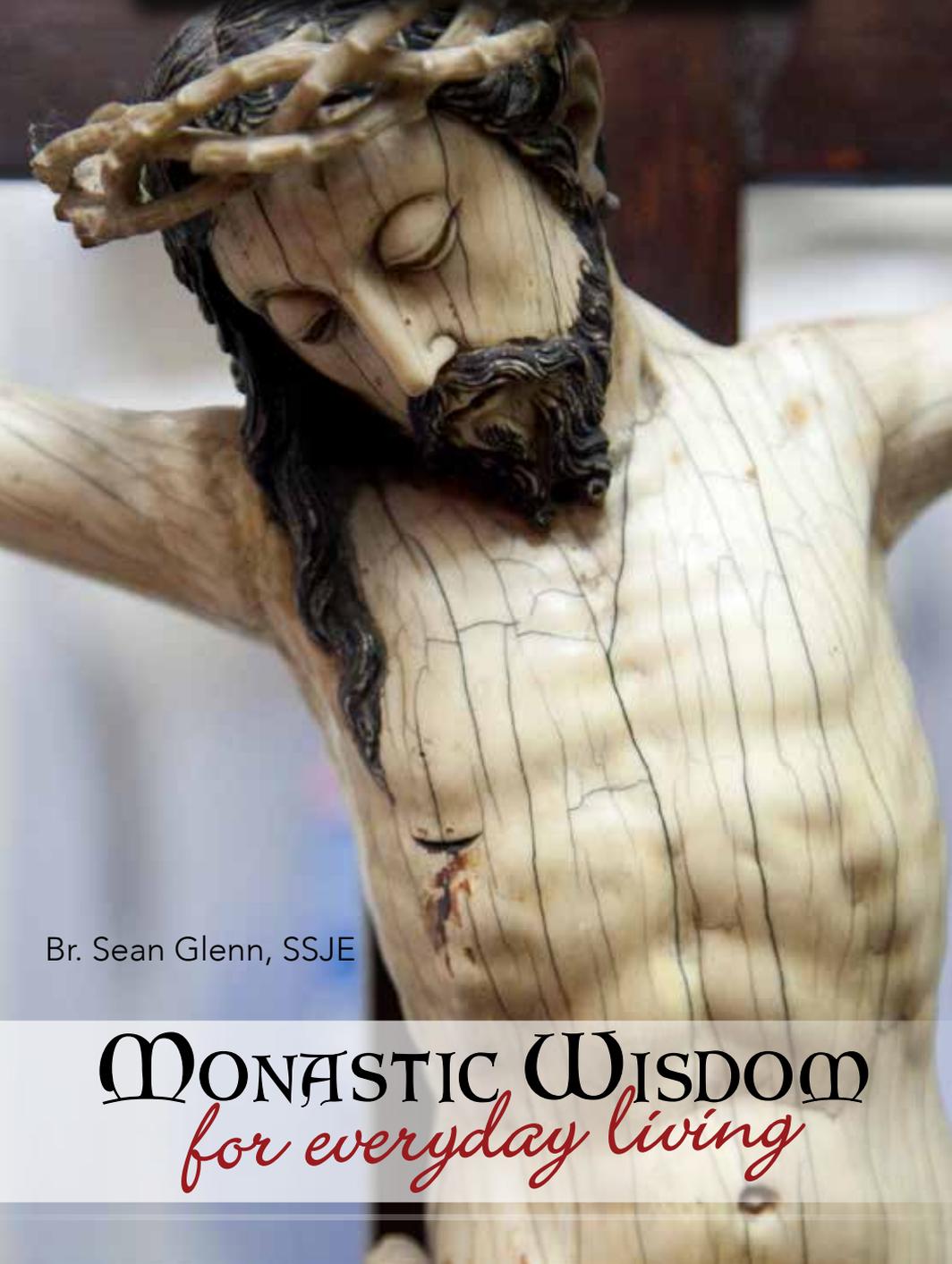


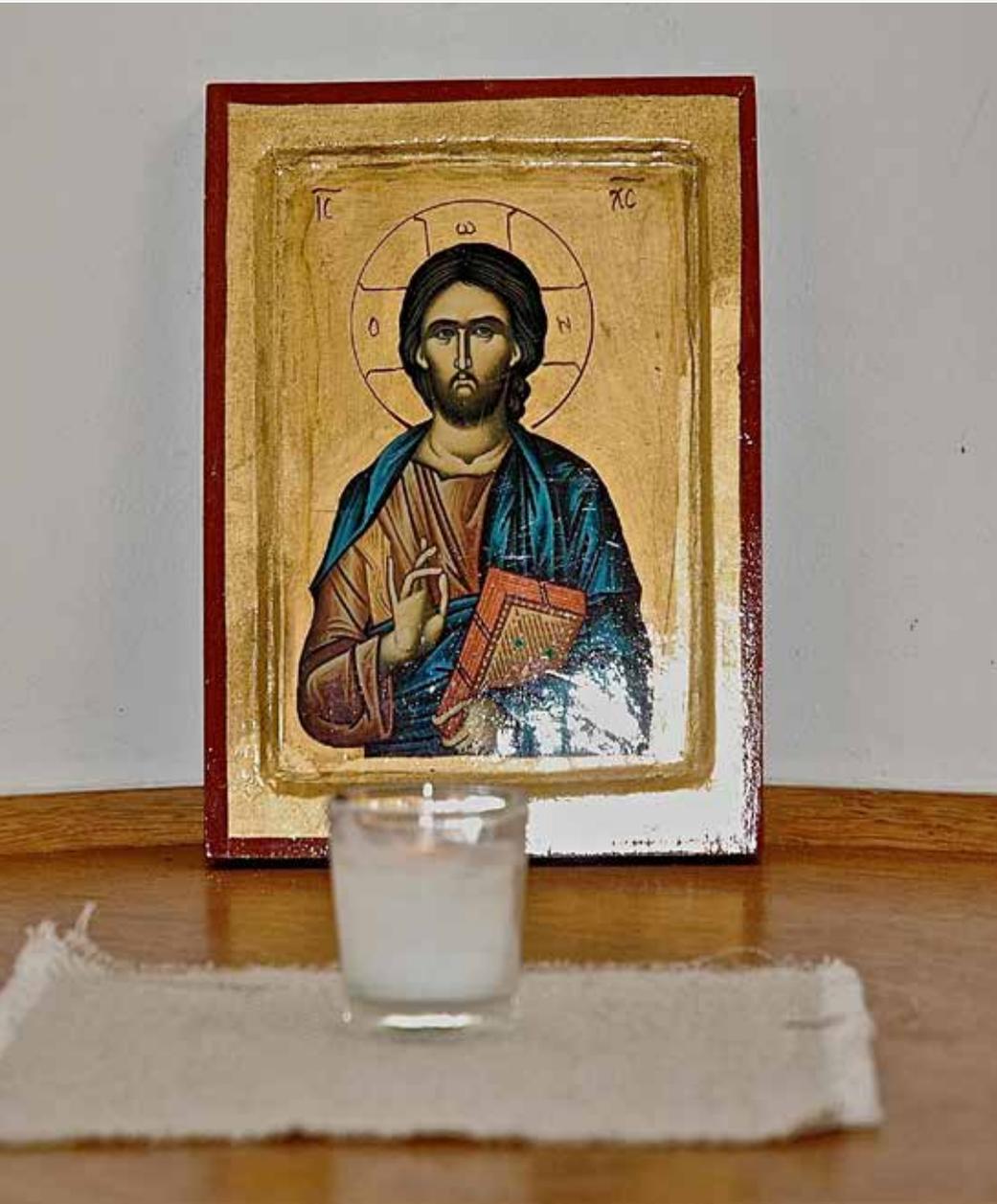
# I Will Take You to Myself

*when God shared our tent in the wilderness*



Br. Sean Glenn, SSJE

**MONASTIC WISDOM**  
*for everyday living*



## I Will Take You To Myself\*

when God shared our tent in the wilderness

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*In general terms, one might say that the problem of incarnation in Christian theology concerns how one imagines God's difference in a way that makes it consistent with God's presence in our world. Can the absolute be present in the concrete without coming too near or being too far away?*

