

Historic Commentary

(Trinity Sunday - Year B)



The Liturgy Letter

Commentary on John 3:1-17 from Selected Church Fathers

[Thomas Aquinas' curated commentary on John 3](#), from a 13th century document called the [Catena Aurea](#) that contains compiled verse by verse commentary on the Gospels from the Patristics and others.

[Venerable Bede](#): Nicodemus was one of the many who believed in Jesus, and therefore he came at night, and not during the day because he was not yet illumined with the gracious heavenly light. This ruler of the Jews came to Jesus by night, hoping, that is, by so secret an interview, to learn more of the mysteries of the faith; the late public miracles having given him a rudimentary knowledge of them.

[Cyril of Alexandria](#): Nicodemus imagines that he can become pious enough to attain salvation merely by marveling at the wonders Jesus had done.... Calling Jesus a teacher from God and a co-worker with him, he does not yet know that Jesus is by nature God, nor does Nicodemus understand the plan of salvation according to the flesh. Instead, he still approaches Jesus as a mere man and has only a slight conception of who he is.

[Chrysostom](#): In other words: Unless you are born again and receive the right instruction, you are wandering somewhere out there far away from the kingdom of heaven. But he does not speak as plainly as this, preferring to make what he says easier to hear by generalizing, "Unless one is born again." In this way he does not specifically address his remarks at Nicodemus.... Now, if he had spoken to the Jews this way they would have ridiculed him and then left. But Nicodemus shows he wants to learn.... And so what Christ says to him is something like this: If you are not born again, if you do not share in the Spirit that comes through the washing of regeneration, everything you think about me will be from a human point of view, not a spiritual one.... Now, some take the expression "again" to mean "from heaven"; others think it means "from the beginning." Either way, it is impossible, Christ says, for someone who is not born in this way to see the kingdom of God. By these words our Lord discloses his nature, showing that he is more than what he appears to the outward eye.

[Chrysostom](#): At our birth we were born without our own knowledge or choice by our parents coming together. We were brought up with bad habits and wicked training. However, so that we may not remain the children of necessity and of ignorance, but may become the children of choice and knowledge and may obtain in the water the remission

of sins formerly committed, there is pronounced over the one who chooses to be born again and has repented of his sins the name of God the Father and Lord of the universe. The one who leads to the font the person that is to be washed calls him by this name alone. For no one can utter the name of the ineffable God. And if any one dares to say this name, he raves with a hopeless madness. Also this washing is called illumination because those who learn these things are illuminated in their understandings. The one who is illuminated is thus washed in the name of Jesus Christ, who was crucified under Pontius Pilate, and in the name of the Holy Spirit, who through the prophets foretold all things about Jesus.

Athanasius: Once the likeness painted on a panel has been effaced by stains from outside itself, the one whose likeness it is needs to come once more to enable the portrait to be renewed on the same wood. And, for the sake of his picture, even the mere wood on which it is painted is not thrown away, but the outline is renewed upon it. In the same way, the most holy Son of the Father, being the image of the Father, came to our world to renew humankind once made in his likeness. He came to find such lost individuals by the remission of their sins. He says as much himself in the Gospels: "I came to find and to save the lost." This is why he also said to the Jews, "Except one be born again," not meaning, as they thought, birth from a woman, but speaking of the soul born and created anew in the likeness of God's image.

Gregory of Nazianzus: And indeed from the Spirit comes our new birth, and from the new birth our new creation, and from the new creation our deeper knowledge of the dignity of him from whom it is derived.

Augustine: [Nicodemus] knew only one birth from Adam and Eve. He did not yet know [the birth] from God and the church. He knew only the parents who beget death. He did not yet know the parents who beget life. He knew only the parents who beget those who will succeed them. He did not yet know the parents who, living forever, beget those who will remain. Therefore, although there are two births, he only knew one. One is from earth, the other from heaven. One is from the flesh, the other from the Spirit. One is from mortality, the other from eternity. One is from male and female, the other from God and the church. But these two are each individual instances. Neither the one nor the other can be repeated.

