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The Dignity of the Human Embryo in the Anthropology of Saint Maximus the Confessor

Abstract

In this article I will analyze the status and the dignity of the human embryo from the first moment of its existence, according to Saint Maximus the Confessor. This issue is part of a larger research in process of my doctoral thesis in orthodox bioethics, entitled: “Homo Fabricatus? The status of the human embryo from orthodox perspective in the context of contemporary biotechnologies”. The aim of this article is to show that we can find in St. Maximus Confessor’s anthropology a fruitfull and credible resources for theological arguing that the human embryo is a human being and



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possesses an intangible and intrinsic dignity. Therefore, to defend the dignity of the human embryo I will use five anthropological arguments of the great patristic theologian: the simultaneity of human creation, the distinction between genesis and generation, resurrection, incarnation and the logos-tropos principle in the divine-human person of Christ. I will critically analyze some important aspects of the Maximian writings related to the theological disputes that he had with the Christological heresies, which I will implement in the orthodox bioethical discourse. I will also conclude that the theological position of Saint Maximus the Confessor regarding the patristic actuality of the presented article is the broadest, deepest and most defining, in the sense that it is more developed and based on a more rigorous and eloquently conceptualized critique.

Keywords

Dignity, human embryo, Anthropology, Saint Maximus the Confessor, Bioethics

1 Introduction

The Theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor¹ represents both a synthesis of the entire Eastern Orthodoxy and an extraordinary expressiveness of what can be called the fullness of the East and the West, because he built the bridge between East

¹ John Anthony McGuckin, *Dicționar de teologie patristică*, [Handbook to Patristic Theology], traducere de Dragoș Dăscă și Alin-Bogdan Mihăiescu, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2014, pp. 316-317.

and West.² He certainly had sources of inspiration because many of his ideas can be identified over the centuries but also from the knowledge he gained from studying classical Greek philosophy. His originality, however, was due to a brilliant intelligence that managed to attract disparate things in a profound and convincing way.³

Because of his misunderstanding of his vision and at the same time of the inability of many to penetrate his theology, which was beyond the rationality of his time, St. Maximus suffered greatly.⁴ In fact, his entire theological activity could be defined as "Theology of the Logos", being at the same time a rediscovery of the Person of the named Logos and a "symphyia" of the theology of the first centuries of Christendom starting with Saint John the Theologian.⁵ Because his contemporaries did not understand the depth of his theology, they considered him a desecrator of the Oriental Tradition.

The extension of the thought of Saint Maximus the Confessor framed Greek philosophy with its rigid points in a new ontological reality. Due to this fact, his theology appears as a universe

² See in this regard Jean-Claude Larchet, *Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul. Mediator între Răsărit și Apus*, [Le Confesseur, médiateur entre l'Orient et l'Occident], trans. from French Daniela Cojocariu, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2010.

³ Andrew Louth, *Maximus the Confessor*, London, New York, Edit. Routledge, 1996, p. 19.

⁴ One of the most recent biographical novels of his life translated into Romanian is the one written by Aleka Ritsou, *Maxim. Mărturisitor și sfânt*, [ΜΑΞΙΜΟΣ -μυθιστορηματική βιογραφία], trad. from Greek by Cristian Spătărelu, Galați, Edit. Egumenița, 2015.

⁵ Irineu Popa, „Teologia Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul ca fluiditate harică ce iradiază din inspirația Sfintei Treimi”, in Picu Ocoleanu, (ed.), *Teologie și spiritualitate în gândirea Sfântului Maxim Mărturisitorul*, Craiova, Edit. Mitropolia Olteniei, 2009, p. 8.

in which his Christology, fully transcendental, becomes a reality in which the sacrifice of the love of the Logos becomes the foundation of the inexpressible descent of the second Person of the Holy Trinity. In this way the full intratrime love extends from the divine Logos to the human person, which was made by the naming of the Son of God, the environment of divine communion and the exponent of this divine attribute. This last idea becomes central in the theology of St. Maximus and develops so as to moderate the idea of "communicatio", best illustrated by the fact that the term "perihoresis"⁶, as an expression of the type of relationship that exists between human and divine nature in Christ it seems to have been used for the first time even from him.⁷ The maximum positive evaluation of creation, the world of substance and accident must include a positive evaluation of man. His anthropology focuses in this sense on three special points that are certainly the strengths in terms of the status of the human embryo. These refer to: the principle coexistence of soul and body, the idea of man as a composite nature and complete species and the conscious analogy between the natural unity of body and soul in man as well as the hypostatic unity of human and divine in Christ.⁸

2 The historical-theological context of the maximum anthropological disputes

⁶ Teofan Savu, *Divino-umanitatea lui Hristos și îndumnezeirea omului în gândirea Sfântului Maxim Mărturisorul*, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2019, pp. 290-291.

