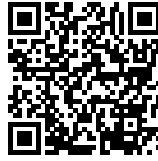




THE ONTOLOGY OF SALVATION

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I cannot begin to count the number of times I wished there were a simple, felicitous word for "ontological." I dislike writing theology with words that have to be explained – that is, words whose meanings are not immediately obvious. But, alas, I have found no substitute and will, therefore, beg my reader's indulgence for dragging such a word into our conversations.

From the earliest times in the Church, but especially beginning with St. Athanasius in the 4th century as the great Ecumenical Councils took shape, the doctrines of the Church have been expressed and debated within the terms related to being itself.



For example, St. Athanasius says that in creating us, God gave us "being" (existence), with a view that we should move towards "well-being," and with the end of "eternal being" (salvation). That three-fold scheme is a very common theme in patristic thought, championed and used again in the work of St. Maximus the Confessor with great precision, as he matured the thought of the Church as affirmed in the 5th Council.

At the same time, this language of being was used to speak about the nature and character of salvation, the same terms and imagery were being used to speak about the Trinity and the two natures of Christ. That language continues up through the Seventh Council and is the language used to define the doctrine of the veneration of the Holy Icons.

Conciliar thought, carried on within the terms of being (being, non-being, nature, person, existence, hypostatic representation, essence, energies, etc.) can be described as speaking in the language of "ontology." Ontology is the technical name for things having to do with being ("onto" as a prefix in Greek means "being").

There is a "seamless garment" of theological exposition that can be discerned across the range of the Councils. It is ontological in character.

Tremendous work and discussion on the part of the fathers resulted in a common language for speaking about all of these questions. Thus, the term "person" (an aspect of "being") is used both for speaking about the Trinity as well as speaking about human persons and the one person of Christ in two natures.

It is the primary "grammar" of Orthodox conciliar thought. No other imagery or language receives the kind of imprimatur as the terms raised up into the formal declarations of the Church's teaching. To a degree, everything else is commentary.

Many other images have been used alongside the ontological work of the Councils. The Church teaches and a good teacher draws on anything at hand to enlighten its students. Nevertheless, the dogmatic language of the Church has been that of "being."

So what constitutes an "ontological" approach to salvation?

Here is an example. "Morality" is a word and concept that applies to behavior and an adherence to rules and laws. "Immorality" is the breaking of those laws. You can write about sin (and thus salvation) in the language of morality and never make reference to the language of being.

But what is created becomes a sort of separate thing from the conciliar language of the Church. Over the centuries, this has often happened in theology, particularly Western theology (Protestant and Catholic). The result is various "departments" of thought, without a common connection. It can lead to confusion and contradiction.

There is within Orthodoxy, an argument that says we are on the strongest ground when we speak in the language of the Councils. The language of "being" comes closer to accurately expressing what is actually taking place. Though all language has a "metaphoric" character, the language of being is, I think, the least metaphorical. It is about "what is."

Back to the imagery of morality. If you speak of right and wrong in terms of being, it is generally expressed as either moving towards the path of well-being-eternal-being, or moving away from it, that is, taking a path towards non-being. What does the path of non-being look like? It looks like disintegration, a progressive "falling apart" of existence.

The New Testament uses the term *phthora* ("corruption") to describe this. *Phthora* is what happens to a body when it dies. Death, in the New Testament, is often linked to sin ("sin and death"). It is the result of moving away from God, destroying our communion with Him.

For most modern people, death is seen as simply a fact of life, a morally neutral thing. It can't be a moral question, we think, because you can't help dying. But, in the New Testament and the Scriptures, death is quite synonymous with sin.

When Adam and Eve sin, they are told that it will result in death (a very ontological problem). A moral approach to that fact tends to see "sin" as the defining term and death as merely the punishment. The ontological approach sees death itself as the issue and the term that defines the meaning of sin. Sin is death. Death is sin.

And so, the language of the Church emphasizes that Christ "trampled down death by death." In the language of ontology, that simple statement says everything. "He trampled down death by death and upon those in the tombs bestowed life." This includes the destruction of sin, freedom from the devil, forgiveness of sins, etc. But all of those things are included in the words of "death" and "life."