Chrysostom: [Nicodemus] coming to Jesus, as to a man, is confused and startled and perplexed on learning greater things than any human being could speak, things no one had ever heard before. For a while, he is impressed by the sublime character of the sayings, but his mind is darkened and unstable, borne about in every direction and on the point of falling away from the faith. Therefore he objects to what he has heard as being impossible in order to bring out a fuller explanation from Jesus.... There were two difficulties for him. The first concerned the kind of birth Jesus was talking about; the second, this idea of the kingdom since neither had the name of the kingdom ever been heard among the Jews, nor of a birth like this. But he stops for a while at the first, which most astonished him.

Augustine: You wonder why a sinner should be born of the seed of a just person. Don't you also wonder why a wild olive is born of the seed of an olive tree? Here is another comparison: think of the baptized righteous person as a grain that has been gleaned. Don't you observe that from this gleaned grain wheat is born with the chaff, without which it was sown? Again, while the propagation of those who are reborn is a matter of spiritual regeneration, do you really want a person to be born circumcised of a circumcised person? Certainly this kind of generation is a bodily act, and circumcision is a bodily act. And yet the offspring of a circumcised man is not born circumcised. So in the same way the offspring of a baptized person cannot be born baptized, because nobody is born again before being born.

Chrysostom: You call him "Master" and say that he "comes from God," and yet you do not receive his words but utilize a word with your master that brings in endless confusion. For the "how" is the doubting question of those who have no strong belief and are still earthbound. Therefore Sarah laughed when she said, "How?" And many others who have asked this question have fallen from the faith.

Some ask, "How was he begotten?" others, "How was he made flesh?" They subject that infinite essence to the weakness of their own reasonings. Knowing this, we ought to avoid this unseasonable curiosity because those who search into these matters will, without ever learning the "how," fall away from the right faith. Nicodemus here asks from anxiety.... But observe how ridiculous anyone talks when he commits spiritual things to his own reasonings.

Tertullian: For the law of baptizing has been imposed and the formula prescribed: "Go," he says, "teach the nations, baptizing them into the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." The comparison with this law of that definition, "Unless one has been reborn of water and Spirit, he shall not enter into the kingdom of the heavens," has tied faith to the necessity of baptism. Accordingly, all thereafter who became believers used to be baptized.

Basil the Great: First of all, it is necessary that the continuity of the old life be cut. And this is impossible unless one is born again, according to the Lord's word. For the regeneration, as indeed the name shows, is a beginning of a second life. So before beginning the second, it is necessary to put an end to the first. For just as in the case of runners who turn and take the second course, a kind of break and pause intervenes between the movements in the opposite direction, so also in making a change in lives it seems necessary for death to come as mediator between the two, ending all that goes before, and beginning all that comes after.

Chrysostom: That the need of water [in baptism] is absolute and indispensable, you may learn in this way. On one occasion, when the Spirit had flown down before the water was applied, the apostle did not stand idle at this point, but, as though the water were necessary and not superfluous, observe what he says, "Can any one forbid water so that these should not be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit as well as we?" Why then is water needed?... In baptism, the pledges of our covenant with God are fulfilled: burial

and death, resurrection and life. And these all take place at once. For by the immersion of our heads in the water, the old person disappears and is buried as it were in a tomb below and wholly sunk forever. Then as we raise them again, the new person rises in his place. As easy as it is for us to dip and to lift our heads again, that is how easy it is for God to bury the old person and to show forth the new. And this is done three times so that you may learn that the power of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit fulfills all this.

Augustine: And then that rebirth, which brings about the forgiveness of all past sins, takes place in the Holy Spirit, according to the Lord's own words, "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, one cannot enter the kingdom of God." But it is one thing to be born of the Spirit, another to be fed by the Spirit; just as it is one thing to be born of the flesh, which happens when a mother gives birth, and another to be fed from the flesh, which appears when she nurses the baby. We see the child turn to drink with delight from the bosom of her who brought it forth to life. Its life continues to be nourished by the same source which brought it into being.

