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St. Irenaeus and the *Imago Dei*

The Importance of Being Human

THE WONDER AND AMAZEMENT that should accompany the astonishing biblical proclamation that human beings are created in the image and likeness of God is often absent today. Among contemporary Christians it may have too much the ring of fixed, and therefore thoughtless, familiarity. For many others it may be thought false in the light of the contemporary scientific understanding of what human beings are and how they historically evolved. Still others may think it utterly irrelevant to our practical secular lives. Irenaeus, an early father of the Christian church (c. 130–200 A.D.), thought it neither false nor irrelevant, and, unlike many Christians today, he gloried in its realism. He was even convinced that it was at the heart of God's act of creation and so of his subsequent actions within salvation history. This essay, then, wishes to examine Irenaeus's understanding of what it means for us as human beings to be made in the *imago Dei*, in the image and likeness of God, and in so doing demonstrate its relevance for our contemporary daily lives.

A Uniquely Christian Idea

To grasp the significance that God created human beings in his own image and likeness, a significance that was not lost on Irenaeus, it must first be noted that such a proposal did not originate from within some common universal human religious sentiment. Within classical paganism, it was the gods who were modeled after the image and likeness of men and women and, in so being depicted, they possessed all of the foibles, weaknesses, and vices that human beings possess. Such an anthropological conception of the gods did not enhance the dignity of human beings. Rather, it merely cheapened the dignity of the gods, and, in the end, exposed them to ridicule and mockery.

The idea that human beings are icons of God did not originate from the bookish musings of some philosopher either. When ancient philosophers did consider the issue of man's nature, they inevitably concluded that what is divine in human beings, and so what makes them like god, is their soul or mind (*logos* or *nous*), that spiritual spark or seed that lies within humankind. While God may not be demeaned in such a view of man's nature, yet, as Irenaeus knew full well, man now is. There is something intimately tied to man, and, in a real sense makes him truly human, that is now evil in and of itself—the body. In the end it is only that which is not human that reflects the *imago Dei*, the spiritual divine spark or seed.

This non-Christian teaching, as found in his contemporary Gnostics, prompted Irenaeus to undertake a thorough defense and examination of the truth that human beings were created in the image and likeness of God. While there were various schools of Gnosticism, one of the common threads within all its various formulations was that there is a conflict between the evil world of matter and the divine world of spirit. This conflict is primarily played out within human beings, for human beings (at least the spiritual elite) are composed of a spark of divine being and a material body. Salvific knowledge (*gnosis*) consisted in knowing how to extricate

one's true self—the divine spark—from the evil material body so as to obtain the freedom to make one's way back to the realm of the spiritual and the divine. Irenaeus found such anthropology contrary to the Christian faith and thus contrary to the dignity that human beings possess.

In contrast to the Gnostics, Irenaeus delighted in the unparalleled and literally incredible thought that human beings, in the totality of who we are, body and soul, are images of God, and were created so by God himself. Moreover, he took pride in the fact that this astounding truth was found solely within the Jewish-Christian tradition (see Gen. 1:27).¹ This tradition holds that the source of such a belief was God himself; for he revealed this truth to us and without such revelation we never would have arrived at such a marvelous and even arrogant idea. Thus, for Irenaeus, to be simply human clothes us with a dignity that is inconceivable, a dignity that pertains not to some spiritual aspect of our being, but to our very created humanness. It is the very humanness of human beings that, for Irenaeus, reflects who and what God is, for in making us human he made us in his own likeness.

In Love with Mud

Contrary to the Gnostics, who saw the formation of the material world as the work of some lesser mischievous or misguided deity (thus accounting for its inherent evilness), Irenaeus insisted that the whole of creation is the work of the one supreme, all-good God. Having outlined the various beliefs of the Gnostics in the first book of his five-volume work, *Adversus Haereses* (*Against the Heresies*), he begins his positive presentation of the Christian Gospel by stating