– Ola Sigurdson<sup>1</sup>

### A Claim to Stake a Life on

At the climax of his sermon *On the Holy Transfiguration*, St. Ephraim the Syrian speaks at length through a cycle of complementary questions. Of the strangeness and paradox that we find in the very being of Jesus Christ, he writes,

*If he was not flesh, whom did Joseph take and flee into Egypt? And if he was not God, in whom were words “Out of Egypt I have called my Son” fulfilled? If he was not flesh, whom did John baptize? And if he was not God, to whom did the Father from heaven say, “This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well-pleased”? If he was not flesh, who fasted and hungered in the desert? And if he was not God, whom did the Angels come down and serve? If he was not flesh, who was invited to the wedding in Cana of Galilee? And if he was not God, who turned the water into wine?<sup>2</sup>*

This cycle of call and response (“If he was not flesh ... / If he was not God ...”) takes up more than a quarter of the entire sermon. What is Ephraim getting at? Why ask his congregation questions like these? Through this repetition of an apparent contradiction, our second-century saint is trying to read two seemingly incompatible forms of being *together*. As his refrain echoes back and forth, one deep calling to another, Ephraim undoes a common division between the material and the spiritual. In the Incarnation of Jesus Christ, the material and spiritual sing together in harmonious concert.

\* The titular phrase, “I will take you to myself,” is an allusion to John 14:3b.

<sup>1</sup> Ola Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies: Incarnation, the Gaze, and Embodiment in Christian Theology*, trans. Carl Olsen (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016), 7.

<sup>2</sup> St. Ephraim the Syrian, *On the Holy Transfiguration*, <https://nftu.net/st-ephraim-the-syrian-on-the-holy-transfiguration/> Accessed 10.27.2020.



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Ephraim does not stand alone among the voices of the Christian movement. In the pages of the New Testament we find this strange claim made again and again, particularly in the work of our own spiritual patron here at SSJE, Saint John the Evangelist. “The material and the spiritual,” writes Shelly Rambo, “are often read in opposition to each other. But [...] the Gospel of John positions them together.”<sup>3</sup> From the very beginning of John’s gospel the astonishing affirmation is made: “And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth.”<sup>4</sup> Or, as David Bentley Hart’s recent translation evocatively (yet faithfully) renders it, “And the Logos [Word] became flesh and pitched his tent among us... and we saw his glory, glory as of the Father’s only one, full of grace and truth.”<sup>5</sup> By pitching himself in the tent of our frail humanity, the glory of God’s desire *for us* is unveiled in Jesus.

From as early as I can remember hearing about the figure of Jesus, this strange claim always accompanied him. As a convert to the faith in early adulthood, I still remember

how outlandish it sounded to me during my childhood and adolescence. Given the centrality of this proclamation to Christianity, the whole of the faith must have seemed just as outlandish and, frankly, impossible to me.

Looking back, I can see a number of reasons I balked at the idea that *God* could become human (... or that a human could be God). Some of these reasons were emotional, grown from the seeds of my sense of shame at my own body, judgements about the bodies of others, or ways my culture had taught me to see and value bodies. No, I would think, how could the creator of the universe (if there were such a thing) become human – so frail, so limited, so full of rage and anger and spite? How could the divine come so close to something that makes foul smells and produces substances like urine and feces? Some of these reasons were intellectual, the result of my unfamiliarity with the gospel and Christian thinking through the centuries. Surely, the great power of the creator would completely overwhelm the tiny frailty of a human being. How *truly human* could this Jesus have been if he were also God?