⁷ Lars Thunberg, *Antropologia teologică a Sfântului Maxim Mărturisorul. Microcosmos și mediator*, translate from english de Anca Popescu, București, Edit. Sophia, 2005, p. 37.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 112.

Biographies of Saint Maximus the Confessor who was born in Palestine around 580 and died in exile in the Caucasus in 662, states that he was born in the midst of a political crisis, fleeing the invasions of the Persians and avatars and witnessing the beginning of the Arab conquests. To these historical realities were added theological disputes, in the sense that neither the Ecumenical Council of Chalcedon in 451 nor that of Constantinople in 553 resolved the Christological problem, and the Monophysites and Chalcedonians continued to face each other constantly.⁹

St. Maximus first turns against the Origenists, whom he reproaches for the way they see the theory of creation. They were convinced that God created from eternity a world of rational beings whose souls pre-exist the creation of bodies. For them, the end of the world and the disappearance of matter will lead to the restoration or apocatastasis of souls in the primary *henada*.¹⁰ Another conflict of a theological nature that was current in his time concerned the dispute between official Chalcedonism and the partisans of moderate Monophysitism theorized in the sixth century AD by Patriarch Severus of Antioch.¹¹ They turned away from the strict monophysitism that denied any quality proper to the humanity of Christ and rejected the dogma of the "two natures" of Christ. For the followers of Seve-

⁹ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți și în izvoarele filozofice și medicale grecești, (sec. VI î.Hr.-sec. V d. Hr.)*, [L'embryon et son âme dans les sources grecques (VIe siècle av. J.-C.-Ve siècle apr. J.-C.)], translate form French by Maria-Cornelia Ică jr., Sibiu, Edit. Deisis, 2014, p. 436.

¹⁰ John Meyendorf, *Christ in Byzantine Theology*, Paris, Edit. Deer Editions, 2010, pp. 59-89.

¹¹ Juan Miguel Garrigues, "La personne composée du Christ d'après saint Maxime", in *Revue Thomiste*, nr. 74/1974, pp. 189-196.

rus, the incarnate Word is a single compound nature: "two" in the beginning, the humanity and divinity of the Savior are "one" according to their composition, in fact humanity loses its own nature.¹² It should be noted that this theory was the basis of monoenergism and monotheism, which stated that in Christ there is one will and one nature, a theory used by the Byzantine emperor and patriarchs to rally dissident populations. Was obviously it is a theological-political compromise that sacrifices the integrity of the human nature of Christ and that Saint Maximus masterfully defended to the point of martyrdom.¹³ One of the Western patrologists rightly called him a "wandering" monk who struggled with political and theological chaos facing death to defend the reality of the incarnation of the Word.¹⁴

These historical and theological aspects mentioned above are absolutely necessary to clarify the context in which Saint Maximus the Confessor turned his attention to the moment when the human embryo receives its soul. It should also be noted that the life of the embryo was not directly debated, given that at that time biology was not a challenge to ethics, but due to the extraordinary synthetic spirit of the great patristic theologian who understood that an error of meaning regarding to the soul of the embryo, it is a diversion concerning man and God-Man.

3 The soul of the embryo

¹² John Meyendorff, *Christ in Byzantine Theology...*, pp. 46-54.

¹³ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 437.

¹⁴ Juan Miguel Garrigues, *Maxime the Confessor. La charité, avenir divin de l'homme*, Paris, Edit. Beauchesne Publishing, 1976, p. 40.

The first text, which can be considered as an argument in favor of the simultaneous creation of soul and body and implicitly in defense of the life of the human embryo is found in Saint Maximus the Confessor in a polemical context and is part of a set of answers he gives to Bishop John of Cyzic at his request. The theological dispute started from a few passages of some ambiguity of St. Gregory of Nazianzus taken from a speech on the subject of the love of the poor: "We are the particles of God and we are from above".¹⁵ Origenist monks interpreted this phrase as a statement of the creation of souls from eternity and their fall into matter. Taking advantage of this to reject the Origenist scheme inherited from Plato, St. Maximus shows that God has in Him from eternity the "logos" (reasons for being or definitions) of each creature, according to which He created them when He had. These "logos" are in fact the "particles of God" of which St. Gregory of Nazianzus speaks.¹⁶

Saint Maximus insists on the substantial and intrinsic connection that exists between soul and body:

“For if, as has been proved before, the body and the soul are parts of man, and the parts necessarily have a reference to each other (because they constitute the whole that characterizes them), and those referred to each other are always and wherever they came into existence at once, constituting as parts, by their meeting, the whole species (εἶδος ὅλον) and being separated from each other only by thought in order to know what each one is after being, it is impossible for the soul and the body, as parts of man, to

¹⁵ St. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 14, 7, in PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XXXV, col. 865C.