It is proper, then, that I should begin with the first and most important head, that is, God the Creator, who made the heavens and the earth, and all things that are therein (whom these men blasphemously style the fruit of a defect), and to

demonstrate that there is nothing either above Him or after Him; nor that, influenced by any one, but of His own free will, He created all things, since He is the only God, the only Lord, the only Creator, the only Father, alone containing all things, and Himself commanding all things into existence (*Adversus Haereses*, hereafter *A.H.*, 2, 1, 1).²

Since God, as the supreme all-powerful creator, creates everything out of nothing (*creatio ex nihilo*) (see *A.H.*, 2, 10, 1–4), Irenaeus insisted that the Gnostics insult him by maintaining that creation was contrary to his will and performed by some lesser malcontent angel or deity. Such a disobedient display of power would imply that such an angel or lesser deity would be more powerful than the supreme God (see *A.H.*, 2, 2, 1–5). Moreover, and more important, because God as the supreme creator is perfectly good, all that he creates is good. Thus, Irenaeus marveled at the bountiful goodness of God as creator, but he equally then gloried in creation itself. As Dennis Minns states, “His religious awe of and love for the Creator God went hand in hand with a religious awe of and love for the world he believed that God to have created.”³ To a degree that would be considered irrationally obsessive by the Gnostics, Irenaeus possessed a childlike enthusiasm and delight in the materiality of the material, the physicality of the physical, and the bodiliness of the bodily. He insisted that God did indeed create man from the dust and slime of the earth [See Irenaeus, *Epideixis (Proof of the Apostolic Preaching)*, hereafter *Epid.*, 11; *A.H.*, 1, 9, 3 and 3, 21, 10]. In a real sense, Irenaeus loved mud.

For Irenaeus, humankind is the pinnacle of the Father’s good creation, because through his two hands—the Son and the Holy Spirit—he created Adam and Eve in his own image and likeness. For human beings to be created in the *imago Dei* is, for Irenaeus, a fundamental theme of the whole biblical narrative. Every phase of salvation history, from creation all the way through to the completion of all things at the end of time fulfilled by Jesus, bears directly on this

matter. The creation of humans in the *imago Dei* is a multifaceted topic containing many interrelated biblical truths. While Irenaeus did not present the whole of his understanding in a systematic manner, I will attempt to bring some logical order to his rich and engaging thought.

In the Image and Likeness of the Son

One of the most striking features of Irenaeus's understanding of what it means to be created in the likeness of God is that he is very specific as to in whose likeness man is created. We are not created in the image of some generic deity, merely of some transcendent, all-powerful intelligent being. Irenaeus perceived the biblical truth that it is first and foremost God the Son who is the perfect image and likeness of God the Father, and for us to be created in the image and likeness of God is to be created in the image and likeness of the Son. The begetting of the eternal Son by the Father is the prototype and the archetype for the Father creating us through and in the likeness of his Son.

Now God shall be glorified in His handiwork, fitting it so as to be conformable to, and modeled after, His own Son. For by the hands of the Father, that is by the Son and the Holy Spirit, man, and not [merely] a part of man, was made in the likeness of God. (*A.H.*, 5, 6, 1)

Three critical constituent and interrelated elements for the whole of salvation history and the whole of Irenaeus's theology flow from the truth that the Father creates human beings in the likeness of his Son through his Son, and the Holy Spirit is instrumental in fashioning this similitude.

First, we discern an authentic Christian personalism within the very heart of Irenaeus's thought. This personalism lies within the very nature of God existing as a Trinity of persons—Father, Son, and

Holy Spirit. Our creation in the image and likeness of God involves all three persons of the Trinity. Moreover, to bear the image of the Son through the action of the Son and the Spirit implies that the Father, from the foundation of creation, desired that he would be the father of many children and that we would be those children that he desired. The relevance of being created in the image and likeness of God resides, then, in our life as human persons—who we are in our deepest essence—because our lives are intrinsically ordered to and lived within the very life of the Trinity. Not to live in union with God is not to live in his likeness.

Second, if human beings are created in the image of the Son through the creative activity of the same Son, then it is the Son to whom the Father will entrust the work of ensuring that human beings attain the fullness and completion of that image and likeness.

