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An Unimaginable Intimacy: The mystery of what God has done for us (Fr. John Garvey)

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Icon of the Crucifixion

One early morning not long ago I woke with a strange physical sense of myself as the product of eons, rather than my usual tired twenty-first-century self. In the period between dream and waking I had the sense of being the son of a son of a son.... And you can go on way back, to a period where our ancestors slept in dens around fires in winter breathing bone dust—even to a period before language. That particular morning I knew that I was here now because of millennia during which human beings were formed by cooperation and cannibalism, compassion and violence.

It is into *this* flesh that the Lord became incarnate, with all its mercies and horrors—a sign of complete and total compassion for what and who we are. The flesh assumed by Jesus is primordial and capable of so many wonders, and horrors.

The love shown in the Trinity and the Incarnation has to do not only with God's love

for humanity but with God's love for all creation, for every atom of it. The love shown in the *kenosis*, the self-emptying of the Word become flesh (to combine Paul and John here), applies to all the universe. When we think of love, we think of what we can make of love as we have encountered it—paternal or fraternal love, the love of husband and wife, the self-sacrificing love of friends—but all this is not close, or is comparable only in a crude way, to “the love that moves the sun and the other stars,” in Dante's wonderful words. We can only occasionally catch a glimpse of it in these other loves, and it is probably wiser to encounter our world with silence than to say, “There it is, that's what it's like.” Love in whatever way we encounter it does offer us a clue, but a willingness to be silent before the mystery gets us closer.

The self-emptying love of *kenosis* happens in the Old and New Testaments, and outside of religion itself. It is in the burning bush, when God does not tell Moses his name; it is in the still small voice; it is in God's refusal to be our idea of “God,” to step into the place we want our idol to be.

Kenosis is not only emptying but at the same time enfleshment (this is in Paul's text, Philippians 2:5–11), taking on our nature, being *not* “God,” being flesh—which is to say mortal, passing, essentially empty, because death empties us completely, and being flesh puts us on that path.

The fullness of what Incarnation means is closed to us, and our minds are incapable of taking it all in. In Jesus an unknowable God (being unknowable is essential to what and who God is) is with us as brother, companion, fellow-sufferer, one who praises John the Baptist and tells a scribe he is close to the Kingdom, gives us saving stories, sits at the well with the Samaritan woman and even jokes with her...this is a shocking level of intimacy that ends in a shameful death, a death not at all noble by the standards of the ancient world.

I believe that this intimacy (and this upsetting of what we expect God and our salvation to be like) is so close to what it would take to bring our tragically wounded world close to God's love, and what it can mean in our lives, that it makes more sense to me than any other story, much more than the notion that, as beautiful as the cosmos is, it is finally without any meaning other than the awe it inspires.

But what Incarnation means goes so deep that our first stumbling interpretations are crude. Matter itself matters here, not just its fleshy human dimension, but any created thing. We identify with sentient beings, being sentient ourselves, and if we are Christians, we believe that God in his compassion in some way suffers with us all—but God is also in some way intimate with silicon, with gravity itself, with dark

matter. Dante's love that moves the sun and the other stars is encountered in flesh; but how does it encounter water? It does, because water *is*.

In some way beyond our capacity to imagine it, what Jesus did on the Cross and in the Resurrection has to do with crystals and large gas planets. How do they come into the love and *kenosis* involved there? I have no clue, but that love and glory and God's own joy participate in being at every level is basic to our faith. When I say the name of Jesus in prayer I am not only naming the one named after Joshua who saved us on the Cross by his death and Resurrection, but a universal event that transforms a universe in which flesh and matter itself mean death into a universe aimed at transformation and life, in which flesh and all forms of matter reflect only God's love for all of creation, which is because he loves it.

By Fr. John Garvey

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