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Doctoral Thesis

**BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE INCORRUPTIBILITY CONCEPT IN
ST. IRENAEUS’ ANTHROPOLOGY**

Abstract

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Key words

Biblical anthropology, *aphtharsia* (incorruptibility), St. Irenaeus of Lyons, biblical typology, Trinitarian vision, image and likeness, dichotomism, holism, Gnosticism

Introduction

St. Irenaeus brought an essential contribution to the development of the Christian thinking and spirituality through everything he created, wrote or lived as a bishop of the Church. Despite this outstanding contribution, his life and work have been hardly known, explored and used nowadays. The present research is motivated by the pioneering thinking and openness of the Christian experience of this important father of the Church. St. Irenaeus is a cornerstone for most of the research trends in theology: dogmatics, spirituality, biblical theology, history of the church etc. Especially at anthropological level, namely the biblical anthropology, St. Irenaeus has been neglected. The research development in this field may bring forth fundamental ideas for the contemporary theological debate regarding the man, in a context where the challenges are decisive. We refer precisely to those generated by biology and genetics, by the global warming and environment, by the economic disparities and the international socio-political problems.

In St. Irenaeus' theological work, one can value the key role played by the incorruptibility concept, namely when shaping a correspondence relationship between the biblical teaching about God and that about man. This concept synthesizes several dimensions of the biblical anthropology as it was developed by the bishop in his work: a Christological one because it is built in relation to the event of the Son's incarnation; an economical one, since man's process of growth and development towards his destiny is performed in all the stages of the divine economy in history; an ecclesiological and a pneumatological one because incorruptibility, as the man's destiny, is performed by the Holy Spirit in the Church.

In the present paper, we aim to accomplish an analysis of the biblical foundations which define and support the concept of incorruptibility as it was formulated in St. Irenaeus' theological and anthropological thinking. To this aim, we would like to analyze some of the most important biblical exegeses of the bishop as we attempt to view the way in which these texts participate to the definition of the concept of incorruptibility as well as their implications at anthropological level. We have in view both texts from the Old Testament (namely the Genesis and the Psalms) and the New Testament (especially the Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John and the Pauline epistles: Romans, Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, and Ephesians)

With respect to its purpose, the paper is structured on three parts, with two chapters each, followed by conclusions and bibliography. Apart from the introductory chapter, the first part contains a chapter where we aim to make a brief overview of St. Irenaeus' life and work, followed by an analysis of the bishop's exegetic method. The chapter ends on an application having the role to prove the biblical character of St. Irenaeus' anthropology. One of the biblical typology ("Adam – Christ" is analyzed, being used by the bishop in establishing his thinking about the man. The second part comprises the analysis of the incorruptibility concept. In the third chapter the idea of

incorruptibility is studied, as it appears in the Scripture, in the Old and New Testament. As an approach method, we only deal with the occurrences of the term „incorruptibility” in the biblical text. In the next chapter, the analysis continues by highlighting the definition of the concept by the Gnostics and by St. Irenaeus. The third part is dedicated to the analysis of St. Irenaeus’ biblical exegeses to the Scripture excerpts that substantiate the concept of incorruptibility. The fifth chapter delves into the analysis of several texts from the Old Testament, especially Gen. 1-3 and Ps. 81. The sixth chapter focuses on passages from the New Testament while the analysis of interpretations is structurally made according to the biblical texts: synoptic, John’s gospel and Paul’s gospel. The paper ends in a series of conclusions about the research, with appreciations regarding the perspectives opened by the biblical research on St. Irenaeus. In the end of the paper we present the bibliographic resources used, classified in biblical comments, specialty studies in anthropology and referring to St. Irenaeus, followed by papers and studies in the field.