Third, it is the Holy Spirit who will transform human beings into the perfect likeness of the Son, and thus ensure their perfect likeness to the Father as his adopted children.⁴

It is necessary to examine more closely what it precisely means for us to be created in God's image and likeness.⁵ For Irenaeus, we are in God's image not merely because we possess reason and free will. Rather, as the previous quotation intimated in specifying that the whole of man was made in God's image, our very bodily formation bears the image of God. This idea keeps with Irenaeus's vigorous approval of the materiality of God's good creation. Irenaeus stated in his *Epidexis (Proof of the Apostolic Preaching)*,

But man He fashioned with His own hands, taking of the purest and finest of earth, in measured wise mingling with the earth His own power; for He gave his frame the outline of His own form, that the visible appearance too should be god-like—for it was as an image of God that man was fashioned and set on earth—and that he might come to life, He *breathed into his face the breath of life*, so that the man became like God in inspiration as well as in frame. (*Epid.*, 11)⁶

It is of singular significance that the body of human beings bears the *imago Dei*. Even though Irenaeus knew that God was a spiritual being, Irenaeus did not conclude that only what is spiritual is capable of bearing the image of the Son of God. If we are made in the image of the Father's Son, and if we are bodily, then, for Irenaeus, our very bodies must manifest the Son's image.

Here Irenaeus stands in stark contrast not only to the Gnosticism of his day, but also to much of the later Christian tradition and even to much of contemporary anthropology. On the whole, Christian anthropology only considered man's soul, with its intellectual and volitional powers, as bearing a suitable likeness of God, and in so doing, relegated the human body to a necessary—but ultimately unimportant—part of human life. This perception of what it means to be in God's image may have been heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy, which saw the body as merely the prison of the soul and from which the soul must escape. However, Irenaeus wished to take the Bible much more seriously. If the Father created man as a bodily being and modeled man after his Son, then the whole man is the icon of the Son. It is within our very bodily visibility (especially within our own countenance) and in our bodily words and actions (words and actions of compassion, kindness, and love) that we physically bear the likeness of the Son. Our likeness to God only then is manifest and enacted through our bodies in bodily speaking and doing God-like deeds. For Irenaeus, it is only because our bodies, by necessity of who we are as bodily beings, participate in righteous deeds that the resurrection of the body is ensured: “[f]or it is manifest that those acts which are deemed righteous are performed in bodies” (*A.H.*, 2, 29, 2). Irenaeus developed this anthropological theme more fully within his understanding of the Incarnation and the work of redemption.

While he never actually quotes the passage, a statement in the book of Wisdom heavily influenced Irenaeus's anthropology: “For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his

own eternity” (Wisdom, 2:23). As the Son is the eternal incorruptible image of the Father, so those who are created in the Son’s image must also assume divine incorruptibility. However, it is precisely at this juncture that Irenaeus’s anthropology takes another unique turn, one that colors the whole of his theology.

Children and the Need for Growth

While we as human beings are created in God’s image and likeness and so will come to share in his eternity and imperishability, Irenaeus insisted that we must grow into the *imago Dei* and mature in his likeness. By the fact that we were created and newly existent in contrast to the eternal and perfect existence of God, we needed to grow into the perfection and incorruptibility for which we had been created. Mary Ann Donovan states: “The impotence was not on God’s side but on the side of humanity.”⁷ But Irenaeus argued in a significant passage that while all things are possible for God (except making what he created immortal),

[C]reated things must be inferior to Him who created them, from the very fact of their later origin; for it was not possible for things recently created to have been uncreated. But inasmuch as they are not uncreated, for this very reason do they come short of the perfect. Because, as these things are of later date, so are they infantile; so are they unaccustomed to, and unexercised in, perfect discipline. (*A.H.*, 4, 38, 1)

On one hand, to be created in the image and likeness of God, for Irenaeus, is to partake of God’s eternal and incorruptible nature. Yet, on the other hand, the very notion of creation necessarily demands that that which is created is not eternal and cannot be created as eternal for this would be a contradiction of terms. Moreover, only what is eternal—that is God—can be truly perfect. Thus, for Irenaeus, Adam and Eve (and, in a sense, all human beings) were

infantile and childlike in their likeness to God and needed to mature in and acquire, through discipline and faithfulness to God, God's eternal perfection and nature. The human race and each individual can only gradually appropriate the incorruptible likeness of God.

