

1 Tome of Leo

HO#17

2 Letter of Pope Leo the Great to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, about Eutyches, 449;

3 Adopted by the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon, 451

4 **Excerpt** Eutyches had no idea how he ought to think about the incarnation of the Word of God; and he had no
5 desire to acquire the light of understanding by working through the length and breadth of the holy scriptures. So at
6 least he should have listened carefully and accepted the common and undivided creed by which the whole body of
7 the faithful confess that they believe in God the Father almighty and in Jesus Christ his only Son, our Lord, who was
8 born of the holy Spirit and the virgin Mary.

9 These three statements wreck the tricks of nearly every heretic. When God is believed to be both almighty and
10 Father, the Son is clearly proved to be co-eternal with him, in no way different from the Father, since he was born
11 God from God, almighty from the Almighty, co-eternal from the Eternal, not later in time, not lower in power, not
12 unlike in glory, not distinct in being. The same eternal, only-begotten of the eternal begetter was born of the holy
13 Spirit and the virgin Mary. His birth in time in no way subtracts from or adds to that divine and eternal birth of his:
14 but its whole purpose is to restore humanity, who had been deceived, so that it might defeat death and, by its
15 power, destroy the devil who held the power of death. Overcoming the originator of sin and death would be
16 beyond us, had not he whom sin could not defile, nor could death hold down, taken up our nature and made it his
17 own. He was conceived from the holy Spirit inside the womb of the virgin mother. Her virginity was as untouched
18 in giving him birth as it was in conceiving him.

19 But if it was beyond Eutyches to derive sound understanding from this, the purest source of the Christian faith,
20 because the brightness of manifest truth had been darkened by his own peculiar blindness, then he should have
21 subjected himself to the teaching of the gospels. When Matthew says, "The book of the generation of Jesus Christ,
22 son of David, son of Abraham," Eutyches should have looked up the further development in the apostolic
23 preaching. When he read in the letter to the Romans, "Paul, the servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set
24 apart for God's gospel, which he had formerly promised through his prophets in the holy writings which refer to his
25 Son, who was made for him of David's seed according to the flesh," he should have paid deep and devout attention
26 to the prophetic texts. And when he discovered God making the promise to Abraham that "in your seed shall all
27 nations be blessed," he should have followed the apostle, in order to eliminate any doubt about the identity of this
28 seed, when he says, "The promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed . He does not say 'to his seeds'--as if
29 referring to a multiplicity--but to a single one, 'and to thy seed' which is Christ." His inward ear should also have
30 heard Isaiah preaching, "Behold, a virgin will receive in the womb and will bear a son, and they will call his name
31 Emmanuel," which is translated "God is with us". With faith he should have read the same prophet's words, "A
32 child is born to us, a son is given to us. His power is on his shoulders. They will call his name 'Angel of great
33 counsel, mighty God, prince of peace, father of the world to come'." Then he would not deceive people by saying
34 that the Word was made flesh in the sense that he emerged from the virgin's womb having a human form but not
35 having the reality of his mother's body.

36 Or was it perhaps that he thought that our lord Jesus Christ did not have our nature because the angel who was
37 sent to the blessed Mary said, "The holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the most High will
38 overshadow you, and so that which will be born holy out of you will be called Son of God," as if it was because the
39 conception by the virgin was worked by God that the flesh of the one conceived did not share the nature of her
40 who conceived it? But uniquely wondrous and wondrously unique as that act of generation was, it is not to be
41 understood as though the proper character of its kind was taken away by the sheer novelty of its creation. It was
42 the holy Spirit that made the virgin pregnant, but the reality of the body derived from body. As "Wisdom built a
43 house for herself," "the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us": that is, in that flesh which he derived from
44 humankind and which he animated with the spirit of a rational life.

45 So, the proper character of both natures was maintained and came together in a single person. Lowliness was
46 taken up by majesty, weakness by strength, mortality by eternity. To pay off the debt of our state, invulnerable
47 nature was united to a nature that could suffer; so that in a way that corresponded to the remedies we needed,
48 one and the same mediator between God and humanity the man Christ Jesus, could both on the one hand die and
49 on the other be incapable of death. Thus, was true God born in the undiminished and perfect nature of a true man,
50 complete in what is his and complete in what is ours. By "ours" we mean what the Creator established in us from
51 the beginning and what he took upon himself to restore. There was in the Savior no trace of the things which the
52 Deceiver brought upon us, and to which deceived humanity gave admittance. His subjection to human weaknesses
53 in common with us did not mean that he shared our sins. He took on the form of a servant without the defilement
54 of sin, thereby enhancing the human and not diminishing the divine. For that self-emptying whereby the Invisible
55 rendered himself visible, and the Creator and Lord of all things chose to join the ranks of mortals, spelled no failure