Yet more deeply, all of these reasons really grew from one crucial blind spot: the God revealed in Jesus Christ wound up being a far cry from the god I had been imagining God to be. Even as I refused to believe in a creator (let alone one who would come to share our lot with us) I was aware of keen tension already expressed in the pages of scripture. As Ola Sigurdson fittingly expressed it at the outset of these pages, “Can the absolute be present in the concrete without coming too near or being too far away?”<sup>6</sup>

Even now, years after my own confirmation, God continues to be very far from anything I could ever imagine. But I find it easier to live with this kind of unknowing because of the unique relationship enabled and sworn by what the church calls *the Incarnation* – that is, the very claim I had misunderstood. God has made it plain that any distance between our flesh and God’s self is forever closed, because in Jesus Christ both the fullness of God’s divinity and the fullness of our humanity meet in *one form*. It is the event by which Saint Paul knows that “neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”<sup>7</sup> Not only is the absolute present in the concrete, it neither competes with nor destroys it. It perfects it. Like the burning bush encountered by Moses, the Incarnation reveals that God does not consume the fragile creature the nearer it comes, but instead makes the creature more beautifully *what it is*.

We are living through a season in the world when the importance of this unique meeting of the finite and the Infinite cannot be underestimated. I feel the significance of the Incarnation now more than ever. For as pandemic, social division, racism, and nationalism(s) threaten to divide the vibrant body of our humanity, this supreme gift of God invites us to reimagine our relationship to one another, our bodies, our nature, and our destiny in a most unexpected way.

3 Shelly Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds: Living in the Afterlife of Trauma* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2017), 39.

4 John 1:14 New Revised Standard Version.

5 John 1:14, trans. David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament: A Translation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), 169. Hart’s rendering “pitched his tent among us” is a closer translation of the Greek ἐσκήνωσεν ἐν ἡμῖν / *eskēnōsen en hēmin*. The NRSV’s choice of “glory as of a father’s only son” is not at all dubious, but John’s phrase δόξαν ὡς μονογενοῦς παρὰ πατρός / *doxan hōs monogenous para patros* (literally, “glory as of the Father’s only-begotten-one”) has been elegantly and compactly expressed in Hart’s own “glory as of the Father’s only one.”

6 Sigurdson, *Heavenly Bodies*, 7.

7 Romans 8:38-39 New Revised Standard Version

## An Existence Reaffirmed “Good”

*The Christian believer cannot but honor the body as an integral part of man’s complex being, the work of God’s hand, the Creator of all things in heaven and on earth, material as well as spiritual. The Christian believer must honor the body as redeemed from degradation and restored to its true dignity by the Incarnation of the Eternal Son; “the Word was made flesh” – conceived by the Holy Ghost, and born of the Virgin Mary; as sanctified moreover by the Holy Ghost, the shrine of His indwelling presence, Who in many ways appeals to our inner being through our bodily nature, and confers on us the highest gifts of spiritual grace through material channels.*

– Fr. Arthur C. A. Hall SSJE<sup>8</sup>

By taking a human body to himself, the God revealed in Jesus reminds us that our bodies are good gifts. In our fallen state, however, it can be easy for us to either forget or (worse) all out deny this affirmation. Consider how often we tend to think of the body as something that holds us back, something to be escaped. The body is where we experience the dualities of pain and pleasure, freedom and confinement, identification and alienation. Our bodies reveal us to be at once like other creatures, yet imprinted with this strange otherness to other creatures.

It is easy to caricature the Christian worldview as one that is deeply mistrustful of the body. To be sure, there are historical reasons for this and the Church has had its own part to play in the ways we have tended to misread the role of the human body. Yet the Church still affirms something that tends to scandalize other forms of religion around the world (including western secularism), an insight named at the very beginning of the Bible: Creation (the material universe) is *good*. The author(s) of Genesis show no ambivalence about this: God beholds all that God creates and names it “good.” Still, it is only after God speaks the words “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness”<sup>9</sup> and creates human beings that we read, “God saw everything that God had made, and indeed, it was *very good*.”<sup>10</sup>

The Incarnation of Jesus echoes the scriptural affirmation that human beings bear the image of their Creator, reminding us to affirm the goodness of our own bodies and the material of Creation all around us. In fact, the Incarnation of Jesus Christ testifies, in flesh and blood, that God is at work in our fragile, time-bound bodies. God shows us in Jesus that the material body is “the shrine of His indwelling presence, Who in many ways appeals to our inner being through our bodily nature, and confers on us the highest gifts of spiritual grace through material channels.”