For from the very fact of these things having been created, [it follows] that they are not uncreated; but by their continuing in being throughout a long course of ages, they shall receive a faculty of the Uncreated, through the gratuitous bestowal of eternal existence upon them by God. . . . But being in subjection to God is continuance in immortality, and immortality is the glory of the uncreated One. By this arrangement, therefore, and these harmonies, and a sequence of this nature, man, a created and organized being, is rendered after the image and likeness of the uncreated God. (*A.H.*, 4, 38, 3)

In a similar manner Irenaeus argued,

How, then, shall he [man] be a God, who has not as yet been made a man? Or how can he be perfect who was but lately created? How, again, can he be immortal, who in his mortal nature did not obey his Maker? For it must be that thou, at the outset, shouldest hold the rank of a man, and then afterwards partake of the glory of God. (*A.H.*, 4, 39, 2)

God created everything for “the benefit of that human nature which is saved, ripening for immortality that which is [possessed] of its own free will and its own power, and preparing and rendering it more adapted for eternal subjection to God” (*A.H.*, 5, 29, 1).

While some, in opposition to Irenaeus, may argue that God could have made us perfect from the beginning, so even possessing incorruptible and immortal life, we should not miss the valid point that Irenaeus is attempting to make for it is relevant to our own lives. Yes, Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of God and so,

in a sense, are all of us, even though our likeness to God has now been tarnished by our present sinfulness. Nonetheless, according to Irenaeus, we, by nature, must grow and mature, “ripen,” into the likeness of God. As human beings we possess the foundational elements of being in the image and likeness of God—a free will, an intellect, a body—but it is only as we live, that is, knowingly and willingly acting through our bodies, that this similitude is truly manifested and fully actualized.

This need for growth, for Irenaeus, is where the source of the predicament of human sin lies. While Adam and Eve were created in the image and likeness of the eternal Son, being “brand new,” they were children, undisciplined in the ways of God and were vulnerable to the wiles and tricks of Satan. “But the man was a little one, and his discretion still undeveloped, wherefore also he was easily misled by the deceiver” (*Epid.*, 12. See 14).⁸

Irenaeus placed an important christological element at this critical juncture of human history. Even prior to their sin the Son of God visited Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to instruct them and help them mature into God’s eternal life.

And so fair and goodly was the Garden, the Word of God was constantly walking in it; He would walk round and talk with the man, prefiguring what was to come to pass in the future, how He would become man’s fellow, and talk with him, and come among mankind, teaching them justice. (*Epid.*, 12)

Despite the Son’s presence within the Garden, there was for Irenaeus a further reason as to why Adam and Eve so easily fell into the clutches of the devil. The one on whom they were modeled had not yet become man; the Son had not yet visibly assumed his own image and likeness and so they had no visible model to follow. The presence of the Son within the Garden merely prefigured and anticipated, as previously quoted, the future coming of the Son as man, thus enabling him to be truly “man’s fellow” capable of educating

man in the justice of God. Again, the visible and physical nature of being in the image and likeness of God is important. Only when the eternal Son manifested his own visible image could Adam and Eve and all of us truly grasp what it fully means to be in God's image and likeness.

For in times long past, it was *said* that man was created after the image of God, but it was not [actually] *shown*; for the Word was as yet invisible, after whose image man was created. Wherefore also he did easily lose the similitude. When, however, the Word of God became flesh, He confirmed both these: for He both showed forth the image truly, since He became Himself what was His image; and He re-established the similitude after a sure manner, by assimilating man to the invisible Father through means of the visible Word. (*A.H.*, 5, 16, 2)

In this passage, as well as in the previous one, it could be argued that Irenaeus perceived the incarnation of the Word was not only a response to sin but rather an indispensable component for the spiritual growth and maturity of Adam and Eve and, subsequently, for the whole of humankind. We perceive, already at the dawn of creation, how our creation in the Son's image and likeness is intertwined with the Son's own incarnation. Irenaeus endorsed St. Paul's insight that Adam is "the figure of him who is to come" (Rom. 5:14). Only by becoming man could the Son of God perfectly image his own image—manhood—and so perfectly exemplify how one is to live in his image and likeness. Moreover, only if the Son became man could he properly instruct us how to live in accordance with his likeness. For Irenaeus, not only are human beings created in the image and likeness of the Son of God, but they cannot truly live as icons of the Son without the Son becoming one of them. So keen is Irenaeus in establishing this bond between the Son and human beings that he stated that human beings were created precisely to provide the Son someone to save.

