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Imago Dei

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Imago Dei

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IMAGO DEI

Reverend Lawrence E. Frizzell

As the apex of creation, human beings (male and female) are in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:26-28; 5:1-3; 9:6; Psalm 8:5-8; Sirs 17:1-14). Both Jewish and Christian theologians have pondered at length the precise content of this doctrine. In the Middle Ages they focused on the intellect and will, residing in the immortal soul, as distinguishing humanity from other animate creatures. More recently, scholars have looked for the meaning that the doctrine would have evoked for pre-philosophical communities.

In the context of the creation hymn (Gen 1:1-2:4) the human being is the viceroy, the representative of God in caring for the earth and its inhabitants. In exercising this vocation of stewardship people are challenged to reflect the presence of the provident God in the world. Secondly, human beings are created to be in a covenantal dialogue with God and to represent the rest of creation as the high priest mediating worship of the Creator. In the Torah only two earthly realities are created according to a heavenly model: the human being and the tabernacle in the wilderness (Exodus 25:40; 26:30, etc.). Just as the tent of meeting (and later the Temple) was the context within which sacrificial worship would be united with the celestial cult, so the human person should recognize the responsibility of reflecting God's presence and ordering the innate capacity of all creatures to serve God.

The concept "image of God" (1 Corinthians 11:7; James 3:9) is the foundation for the call to imitate God (Leviticus 19:2; Matthew 5:48; Luke 6:36; 1 Peter 1:16) by recognizing the divine presence in one's neighbor (1 John 4:20, see Matthew 25:31-46). For Christian theologians, Jesus is the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15) and through him people conform to the divine Exemplar (Romans 8:29; 2 Corinthians 3:18). Christ is the last Adam whose obedience provides the foundation for human transformation (1 Corinthians 15:45-50).

What was the effect of Adam's sin on the human order? Many early orthodox Christian theologians maintained that humanity is wounded or marred by the effects of original sin, whereas Protestant reformers declared that human nature was corrupted and distorted from its destiny. Both agree that restoration to intimacy with God came through the Paschal Mystery, the death-and-resurrection, of Christ.

Jewish teachers drew upon Genesis 1:26-28 as a foundation for doctrinal and moral insights into the meaning of life and respect for the inherent dignity of every human being. When discussing the responsibility of judges regarding the death penalty, the sages noted: "A king stamps many coins with one seal and they are all alike; but the King of Kings, the Holy One Blessed Be He, has stamped each human being with the seal of the first man, yet not one is like his fellow" (Mishnah Sanhedrin IV:5).

Imago Dei is the doctrinal foundation for both Jews and Christians to grapple with virtually all issues of the moral order, from the challenge for each person to conform human life to the divine

Exemplar, to a self-respect that acknowledges the basic equality of all persons, to the human responsibility for the rest of creation.

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