8 Fr. Arthur C. A. Hall SSJE, “Discipline of the Body,” in *Self-Discipline*, 24-25.

9 Genesis 1:26 New Revised Standard Version.

10 Genesis 1:31 New Revised Standard Version. Emphasis mine.



Yet through this self-revelation, God did much more than merely reaffirm our image-bearing status. In fact, the whole picture of our image-bearing status is refined and clarified in the way God interacted (through the humanity of Jesus) with our bodies. The kinds of bodies with which Jesus moved, the bodies who experienced Jesus’ love, the bodies with which Jesus identified himself tended to be bodies most societies cast off, disregard, or pity. Jesus, however, shows us the very power of God on display and at work in them. Even more, by freely handing himself over to be tortured and crucified by the very creatures he came to save, Jesus allowed his own precious body to become one of those so often cast off, disregarded, or pitied. He allowed the marks of death to fall upon his body in the same way they fall upon all bodies. Indeed, these marks would become pivotal identifiers after his Resurrection.

By “pitching his tent among us” in this way, God has definitively met us – and promises to meet us – in the body. As such, any spirituality that denies the body a place and role in the redemption of the human person must confront the cross of Jesus. God has met the human being truly and concretely in the tortured, suffering body of Jesus. All bodies, astonishingly, may become chalices of God’s active grace – but in particular those bodies Jesus identified with, those the world may find deficient, broken, disturbing, or repugnant. Not the bodies we have moralized into a strong, sound independence; but the broken bodies, discarded, harassed, or ignored, dependent upon God and one another. The world may try to tell us the body is for any number of things, including escape. Yet the Incarnation tells us that the body is good, that the body is for the showing forth of the divine love.

## Nature: Body and Soul

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ,  
the only Son of God,  
eternally begotten of the Father,  
God from God, Light from Light,  
true God from true God,  
begotten, not made,  
of one Being with the Father.  
... by the power of the Holy Spirit  
he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary,  
and was made truly human.

- The Nicene Creed<sup>11</sup>

There is profound wonder in the fact that God would take a human body to himself. It scandalizes or undoes so many of our ideas about the physical's relationship to the spiritual. It shows us that the fire of divine Love does not intend to consume and destroy us, but to enliven us and make us more gloriously who we are. But there is a larger significance to the Incarnation. When we confess that, in the words of the Creed, Jesus is "God from God" and "became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made [truly human]," we are naming something much larger than the fact that Jesus took to himself a human body.

By becoming incarnate from the Virgin Mary and becoming truly human, God not only took a human body to himself, but took a human *nature*. Not simply our *physical condition*, our poverty, our bodily limitation; but our psychological poverty, our spiritual poverty, our experiences of separation, loss, anxiety, and death. Both realities he transfigured in the Spirit. Although Christians are called to live lives in the Spirit, this does not elide or undo the fact that Jesus Christ took to himself this crucial aspect of our humanity, something the scriptural tradition rather unfortunately and misleadingly calls "flesh."

While commonly mistaken as another word for our bodies, "flesh" is more than our physical embodiment. Although flesh is wrapped up in our experience of being embodied, flesh was generally understood before the Reformation as distinct from body. Reading imagery of the flesh informed by the Gospel of John, Shelley Rambo reclaims early Christian insights about this strange area of human experience. "Flesh binds individual bodies to a world. Flesh is marked by the world and by its various processes of life and death. Flesh attests to a way of being constituted in relationship with everything

<sup>11</sup> Most translations render this phrase "and was made man," but the original reads, "καὶ ἐνανθρωπήσαντα/*kai enanthrōpēsanta*" (literally, "and became human"). Greek uses three separate words for "man," "woman," and "human(ity)" (ἀνδρας/*andras*, γυναίκα/*gynē*, and ἄνθρωπος/*anthrōpos*).

that is around us."<sup>12</sup> Our psychology, our social formation, our wounds and traumas, even the languages we use (all of these realities that seem to share in the material while always somehow transcending it) are the world named by the word "flesh." And the world with which it is in relationship, we remember from Genesis, is created "good."