For inasmuch as He [the Son] had a pre-existence as a saving Being, it was necessary that what might be saved should also be called into existence, in order that the Being who saves should not exist in vain. (*A.H.*, 3, 22, 3; see also 5, 1, 1)⁹

Nonetheless while Adam and Eve were vulnerable to the deception of Satan, they had no excuse for sinning. Being in the likeness of God, they possessed “free will” and “the power of choice” (*A.H.*, 4, 37, 4).

[T]hey who have not obeyed shall, with justice, be not found in possession of the good, and shall receive condign punishment; for God did kindly bestow on them what was good; but they themselves did not diligently keep it, nor deem it something precious, but poured contempt upon His super-eminent goodness. (*A.H.*, 4, 37, 1)

Thus, Adam and Eve and the whole of their progeny tarnished their divine image and lost their divine similitude, and so came under the power of Satan (see *A.H.*, 3, 18, 1; 5, 2, 1; 5, 21, 3). As Irenaeus stated, “We lost, in Adam, the privilege of being in the image and likeness of God” (*A.H.*, 3, 18, 1). The most severe consequence of sin is that instead of obtaining the incorruptible nature of God, human beings now die, for “separation from God is death” (*A.H.*, 5, 27, 2). Adam and Eve fell under the power of death “because they did eat in disobedience; and disobedience to God entails death” (*A.H.*, 5, 23, 1).

Jesus: The Second Adam

For Irenaeus, the relationship between the Son of God and humankind, founded on creation in that human beings are created by the Son in his own image and likeness, finds its fulfillment in the Son becoming man and enabling humankind to obtain the goal for which it was originally created: the incorruptible likeness of the eternal

Son. This demands that within the Incarnation the Son of God must become man, and it must be man that the Son of God becomes.

He caused man (human nature) to cleave to and become one with God. For unless man had overcome the enemy of man, the enemy would not have been legitimately vanquished. And again: unless it had been God who had freely given salvation, we could never have possessed it securely. And unless man had been joined to God, he could never have become a partaker of incorruptibility. (*A.H.*, 3, 18, 7)

Irenaeus pointedly asked, “[H]ow can they (human beings) be saved unless it was God who wrought out their salvation upon earth? Or how shall man pass into God, unless God has [first] passed into man?” (*A.H.*, 4, 33, 4). Only if it is truly the Son who is man can he restore our likeness to himself, but, equally, only if the Son is truly one of us, can our image be restored by him. The Son of God must come into the world as man in order to seek out the lost sheep, and “save that very man who had been created after His image and likeness, that is, Adam” (*A.H.*, 3, 23, 1). The hand of God who first created man in his own image and likeness is the very same hand that now restores and perfects man in his own image and likeness (see *A.H.*, 5, 16, 1).

[U]nless He (the Son) had Himself been made flesh and blood after the way of the original formation [of man], saving in his own person at the end that which had in the beginning perished in Adam. . . . He had Himself, therefore, flesh and blood, recapitulating in Himself not a certain other, but that original handiwork of the Father, seeking out that thing which had perished. (*A.H.* 5, 14, 1 and 2)

The Son of God could not redeem us by his blood, “if He did not really become man, restoring to His own handiwork what was said

