

Dialogues on Jesus in China (5)

Did the Incarnation lower the dignity of the Lord of Heaven?

By Gianni Criveller

Being [the] Lord of Heaven and Earth and all creation, if He then becomes incarnate as Man, would it not be blasphemous? This seems a very illogical idea.

The question asked by Ye Xianggao on whether the Incarnation constitutes a lowering of the dignity of the Lord of Heaven, must have been recurrent in China if Aleni devoted four chapters to it in his *Introduction to the Incarnation*.

The one who reigned over Heaven and Earth and all Creation, His moving into the body of an infant seems to be not appropriate...

Not surprisingly, the thorny question was also debated in the *Diary of Oral Exhortations*. Aleni's interlocutors were thinking about the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven in terms of the Emperor, the Son of Heaven. They found it impossible to accept the humiliation implied by the descending of the Supreme Ruler to the human level.

The meaning of the term Tianzhu, is the same as what we know in China as the Emperor. If the Lord of Heaven was said to be incarnate, then I really cannot understand how [the] most supreme Lord of Heaven became incarnate and [was] born as man. Is not the idea blasphemous?

The objection raised in these dialogues is universal and is not an insurmountable obstacle to embracing the faith, according to Aleni. It already reveals a high esteem for the dignity of God and a fair judgement of the weakness of man. In his answer, Aleni explains in scholastic terms the infinite nature of God and the appropriateness of the Incarnation. However, according to Aleni, love is the ultimate motivation that moved God towards becoming human. It is not enough for the Lord of Heaven to be believed in. He wants to narrow down the distance between Himself and us. He wants to be in a loving relationship with us, because He is our closest kin.

Without the Incarnation, even if people on earth actually believe in His existence, they might still think that He is high above [in Heaven], so distant that there is no mutual relationship between Him and them. The Lord of Heaven is supreme, yet His love for



Aleni's drawing explaining how Jesus carries his cross up the mountain, taken from the book, *Explanations of the Scriptures with Images of the Lord of Heaven Incarnate*.

His millions of people is like a father's love for his children. The love is ever so deep like that of a close kin and really is our closest kin.

God is love; therefore there is no contradiction between divinity and humanity in Jesus. The Lord of Heaven is infinite not only in dignity, but also in goodness (from *The Introduction to the Incarnation*):

Therefore, the Incarnation of the Lord of Heaven did not lower his dignity, [but] was proof of his ultimate dignity and ultimate goodness. It was a manifestation of the greatness and depth of God's love.

It was not the Lord of Heaven who was lowered, but the nature of the human person which was elevated.

Therefore His most spiritual being, although in union with human nature, still maintained the wonder of His being.

Aleni shows through simple analogies or parables that God's love towards humanity was the motivation for the Incarnation. The first image is the grafting of pear and peach trees, and it aims to show how the nature of God did not change by uniting with humanity. Other parables are drawn from family and imperial life.

The Lord of Heaven's love for humankind is very much like a mother's love for her child. As a gentle, loving mother nurtures her child, she holds him and embraces him and bathes him herself. There is no question of the mother being disrespectful.

Two parables taken from the life of an emperor were also used and are reported in the three books of dialogues:

When there is great chaos across the country and the [officials have] no power to control the situation, then the supreme lord of the ninth sky [the most respected position of kings] comes personally to smooth out the situation and create peace.

Not only would it not be blasphemous, [but] the sense of gratitude [towards the king] would be doubled...

The Emperor dwells in the ninth sky, but if he sees his beloved son suddenly fall into a pond, would he not rescue his son immediately himself instead of being concerned about diminishing himself or waste time shouting for his left and right subordinates to help?

The examples of a mother who takes care of her child and an emperor that saves his son's life were able to touch the hearts of Aleni's listeners and readers. In this, Aleni proved to be an excellent teacher of the Gospel of love, adopting even the 'daring' image of God as mother, which, if it has biblical roots, never became mainstream in Christian literature. Moreover, in the dialogue mentioned above, Aleni adopted the term of Great Father Mother to define God, who could not leave his children alone and abandoned.

Aleni was able to go to the heart of the Christian message, avoiding the complex theological explanations that might have left Aleni's interlocutors ever more puzzled and perplexed. The post-Tridentine theology, incorrectly called 'counter-reformist', in which Aleni was educated, is considered to be too scholastic and juridical. It is assumed that preachers in those days presented an image of God resembling a severe and threatening sovereign, who inspires awe and fear rather than confidence and devotion.

Two attentive young Chinese scholars recently expressed an insight seldom grasped by Chinese commentators on the work of the missionaries in China.

In our view the most important reason for the breakthrough of Aleni and other Jesuits in China was not dependent on their theories, but because they brought with them the good news of Christ's love and everything they did in China was imbued with this love. (*Tripod*, No. 111, 1999, p. 37.)

Numerous missionaries indicate that in the Chinese context as elsewhere, today as yesterday, the existential experience of God as a loving Father constitutes the main reason for attracting new converts to the Christian faith. Let us keep announcing that we are not abandoned and alone; let's keep witnessing to the love of God, our father and mother.