¹⁶ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 439.

anticipate or follow each other, because otherwise the so-called reason of referring to one another will evaporate”.¹⁷ The second text as an argument for the life of the human embryo from the first moment of existence, starts from the premise that if the soul and the body are not created simultaneously and if there is no solid connection between them, then we can talk about interchangeability and dogma about resurrection could be replaced by the theory of metempsychosis.¹⁸ Saint Maximus shows this impossibility and concludes:

“And again: if the soul is a species of self before the body, or the body, as well, and they constitute another species by uniting the soul with the body, or the body with the soul, it would undoubtedly do so either by suffering. -from the outside, either by their nature. If, as they suffered, they suffered this, coming out of it, they became what they were not and therefore corrupt themselves; and if they do it by nature, then it will always happen because of nature, and the soul will never cease to reincorporate itself, or the body to unite with other souls. But the fulfillment of the whole as a species by uniting one with the other, as I reckon, is neither the work of any suffering, nor of the natural power of the parts, but of their birth (making), at once, as a whole species. For it is not possible to transform any species into another species, without corruption”.¹⁹

A counter-argument to the above statements may result from the fact that the soul and the body are separated by physical

¹⁷ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XCI, col.1100 C6-D2, trans. rom. Dumitru Stăniloae in P.S.B. vol. 80, Bucharest, Edit. Insititul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe române, 1983.

¹⁸ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 439.

¹⁹ Saint Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua....*, col. 1100 D2-1101 A6.

death, and the immortal soul continues to exist without the body, despite the fact that the human compound has disintegrated. Saint Maximus dismantles this objection which apparently seems to be real, motivating thus:

"For after the death of the body the soul would not be called my mere soul, but the soul of man, and the soul of some man. For even after the body (after the death of the body) it has as its species the whole human being, as a characteristic that belongs to it as a part of it based on the relationship. Likewise, the body is mortal by nature, but it is not detached from the whole human because of birth. For the simple body is not called the body, after the separation of the soul, but the body of man, and the body of a certain man, even if it corrupts and dissolves in the elements of which it is. For he has, even as part of his species (ὡς εἶδος), the human whole as a characteristic that belongs to him as a part of this whole based on the relationship. In both, that is, in the soul and in the body, the relationship, conceived as something that cannot be torn away, since they are parts of the whole human species, also depicts their bringing together into existence and proves the difference between them according to being a kind of reason planted in them after being. So it is not possible everywhere to find or name any body or soul apart from the relationship between them. For at the same time with the part it is shown that it is part of someone. So that if a part of another pre-exists, the whole of which part is involved is involved in it. For her relationship is inalienable."²⁰

4 Genesis / generation of the human embryo

²⁰ *Ibidem*, col. 1101 A10-C7.

The third argument that Saint Maximus uses in favor of the existence of the soul in the embryo, is in fact an anthropological reply that he gives against those who saw in the distinction between genesis and generation, a time lag in the creation of soul and body, but also against those who used the pretext of simultaneity to say that the soul is born as the body as the translationist heresy showed.²¹ The genesis of this argument is in fact a homily of St. Gregory of Nazianzus that John of Cyzicus brings to his attention, in which the successive births of man are evoked.²² Saint Maximus the Confessor draws a parallel between the creation of Adam and the Incarnation of the Word. He now completes his teaching on pre-existing "logos" in God with that on "tropes" or ways of coming into being. He parallels for each created being the "logos" of his genesis which in man is the fact of being composed of soul and body with the "tropos" of his generation which in man corresponds to the bodily procreation between the two sexes, for to show that the only distinction between the two exists only at the level of thought.²³ Consequently, Saint Maximus states: "The soul is unspeakably constituted by the divine and vital insufflation and the body from the substrate matter or the seed of the body from which it is made at once with the soul at birth".²⁴ He then describes how

²¹ The Latin apologist Tertullian describes translationism in chapters 25-27, as can be seen in, Tertullian, *About the Soul*, PL (Patrologia Latinae edited by J. P. Migne), vol. II, col.690 C-696 C., translate in rom. Nicolae Chişescu. in P.S.B. vol. 3, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 1981.