Further, wondering at the significance of the *wounded* body the resurrected Christ presents to Thomas in the twentieth chapter of John, Rambo names another revelation for us:

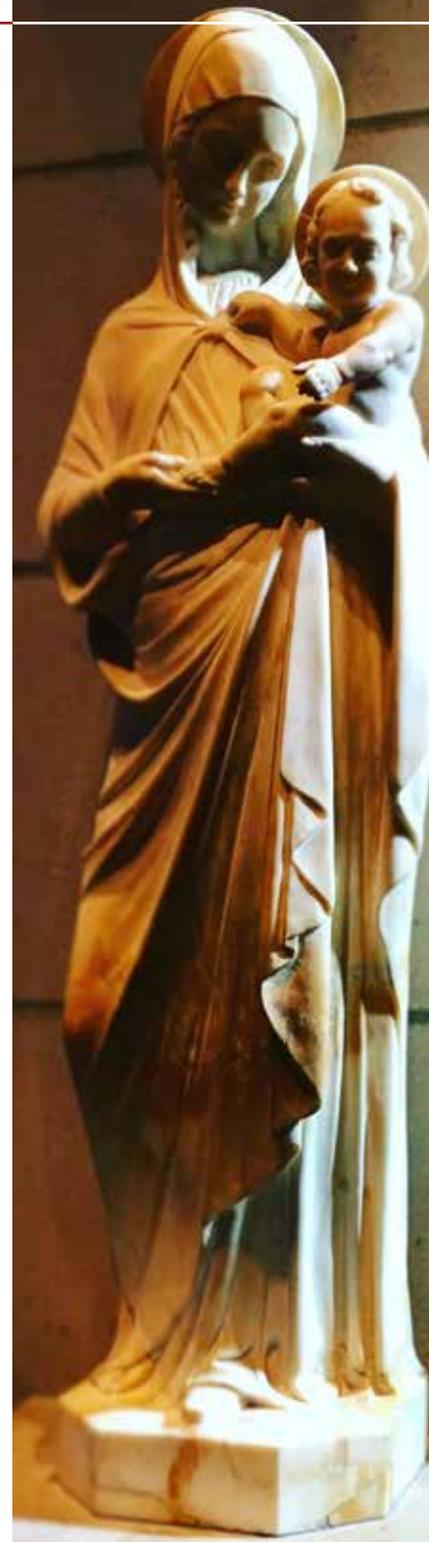
Thinking of Jesus' return in terms of a *marked* body, we see him as one subjected to the ... realities of his day. He was crucified under Roman imperial rule. But this is not the whole account. [John's] prologue also presents him in incarnational terms, as the eternal Word taking on flesh. If we read his return in terms of *marked flesh*, the history is not just singular but collective. His entrance into history affirms all that is fleshly, but also moves it toward its fullness.<sup>13</sup>

All of these material-yet-not-material realities of our total humanity – the intersections of our embodiment and our inner nature – are taken up by the Only-Begotten-One when he pitches his tent among us. By retaining the marks of his torture and death, the resurrected Christ reveals that he has not just entered our embodiment, but indeed has entered all of the realities that inform our very spiritual condition, our humanity in its wholeness: wounds and joys, body and soul.

Even this is not the end of the story, however. It would be one thing if God had met us in our condition and then simply departed as he came. But that is not the story the Church preserves. Not only does God the Only-Begotten-One stoop his infinity down into our physical and spiritual limitations, failures, and struggles. That kind of identification would be gift enough, to be sure, but God's generosity revealed in Christ's Incarnation goes even further – even to the very heart of the God.

<sup>12</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 39.

