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“CARNIS RESURRECTIONEM”

— Origins and Implications —

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State of the Question

The resurrection of Jesus is one of the central beliefs of Christianity. St. Paul does not say if Christ had not died, our faith would be in vain. Rather, “If Christ had not been raised,” he asserts, “your faith is futile” (1 Cor 15:17). Yet, history shows that resurrection had been a debated topic during the New Testament times (Mk 12:18; Lk 20:27; 2 Tim 2:18; Acts 23:8; 17:32; 1 Cor 15:12) and since then. Theologians of the post-New Testament period began to speak of the “resurrection of the flesh” (*anastasis sarkos*). This phrase continues to be used to the present day in the Roman Catholic theological circles (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), #1017). As a matter of fact, nowhere does the New Testament speak of the rising of the flesh but only of the “resurrection of the dead” (*anastasis nekrōn*) (Mt 22:31; Lk 20:35; Acts 4:2, 17:32; 23:6; 24:21; 26:23; Rom 1:4; 1 Cor 15:12-13, 21, 42; Heb 6:2 1 Pet 1:3) or resurrection “from/out of the dead ones” (*ek [tōn] nekrōn*) (1 Thess 1:10; Eph 5:14). Hence, in this post-modern natural scientific worldview it may be asked, is it adequate to speak of the resurrection in terms of physicality? This article will first trace how the term “flesh” came about to be associated with the resurrection. Then, it will demonstrate how this very expression was carried down through the centuries,

beginning with the scholastics. Finally, it will point out some implications of this expression.

1. Origins of the Term “Flesh”

This section will begin by examining the patristic teachings of the nature of the resurrection. This will help to understand the circumstances in which the term “flesh” originated as a way to discuss resurrection. The study of the church fathers is known as patristics. But “patristics” is a blanket-term, for it covers the church writers and thinkers up to the early middle ages. Since they wrote under different historical, theological, and political circumstances of the time, they are generally placed into three groups: Apostolic fathers, Apologists, and church fathers.

Apostolic fathers (who followed the Apostles) mostly wrote to fellow Christians for whom resurrection was not a problematic issue. So these fathers taught very minimal about the nature of resurrection. In other words, they did not put forward any philosophical reflections regarding the resurrection but just preached the fact of the resurrection. Furthermore, generally speaking, they often preserved the New Testament language “the resurrection of/from the dead.”

Yet, two among them introduced a new term into Christian literature, and in the ensuing centuries resurrection would come to be expressed in that term. Ignatius of Antioch (ca.35-ca.108) may have been the first to stress the carnal aspect of the resurrected Christ. “And after [Christ’s] resurrection he ate and drank with them like someone composed of flesh.”¹ The other is Clement of

¹ *Smyrn.* 3.3. In fact, Ignatius used words flesh (which represents the sphere of corruptibility) and spirit to speak of the resurrection of Christ. Thus, he asserted a spiritual transformation

Rome (d. ca.99) who in the *Second Letter of Clement* (ca.98-ca.100) went a step further in discussing resurrection.² It seems that the letter is addressed to the Corinthians to whom St. Paul had already written about resurrection in terms of “spiritual body” (1 Cor 15:44). It seems also that the problem concerning the resurrection was something still very much alive in the Corinthian community even after St. Paul’s time, a problem caused by some members who denied the judgment of the flesh or the rising of the flesh. Clement taught that if Christ won salvation in the flesh, then those who believe in Christ also would be saved in their “flesh.”³ Clement thus used a language found neither in St. Paul nor anywhere in the New Testament to discuss resurrection.

Apologists of the latter half of the second century mostly wrote to those outside the church, for they often had to defend the Christian faith in the face of persecutions and pagan accusations. Since they wanted the educated Greeks and Romans to see the logic of the Christian faith, they wrote it couched in the Greek philosophical system of the day.⁴

of the flesh in Christ. W. R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch: A Commentary on the Letters of Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 23.

² The authorship of this letter is debated among scholars. Although it is generally attributed to Clement of Rome, probably was not written by him. In addition, it is a homily rather than a letter.

³ *Second Letter of Clement*, 9.5.