1. St. Irenaeus – a biblical theologian

In the second chapter, alongside a synthesis on St. Irenaeus’ life and works, we attempted to prove the biblical character of the bishop’s work. His reputation as a biblical theologian is entirely justified and it was supported by a series of observations taken from the analysis of the bishop’s work as well as by the critical notes on the literature. We showed that this biblical character is not only given by massive quotations from the Scripture texts but also by a clear awareness of the nature of the biblical text, by a profound understanding of the reason why Scripture should be interpreted and by a real identification of some principles governing the hermeneutical exercise. The bishop rejects the idea that the Scripture would be a text with a hidden meaning, needing a complicated method of interpretation and identification of that meaning. He is fully aware that the biblical text is an “incarnation” of the divine Word within the human parameters of communication that is within a text admitting a certain language, specific literary forms and particular communication means, etc. The interpretation is understood as an inherent part of the Christian experience, of man’s relation to God’s revelation. In comparison with the Gnostics, the bishop believes that the interpretation of the sacred text admits other commitments than the approach of a poetic, philosophic or mythological text. The author of the Scripture is God Himself; He is the one who inspired the biblical author to write and He is the one who assists and inspires the interpreter to correctly understand the message of the Scripture. As an exercise of a charisma, the interpretation is performed in the Church, in line with an interpretative tradition coming from the Apostles.

If the literature has focused on clarifying the importance of the *Rule of truth* in the interpretation of Scripture at St. Irenaeus, in this paper we tried to synthesize the main principles guiding the bishop in the Scripture interpretation. He placed some of them in full view, he

explained their role himself and that is why they have been easily identified. An example in this respect is the use of the biblical typology to identify the whole message of the Scripture which is exposed in the two Testaments. We needed to discover some others ourselves, by analyzing the bishop's exegeses to different biblical passages or to observe them from different positions adopted against the Gnostics.

In the research undertaken, we underline St. Irenaeus' visions on the Scripture as an authority. Such an approach has important implications for the correct understanding of St. Irenaeus' work and ensures a good assessment of his exegetic method. We especially emphasize the idea that the Scripture, as authority, through interpretation, offers the believers relevant answers to fundamental questions and real problems in the life of the local Church. In order not to be subjected to the breach between the academic theology and the practical one, we present our conclusions according to St. Irenaeus' spirit and in compliance with the wish of the biblical exegesis to propose real implications and applications from the study of the Scripture to man's life in the world.

St. Irenaeus strongly believed that, as far as the relation with the sacred text is concerned, the distinct approach of Christianity is given by the understanding that God's word is first and foremost a person. As a text, the Scripture is an "incarnation" of the divine Word which makes itself accessible to man, to his way of existence and his need of communication. This vision makes the interpreter careful to the way the biblical text witnesses the lively and real presence of the divine person in relation to the man and the world. That is why the Scripture is not a coded text, but one addressing to each and everyone, with the intention to help them know God and to have access to Him. Understood as authority, the Scripture does not impose itself, does not have intrinsic powers like a magical text, but it is always supported and affirmed by its author who involves himself in order to accomplish what he wrote in the biblical text. To the same extent, the interpreter is required to place himself in an authority frame, represented by the Church and its Tradition as well as by a personal and real living of the truth revealed in the Scriptures.

Such an understanding of the Christian Bible, as it was discovered in St. Irenaeus' work, may bring a significant contribution to the dynamics of the Church in the beginning of the XXIth century which inherits a critical breach between the academic and the practical theology. St. Irenaeus, through the power of his thinking and his life model culminating with his martyrdom in Christ, proves that the interpreter of the Scripture cannot be a man estranged from the ecclesial experience, from the apostolic community, from the liturgical and sacramental life of the Church, from the real problems faced by the believers. The interpretation is a charisma of the Holy Ghost which is received and is exercised in the saints' communion in the Church, respecting the authority of the predecessors and assuming the responsibility to continue their work, offering the Church and the world meanings of the Scripture in accordance with the current problems.