<sup>13</sup> Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*, 40. Emphases original.





## Glorification: I Will Take You to Myself

*After his glorious resurrection he openly appeared to his disciples, and in their sight ascended into heaven, to prepare a place for us; that where he is, there we might also be, and reign with him in glory.<sup>14</sup>*

I want to attempt to illustrate this further significance of the Incarnation with a musical image first. One of the most deeply moving experiences I can have when listening to a piece of music is encountering a moment, say of a symphony, when the composer takes a musical idea that initially sounded melancholic or dejected and then completely re-clothes it with a new harmony, a new texture, a new color. Moments when a theme of despair will come back, emerging from the texture of the orchestra with a new color,

<sup>14</sup> Proper Preface for Ascension, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1979), 379.

lit and transfigured by a new set of chords, singing a new song of celebration. Because of their initial appearance as themes of sorrow, their unanticipated transformation into songs of joy is all the more palpable, mysterious, and miraculous. These moments speak to me of the kind of destiny God has disclosed for us in the revelation of Jesus.

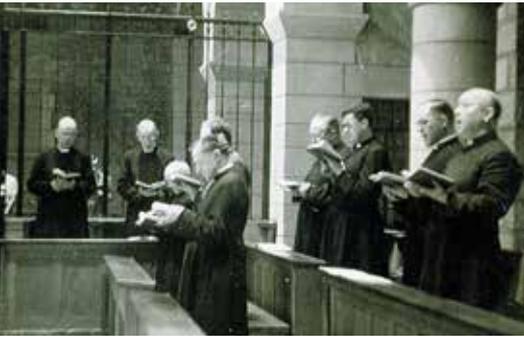
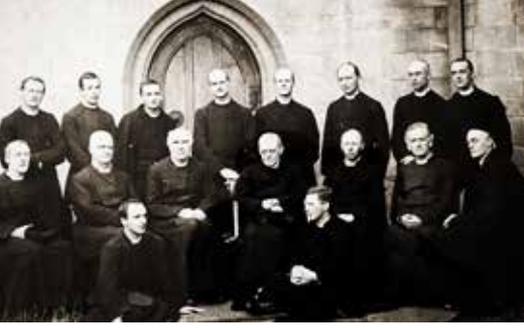
Christ's Incarnation and Resurrection give us a foretaste of the way God has promised to incarnate us all in the age to come. The Ascension of his Incarnation shows something equally remarkable: the generous destiny for which God has made us from the very beginning.

Having been made flesh, having pitched his tent – body and soul – among us his creatures to live and eventually face the shame of death, Jesus resurrected – wounds and all – reveals the glory for which it has all been purposed. It has all been purposed for an unanticipated glory. That is, the divinization of the human being. An early Christian phrase summarizes this glorious destiny in this way, “*Deus fit homo ut homo fieret Deus*” (God became human so that the human might become [like] God). Or, as our visionary founder, Richard Meux Benson has written, “We cannot have an abiding faith in the Incarnation unless we recognize consequences in ourselves proportionate, and nothing can be proportionate to God becoming flesh short of the great mystery of ourselves becoming one with God as His children.”<sup>15</sup> Like the transfiguration of a melancholy motif, the Risen Lord carries the body of this glorified humanity (still bearing the marks of death – both physical and spiritual) into the

very heart of God. Not only has God pledged to meet us in our bodies, not only has God vowed to meet us in the fullness of our humanity, God has promised to take us, with the Risen Jesus, to his very self.

In an act only the power of God could accomplish, God came as close to humanity as is possible and has invited humanity to enter into that tender intimacy, which is God's desire. God became human so that our humanity could be healed and redeemed from the inside. God became human so that our humanity might be taken to the place for which it was always destined: the heart of the Father. God's Incarnation in Jesus Christ reveals to us that our creatureliness will be neither consumed nor destroyed by the fire of his Love, but will be at last enlivened as we become more completely the creatures God creates us to be.

<sup>15</sup> Richard Meux Benson SSJE, *The Final Passover*, vol. 2, 402.



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