window on that question, we will look briefly at the Christological heresy of Docetism. That heresy has been highly significant in misshaping the Christian vision and culture in general and the Catholic vision and culture in particular.

Docetism, from the Greek *dokein* meaning “to seem”, rejects the humanity of Jesus. According to this heresy, Jesus only *seemed* to be a human, his body being some kind of phantasm.

Early signs of Docetism can be found in the Christian Scriptures:

Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God; for many false prophets have gone out into the world. By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, and every spirit that does not confess Jesus (*Gk dissolves Jesus*) is not from God. (1 John 4:1-3)

Many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh; any such person is the deceiver and the antichrist! (2 John 7)

St Jerome wrote:

While the Apostles yet remained upon the earth, while the blood of Jesus was almost smoking upon the soil of Judaea, some asserted that the body of the Lord was a phantom. (St. Jerome, (d. 420 CE); quoted in T. E. Pollard, *Johannine Christology and the Early Church*, Cambridge University Press, 1970, 19)

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> century the Gnostics espoused this way of thinking, based on their belief that matter is evil. However, it is one thing to recognise Docetism in the Gnostics of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, it is quite another thing to recognise it in the Catholic mind down through the ages and into our own time. Cardinal Walter Kasper writes:

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<sup>1</sup> This reflection is one part of Fr Michael’s submission to the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse – 6 February 2017. It is made available at Christmas time because it has obvious relevance to our celebration of the Incarnation and, particularly, of how that shapes our daily lives as disciples of Jesus Christ.

It is undeniable that in generally current ideas of Christianity, Jesus Christ is often thought of more or less as a God descending to earth whose humanity is basically only a kind of clothing behind which God himself speaks and acts. Extreme notions of that kind see God .... slipping into human nature like someone putting on dungarees in order to repair the world after a breakdown. The biblical and Church doctrine that Jesus was a true and complete man with a human intellect and human freedom, does not seem to prevail in the average Christian head. (Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, Paulist Press, 1976, 46)

Karl Rahner SJ wrote similarly:

In the ordinary religious life of the Christian, Christ finds a place only as God. (Karl Rahner, "Current Problems in Christology," in the author's *Theological Investigations*, (Volume I), Helicon, 1961, 165)



Denial of – or at least failure to embrace – the enfleshing of God in Jesus of Nazareth, is not just an academic matter. In fact, it is probably a fair guess that, at a theoretical level, most if not all Catholics would totally reject Docetism. The true importance of Docetism lies in its implicit presence in the way we think and behave.

As a practical matter it becomes obvious when we ask the simple question: Why would we have difficulty in accepting Jesus Christ as human? What is it about the enfleshing of the Son of God that so troubles us?

Obviously, we are troubled by the utterly incomprehensible fact that the Infinite has taken on a finite identity. That distresses the human mind seeking to understand the Incarnation. However, I suggest a significant part of the truth of the matter is that we have difficulty accepting ourselves as human. In other words, it is our own enfleshing that troubles us and prevents us from accepting the enfleshing of the Incarnation. T S Eliot's insight is helpful:

unnamed feelings which form the substratum of our being, to which we rarely penetrate for our lives are mostly a constant evasion of ourselves .... (T S Eliot, *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Harvard University Press, 1933, 149.)

Another early heresy, closely related to Docetism, is Encratism. The eminent historian and theologian, Louis Bouyer writes:

The chief deviation to which the ascetic ideal of the first centuries was sometimes reduced in popular literature was an insistence on continence so fervent that it came rather to neglect its motivations. Then, under the influence of the pessimistic dualism of the period, marriage came to be condemned along with the whole of life in the flesh. This is what has been called encratism. (Louis Bouyer, *History of Christian Spirituality I: The Spirituality of the New Testament and the Fathers*, The Seabury Press, 1963, 189.)