²² Saint Gregory of Nazianzus, *Orationes* 40.2 in PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XXXVI, col. 360 B.

²³ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 441.

²⁴ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua....*, col.1321 C4-C8.

the simultaneity of soul and body is achieved in the human embryo, although their origin is distinct:

“So the creation of the soul, as the teacher clearly says, is not done from a subsisting matter, like bodies, but from the will of God, by the breath of life-making, in an unspoken and unknown way, as only his Maker knows. The soul, receiving existence at birth together with the body, is brought into existence towards the completion of a man; and the body is made of the subsisting matter, that is, of another body, at birth it receives at the same time the composition with the soul in order to be a species with it. [...]. So we must distribute, by contemplation, at conception, the breath of life and the Holy Spirit on account of the mental (intellectual) essence of the soul, and the incarnation and the breath, on account of the body, as the Fathers say”.²⁵

In fact, the creation of Adam was based on Saint Maximus, this double principle "logos-tropos", identical with the creation of the New Adam at the time of His appointment: "The Lord also received the Spirit of life-maker, that is, the breath of His humanity, or mental soul, together with the body of the Immaculate Virgin, and not after birth".²⁶

Also on this line he makes a digression to reject on the one hand the Origenists who claimed that the soul pre-exists the body, and on the other hand those who claimed that the body pre-exists the soul. From a critical perspective it can be stated that by combating these two theories, Saint Maximus the Confessor credits the identity and integrity of the human embryo, because he argues that human existence from the moment of conception cannot exist without the cohabitation of soul and body simulta-

²⁵ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua....*, Col.1324 C1-D3.

²⁶ *Ibidem*, col. 1325 C.

neously. In fact, it has been said that the pre-existence of souls would open the door to all distortions of a dualistic nature.²⁷ For St. Maximus the greatest threat of pre-existence refers to the fact that if souls pre-exist before bodies that were created only to punish souls because of the sin previously committed by beings without bodies, then for this reason “we would assume that the only cause of the great and sublime work of the seen, by which God is known as the One who is proclaimed in silence, is the evil which compelled God to create without will the world which he did not please.”²⁸

He shows that the creation of bodies could not be imposed by anything or anyone on the Creator, and this teaching is proper to those who introduce two contradictory principles.²⁹

5 The anthropological resources of Saint Maximus the Confessor and the foundation of the dignity of the human embryo

The fourth argument that Saint Maximus invokes against the Origenists is the exaltation of Christ with the body³⁰, in fact the

²⁷ A synthetic analysis of the life of the embryo at the time of conception is in Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, “Maxime le Confesseur et l’humanité de l’embryon”, in Henri de Lubac, (ed.) *La Politique de la mystique: Hommage à Mgr Maxime Charles*, Paris, Edit. Criterion Editions, 1984, pp. 163-171.

²⁸ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua....*, col.1328 A.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, col. 1329 A1-1322 B1.

³⁰ According to the natural and theological argument for the positive value of the body, Saint Maximus brings the Christological one. The supreme argument for the value and for the eternal duration of bodies is that the Son of God himself assumed our body, ascended with him to heaven, above all angels, sits with him at the right

guarantee of the resurrection of the bodies to the Universal Judgment, critically stating that the human embryo in its entirety body and soul is called by God to salvation:

"If so, who is so bold and courageous and ignorant of anything other than to fight impudently against the obvious and the clear, so as to easily think that the bodies will one day pass into non-existence by the perfect advancement of the rational beings, as they say, once he believes that the Lord and God of all is with the body now and forever, giving others the power to advance and pulling and calling all to their own glory, as far as possible to humanity, as Leader of salvation of all and blotting out all?"³¹

Saint Maximus continues his approach against the Origenists to show that the ascension of Christ to heaven was not only spiritual but also somatic:

"For if it had pleased him that this should also come to pass, he would have done it first in himself, and this one, along with the others, to whom he submitted for us as a lover of men. it would be perfect like us, for us believing to hope this one together with the others. Besides, if we bear to say this, how will we believe, according to this holy teacher, that what has been united with God is also saved? «For that which is joined together, saith he, is written unto Cledon, and to the Word of God; that is saved» But with God the Word was united with the soul and the body, so with the soul the body will be saved".³²

hand of the Father, will come with him to pretend the whole universe and save our souls and bodies. See in this sense the explanation of Father Dumitru Stăniloie from his commentary on *Ambigua*, in [P.S.B. vol. 80, Bucharest, Edit. Institutului Biblic și de Misiune a Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, 1983, p.284, note 357].