⁴ In particular, what concerns us here is the prevalent anthropology. The ancient Israelite understood human beings as “living” beings because they have “the breath of life” (Gen 2:7; 6:17; 7:4; Job 12:10). Perhaps unaware of this biblical anthropology, Greek philosophers, especially Plato and Aristotle, developed a different anthropology. They described human beings in terms of “body and soul.” Although Plato viewed a sharp division between body and soul (*Phaedo*. 91d), he saw the human body as a unified whole, i.e., soul and body joined together (*Phaedrus*. 246c, *Phileb*, 29a-b). So Plato called this “whole” mortal (*Phaedrus*. 246c). But body is not the whole of a person. Plato’s pupil Aristotle viewed a living thing as a “body with a soul.” For Aristotle, soul refers to the principle of life in a living thing. This makes an inseparable connection between body (matter) and soul (form) (*De Anima*. 2.1, 412a and 413a). According to Aristotle, human beings have the highest soul compared to that of plants or animals because it possesses reason in addition to other lower ordered qualities (i.e., reproduction and nutrition possessed by plant’s soul; in addition, desire,

Justin Martyr (100-165) used the phrases “resurrection of the body”⁵ and “resurrection of the flesh”⁶ in order to wed Christianity to Greek philosophical categories. Irenaeus of Lyons (130-202) spoke of the resurrection of this earthly, fleshly body on the grounds of the power of God,⁷ of the Incarnation,⁸ and of the Eucharist.⁹ This approach by Justin and Irenaeus to the resurrection was also something that resulted from their millennial tendencies.¹⁰ Other Apologists just echoed the teachings of their contemporaries.¹¹

sense, and motion possessed by animal’s soul), hence his definition of human being as rational animal (*zoon logikon*). For Aristotle, the mind rather than the soul is eternal. In the New Testament, there are only five instances where human beings are described as “body and soul” (Mt 6:25; 10:28; Lk 12:22-23; 1 Thess 5:23; Rev 1:13). In other words, this is not a consistent manner that the New Testament speaks of human beings.

⁵ *Dialogue with Trypho*, 45.1; 80.4; 82.1.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.5.

⁷ “They will indeed rise in the flesh, although unwillingly, in order to acknowledge the power of the one who stirs them up from the dead” (*Against Heresies*, 1.22.1).

⁸ “If flesh did not have to be saved, the Word of God would never have been made flesh. And if the blood of the just had not been sought after, the Lord would never have had blood” (*Ibid.*, 5.14.1)

⁹ “However, how can they say again that the flesh, which is nourished by the body and blood of the Lord, goes to corruption and does not partake of life? Therefore, let them either change their opinion or abstain from offering what has just been said. However, our opinion is in harmony with the Eucharist, and the Eucharist in turn confirms our opinion. Indeed, we offer to him what is his, harmoniously declaring the participation and union of the flesh and Spirit. For just as the bread that is from the earth, when it receives the invocation of God, is no longer common bread, but the Eucharist, consisting of two realities, earthly and heavenly, so also our bodies, receiving the Eucharist, are no longer corruptible, but have the hope of resurrection” (*Ibid.*, 4.18.5).

¹⁰ “Millennialism” is about the thousand-year reign of Christ mentioned in Revelation 20:406. Justin and Irenaeus held different concepts of “millennialism.” Justin believed in a resurrection of the saints followed by their one thousand-year reign in Jerusalem. At the end of that reign, the wicked would be raised, and all would experience a final judgment (*Ibid.*, 80.5; 81.4). Seeing each day as a thousand years in the story of creation, Irenaeus believed in a six thousand-year reign for the conclusion of the created things (*Against Heresies*, 5.28.3).

¹¹ Titan, *Address to the Greeks* 15; Tertullian, *On the Resurrection*, 53.3; Methodius, *On Resurrection*, 2.18. In addition to the Incarnation, Tertullian argued the fleshly resurrection based on the resurrection of Lazarus. Although raised by Jesus, Lazarus was again prone

Among the church fathers of the fourth and fifth centuries, Jerome (340-420) expected the resurrection of this earthly, fleshly body.¹² Gregory of Nyssa (d. ca. 386) expressed different concepts of the resurrection in his various works, but also claimed a resurrection understood as the restoration of human nature to its original condition akin to the body of Adam and Eve before sin.¹³ Augustine of Hippo (354-430) disagreed to the idea that resurrection is the restoration of our original nature. Instead he accepted a physical understanding of the resurrected body's nature by stating that "the flesh rises again."¹⁴ Although it was somewhat difficult for Augustine to reconcile this phrase with St. Paul's words "for flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor 15:50), he had a solution. It was by claiming that in the resurrection we will possess flesh so that we will not be possessed by it.

Therefore, when we will have risen, flesh will not carry us, but we will carry it. If we carry ourselves we will possess it. If we will possess it, we will not be possessed by it. Because freed from the devil we are the kingdom of God, and so flesh and blood will not possess the kingdom of God.¹⁵

Augustine explained his position at length by saying that the resurrected flesh would not be corruptible.

The proper name of flesh and blood will also cease to exist; because they are names that apply to mortality. . . . However, the body, because it is not

to death. So without probing the dying of Lazarus after his resurrection, Tertullian claimed Lazarus as "the pre-eminent instance of resurrection." *On the Resurrection*, 53.3.

¹² *Letters*, 84.5.

¹³ *De Anima; De Hominis Opificio*, 17.