The American Jesuit, Thomas H Clancy SJ, writes:

Naked will, mistrust of pleasure – those are bywords of a spiritual doctrine drummed into many generations of Jesuits and other priests and religious. Father John Roothaan, the twenty-first general of the Society (of Jesus), wrote in his spiritual journal the following principle of abnegation:

Whatever is pleasing is to be avoided for the precise reason that it is pleasing. Whatever is displeasing is to be sought for the precise reason that it is displeasing, unless some just motive persuades otherwise, or rather some just and *certain* motive of the divine service and glory *commands* otherwise. (Quoted in Robert North, *The General Who Rebuilt the Jesuits* (Milwaukee, 1944), 180. Italics added.) (Thomas Clancy SJ, “Feeling Bad About Feeling Good,” *Studies in Jesuit Spirituality*.)

The reality of our enfleshing leads inevitably to the experience of ourselves as sexual beings. It was hard to avoid the sense, as a young man growing up in the Catholic Church of the 1950s for example, that there was something “bad” about sex. A “moral problem” was typically assumed to be a problem with sex. This way of thinking led to a terrible ambivalence, where there is a preoccupation with sex as something we ought not be preoccupied with. It is like saying to someone: “Don’t think of the Harbour Bridge!” The normal, healthy experience of being in the flesh – of being subject to hormones and body chemistry – tragically was not a factor in this thinking. It goes some way to explaining why sexuality became an area of obsessive-compulsive behaviours for many and an avenue for the immature to explore and vent some of their childish fantasies.

The reality of our enfleshing not only includes the experience of ourselves as sexual being, it also includes the experience of ourselves as mortal beings. The flesh, sex and death are of a piece. Our mortality is intimately tied up in this. A common way to avoid the implications of our mortality and the anxiety it provokes, is to seek power and control wherever and however we can get it. This prompts a serious practical question: Might that interplay of flesh, sex and death, have something to do with the use and abuse of power in human societies, the Church included? The expression, “lust for power,” may in fact hold a deeper truth than we normally allow.



Docetism sets up a radical – and generally unacknowledged – conflict in the Christian consciousness and this conflict tends to undermine our attempts to be “Christlike” – something that is at the very centre of our lives. How can we identify with someone who only *seems* to be human? Sebastian Moore pointed in this direction when he wrote some fifty years ago:

The effect of being continually exposed to the truth which is doing one no good is distressing to the soul. There can even result a kind of unbelief, an exhaustion of the spirit, which is all the worse for being partly unconscious. (Sebastian Moore OSB, “A Catholic Neurosis?”, *The Clergy Review*, Volume XLVI, No. 11 (November 1961), 647.)

If the Christ I am daily endeavouring to know and follow was actually unwilling to identify himself with my flesh, then I find myself torn. Even if this conflict is not acknowledged or even recognised, is it not fair to assume that it will have some significant effect on my sense of myself and eventually on my behaviour? And if this conflict has been operative within the Catholic system, is it not also fair to assume that it will have adversely affected the training of priests and religious? Most particularly, will it not have affected our attitude to sexuality and specifically our training for celibacy?

We have largely forgotten the insight of St Thomas Aquinas:

Our bodily condition is not the creation of an evil principle, as the Manichees imagine, but comes from God. And so with the affection of charity, by which we love God, we should love our bodies too. (IIa IIae, Q.25, a.5.)



When human beings get caught in a radical and (largely) unconscious conflict, it takes a toll. It takes energy to deal with such conflicts. It can leave people joyless and even depressed. It can generate chronic anger and rigidity. Perhaps more alarmingly, it can lead to compensatory behaviours. The more gross and obvious of these compensatory behaviours are manifest in bodily actions, such as inappropriate eating, inappropriate drinking and inappropriate sexual activity. However, some may find compensation in more subtle ways, in “success” for example, and the trappings of power the system offers.

I do not think it is a great distance from Docetism to inappropriate sexual behaviours or the inappropriate use of power and control within the Catholic Church. If Docetism is a relevant part of the sexual abuse issue – and I believe it is – then one part of our response to the sexual abuse issue is an urgent reframing of our Christological vision, particularly at the practical and pastoral level.

