

The Fathers of the First Ecumenical Council

John 17:1-13

From the Explanation of the Gospel of St. John

by Blessed Theophylact, Archbishop of Ochrid and Bulgaria

1–3. These words spake Jesus, and lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said, Father, the hour is come: Glorify Thy Son, that Thy Son also may glorify Thee; as Thou hast given Him power over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as Thou hast given Him. And this is life eternal, that they might know Thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, Whom Thou hast sent. Having encouraged the disciples to face bravely the coming tribulations, Christ raised their spirits again, this time by prayer. By praying, He teaches us that when temptations assail us we should put everything else aside and flee to God. However, one could say that Jesus was not actually praying, but rather conversing with the Father. Do not be surprised that it is said elsewhere that Jesus did pray, kneeling on the ground (see Mt. 26:39). For the Lord came, not only to reveal Himself to us, but to teach us every virtue by His own example, as a good instructor. Showing us that He goes willingly to His crucifixion, He says, *Father, the hour is come*. See how He longs for the Passion, and embraces it. He calls it His glory, and His Father's glory, for indeed, by the Passion both were glorified. Before the crucifixion, He was practically unknown, even to the Jews: *Israel does not know Me* (Is. 1:3), He said. Afterwards, the whole world flocked to Him.

What exactly is the “glory” that belongs to Him and the Father? It is the benefitting of all flesh by God's gifts. This is the glory of God. The Lord had previously commanded His disciples not to go into the way of the Gentiles (Mt. 10:5). Now, grace is no longer limited to the Jews. It is offered to the whole world. To this end, the Lord was planning to send the apostles to the Gentiles. But lest the disciples imagine this plan was His own notion, contrary to the will of the Father, Jesus reminds them that it is the Father Who has *given Him power over all flesh*. In what sense does Christ have power over all flesh, when, as we know, not everyone believes? Christ strives to bring everyone to faith. If some refuse to heed Him, it is not His fault, but the fault of those who reject His teaching. When it is said that the Father “gives” something to the Son, or that the Son “receives” something from the Father, understand that such expressions are a condescension to the limitations of His listeners' understanding, as we have pointed out before. Christ was always careful to avoid speaking openly about His divinity. The Jews would have been outraged to hear Him claim to be divine, so He said only as much as they could bear at the time. We employ similar condescension when speaking to infants: without naming the object, we point to bread or water, and ask, “Do you want this?” Remember how, at the beginning of the Gospel, the Evangelist stated boldly about Christ: *All things were made by Him* (Jn. 1:3), and, *As many as received Him, to them gave He power to become the sons of God*, (Jn. 1:12). How then can He, Who gives others the power to become sons of God, lack divinity in Himself and require it as a gift from the Father? And so, understand that an exalted reality underlies the humble statement. *To as many as Thou hast given Him*—here is the modest expression; *that He should give them eternal life*—here, the revelation of the power and authority of the Only-begotten Godhead.

If God alone gives physical life, how much more so eternal life? Christ calls the Father *the only true God*, in contrast to the false gods of the Gentiles, but by no means does He exclude Himself from the divinity of the Father. Because He is the true Son, He must also be true God, as the Evangelist insists in his general epistle: *Jesus Christ ... is the true God, and eternal life* (I Jn. 5:20). On the basis of the present text from the Gospel, the heretics would make a false god of the Son, and have the Father as their sole divinity. They should be careful not to forget everything else written by Saint John, who also tells us that the Son is the true light (Jn. 1:9). According to their reasoning, this must mean that the Father is a false light! And so, if the Evangelist calls the Father *the only true God*, it is to distinguish Him from the false gods of the Greeks, not from the Son. Incidentally, the heretics tie the passage, *Ye ... seek not the honour that cometh from God only* (παρὰ τοῦ μόνου θεοῦ, Jn. 5:44), to the one we have been discussing. They imagine that this reinforces their argument that if the Father is the only God (ὁ μόνος Θεός), the Son cannot be God. What an absurd conclusion!