Ambrose: Who is the one who is born of the Spirit and is made spirit but he who is renewed in the spirit of his mind? This certainly is he who is regenerated by water and the Holy Spirit, since we receive the hope of eternal life through the laver of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Spirit. And elsewhere the apostle Peter says, "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit." For who is the one who is baptized with the Holy Spirit but the one who is born again through water and the Holy Spirit? Therefore the Lord said of the Holy Spirit: "Very truly I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being born of water and Spirit." And therefore he declared that we are born of him in the latter case, through whom he said that we were born in the former. This is the sentence of the Lord. I rest on what is written, not on argument.

Leo the Great: Whoever of you, therefore, takes pride (with devotion and faith) in the name of Christian, ponder, by an accurate judgment, the grace of this reconciliation. To you once "cast aside," to you driven out from the thrones of "paradise," to you dying from long exiles, to you scattered into "dust" and ashes, who had no longer any hope of living—to you has "power" been given through the incarnation of the Word. With it, you can "return from far away" to your Maker, can recognize your Father, can become free from slavery and can be made again a child rather than an outsider. With this power, you who were born of flesh that is subject to decay can be "born again from the Spirit" of God and can obtain through grace what you do not have through nature.

Chrysostom: There is no longer a mother, or birth pangs, or sleep or coming together and embracing of bodies. From here on out, all the fabric of our nature is framed above, of the Holy Spirit and water. The water brings about the birth of the one who is born. What the womb is to the embryo, the water is to the believer because the water is where the person is fashioned and formed. At first it was said, "Let the waters bring forth the creeping things that have life." But from the time that the Lord entered the streams of the Jordan, the water no longer gives the "creeping things that have life" but souls that are rational and endued with the Spirit.... But that which is fashioned in the womb needs time, whereas that fashioned in the water is all done in an instant.... For the nature of the

body is such as to require time for its completion, but spiritual creations are perfect from the beginning.

Theodoret of Cyr: If the only meaning of baptism were remission of sins, why would we baptize newborn children who have not yet tasted of sin? But the mystery of baptism is not limited to this. It is a promise of greater and more perfect gifts. In it are the promises of future delights. It is the type of the future resurrection, a communion with the master's Passion, a participation in his resurrection, a mantle of salvation, a tunic of gladness, a garment of light, or rather it is light itself.

Gregory of Nyssa: We know too that the flesh is subject to death because of sin, but the Spirit of God is both incorruptible and life-giving and beyond death. As at our physical birth there comes into the world with us a potentiality of being again turned to dust, plainly the Spirit also imparts a life-giving potentiality to the children begotten by himself. What lesson, then, do we learn from this? We learn that we should wean ourselves from this life in the flesh, which has an inevitable follower, death; and that we should search for a way of life that does not bring death along with it.

Tertullian: The Lord himself axiomatically and distinctly pronounced, "that which is born of the flesh is flesh," because it is born from the flesh. But if he here spoke simply of a human being and not of himself, then you must deny absolutely that Christ is man and must maintain that human nature was not suitable to him. And then he adds, "That which is born of the Spirit is spirit," because God is a Spirit, and he was born of God. Now this description is certainly even more applicable to him than it is to those who believe in him. But if this passage indeed applies to him, then why does not the preceding one also? For you cannot divide their relation and adapt this to him and the previous clause to all other people, especially as you do not deny that Christ possesses the two substances, both of the flesh and of the Spirit. Besides, as he was in possession both of flesh and of Spirit, he cannot possibly—when speaking of the condition of the two substances that he himself bears—be supposed to have determined that the Spirit indeed was his own but that the flesh was not his own. Forasmuch, therefore, as he is of the Spirit, he is God the Spirit and is born of God; just as he is also born of the flesh of man, being generated in the flesh as man.

Ambrose: "Where it chooses," says the Scripture, not "where it is ordered." If, then, the Spirit does breathe where it chooses, cannot the Son do what he wills? Why, it is the very same Son of God who in his gospel says that the Spirit has power to breathe where it chooses. Does the Son, therefore, confess the Spirit to be greater, in that it has power to do what is not permitted to himself?