³¹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua...*, col. 1332 D-1333 A.

³² *Ibidem*, col. 1333 D5-1336 A6.

St. Maximus the Confessor mentions in one of his epistles those who asserted that souls pre-exist bodies "in Greek or pagan form," which he puts in opposition to those who asserted that bodies pre-exist souls "in Jewish form".³³ It was interpreted that, in this context, reference is made to an exegetical dispute related to the Greek translation, accused of "Judaizing" the passage in Exodus 21, 22-23 regarding the introduction of a difference between the "unformed" embryo and the "formed" embryo in the sense that this literary interpretation would benefit the theory of the preexistence of bodies.³⁴ It is known that some exegetes, such as the case of the bishop Theodoret de Cyr, fixed the moment of the human embryo, based on the Aristotelian tradition forty days after conception.³⁵ From the point of view of St. Maximus, the exegesis of the Exodus is questionable, because Moses did not refer at all to this distinction between the formed and the unformed embryo.³⁶ Moreover, he interprets a question related to this topic, in an allegorical sense.³⁷

³³ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Epistle 12 to John Cubicularul*, PG (Patrologia Graeca editată de J. P. Migne), vol. XCII, col.489 A [trad. rom. Dumitru Stăniloae in P.S.B. vol. 81, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 1990].

³⁴ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p.445.

³⁵ Teodoret de Cyr, „Thérapeutique des maladies helléniques”, in [Sources Chrétiennes, nr.57], translate from Greek by Pierre Canivet, Paris, Edit. Deer Editions, 1958, pp.243-244.

³⁶ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua...*, col. 1340 C14-D4.

³⁷ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Questions and perplexities*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XC, col.807 C-810 A, translated into Romanian by Laura Enache, introductory study, notes and indexes by Dragoș Bahrim, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2012, pp. 95-96.

By the fifth argument Saint Maximus shows the impossibility of the existence of a body without a soul, and therefore of an inanimate embryo, stating the following:

"To say that souls come into existence after bodies, as you do, is easy, for anyone who wants to, but to rationally establish this statement is very difficult and difficult and it is not at all easy to prove what is supported by it. For if the seed³⁸ which lays the beginning of man's making is, in your opinion, utterly inanimate, it is also utterly part of life, because that which is utterly devoid of any kind of soul is devoid of any power of life. And if he is completely devoid of soul and life-sustaining work, it is obvious that he is dead. And if we admit that he is dead, he does not feed, nor does he grow, nor will he be able to subsist in any way and he remains undecomposed and scattered".³⁹

He highlights this reasoning in a paradigm of how wounds heal only if bodies are animated, because otherwise they would decompose. In other words, the critic stating Saint Maximus indirectly indicates here the co-subsistence of the soul and the body in the human embryo:

"In fact, how what is inherently scattered and easily decomposed by nature would persist, if it does not pre-exist logically, as a foundation, a certain vital power, which gathers and gathers naturally around it what is scattered, power in which he received to have both the existence and the form of the Power that built all with wisdom? For in what the body has its existence after it has been born, in that it is right to say that it also has the beginning of its subsistence. Because what makes the body that separates

³⁸ This is by no means a seed or a sperm, because Saint Maximus is a declared anti-translator, but this is in biological terms the product of conception or the zygote that was born immediately after the process of syngamy.

³⁹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua...*, col. 1336 C.

from the soul to dissipate, of course, makes the body, rightly, by its coming into existence, to begin to subsist with it".⁴⁰

Saint Maximus also meets here with the objection of his contemporaries who showed that, if a soul is necessary for the development of the embryo, a rational soul must not be seen in it.⁴¹ In fact, this counterargument is considered by him, because it comes from the philosophical disputes of antiquity and dismantles it through a coherent and nuanced logic:

"And if, distressed by these reasonings, you say that the seed which gives rise to the constitution of man is not entirely dead, but participates in a certain vital power, however small, and therefore has a certain soul by participating in such a power, (for without a soul there is no life either in those which arise in nature, nor in those contained in the ever-moving orbit of heaven, and no life exists, according to rational judgment, without a soul), any kind of life you would admit that it has the seed at birth you should consider it as the property of a certain soul, which forms the constitutive difference of the respective being from those who are not like it.