4–6. I have glorified Thee on the earth: I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was. I have manifested Thy name ... We learn from this that the Father glorifies the Son in the same manner as the Son glorifies the Father. *I have glorified Thee on the earth*, Christ declares. Quite rightly did He add, *on the earth*, for the Father was already glorified in the heavens and worshipped by the angels, while the earth lay in ignorance. Having proclaimed the Father to all, the Son now declares, “I have glorified Thee everywhere on earth by imparting the knowledge of God, and I have finished the work which Thou gavest Me.” The work of the Only-begotten Son Incarnate is: to sanctify our nature; to overthrow the ruler of this world, who made himself out to be God; and to plant the knowledge of God in the creation. But how had He finished this work, when it was hardly begun? “I have finished what is My part to do,” He explains. Indeed, Christ has already accomplished the greater part by implanting in us the root of every good, by conquering the devil, and by flinging Himself into the maw of the all-devouring beast of death. From this “root” would follow by necessity all the fruits of the knowledge of God. It is in this sense that He has finished the work. “I have sown, I have planted the root: the fruits are sure to follow. *O Father, glorify Thou Me with Thine own self with the glory which I had with Thee before the world was formed.*” At that point the nature of flesh had not yet been glorified: it had not been made worthy of incorruption and of sharing the royal throne. This is why the Lord declares, *Glorify Thou Me*, meaning, “Receive My dishonored and crucified human nature, and raise it up to the glory which I—the Son and Word of God—had with Thee before the world was.” After His ascension, Christ in our human nature was seated on the royal throne, and now He is worshipped by all creation.

Then Jesus explains His words, *I have glorified Thee on the earth*, as meaning, I have manifested Thy name. How is it that the Son was first to manifest God’s name, when Isaiah said, *They ... shall swear by the true God* (Is. 65:16)? As we have often pointed out, God’s name was already revealed, but only to the Jews, not the whole world. Now Christ announces that God’s name will also be revealed to the Gentiles, since He has destroyed the devil, the teacher of idolatry, and planted the seeds of divine knowledge. If at that point the pagans already had some knowledge of God, it was only as creator-demiurge, not as Father. The Son revealed that the creator was the Father. Moreover, by His own words and deeds, Christ revealed not only His Father, but Himself.

6–8. I have manifested Thy name unto the men which Thou gavest Me out of the world: Thine they were, and Thou gavest them Me; and they have kept Thy word. Now they have known that all things whatsoever Thou hast given Me are of Thee. For I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from Thee, and they have believed that Thou didst send Me. By saying, *The men which Thou gavest Me*, the Lord makes two points: first, that He is not in opposition to the Father—“I did not snatch these men from You”; and second, that it is the Father’s will that the disciples believe in the Son—“You are well pleased that they have come to Me. Between us there is no rivalry, only love and oneness of mind. *And they have kept Thy word* by believing in Me and giving no heed to the Jews.” He who believes in Christ “keeps the word of God”—the Scripture and the law—for the Scripture proclaims Christ, and everything the Lord told the disciples was from the Father. As Jesus told the disciples earlier in this discourse, *I speak not of Myself* (Jn. 14:10). He also instructed them, *Abide in Me* (Jn. 15:4), and they did abide in Him and kept the word of the Father.

Now they have known that all things whatsoever Thou hast given Me are of Thee. This means: “Now have My disciples known that (in My divine nature) I have nothing of My own and I am not different from You. Nothing whatsoever of the things Thou hast given Me were given by grace, as are the divine gifts bestowed upon created beings. Rather, they are of Thee,” which means, “They are not something I have acquired, but belong to Me by nature; they belong to Me as the Son Who has full authority over His Father’s property.” One might ask, “How have the disciples known this?” The Lord provides the answer: *I have given unto them the words which Thou gavest Me*, which means, “They know this by My words and teachings.” Christ taught them continuously: “All that I have is of the Father; I came out from Thee; and, Thou didst send Me.” Throughout the Gospel the Lord affirms that He is not an adversary of God, for He does the Father’s will.