2. Incorruptibility – a biblical concept

A chapter of our research is represented by the analysis of occurrences of incorruptibility in the Scripture as well as by an assessment of the conceptualization of incorruptibility at the Gnostics and St. Irenaeus. From the analyzed texts, we drew the conclusion that the biblical meaning of the notion incorruptibility is twofold. On one hand, it refers to God's being: incorruptibility is a divine feature which, alongside immortality, characterizes eternity and the lack of the becoming, of a movement or necessity in God. Incorruptibility shows perfection and full sufficiency in itself of the divine being which revealed itself in the Gospels. Incorruptibility also characterizes the entire economy of God, his actions and words, namely those performed in the Son's incarnation. On the other hand, the term is applied to the human being, who is called to live in union with God, without being subject to the fall, to the corruptibility as he is in the present times. When applied to the man, incorruptibility has two hypostases: it represents the life quality and the nature of the resurrected, restored man – it is an heritage or a gift from God shared by man for eternity; in opposition with the corruptness, the restoration process of the man starts in this world and the believer updates incorruptibility in this world through the life he lives with God in the Church. Thus, incorruptibility is a feature or a quality of the Christian relationships and love as well as a feature of the inner man, of the Christian character.

The exploration of the biblical presence of the word *aphtharsia* is at its first stage in the research field and the present paper contributes to opening this path. The literature on the biblical anthropology neglects this important Pauline concept while the biblical commentaries place it in the field of eschatology. As we attempted to highlight in the present paper, *aphtharsia* has significant anthropological meanings and needs a deeper inspection of the specialists. We believe that a research follow-up in this respect may foster valuable results for the biblical anthropology, a field with many challenges, both from science and the new philosophical and religious trends specific to the postmodernist era. The concept of incorruptibility especially represents a serious ally in the fight with the dualist dichotomies, with the moral relativism and the risk of isolation faced by modern Christianity.

3. A potential solution to dichotomism or trichotomism

The study of St. Irenaeus' work and more especially of his teachings about man enabled us to ascertain that what is presented by numerous authors in a modern theological and anthropological contemporary language, using a twofold or threefold vision about man, is remote from the biblical understanding. Without an adequate study on the manner in which the New Testament teaching about man uses certain terms originating in the Greek Judaism, from the intertestamentary era, one can build an abstract understanding about man, diverted from the spirit of the Scripture. We showed that the twofold or the threefold anthropology is the product of a

wider construction of the Gnostic soteriology of Greek nature. The distinction among body, soul and grace comes from a Gnostic distinction at ontological level regarding three reality aspects: the spirit associated with perfection, the matter, which is related to degradation and death and the intermediary area between the two which corresponds to the soul. The anthropological dichotomy (or trichotomy) represents an immediate application of the ontology professed by all the Gnostic groups. The distinction body, soul and grace will penetrate the biblical text of the New Testament, especially in the Pauline texts, both influenced by the mutual Hebrew-Greek heritage from the previous period and by the direct confrontation between the Christianity and Gnosticism in the apostolic period. In the biblical text, the area of this confrontation focuses on the eschatology and soteriology, which is why the anthropological valences must be carefully studied.

The analysis of St. Irenaeus' anthropology by means of the incorruptibility concept allowed us to observe that the bishop considers the New Testaments texts a continuation of the biblical tradition of the Old Testament where the man is considered in a different vision from that of the Gnostics. The accent falls on the indestructible unity of the man, on the existence of a composing principle of the human being which makes possible an existence participating to life. This enables us to say that the man is a being with a unitary and relational constitution similar to God. In this light, the Pauline distinctions between body and soul or among body, soul and grace are only a part of the tools he used in order to answer the Church's problems of that time, using the biblical Judaic heritage and facing a Greek influence trend, represented by the entire range of the Gnostic heresies. In the biblical text, these distinctions have fairly eschatological valences, bringing into discussion man's death, the intermediary state and the resurrection. Still, by means of the incorruptibility concept, the dilemma of dichotomism or trichotomism may be overcome and a vision about man can be built enabling the establishment of relations among the initial state of man, the present state implying the fall, the intermediary state after death and his eschatological fulfillment. The incorruptibility concept allows these relations by preserving the terminological distinctions for each state, without overlooking the detail that the discussion refers to the same being and the same constitution and without admitting the idea of man's transformation through the passage from one state to another one.

In contrast with the modern exegeses, *incorruptibility* receives in St. Irenaeus a rich anthropological content without confining to the eschatological dimension of the biblical passages under analysis. It would be a mistake to believe that this anthropological emphasis is due to the polemic character of the text and therefore to the bishop's intention to fight against the gnostic interpretations of the Scripture. On the contrary, the bishop stays loyal to his method and to the Rule of Truth which sustains that God is the creator of all, he stays different from his creation and his aim was that the man would join him for eternity, would participate to his own incorruptibility. To this aim, God planned two things: to provide the man with a dynamic constitution in order to

move towards this purpose, going through different stages; to make the man after a model which is exactly the incarnated Son, the perfect man, the one who makes possible the eternity and the incorruptibility of the created being.