[of it] in the beginning, that man was made after the image and likeness of God" (*A.H.*, 5, 2, 1). It should be noted then, for Irenaeus, the Son of God took on himself a humanity after the very race of fallen Adam, for "if the Lord had taken flesh from another substance, He would not have reconciled that one to God which had become inimical through transgression" (*A.H.*, 5, 14, 3).¹⁰ In assuming our Adamic humanity, the Son "sets forth the recapitulation of the same man, who was at the beginning made after the likeness of God" (*A.H.*, 5, 12, 4). Thus, the Son was truly born of a woman, was truly wearied, was truly sorrowful, and truly suffered and died (see *A.H.*, 3, 22, 1–2). Notice here Irenaeus's important notion of "recapitulation": in becoming man the Son summed up and united (took to himself) all that it means to be human. The Son of God recapitulated into himself "His own handiwork; and on this account does He confess Himself the Son of man" (*A.H.*, 3, 22, 1.). The incarnation bears directly on the restoration of our being in the image and likeness of God, the incarnation understood as "the Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through His transcendent love, become what we are, that He might bring us to be even what He is Himself" (*A.H.*, 5, Preface).

The Son taking on our humanity in the incarnation was, for Irenaeus, the prerequisite for our being remolded into his image and likeness, but this was not enough. The Son had to assume into himself, to "recapitulate," the whole of man's sinful life and history and transform this life and history of disobedience by his obedience. In so doing, Jesus becomes the new Adam of a new human race that is re-created, through the Spirit, in his own image and likeness. Irenaeus saw it as significant that Jesus' ancestry in Luke's Gospel is traced all the way back to Adam himself and the Son of God, in becoming man, passed through all the stages of human growth from infancy to maturity (see *A.H.*, 3, 22, 3; 2, 22, 4). In recapitulating this human history and life of disobedience in his own obedience, he reversed the whole chronicle of disobedience.

For as by one man's disobedience sin entered, and death obtained [a place] through sin; so also by the obedience of one man, righteousness having been introduced, shall cause life to fructify in those persons who in times past were dead. (*A.H.*, 3, 21, 10)

It is significant for Irenaeus that Jesus died on the same day Adam first sinned—the day before the Sabbath (see *A.H.*, 5, 23, 2). Adam's disobedience is rectified by the obedience of the Second Adam finding his culmination on the cross.

For doing away with [the effects of] that disobedience of man which had taken place at the beginning by the occasion of a tree, "He became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross (Phil. 2:8);" rectifying that disobedience which had occurred by reason of a tree, through that obedience which was [wrought out] upon the tree [of the cross]. (*A.H.*, 5, 16, 3; see also 5, 19, 1)

For Irenaeus, it is only right and proper that, since it was man the devil conquered and by so doing brought death into the world, a man of our fallen race "comprising in himself that original man" should vanquish the devil and bring forth life.

[A]s our species went down to death through a vanquished man, so we may ascend to life again through a victorious one; and as through a man death received the palm [of victory] against us, so again by a man we may receive the palm against death. . . . [T]he Lord did perform His Command . . . by both destroying our adversary, and perfecting man after the image and likeness of God. (*A.H.*, 5, 21, 1 and 2)

The Spirit Remolds Us into the Likeness of the Son

Having recapitulated the whole of our sinful history on the cross and transforming it by his sacrificial act of love, the resurrected Jesus

becomes the first man to obtain the perfect image and likeness of God, for it is the risen humanity of Jesus that most fully manifests the Son's divine likeness to the Father. Through faith and baptism the Christian comes to partake of this risen life through the Holy Spirit (see *A.H.*, 5, 11, 2). It is the Holy Spirit that molds and fashions us into the image of Jesus, and in this way we take on the likeness of the Father as his children.

God manifested that he is indeed a God of power by vivifying what was mortal and making what is corruptible incorruptible. Again, Irenaeus emphasized that this divine power extends even to the flesh (see *A.H.*, 5, 3, 2 and 3; 5, 4, 2). Because human beings in their totality were created in the image and likeness of the Son, in that same incarnate Son they are re-created in his image through the Holy Spirit. We are spiritual, for Irenaeus, not in the sense that our "flesh has been stripped off and taken away," but because we have received the Holy Spirit (*A.H.*, 5, 6, 1).