of power: it was an act of merciful favor. So, the one who retained the form of God when he made humanity, was made man in the form of a servant. Each nature kept its proper character without loss; and just as the form of God does not take away the form of a servant, so the form of a servant does not detract from the form of God. It was the devil's boast that humanity had been deceived by his trickery and so had lost the gifts God had given it; and that it had been stripped of the endowment of immortality and so was subject to the harsh sentence of death. He also boasted that, sunk as he was in evil, he himself derived some consolation from having a partner in crime; and that God had been forced by the principle of justice to alter his verdict on humanity, which he had created in such an honorable state. All this called for the realization of a secret plan whereby the unalterable God, whose will is indistinguishable from his goodness, might bring the original realization of his kindness towards us to completion by means of a more hidden mystery, and whereby humanity, which had been led into a state of sin by the craftiness of the devil, might be prevented from perishing contrary to the purpose of God.

So, without leaving his Father's glory behind, the Son of God comes down from his heavenly throne and enters the depths of our world, born in an unprecedented order by an unprecedented kind of birth. In an unprecedented order, because one who is invisible at his own level was made visible at ours. The ungraspable willed to be grasped. Whilst remaining pre-existent, he begins to exist in time. The Lord of the universe veiled his measureless majesty and took on a servant's form. The God who knew no suffering did not despise becoming a suffering man, and, deathless as he is, to be subject to the laws of death. By an unprecedented kind of birth, because it was inviolable virginity which supplied the material flesh without experiencing sexual desire. What was taken from the mother of the Lord was the nature without the guilt [of original sin]. And the fact that the birth was miraculous does not imply that in the Lord Jesus Christ, born from the virgin's womb, the nature is different from ours. The same one is true God and true man.

There is nothing unreal about this oneness, since both the lowliness of the man and the grandeur of the divinity are in mutual relation. As God is not changed by showing mercy, neither is humanity devoured by the dignity received. The activity of each form is what is proper to it in communion with the other: that is, the Word performs what belongs to the Word, and the flesh accomplishes what belongs to the flesh. One of these performs brilliant miracles; the other sustains acts of violence. As the Word does not lose its glory which is equal to that of the Father, so neither does the flesh leave the nature of its kind behind. We must say this again and again: one and the same is truly Son of God and truly son of man. God, by the fact that "in the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God"; man, by the fact that "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." God, by the fact that "all things were made through him, and nothing was made without him," man, by the fact that "he was made of a woman, made under the law." The birth of flesh reveals human nature; birth from a virgin is a proof of divine power. A lowly cradle manifests the infancy of the child; angels' voices announce the greatness of the most High. Herod evilly strives to kill one who was like a human being at the earliest stage the Magi rejoice to adore on bended knee one who is the Lord of all. And when he came to be baptized by his precursor John, the Father's voice spoke thunder from heaven, to ensure that he did not go unnoticed because the divinity was concealed by the veil of flesh: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased." Accordingly, the same one whom the devil craftily tempts as a man, the angels dutifully wait on as God. Hunger, thirst, weariness, sleep are patently human. But to satisfy five thousand people with five loaves; to dispense living water to the Samaritan woman, a drink of which will stop her being thirsty ever again; to walk on the surface of the sea with feet that do not sink; to rebuke the storm and level the mounting waves; there can be no doubt these are divine.

So, if I may pass over many instances, it does not belong to the same nature to weep out of deep-felt pity for a dead friend, and to call him back to life again at the word of command, once the mound had been removed from the four-day-old grave; or to hang on the cross and, with day changed into night, to make the elements tremble; or to be pierced by nails and to open the gates of paradise for the believing thief. Likewise, it does not belong to the same nature to say, "I and the Father are one," and to say, "The Father is greater than I." For although there is in the Lord Jesus Christ a single person who is of God and of man, the insults shared by both have their source in one thing, and the glory that is shared in another. For it is from us that he gets a humanity which is less than the Father; it is from the Father that he gets a divinity which is equal to the Father.