Augustine: A father, a man who will one day die, begets through his wife a son to succeed him; God begets from the church sons, not to succeed him but to remain with him. And [the Gospel] continues: "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit." Therefore we are born spiritually, and in the Spirit we are born by word and sacrament. The Spirit is present that we may be born. The Spirit is present invisibly from whom you are born, because you too are born invisibly. For [the Gospel]

continues and says, “Do not wonder that I have said to you, ‘You must hear his voice but do not know where he comes from or where he goes.’” No one sees the Spirit. And how do we hear the voice of the Spirit? A psalm sounds forth: it is the Spirit’s voice. The gospel sounds forth: it is the Spirit’s voice. God’s word sounds forth: it is the Spirit’s voice. “You hear his voice, but do not know where he comes from or where he goes.” But if you too should be born of the Spirit, you will be such that he who is not yet born of the spirit has no idea where you come from or where you go. For he continues and says, “So is everyone who is born of the Spirit.”

Augustine: As a human being he was on earth, not in heaven where he now is ... although in his nature as Son of God he was in heaven, but as Son of man he was still on earth and had not yet ascended into heaven. In a similar way, although in his nature as Son of God he is the Lord of glory, in his nature as Son of man he was crucified.

Chrysostom: Having made mention of the gift of baptism, he proceeds to the source of it, that is, the cross.... These two things, more than anything else, declare his unspeakable love: that he both suffered for his enemies and, having died for his enemies, he freely gave them by baptism the entire forgiveness of all of their sins.

Ambrose: It was good that the Lord ordained that, by the lifting up of the brazen serpent, the wounds of those who were bitten should be healed; for the brazen serpent is a type of the cross.... In the same way, the world was crucified in its allurements. Therefore not a real but a brazen serpent was hung. This is so because the Lord took on himself the likeness of a sinner in his body but, in actuality, was without sin. In this way, he imitated a serpent through the deceitful appearance of human weakness, so that when he laid aside the slough of the flesh, he might destroy the cunning of the true serpent.

Cyril of Alexandria: This story is a type of the whole mystery of the incarnation. For the serpent signifies bitter and deadly sin, which was devouring the whole race on the earth ... biting the Soul of man and infusing it with the venom of wickedness. And there is no way that we could have escaped being conquered by it, except by the relief that comes only from heaven. The Word of God then was made in the likeness of sinful flesh, “that he might condemn sin in the flesh,” as it is written. In this way, he becomes the Giver of unending salvation to those who comprehend the divine doctrines and gaze on him with steadfast faith. But the serpent, being fixed upon a lofty base, signifies that Christ was clearly manifested by his passion on the cross, so that none could fail to see him.

Chrysostom: The text, “God so loved the world,” shows such an intensity of love. For great indeed and infinite is the distance between the two. The immortal, the infinite majesty without beginning or end loved those who were but dust and ashes, who were loaded with ten thousand sins but remained ungrateful even as they constantly offended him. This is who he “loved.” For God did not give a servant, or an angel or even an archangel “but his only begotten Son.” And yet no one would show such anxiety even for his own child as God did for his ungrateful servants....

He laid down his life for us and poured forth his precious blood for our sakes—even though there is nothing good in us—while we do not even pour out our money for our own sake and neglect him who died for us when he is naked and a stranger.... We put gold necklaces on ourselves and even on our pets but neglect our Lord who goes about naked and passes from door to door.... He gladly goes hungry so that you may be fed; naked so that he may provide you with the materials for a garment of incorruption, yet we will not even give up any of our own food or clothing for him.... These things I say continually, and I will not cease to say them, not so much because I care for the poor but because I care for your souls

Augustine: Unless the Father, you see, had handed over life, we would not have had life. And unless life itself had died, death would not have been slain. It is the Lord Christ himself, of course, that is life, about whom John the Evangelist says, “This is the true God and eternal life.” It was he himself that through the prophet had also threatened death with death, saying, “I will be your death, O death; I will be your sting.” This was as though he had said, “I will slay you by dying. I will swallow you up. I will take all your power away from you. I will rescue the captives you have held. You wanted to hold me, though innocent. It is right that you should lose those you had the power to hold.”

Venerable Bede: Our Redeemer and Maker, who was Son of God before the ages, became Son of man at the end of ages. Thus the one who, through the power of his divinity, had created us to enjoy the happiness of everlasting life, might himself restore us, through the weakness of our humanity, to recover the life we had lost.