¹⁴ *Sermon*, 362.13.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 362. 14.

now mortal, is not properly called flesh and blood, because bodies are earthly; rather, it is called a body that is now said to be celestial. . . . Because the flesh in rising again will be changed into such a body that there will no longer be mortal corruption, and for that reason there will be no name of flesh and of blood.¹⁶

Thus, since Augustine a resurrection that involved flesh was well established. And this fleshly framework would become the basis for discussing the resurrection in the later centuries.

Up to this point it appears that an understanding of a resurrection in the flesh arose because some Christians denied it. The Apostolic fathers stressed that because Christ was in the flesh and rose in the flesh, Christians too will rise in the flesh. To those who denied it on the ground that flesh is not worthy of resurrection, the Apologists stressed the unity of the human person and the consequent necessity of the resurrection of the flesh. Although Augustine used the term “spiritual body” for resurrection, he meant by it a fleshly resurrection.

2. Scholastics and Church Officials

Influenced by Augustine, scholastics continued to express resurrection of the flesh. Hugh of St. Victor (ca. 1096-1141) maintained that God was able to reassemble physical body parts in a way that God sees appropriate for forming spiritual body.¹⁷ And the substance of this spiritual body would be nothing but flesh.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 362.18.21.

¹⁷ *De Sacramentis*, 2.17.18.

But if I will rise in any airy body, then it will not be I who rise. For how is it a true resurrection if the flesh is not able to be true? Therefore, clear reasoning suggests that, if the flesh will not be true, then certainly the resurrection will not be true. For a proper resurrection cannot be said to exist where what has fallen does not rise.¹⁸

Throughout his discussion of the resurrection, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) maintained the physicality of the resurrected body. He argued that the body would be transformed and reunited with the soul of that person to form the resurrected body. If the soul does not take back the same body "it will not be called a resurrection, but rather the assumption of a new body."¹⁹ Furthermore he asserts:

It is necessary that numerically the same person rise again; and this indeed happens when the numerically same soul is united to the numerically same body. For otherwise there would be no resurrection properly speaking, if the same person were not reformed. Hence to claim that the one who will rise is not numerically the same is heretical, since it is contrary to the truth of Scripture, which proclaims the resurrection.²⁰

Following the thinking of Augustine, the scholastics generally understood the resurrection in physical terms. They understood human being to be both body and soul. They maintained materially resurrected body.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 2.17.13.

¹⁹ *Supplement*, 79, a. 1, *respondeo*. *Supplement* is the section of the *Summa Theologiae* which, due to Aquinas's death, was completed by Reginald of Piperno.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 79, a. 2, *respondeo*.

The teaching of the scholastic period is carried into the Second General Council of Lyons (1274) whereby the council states “*Credimus etiam veram resurrectionem huius carnis, quam nunc gestamus, et vitam aeternam*” (“We believe also in the true resurrection of this flesh which we now bear, and life eternal”).²¹ *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1873) just retained the teachings of the day heavily influenced by creeds, church fathers, and other theologians. In addressing the resurrection, this *Catechism* dealt with the Apostles’ Creed (*Symbolum Apostolorum*).²² In “ARTICULUS XI” of this creed, the *Catechism* teaches about the “*carnis resurrectionem*.”²³ The *Catechism* clarifies the use of this terminology by stating that since the apostles wanted to show the immortality of the soul, they called resurrection “*carnis resurrectionem*,” for that which needed to be raised is the flesh, not the soul. Thus, by retaining this non-New Testament creedal language, this *Catechism* perpetuated the notion of the resurrection of the flesh that had been understood since the second century.

On December 14, 1983, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) published a document titled “Translation of the Phrase ‘Carnis resurrectionem’ in the Apostles’ Creed.” In this document the CDF asserted “the two formulas ‘resurrection of the dead’ and ‘resurrection of the flesh’ are different but complementary expressions of the same early tradition of the

²¹ Denzinger-Schönmetzer (DS), # 854.

²² The basis of the Apostle’s Creed is the Old Roman Creed used in the context of baptism in Rome from the end of the second century. The Apostle’s Creed acquired its name because of the belief that each of the Apostles contributing to each article of faith under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), # 194; Stephen W. Need, *Truly Divine Truly Human: The Story of Christ and the Seven Ecumenical Councils* (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 53.

²³ *Catechismus Concilii Tridentini* (1873) 130. English edition of this *Catechism* translates “*carnis*” into “body.” *The Catechism of the Council of Trent* (1982), 120.

Church.”²⁴ Furthermore, the CDF expressed its desire in favor of retaining the literal translation of *carnis resurrectionem* for a number of reasons:

...the exclusive or global prevalence of the formula, “resurrection of the dead,” would constitute a doctrinal impoverishment. While it is true that this expression implicitly contains the affirmation of the bodily resurrection, the expression of the formula, “resurrection of the flesh,” is more explicit in affirming that particular aspect of the resurrection, as is demonstrated by its origin.