4. Incorruptibility in St. Irenaeus' anthropology

We believe that the conceptual development of incorruptibility at St. Irenaeus is performed in accordance with the biblical theological elements that we shaped in the third chapter. St. Irenaeus develops the biblical idea presenting God as an incorruptible being and relates this biblical meaning to what his opponents and predecessors had professed before. The idea of incorruptibility of the divine being is not exclusively biblical; it is met in the Greek world, in the intertestamentary Judaism and at the Gnostics. St. Irenaeus' essential contribution is that he defined the incorruptibility of God's being in a Trinitarian vision, drastically new from the previous approaches. By means of the biblical texts analysed (especially those from Gen. 1-3, John 1; Parables 1, 3, John 17, etc), the bishop defines incorruptibility in relation to the persons of the Holy Trinity and not having an essence or a divine substance. God is incorruptible because he is a personal being who fully lives in himself and through himself, he is the perfect life in the communion among the persons of the Holy Trinity. Incorruptibility is the stability and eternity of this life which is not subject to any necessity, but aims at the fullness of God's life as a mutual gift in love and absolute freedom of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this light, the man and the world are the fruits of an emanation generated by fall or ignorance, as well as the result of a free choice of the persons of the Holy Trinity to offer the gift of life and the incorruptibility to its creation. The definition of incorruptibility given by the bishop retrieves the discussion from the existentialist level, specific to the Greek philosophy and the Gnostics and places it within the biblical parameters, presenting God as a personal, community, perfectly free being.

Such a definition of incorruptibility is used by the bishop in relation to the man. The biblical God is the one who directly and concretely is involved in the act of creation (cf. Gen. 2:7) and continuously involves in the achievement of his plan, that of offering the man as a gift his own incorruptibility. The breach with the ancient world is produced with the statement that the man is totally created, he is not immortal and does not intrinsically own incorruptibility. In exchange, through the constitution he has received, he can participate to God's incorruptibility, meaning that he can live eternally in a love relationship with the Holy Trinity persons. This destiny is Christological fulfilled through the incarnation of God's Son, ensuring the union of the created with the uncreated and the real opportunity of the man to take part in the incorruptibility.

We believe that the analysis of this paper supports the hypothesis about the key role of the concept of incorruptibility in St. Irenaeus' anthropology. When understanding the vast picture of the divine economy, incorruptibility is a concept which creates a relationship between beginning

and end, between the man's final goal and his constitution received at creation, between the meaning for which he was created and the manner in which this could be attained. By attempting to clarify its Christological dimension, we showed that the bishop finely and profoundly grasps the man's place in the biblical revelation, outstripping the dogmatic approaches that narrow the discussion to a soteriological aspect. The concept of incorruptibility allows the presence of the soteriological level within the larger equation of a divine economy having in its centre Jesus Christ, the one who not only is the man's redeemer, but also his fulfilment. He is the peak of the divine economy which reveals the model after which we have been created; he is the man at the highest of his maturity and perfection, man's target and the destiny. In the research, we grasped some of the anthropological valences of the incorruptibility concept as they were developed by St. Irenaeus in the interpretations of the biblical texts.

Incorruptibility is not an intrinsic feature of the human nature

In his exegeses of the Scripture, St. Irenaeus appeals to the ontological argument of the distinction between created and uncreated and supports the idea that naturally incorruptibility is a feature specific only to God. Man is a created being, has a *mortal* and *temporary* nature and it can be subject to corruption and degradation; man does not have life in himself, he takes part in the life coming from God and is totally dependent on his creator. Due to his ontological status, the man has an end in time and does not have in himself the immortality and life. The ontological limit of this temporary feature is transformed by God in a project having in view the becoming of the man: from childhood to maturity, from temporariness to eternity, from one type of participation to life – the breath from the creation – to another type, which implies the full and stable acquisition of the Holy Spirit. This truth represents the specific difference of the Christianity and offers a real help in the present context of the Church's fight against religious influences of the same dualist nature as the Gnosticism, which invite the modern man to „holistic” and „integrating” experiences through the discovery of the inner „divine”, of the man's „spiritual dimension”.

