

Several controversial issues swirl in the letters of Cyril, Nestorius, Archbishop Leo that result in the Council of Chalcedon's "Definition of the Faith." Among these issues, the role of Mary as the mother of Christ is significant as these early Christian thinkers theorize the human/divine nature of Christ. As significant as she is in these conversations, Mary's role is secondary to the more central soteriological question raised pertaining to Christ's ability to achieve human salvation. Behind this question (how Christ achieves salvation for humanity) is an even more pressing question about the impassibility of God. This question, while subtly present in the texts, appears to weigh heavily on the minds of these thinkers: Does God suffer in Christ?

For Nestorius, the idea of a suffering God seems repugnant. In fact, it is hard to imagine that Nestorius believes that suffering of any kind is prompted by God because God is Creator and sustainer of Creation.¹ Seeing the divine image corrupted by the influence of the devil, God sends the Logos into the world of flesh to defeat the evil influence and restore the divine image.² "God saw the ruined nature, and the power of the Godhead took hold of it in its shattered state. God held on to it while himself remaining what he had been, and lifted it up high."³

Nestorius goes to great lengths to separate the divine and human natures of Christ. They are two natures at work simultaneously in the one Christ. However, wherever there is redemptive suffering on behalf of humanity, Nestorius does not

¹ *The Christological Controversy*, 123-124.

² *Ibid.*, 124-125.

³ *Ibid.*, 125.

imagine that the Logos/ divine nature suffers. “The third day burial belonged to this man, not to the deity. His feet were fastened down by nails; he is the one whom the Holy Spirit formed in the womb.”⁴ “That is why the demons shudder at the mention of the crucified flesh; they know that God has been joined to the crucified flesh, even though he has not shared its suffering.”⁵

Cyril is much less emphatic about separating suffering from the divine nature of Christ. Unlike Nestorius, Cyril does not imagine a divide between the Logos and humanity within Christ. So, wherever one suffers, the other is affected. “Since, however, the body that had become [the Logos’] own underwent suffering, he is — once again — said to have suffered these things for our sakes, for the impassible One was within the suffering body.”⁶ Still, Cyril seems uncomfortable with the thought of a suffering God and almost immediately backtracks saying, “It is not that [the Logos] actually experienced death as far as anything that touches his [divine] nature is connected to think that would be insanity. Rather it is that, as I said earlier, his flesh tasted death.”⁷ Still, it is imperative for issues relating to human salvation that Logos and flesh be entirely one nature in Christ so that flesh is redeemed through the power of the Logos.⁸

Mary’s role is more significant in the letter of Archbishop Leo, but she is acknowledged, as in other places, only in order to explain the nature of Christ, not for her own sake. Leo explains that Christ is born “with a new kind of birth” in which Mary supplies the fleshly material and even goes so far as to say that Christ is offspring of the

⁴ Ibid., 128-129.

⁵ Ibid., 130.

⁶ Ibid., 133.

⁷ Ibid., 134.

⁸ Ibid., 134.

seed of Abraham, implanted in Mary by the Spirit.⁹ Leo uses the illustration of Christ's birth to demonstrate the possibility of a *new kind of death*.

We read that the son of man came down from heaven (the Son of God took on flesh from the Virgin of whom he was born), and conversely we say that the Son of God was crucified and buried (even though he endured these things not in that divine nature in virtue of which, as Only Begotten, he is coeternal and consubstantial with the Father, but in the weakness of his human nature).

In the patristic context, the question of God's suffering was soteriological. How does an impassible God redeem the sinfulness of humanity? In our context, the suffering of God is also soteriological, but the question is almost entirely different. How is the suffering of humanity redemptive? To answer our own question, we look not to eternity, but rather to the everyday experiences of the poor, oppressed, victimized and marginalized; we long to see God with them. Consider liberation theologies that locate God among the poor.

In liberation theologies, sin is social, systemic and concrete. Gutierrez says, "[Sin] cannot be encountered in itself, but only in concrete instances, in particular alienations."¹⁰ Wherever, then, patristic thinkers aim to separate the suffering of Christ from the Logos, liberation theology claims salvation cannot be achieved. Just as sin is historical and concrete, and the consequences of sin (i.e. suffering) are concrete, so the redemptive act must also be firmly within the concrete individuals, societies and systems that oppress. A God who does not suffer does not truly know the effects of sin and is thereby incapable of redeeming humanity from its own suffering.

⁹ Ibid., 147.

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1988) 103.