And if, driven by the force of truth, you must recognize that the embryo also has a soul, it is fitting and incumbent upon you to say for yourself what and how it is and how it can be understood and named. If you say that it has only a nourishing and growth-causing soul, that is, only as that of a plant and not as that of man, based on this word the body will be after you what is nourished and made to grow. But no matter how much I think about it, I don't understand how man can be the father of the plant, who has nothing, by nature, human existence. And if you attribute to man

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, col. 1337 A6-B3.

⁴¹ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 446.

only the soul endowed with feeling, the embryo will be recognized to have at birth, of course, a soul of horse or ox, or of other land and air animals, and after you man would no longer be, by nature, the father of man at the beginning of his formation, but as I have that is, of any plant or animal on earth. And what could be more absurd and crazy than this?"⁴²

From a critical perspective it can be stated that from this long but very important text for arguing the existence of the soul in the human embryo, Saint Maximus, after using the argument taken from the vital and immanent power of the embryo at the moment of conception, marks his position with an argument. theologically related to the coming of the soul into existence at the same time as the body. It is a question here of the pre-existence of the reasons of God's creatures, who foretell the creatures in their fullness. In other words, the integrity of the embryo from the beginning of its existence is closely related to its pretemporal thinking by the Creator.

Saint Maximus the Confessor is forced to express himself on another objection that came from the partisans of the late life of the embryo. They claimed that the creation of the rational and intellectual human soul could not be related to the act of carnal conception. He rejects this theory and uses this circumstance to support once again the importance of the value of the embryo and the natural laws of its existence:

“And if, by avoiding these arguments, you rush to the last, saying that it is not right that what is in the image of God and God (so called the mental soul) should begin to subsist with the flow and the dirty pleasure, and that it is more proper to consider that it must be said that it enters forty days after conception, you prove yourself openly blaming

⁴² St Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* ..., col. 1337 B4-1340 A.

the Maker of nature, and you rightly expose yourself to the dreadful danger of blasphemy arising from here. Because if the wedding is bad, it is obvious that the law of natural birth is bad. And if this law of birth by nature is evil, he will rightly accuse you, the One who made the nature and gave it the law of birth".⁴³

For Saint Maximus, to state that at the moment of conception the embryo is only a body widowed by his soul, is identical with the denial of the Christological stake of the incarnation of the Word. That is why he argues the impossibility of this aspect and concludes definitively his position:

"However, I am afraid to receive such an opinion, lest, the order of reasoning advancing from step to step, make me rightly guilty of frightful iniquities, forcing me to say in the course of reasoning what is not permitted. let it be said: that our Lord and God, if he truly was willing to become a man like us without sin, became man without soul and without mind at the time of conception, and that he remained so for forty days. But our holy parents and teachers say openly, or rather the Truth itself says and said through them that, at the descent of God-Word at birth, the Lord Himself and God-Word were united, without any passage of time, with the body through the mediation of the rational soul and did not receive through the mediation of the inanimate body a rational soul that came after that; that he did not assume a completely inanimate body, or a soul without mind and without reason, but united to Him after the hypostasis, unspeakably, the indefinitely full nature consisting of rational soul and body. That is why I fully embrace the teaching of coexistence, and the two extreme opinions, contrasting with each other and the one in the middle, I reject as appropriate, because I have as a defender and teacher without error of this opinion, through the

⁴³ *Ibidem*, col.1340 B.

very mystery of His incarnation. what He truly became man and confirmed by Himself the subsistence of the full nature at the same time as it came into existence by birth. He did nothing but renew the nature, that is, he changed the conception by seed and the birth by corruption, which nature attracted after disobedience, falling from the divine and spiritual multiplication, but he did not renew the reason of nature after which is and is born subsisting from the very coming to existence from the rational soul and the body".⁴⁴

A critical clarification is also required here. It is known that the great Western medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas, taking Aristotle's theory⁴⁵, argued that the human embryo was inhabited only 40 days after conception⁴⁶, but in the case of the Savior's person, he made an exception, showing that it was the only one to be animated from the moment conception. In exchange for Saint Maximus, the life of the embryo at conception was an integral matter of the definition of human nature assumed by Christ through the incarnation. The renewal of the miraculous conception of Christ does not apply to his natural definition, but to his way of coming into existence, that is, to his virginal conception without the biological implication of male genetic material. That is why Saint Maximus considered the

⁴⁴ *Ibidem*, col.1341 AB-C2.