The man is destined for incorruptibility

The statement that the man is destined for incorruptibility is not a novelty for the Ancient times and does not even represent a revolution in the contemporary times. This topic has been and will still be very present and the biblical anthropology may provide an adequate answer to the sometimes non-uttered question, each time the human being is near death or faced with fundamental questions. By the biblical definition of incorruptibility, St. Irenaeus creates a correspondence between the being of God and the being of man, who was created in the image and likeness of God. In a way which is different from what the subsequent patristic literature will present, St. Irenaeus has the genius intuition that the biblical expression “the image and likeness of

God” focuses a constitutive element of the man making him able to live as God. Within the man, this principle is affirmed as an indestructible unity of a composed being and as a relational dynamics ensuring the constant receiving of life from God. Man’s incorruptibility is defined by the bishop as participation to God’s incorruptibility, as a grace received by man from the one he looks like. The man’s fate is to obtain the grace of the Father that is his becoming into the son of God. This becoming is the gift of the Holy Father and is direct implication of the fact that the Son of God assumed the nature of the man. Thus, St. Irenaeus’ famous quotation has a full meaning: *Gloria enim Dei vivens homo, vita autem hominis visio Dei*. This sight of God is the man’s participation to the divine life through a special relation with each of the persons of the Holy Trinity: “The Holy Spirit prepares the man for the Son, the Son leads him to the Father and the Father gives him incorruptibility and eternal life, which come from the sight of God”.

The participative, relational dimension of incorruptibility is a part of the same specific difference of the Christianity, to whose shaping St. Irenaeus brought a significant contribution. The ancient Greek essentialism, alongside every form of determinism are rejected by the Christian biblical anthropology, which strongly affirms that the man’s destiny preserves the ontological distance between the creator and the creation, admits man’s freedom to answer God’s offering and implies a perpetual dynamics of a fully personal relationship, which does not consume itself but it always amplifies the man’s answer.

Incorruptibility is a Christological achievement

In the spirit of the Scripture, St. Irenaeus proves that the man was created after the model of the Son who became a man. Through God’s union with the man, in Jesus Christ, the man’s destiny becomes a Christological one, meaning it is connected to the life received from the resurrected Christ and to the life with him for eternity. Through incarnation, the Son has showed to the world the real image of God. He is the model used for the first Adam and that the Son shows when he becomes a man. Incorruptibility is equivalent with the gift of adoption performed by God in Christ. It meets the man’s state as a created being, its weakness and the inability to bear perfection from the very beginning. Through the Son, incorruptibility is united with the created being and is always updated at the level of the man through the work of the Holy Spirit.

St. Irenaeus’ Christological anthropology, having a Christological definition of incorruptibility, offers the possibility to capitalize on the Son’s incarnation beyond the soteriologic horizon. God became a man in order to achieve his own work and not for having been constrained by the accident of the sin. Christ’s presence into the world as a source of incorruptibility, as recapitulator of creation, projects another light on the human experience in the Church. The founding personal relationship between the man and Christ ensures the full capitalization of his constitution as a being created in the image and likeness of God. Even under the circumstances of

a fallen and not entirely restored world, the man, who begins a relation with Christ, becomes himself a revealing presence discovering the true nature and consistency of the man, its true dignity and value. The man's revelation is not a new form of anthropocentrism; it corresponds to God's expectation that his apprentices should be the "salt" and "light", that consistent presence in the world which should confer taste and meaning. In other words, in St. Irenaeus' language, the son status through creation is thus outrun in order to reach the status of the son through adoption.