Now the final result of the work of the Spirit is the salvation of the flesh. For what other visible fruit is there of the invisible Spirit, than the rendering of the flesh mature and capable of incorruption? (*A.H.*, 5, 12, 4; see 5, 13, 3)

It is "the union of flesh and spirit, receiving the Spirit of God, [that] makes up the spiritual man" (*A.H.*, 5, 8, 2; see also 5, 9, 1). It is only through the "outpouring of the Spirit" on the whole of us—body and soul—that we take on the likeness of God. "Those then, are the perfect who have had the Spirit of God remaining in them, and have preserved their souls and bodies blameless" (*A.H.*, 5, 6, 1).

Irenaeus argued, we "receive a certain portion of His Spirit, tending towards perfection, and preparing us for incorruption, being little by little accustomed to receive and bear God" (*A.H.*, 5, 8, 1). By the power of the Spirit, through lives of obedience, Christians are now growing and maturing into the Son's image and likeness as the Father intended from the beginning.

[W]here the Spirit of the Father is, there is a living man; . . . flesh possessed by the Spirit, forgetful indeed of what belongs to it, and adopting the quality of the Spirit, being made conformable to the Word of God . . . [R]eceiving the Spirit, [we] walk in newness of life, obeying God . . . [W]ithout the Spirit of God we cannot be saved. (*A.H.*, 5, 9, 3)

We are now gradually getting accustomed to the work of the Holy Spirit within us, who allows us to cry out “Abba,” Father, and so take on immortality. When we rise from the dead, the Spirit “will render us like unto him (the Son), and accomplish the will of the Father; for it shall make man after the image and likeness of God” (*A.H.*, 5, 8, 1).¹¹

Conclusion

Irenaeus had a rich understanding of what it means to be made and live in the image and likeness of God. The main points of Irenaeus’ understanding have relevance in our own lives.

First, to be in the *imago Dei* is to live our lives within the very life of the Trinity itself. It is within the Trinity that we assume our own divine likeness, that we become, through the transforming work of the Holy Spirit, children of the Father after the image of his eternal Son. Here we perceive the depth of our dignity as human persons.

Second, as Irenaeus has emphasized, we were created in the likeness of the eternal Son and so we are most intimately entwined from beginning to end with that Son, especially with the incarnate Son. It is Jesus, the incarnate Son, who manifests visibly what it means to be in the image and likeness of God. He teaches us through his works and actions how we are to live as images and likenesses of God. Most of all, through his obedience, even in his death on the cross, Jesus has freed us from sin, death, and the devil, those ancient enemies who would deprive us of our divine similitude. Moreover, Jesus through his resurrection has restored, in an unforeseen

manner, our likeness to God by allowing us to share in his incorruptible and immortal nature. Here Irenaeus prophetically anticipated by almost two thousand years the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. That Council wrote:

In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear. For Adam, the first man, was a type of him who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling. . . .

He who is the “image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15), is himself the perfect man who has restored in the children of Adam that likeness to God which had been disfigured ever since the first sin. Human nature, by the very fact that it was assumed, not absorbed, in him, has been raised in us also to a dignity beyond compare.¹²

Third, Irenaeus has encouraged us to appreciate and rejoice in our bodily existence. It is the whole of us—body and soul—that bears the likeness to God both within our very being and within our bodily words and actions. It is through the resurrection of our bodies that we take on the perfect image of Jesus, the risen and glorious man. Respect for our bodies and the bodies of others is an essential element of Christian Gospel.¹³

Last, we are conformed into the likeness of the incarnate Son of God through the Holy Spirit. He pours into our hearts the love of the Father allowing us in return to cry out “Abba,” Father. Moreover, he is the life and power within us that allows us to live holy lives and grow and mature in the likeness of Jesus. Equally, it is the Holy Spirit, dwelling within us, who allows us to participate in and appropriate the incorruptible and eternal life of the Father and the Son, and wholly attain the fullness of the *imago Dei*. For Irenaeus, this ultimately means that our dignity and life surpasses that of even the

angels. He concluded his work, *Adversus Haereses*, against those who would demean the dignity of human beings by denying our divine likeness, by declaring that the essence of God's handiwork is that

[The Father's Son], His offspring, the First-begotten Word, should descend to the creature, that is, to what had been moulded, and that it should be contained by Him; and, on the other hand, the creature should contain the Word, and ascend to Him, passing beyond the angels, and be made after the image and likeness of God. (*A.H.*, 5, 36, 3)