⁴⁵ Aristotle, *Histoire de animaux*, [Τῶν περὶ τὰ ζῷα ἱστοριῶν], volume II, book VII, col. 583 B, translation from ancient Greek into French by Pierre Louis, Paris, Edit. Belles Lettres, 1968, p. 141.

⁴⁶ Fabrizio Amerini, *Aquinas on the Beginning and End of Human Life*, [Tommaso D'Aquino: Origine e fine della vita umana], translated by Mark Henniger, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Edit. Harvard University Press, 2013, pp. 104-105.

distinction between the human nature assumed by Christ and the way it came into existence.⁴⁷

The dramatic historical context of his time, caused by a campaign of the Persians and Avars against Constantinople in the spring of 626, forced St. Maximus the Confessor to go into exile. After a short stay in Crete where he has talks with the bishops who adhere to Severian Monophysitism, he arrives in North Africa near the city of Carthage where he settles at the Eucratas Monastery.⁴⁸ The theological context in which he will state his opinion on the status of the human embryo was due to the Monophysite danger posed by the proselytism of the Severian monks from Syria and Egypt, who also took refuge from the Arab invasion and enjoyed imperial protection.⁴⁹

To highlight the union of humanity and divinity in Christ, Patriarch Severus of Antioch had used the expression "compound nature," referring to the classical comparison of the union of soul and body, in which two different natures unite to form the third compound of the first two.⁵⁰ A fierce defender of the Chalcedonian dogma concerning the unmixed union of the two natures in Christ, St. Maximus rejects the Severian positions and presents the difference between the two natures in the Person of the Word and that of the body and soul in man. Since the human embryo is a compound nature, existing as parts of a

⁴⁷ Irénée-Henri Dalmais, "L'innovation des natures d'après saint Maxime le Confesseur à propos d'Ambigua 42", in *Studia Patristica*, vol. XV, nr.1 / 1984, pp. 285-290.

⁴⁸ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul. O introducere*, [Saint Maxime le Confesseur], trad. from French Marinela Bojin, Iași, Edit. Doxologia, 2013, p. 26.

⁴⁹ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 450.

⁵⁰ John Meyendorff, *Christ in Byzantine Theology...*, p. 48.

whole, the same cannot be said of the two natures of Christ, for one of them has existed since eternity. In this sense he speaks of the life of the human embryo:

"Every thread composed of its components by the very birth of its parts at the same time and by their coming into existence from what is not and towards the fulfillment of the harmony of all, from the power that gives existence to the whole and sustains in existence those produced, has its parts encompassed each other. This is the case with man and the others who have received a compound nature. Thus the soul unwittingly embraces the body and is embraced by the body and gives life to the body without any free decision, by the very fact that it exists; and naturally participates in his suffering and pain for the capacity of them that are in him".⁵¹

Saint Maximus reiterates this distinction in order to clarify in full: "For all the compound nature is brought to the union of the parts by composition, without a decision of the will. Then the parties are of an age between them and with her, coming into existence together, no part temporarily not existing to the other".⁵² From a critical perspective it can be said that both maxim texts argue for the contemporaneity of the soul and body that come into existence simultaneously in the human embryo from the moment of conception or from the first moment of its existence, unlike the two natures of Christ which are not

⁵¹ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Epistle 12 to John the Cubicular*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XCI, col.488 D-489 A7 [trans. rom. Dumitru Stăniloiaie in P.S.B. vol. 81, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 1990].

⁵² Idem, *Epistola 13 to Illustrious Petru*, PG (Patrologia Graeaca editată de J. P. Migne), vol. XCI, col.517 A, translated into romanian by Dumitru Stăniloiaie, P.S.B. vol. 81, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 1990.

contemporary. for the Word has existed from eternity, and His human nature has received it by the act of the incarnation. Christ thus incarnating himself voluntarily and freely is not a compound nature like the human embryo but a compound hypostasis in which the two natures, preserving their properties, unite in the person of Christ. Through the hypostasis of the Word, human nature is assumed and enipostasized.⁵³ In order to defend the reality of the act of the incarnation, as well as the simultaneity of the soul and the body in the human embryo, the definition of compound human nature is for Saint Maximus the Confessor the capital and intrinsically linked to the Christological stake.⁵⁴ For this reason he returns to it again in an attempt to edify a clergyman converted to Monophysitism: “of itself, separated from the other before their composition in the act of bringing into existence the (hypostasis) of the species. For the composition is at once with their appearance and it is at once the fulfillment of the species in their composition”.⁵⁵ It is obvious that for Saint Maximus the life of the human embryo is intimately linked to the Christological dogma of Chalcedon. Undoubtedly, the presuppositions and preliminary data from which he starts and which he does not give up even when his life is threatened are not the biological or metaphysical ones but the

⁵³ Jean-Claude Larchet, *Îndumnezeirea omului la Sfântul Maxim Mărturisitorul*, [La divinization de l'homme selon saint Maxime le Confesseur], translate from French by Mihaela Bojin, Bucharest, Edit. Basilica, 2019, p. 359.