The man has the ability to receive incorruptibility

Incorruptibility is the eternal life that the man receives and will perpetually receive from God. The human being received a constitution enabling the participation to incorruptibility. On one hand, this constitution is announced in Gen. 1:26 and focuses on the constitutive principle of the man to have a personal way of existence like God. Since this destiny is reached in Christ, the man is created for the Son's incarnation. As an epitome of Christ, Adam forebodes the incarnation and indicates at the same time that he was created with a constitution which makes possible God's coming in human form. On the other hand, as a destiny of the man, incorruptibility focuses his status as a created being and it is obtained as a result of a growth process from childhood to maturity: "what is created has necessarily a beginning, an intermediary state and a maturity state" (cf. Gen. 1:28). The man received a dynamic constitution and the becoming is a constitutive side of his being. Incorruptibility focuses on the likeness of man to God and it is performed from a pneumatological point of view. God's Spirit ensures the development and growth towards perfection, whose result is the full acquisition of incorruptibility in eschaton. In St. Irenaeus' biblical anthropology, the relation between the initial state of innocence and childhood of the man and his maturity stage is performed by means of incorruptibility, allowing a correct evaluation of man's true nature, the one who received as a seed at creation what should become in eschaton.

The importance of such a vision on the man's intrinsic value as a composed being and on the man's dynamic nature is decisive for the Christian experience. The stake of the Christian life is no longer the acrobatic exercise between religious downs and ups or a life exclusively shaped in a religious manner, but "the becoming into full maturity in Christ", the fulfilment of the human person on all levels, as it was created by God: social, rational, emotional, esthetic, moral, creative being. The union with Christ represents the man's opportunity to re-enter the path of his becoming, leaving the frozen state brought by the fall. History does not only become a salvation space, but also the expression of the united man with God, a man who develops and fulfils as a person.

God's gift and man's effort to reach incorruptibility

The life received from God is not automatic. If immortality and incorruptibility are God's gifts, then the man is called to freely assume the divine offering. By keeping the communion with

God, even within the limits of a created and mortal nature, the man would have kept his existence under the primordial conditions and would have grown and developed towards his maturity in order to meet God in the Son's incarnation. The fall is a failure of man's destiny, but not a failure of God's plan. The Son's incarnation solves the problem of the sin and makes possible the continuation of the divine economy; the man has now the chance to develop his being towards perfection by taking part to God's incorruptibility.

The incorruptibility concept relates the creation and the man's constitution to his destiny and to the fall. As participation to God's life, the incorruptibility implies a new beginning and an update in history of the growth process lost through sin. Even if a lost and corrupted being, the man may still participate to incorruptibility through the sacramental life of the Church, through the pledge of the Holy Spirit that works inside the man on his ascent to perfection. The man is touched by incorruptibility through the baptismal "bath", through the communion with the body and blood of Christ and through his quality as temple of the Holy Spirit. By means of his free answer to follow Christ's path, the life of faith becomes a fight and the incorruptibility a reward, a crown of this coherent becoming towards God.

In a world dominated by an illegitimate fear in regard to the man's weakness and degradation, his excessive consumption dependence, the Christianity restates that the world has already received the seed of incorruptibility, that it has entered the process of restoration in Christ. The sacramental communion with Jesus Christ and the pledge of the Holy Spirit make the man an eschatological presence in this world, a mediator and a saint, God's partner in his economy, a meaningful presence for all God's reasons placed in the world, a voice that hails the man's true identity and value. This anthropologic vision meets the present challenges about the dualistic excesses and extremes that contest the value and quality of the body, of the man as a composed being, the serious drifts from chastity and the normality of the marital space, the relativism that overflows in regard to the value of life and the uniqueness of each person. By rediscovering the royal and priestly dignity of the man in the world, together with Christ, the Christian proclaims the importance of his responsibility towards creation, his worries about the excesses that waste and destroy resources, creating unbalances and dependences. Last but not least, the Christian community in itself may entirely benefit from St. Irenaeus' anthropological vision which directs the Christian experience from isolation from the world towards a committed involvement in the problems of the modern man who needs meaning, direction and convergence. If in Jesus Christ the man enters the dynamics of becoming towards his destiny, if he already participates to incorruptibility, then the ecclesial life escapes the trap of the religious activism or the dichotomies that separate life between religious and non-religious, sacred or pagan, matter and spirit, body and soul, natural and supernatural etc.

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