So it is on account of this oneness of the person, which must be understood in both natures, that we both read that the son of man came down from heaven, when the Son of God took flesh from the virgin from whom he was born, and again that the Son of God is said to have been crucified and buried, since he suffered these things not in the divinity itself whereby the Only-begotten is co-eternal and consubstantial with the Father, but in the weakness of the human nature. That is why in the creed, too, we all confess that the only-begotten Son of God was crucified and was buried, following what the apostle said, "If they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of majesty." And when our Lord and Savior himself was questioning his disciples and instructing their faith, he says, "Who do people say I, the son of man, am?" And when they had displayed a variety of other people's opinions, he

says, "Who do you say I am?"--in other words, "I who am the son of man and whom you behold in the form of a servant and in real flesh: Who do you say I am?" Whereupon the blessed Peter, inspired by God and making a confession that would benefit all future peoples, says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." He thoroughly deserved to be declared "blessed" by the Lord. He derived the stability of both his goodness and his name from the original Rock, for when the Father revealed it to him, he confessed that the same one is both the Son of God and also the Christ. Accepting one of these truths without the other was no help to salvation; and to have believed that the Lord Jesus Christ was either only God and not man, or solely man and not God, was equally dangerous.

After the Lord's resurrection--which was certainly the resurrection of a real body, since the one brought back to life is none other than the one who had been crucified and had died--the whole point of the forty-day delay was to make our faith completely sound and to cleanse it of all darkness. Hence he talked to his disciples and lived and ate with them, and let himself be touched attentively and carefully by those who were in the grip of doubt; he would go in among his disciples when the doors were locked, and impart the holy Spirit by breathing on them, and open up the secrets of the holy scriptures after enlightening their understanding; again, he would point out the wound in his side, the holes made by the nails, and all the signs of the suffering he had just recently undergone, saying, Look at my hands and feet--it is I. Feel and see, because a spirit does not have flesh and bones as you see that I have. All this was so that it would be recognized that the proper character of the divine and of the human nature went on existing inseparable in him; and so that we would realize that the Word is not the same thing as the flesh, but in such a way that we would confess belief in the one Son of God as being both Word and flesh.

This Eutyches must be judged to be extremely destitute of this mystery of the faith. Neither the humility of the mortal life nor the glory of the resurrection has made him recognize our nature in the only-begotten of God. Nor has even the statement of the blessed apostle and evangelist John put fear into him: "Every spirit which confesses that Jesus Christ came in the flesh is from God, and every spirit which puts Jesus asunder is not from God, and this is Antichrist." But what does putting Jesus asunder consist in if not in separating his human nature from him, and in voiding, through the most barefaced fictions, the one mystery by which we have been saved? Once in the dark about the nature of Christ's body, it follows that the same blindness leads him into raving folly about his suffering too. If he does not think that the Lord's cross was unreal and if he has no doubt that the suffering undergone for the world's salvation was real, then let him acknowledge the flesh of the one whose death he believes in. And let him not deny that a man whom he knows to have been subject to suffering had our kind of body, for to deny the reality of the flesh is also to deny the bodily suffering. So, if he accepts the Christian faith and does not turn a deaf ear to the preaching of the gospel, let him consider what nature it was that hung, pierced with nails, on the wood of the cross. With the side of the crucified one laid open by the soldier's spear, let him identify the source from which blood and water flowed, to bathe the church of God with both font and cup.

Let him heed what the blessed apostle Peter preaches, that "sanctification by the Spirit is effected by the sprinkling of Christ's blood"; and let him not skip over the same apostle's words, "knowing that you have been redeemed from the empty way of life you inherited from your fathers, not with corruptible gold and silver but by the precious blood of Jesus Christ, as of a lamb without stain or spot." Nor should he withstand the testimony of blessed John the apostle: "and the blood of Jesus, the Son of God, purifies us from every sin"; and again, "This is the victory which conquers the world, our faith. Who is there who conquers the world save one who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? It is he, Jesus Christ who has come through water and blood, not in water only, but in water and blood. And because the Spirit is truth, it is the Spirit who testifies. For there are three who give testimony--Spirit and water and blood. And the three are one." In other words, the Spirit of sanctification and the blood of redemption and the water of baptism. These three are one and remain indivisible. None of them is separable from its link with the others. The reason is that it is by this faith that the Catholic Church lives and grows, by believing that neither the humanity is without true divinity nor the divinity without true humanity.

Excerpted from the Letter of Pope Leo the Great to Flavian, bishop of Constantinople, about Eutyches, 449.