Abandoning the formula “resurrection of the flesh” carries with it the inherent danger of supporting the modern theories that place the resurrection at the moment of death, in practice excluding the bodily resurrection, especially in the flesh. Regarding the present dissemination of the similarly “spiritualized” vision of the resurrection, the CDF has brought this issue to the attention of the Bishops in the letter “on certain questions concerning eschatology,” issued May 17, 1979.²⁵

Of the resurrection of Christ, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) teaches:

²⁴ <www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19831214_carnis-resurrectionem_en.html>

²⁵ Ibid. Nowhere does the document mention who promoted the modern theories of resurrection at the moment of death and of spiritualized vision of the resurrection. The CDF, however, might have had in mind, among others, Karl Rahner (1904-84) and Rudolf Bultmann (1884-1976). According to Rahner, resurrection occurs at the moment of one's death. At death, freed from time and space one immediately enters into eternity, hence into resurrected life. Brian Schimisek, *Resurrection of the Flesh or Resurrection from the Dead: Implications for Theology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013), 43. Of the resurrected body, Bultmann spoke of a spiritual body as a “Spirit-ruled *soma*.” According to him, at resurrection the body, rather than the reassembled flesh, would be transformed and ruled by the Spirit whereby the body would no longer be under the power of flesh. R. Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament*, vol.1 (London: SCM Press, 1952-55), 195, 201-02.

Christ's Resurrection was not a return to earthly life, as was the case with the raisings from the dead that he had performed before Easter. . . . Christ's Resurrection is essentially different. In his risen body he passes from the state of death to another life beyond time and space. At Jesus' Resurrection his body is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit: he shares the divine life in his glorious state, so that St. Paul can say that Christ is "the man of heaven."²⁶

Yet, the same *Catechism* repeats the statement of the Second Council of Lyons: "We believe in the true resurrection of this flesh that we now possess."²⁷ The tendency to retain traditional language is again exemplified here.

Thus, up to this point a ratification of earlier expression and terminology for the resurrected body as a physical body continues to be used in the current Catholic theological circles.

3. Implications

St. Paul the apostle (1 Cor 15:50) states that the "'resurrection of the flesh' is not a 'resurrection of physical bodies.'"²⁸ The church fathers did not share an understanding of human biology as much as we do today. So for the nascent church it was perhaps necessary to teach the resurrection of the flesh. In addition, the "resurrection of the flesh" language was shaped by the second and third century philosophical and theological debates. Removed from that time period by eighteen centuries, retaining the literal translation of *carnis resurrectionem* in

²⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, # 646.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, # 1017.

²⁸ Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, trans. J. R. Foster (New York, New York: Herder and Herder, 1971), 277.

the recent official church teaching (in order to be faithful to the tradition) seems to have implanted a gross physical characterization of resurrection into the Christian imagination. Such a characterization does not conform to a biblical understanding of resurrection. One may ask is not Scripture also a Tradition?

In the New Testament, resurrection is one expression of speaking of what happened to Jesus after his death. Other expressions are exaltation (Phil 2: 9-11), glory (Mt 16:27), seated at the right hand of God (Rom 8:34). Each of these expressions of Jesus's life after death essentially conveys the fundamental reality: transformation and change or resurrection to a new life rather than a resurrection that involves flesh.

For Christians this new life with Christ is a new birth (1 Pet 1:13), redemption (Rom 8:22-23), future true life (1 Tim 4:8; 6:19), and life eternal (Jn 6:51; 58). All of these point to the reality that Christians believe that they shall be with God, they shall take part in the divine life of the Triune God, and they shall see God face to face through Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit. Yet no one is able to articulate precisely what that life will be like or entail because no one who died in Christ has shared with us about his/her experience of life eternal. For resurrection is a transcendental state. So resurrection of the body must not be thought of in the physical terms that are relevant to this present state of biological existence. Does not St. Paul remind us that the resurrected state is something that is to be experienced after death? "Eye has not seen, and ear has not heard . . . what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). Perhaps that what is important now is having faith in the words that Christ our Savior spoke to Martha "I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live" (Jn 11:25). But what that form of resurrection and life might be is known only to God. A too-physiological understanding of bodily

resurrection impedes the appreciation of the radical transformation that is promised to us.²⁹

Conclusion

The “resurrection of the flesh” language is ultimately an “expression,” just like other expressions of the resurrection of Christ found in the New Testament that we just pointed out. Failure to understand this will result in meaningless notions of life after death involving flesh that will be easily dismissed by today’s educated mind.

²⁹ Anthony Kelly, *Eschatology and Hope* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2006),176.