⁵⁴ Davis Albert Jones, *The Soul of the Embyo. An inquiry into the status of the human embryo in the Christian tradition*, London, New York, 2004, p. 132.

⁵⁵ St. Maximus the Confessor, *Epistle 15 to Deacon Cosmas of Alexandria*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne), vol. XCI, col.552 D6-13, translated into romanian by Dumitru Stăniloae, P.S.B. vol. 81, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 1990.

theological ones.⁵⁶ For him, what achieves the unity between body and soul is the "hypostasis" which is identical with the "person" who makes his the doubt in existence at the moment of conception through the simultaneous creation and direct composition of a soul and a body.⁵⁷

A last argument, evoked here in favor of the status of the human embryo from the perspective of the anthropology of Saint Maximus the Confessor, is related to the dynamics or dynamism of created nature. In Greek philosophical literature there is a perspective that form is transcendent. In this case, form no longer exists in the sensible world, but "by itself" (αὐτό καθ'αὐτό) in a separate world, which is not the sensible world of material things, but the intelligible world of pure forms.⁵⁸ In Platonic terms God is "ὄν" "And all creation is inherently ephemeral (γυγόμενα) Being and becoming.⁵⁹ In the maxim cosmological vision man possesses subsistence and potentiality, in order to actualize his potential insofar as he receives or participates in his existence (εἶναι) what is possessed by God.⁶⁰ Existence or

⁵⁶ Florin Crișmăreanu, *Analogie și cristologie. Studii dionisienie și maximiene*, Iași, Edit. Universității Alexandru Ioan Cuza, 2014, p. 296.

⁵⁷ Marie-Hélène Congourdeau, *Embrionul și sufletul lui la sfinții Părinți...*, p. 450

⁵⁸ Robin George Collingwood, *Ideea de natură. O istorie a gândirii cosmologice europene*, [The idea of Nature], trans. from English by Anghel Alexandru, Bucharest, Edit. Herald, 2012, pp. 98-99.

⁵⁹ Demetrios Harper, *The Analogy of Love. St Maximus the Confessor and the Foundations of Ethics*, Yonkers, New York, Edit. St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2019, p. 101.

⁶⁰ St Maximus the Confessor, *Heads about love*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne) vol. XC, col.1049 C, trans. rom. Dumitru Stăni-

being is, therefore, a gift and is freely offered to all creatures, who are brought "ex nihilo" to the possibility of full participation and actualization in God, an actualization that is left to their own will.⁶¹ For Saint Maximus the exclusiveness of God as "αυτό ό έστιν"⁶² is strongly influenced by the doctrine of creation "ex nihilo".⁶³

6 Conclusions

From the perspective of a critical vision it can be concluded that, in Maximian anthropology, the hypostasis or the human being begins to exist from the moment of conception, through the simultaneous creation and constitution of a soul and a body. The anthropological and Christological argument based on the dogma of the incarnation masterfully used by Saint Maximus the Confessor, gave a high credit to the life of the human embryo from the first moment of its existence. The indisputable arguments of the great theologian made him the main savior of Chalcedonian Christology on the occasion of the Monothelite crisis but also one of the deepest and brightest supporters and defenders of the Eastern Church. Along with St. Gregory of Nyssa, the theology of Saint Maximus the Confessor remains fundamental regarding the issue of the status of the human

loaie in "The Philokalia of holy needs of accomplishment", vol. 2, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 2018.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*, col. 102 A.

⁶² This phrase essentially summarizes what he conveys in St. Maximus the Confessor, *Theological and Economic Heads*, PG (Greek Patrology edited by J. P. Migne) vol. XC, col.1085 A, trans. rom. Dumitru Stăniloaie in "Filocalia sfintelor nevoințe ale desăvârșirii", vol. 2, Bucharest, Edit. IBMBOR, 2018.

⁶³ Demetrios Harper, *The Analogy of Love...*, p.101.

embryo from the perspective of patristic orthodox anthropology.