An advantage in speaking in this manner can again be seen in comparing it to a simple moral approach. Morality is about actions, obedience, and disobedience. It says nothing about the person actually doing those things (or it can certainly avoid that topic).

It can mislead people into thinking that being and existence are neutral sorts of things and that what matters is how we behave. This can be coupled with the modern heresy of secularism in which it is asserted that things have an existence apart from God, that the universe is just a "neutral no-man's land."

The ontological approach denies this and affirms that God upholds everything in existence, moment by moment. It affirms that existence itself is a good thing and an expression of God's goodness. It says as well that it is the purpose of all things that exist to be in communion with God and move towards eternal being. It is the fullness of salvation expressed in Romans 8:21-22.

Moral imagery also tends to see the world as disconnected. We are simply a collection of independent moral agents, being judged on our behavior. What I do is what I do, and what you do is what you do, and there is nothing particularly connected about any of it.

The language of being is quite different. Everything in creation that exists shares in the commonality of created being. What happens to any one thing effects everything else. There is true communion at the very root of existence.

And it is this communion of being that the fathers use when they speak of Christ's Incarnation and our salvation. When the Creed says, "Who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became man," it is speaking about salvation. It does not say, "Who, in order to pay the penalty that was due..."

Such language can be used and has been used, but it is not at the heart of the Conciliar words of the Church. It is not recited every Sunday.

So how does Christ save us in terms of being? In essence (no pun intended), He became what we were in order to make us what He is. He became man, entering and restoring the full communion which we had broken.

The Lord and Giver of Life, the Author of our Being entered into dying humanity. He took our dying humanity on Himself and entered into the very depths of that death ("suffered death and was buried"). He then raised that same dying humanity into His own eternal life. This is our forgiveness of sins.

If sin is death, then resurrection is forgiveness. Thus we sing at Pascha: "Let us call brothers even those that hate us and forgive all by the resurrection." That sentence only makes sense in terms of the ontological language in which it is written.

We do bad things (immoral things) because we have broken communion with God. "Sins" are the symptoms and signs of death, decay, corruption, and disintegration at work in the soul. If left unattended, it will drag us into the very depths of near non-being in what can properly be described as hell. This is reflected in the Psalm verse, "The dead do not praise the LORD, Nor any who go down into silence." (Psa 115:17)

In Holy Baptism, we are asked, "Do you unite yourself to Christ?" This is the language of being and communion. St. Paul tells us that in Baptism we are united to Christ in His death and raised in the likeness of His resurrection. He then adds that we should "walk in newness of life." That union with Christ and infusion of His Life creates a moral change that can be described in the language of being.

The unity of language, I believe, is very helpful and salutary. It is easy for modern believers, nurtured in the language of morality, to hear teachings about the Trinity and the two natures of Christ, etc., and think, "What has any of that got to do with my life?" That is a natural conclusion when salvation is expressed in a language that is separated from the language of the doctrinal foundations of the Church.

There are some who have pushed the moral language into the language of the Trinity, such that what is important is the Son's propitiation of the Father's wrath. Such terms find no place within the Conciliar thought of the Church and can (and have) created problems.

It is not that such terms have no use nor that they have never been used by any of the Fathers at any time. But they have a long history of being misused and distorting and obscuring the foundational doctrines of the Church.

In my own life, I personally found the language of being, when applied to my salvation, to explain the

meaning of Scripture more thoroughly and connect my daily life and actions to the most fundamental doctrines of the Church.

It allowed me to read St. Athanasius, St. Basil, St. Gregory, St. Maximus and a host of others without feeling that I had come to something foreign. It more than adequately addresses moral questions, whereas moral language cannot address anything else and creates problems and heresies when it is imported into the language of the Trinity.

I should add that I have worked within this for nearly 30 years and have found nothing within Scripture than cannot be understood within the ontological understanding and that doing so frequently takes you deeper into understanding what is actually going on. It also forces you to ask the questions of "how does this relate to everything else?"

I hope this little introductory train of thought is helpful for those who are thinking about these things. It should explain why I see this as important and something that goes to the very heart of the Orthodox faith.

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The [photo](#) shows, "The Assumption of the Virgin" by Francesco Botticini, painted ca. 1475-1476.