9–10. I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine. And all Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine; and I am glorified in them. To make it clear that everything He has been saying to the Father is purely for the benefit of His disciples, the Lord now adds, “*I pray for them*, and not for the world. I love and take care of My disciples; I bestow upon them what is Mine; and I beseech You, Father, to protect them. I do not pray to You on behalf of coarse, vulgar men who think about nothing except this world; *I pray ... for them whom Thou hast given Me; for they are Thine.*” When the Lord says, whom Thou hast given Me, this does not mean that the Father only recently gave Him authority over these men. It does not mean that there was a time when the Father had this authority, but the Son did not, nor that the Father lost this authority when that the Son gained it. To make this clear, the Lord declares, “*All Mine are Thine, and Thine are Mine.* For as long as they have been Yours, they have been Mine, for all Thine are Mine. They did not come into My possession a moment ago. And the fact that they are Mine in no way implies that they are no longer Yours. They have not been taken from You, for all Mine are Thine. Furthermore, I am glorified in them, which means, “I share the glory of My Father, just as the son of an emperor shares his father’s authority and glory: both are held in equal honor by their subjects.” If the Son were less than the Father, He would not dare to say, *All Thine are Mine*. The master owns everything that his servant has, while the servant owns nothing of his master’s. Here, on the contrary, what the Father has belongs to the Son, and what the Son has belongs to the Father. Thus the Son is glorified in all who belong to the Father, for the Son’s authority over all creation is equal to the Father’s.

11–12. And now I am no more in the world, but these are in the world, and I come to Thee. Holy Father, keep through Thine own name those whom Thou hast given Me, that they may be one, as We are. While I was with them in the world, I kept them in Thy name. Why does Jesus repeat, *I am no more in the world*, and, *While I was with them in the world*? At first glance these statements seem to contradict the promises He had made: *Lo, I am with you always* (Mt. 28:20), and, *Ye shall see Me* (Jn. 16:16). The truth is that He tells the disciples only as much as they are able to understand at the moment. Since they were likely to be distraught at being left without His help, Christ declares that He has committed them to His Father’s care and protection. (For the disciples’ benefit) He says to the Father, “Because You are calling Me to Yourself, You must guard them by Your own name,” which means, “by the help and power that You have given Me.” What kind of protection does the Father give? He bestows unity, that they may be one. “If they preserve love for one another and do not separate into factions, they will be invincible.” Of course, Christ does not mean that they should become literally one person. He means that they should imitate the Father and the Son by acquiring unanimity of thought and will among themselves. Because the disciples would have found it impossible to believe Him if He had said, “Even though I am no longer with you, I will still protect you,” Jesus reassures them by calling upon the Father to be their protector. By appearing to entreat the Father on their behalf, He gives them hope. In the same vein, when Christ says, *I kept them in Thy name*, He does not mean that He kept them safe only by the power of the Father’s name. He speaks in this manner—as we have explained many times—on account of the weakness of His listeners, who as yet could not grasp that He was God. By doing so, the Lord strengthens and reassures them: “While I was with you, you were protected and guarded by the power of the Father’s name. Now you must believe that He will continue to guard you, for it is His nature to do so.”

12–13. Those that Thou gavest Me I have kept, and none of them is lost, but the son of perdition; that the Scripture might be fulfilled. And now I come to Thee; and these things I speak in the world, that they might have My joy fulfilled in themselves. *Those that Thou gavest Me I have kept*: these words convey profound humility if one properly understands them. Throughout this chapter it might appear that Jesus is directing the Father to guard the disciples after His departure, like a man who gives his friend a sum of money for safe keeping and tells him, “Look, I have not lost any of this: neither must you.” But in reality, the Lord is consoling the disciples: “These things I speak in the world to reassure the disciples and give them joy. Knowing that You have received them safely and will guard them—just as I did, without losing any—they can again breathe freely.” How can the Lord claim to have lost none of them, when Judas fell away, and many other followers left Him as well (see Jn. 6:66)? “As far as it depended on Me,” He explains, “I have lost none of them. I did everything on My part to keep them, and I guarded them zealously. If some chose to reject Me, it is not My fault.” *That (ἵνα) the Scripture might be fulfilled*, meaning, every Scripture referring to the son of perdition. For he is mentioned in various places in the Psalms and in other prophetic books. As we have explained before, the conjunction ἵνα, (in order) that, is commonly used in Scripture to express the outcome of an event