Gustaf Wingren clearly summarizes Irenaeus's concluding position: "This communion with God is manifested in a conclusive way in the resurrection of the dead, and the final, unutterable events of the Consummation, when the Spirit, or Christ, finally takes possession of man. The true life of man is fellowship with God."¹⁴ This judgment keeps with what is probably Irenaeus's most famous passage: "For the glory of God is a living man; and the life of man consists in beholding God" (*A.H.*, 4, 20, 7). The Father's glory resides in our being fully alive in the Holy Spirit as the perfect images of his Son. But to be fully alive, we must be consumed by the vision of God's own divine glory. It is this vision that fully transforms us into the fullness of his likeness. For Irenaeus this transforming vision comes not simply through theological study, but also, and more importantly, within the context of prayer. In prayer, the Holy Spirit empowers us to perceive the eternal splendor of the Father so we might be conformed into the likeness of his own radiant Son and in being conformed we, in turn, give the Father glory.

Notes

1. It is fascinating that, while the Old Testament prohibits the making of idols since no fabricated image of God bears his true likeness, human beings themselves are living images of God within the Jewish-Christian tradition. Moreover, Jesus, the Incarnate Son, is the pure icon of the Father.

2. The translation of Irenaeus's *Adversus Haereses* is taken from A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, ed., *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1989).
3. Dennis Minns, *Irenaeus* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1994), 25.
4. For Irenaeus, while the Son is the image of the Father, the Holy Spirit is seen as the image or similitude of the Son. "For His [the Father's] *offspring* and His *similitude* do minister to Him in every respect; that is, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*A.H.*, 4, 7, 4).
5. In a couple of places Irenaeus does seem to make a distinction between being in the image of God and being in the likeness of God, the former pertaining more to man's "bodily" image and the latter pertaining more to his "spiritual likeness" through the action of the Holy Spirit (see *A.H.*, 5, 6, 1; 5, 16, 2). Ultimately, for Irenaeus, the whole man is created in the image and likeness of the Son, and this can only be fully achieved through the indwelling and transforming work of the Spirit. See J. Fantino, *L'homme, image de Dieu chez saint Irénée de Lyon* (Paris: Cerf, 1984).
6. The translation of the *Epideixis* is taken from *Proof of the Apostolic Preaching, Ancient Christian Writers*, vol. 16, trans. by J. P. Smith (New York: Paulist Press, 1952).
7. See Mary Ann Donovan, *One Right Reading? A Guide to Irenaeus* (Collegeville, Minn.: The Liturgical Press, 1997), 132. See also R. F. Brown, "On the Necessary Imperfection of Creation: Irenaeus *Adversus Haereses* IV.38," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 28 (1975): 17–25.
8. Scholars debate as to how literally Irenaeus wants his readers to consider Adam and Eve to be children. Were they children merely in the sense of being spiritually, emotionally, and mentally immature, or were they even physically children? Irenaeus certainly means the former, and he may even mean the latter.
9. D. Unger ardently argues that, for Irenaeus, the Son of God would have become incarnate even if there had been no Fall. See "Christ's Role in the Universe According to St. Irenaeus: Part I," *Franciscan Studies* 26 no. 1 (1945): 3–20; and Part II, 26 no. 2 (1945): 114–37.
10. For further study on the need for the Son of God to take on himself a humanity of the fallen race of Adam, see Thomas Weinandy, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993).
11. On the work of the Holy Spirit in conforming humankind into the likeness of God, see J. G. M. Purves, "The Spirit and the *Imago Dei*: Reviewing the Anthropology of Irenaeus of Lyons," *Evangelical Quarterly*, 68 no. 2 (1996): 99–120.
12. *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, 22.
13. J. Behr argues that Irenaeus espouses a "bodily" asceticism that endorses full human sexuality. See *Asceticism and Anthropology in Irenaeus and Clement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 111–115, 211. I want to thank Matthew Steenberg for calling my attention to this work.
14. Gustaf Wingren, *Man and the Incarnation: A Study in the Biblical Theology of Irenaeus* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1959), 210–211.