The Orthodox Meaning of St. Cyril of Alexandria's "One incarnate Nature of the Word"

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- The dogma is that the incarnate Christ is one divine person with two distinct natures, a divine nature and human nature. The two natures are not merged into one nature but remain distinct. And they are not separated but are united in one divine person. (two natures in one divine person)
- The Nestorians believe that in the incarnate Christ there are two distinct persons (the divine Son of God and the human Son of Mary) who are united but distinct. Therefore, Mary only gave birth to the human person which, upon conception, united itself to the divine person while remaining distinct from the human person. Hence they believe the heresy that Mary is not the Mother of God. (two persons are united, a divine person and a human person)
- The Arians rightly believe that Jesus is only one person but heretically believe he is a human person. They believe God dwells in him as he does in other men but to a higher degree. Hence they believe Jesus is God's son by adoption, like with other holy humans, and not by nature. Therefore they believe the heresy that Mary was not the Mother of God. (one human nature in one human person)
- The Monophysites rightly believed that the incarnate Christ is only one person but heretically believe that his human nature merged with his divine nature to form one nature. But they do believe the dogma that Mary was the Mother of God. (one nature, a merged divine-human nature, in one divine person)

To defend their heresies, the Arians, Nestorians and Monophysites took out of context St. Cyril of Alexandria's (c. 376-444) words the "one incarnate nature of the Word" in the following quote:

> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *First Letter to Succensus*, 5th century: "[Chapter 6] After the union has occurred, however, we do not divide the natures from one another, nor do we sever the one and indivisible into two sons, but we say that there is One Son, and as the holy Fathers have stated: <u>One Incarnate Nature of the Word</u>."

St. Cyril's use of the words "one incarnate nature of the Word" in this quote means "one incarnate person of the Word." When he said "we do not divide the natures," he means that the two natures are united in one person.

We know that when St. Cyril said the "one incarnate nature of the Word," he means that the two natures (the divine nature and the human nature) are united in one divine person from his other teachings on this topic and his explanation and context of these words.

For example, in the same First Letter to Successus (in which St. Cyril says "one incarnate nature of the Word"), he also says the following:

> St Cyril of Alexandria, *First letter to Successus*: "[Chapter 7] As to the manner of the incarnation of the Only Begotten…, we would admit that <u>there are two united natures but only One Christ and Son and Lord, the Word of God made man and made flesh</u>. If you like we can take as our example that very composition which makes us men. For we are composed of body and soul and we perceive two natures; there is one nature of the body, and a different nature of the soul, and yet one man from both of them in terms of the union. <u>This composition from two natures does not turn the one man into two, but as I have said there is one man by the composition of body and soul</u>.
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> "[Chapter 6] And so, we unite the Word of God the Father to the holy flesh endowed with a rational soul, in an ineffable way that transcends understanding, <u>without confusion, without change, and without alteration</u>, and we thereby confess

> One Son, and Christ, and Lord; the same one God and man, not someone alongside someone different, but one and the same who is and is known to be both things."

And here are more of his teachings on this topic:

> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Epistle 45*: "Therefore… we say that there are two natures which are united, but that Christ the Son and Lord is one, the Word of God the Father made man and incarnate."
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> > [RJMI: "that Christ…is one [person], the Word of God." And "two natures united" means that the divine nature and human nature did not merge into one nature, as the monophysites believed.]
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> St. Cyril of Alexandria, *Second Letter to Succensus*, 5th century: "[Chapter 4] For if we had said that there was one nature of the Word and had kept silent and not added that it was 'incarnate', as if we were excluding the economy, they might perhaps have had a point when they pretended to ask where was the perfection in the humanity or how did our human essence endure. But since both the perfection in the humanity and the assertion of our human essence is implied by the word 'incarnate' then let them stop leaning on this broken staff… [Chapter 3] They twist the facts, failing to recognize that the reality is one incarnate nature of the Word. If the Word who was begotten mysteriously of God the Father and who afterwards issued as man from woman by assumption of flesh (not lifeless flesh but flesh endowed with life and reason) is truly and actually one Son, he cannot be divided into two persons or sons but remains one… If we call the only-begotten Son of God become incarnate and made man 'one', that does not mean he has been 'mingled', as they suppose; the Word's nature has not transferred to the nature of the flesh or that of the flesh to that of the Word—no, Each nature is understood to remain in all its natural characteristics for the reasons we have just given, though they are ineffably and inexpressibly united, and this is how he demonstrated to us the one nature of the Son; though of course, as I have said, it is the 'incarnate nature' I mean. The term 'one' can be properly applied not just to those things which are naturally simple, but also to things which are compounded in a synthesis. Such is the case with a human being who comprises soul and body. These are quite different things and they are not consubstantial with each other, yet when they are united they constitute the single nature of man, even though the difference in nature of the things that are brought into unity is still present within the system of the composition."

Therefore, in some cases, a word used by one theologian (such as nature) can mean something different to another theologian. And this can cause confusion. And heretics take advantage of this confusion to hide or defend their heresies. For instance, in context, St. Cyril's words "one incarnate nature" means "one incarnate person," but the heretics took it to mean nature in relation to Christ's divine nature and human nature and not in relation to his person:

> *History of Christian Dogma*, Apostate Tixeront, 1913: "For the Antiochian school, the words physis [nature] and hypostasis [a thing], in Christology, were synonymous, meaning a concrete substance with its essential properties and faculties. In opposition to them stood prosopon [person] which signified a complete individual, or an independent person. For Cyril when dealing with Christology these three words, physis [nature], hypostasis [a thing] and prosopon [person], mostly designate the same thing, vis., a concrete individual, an independent person, existing by itself. That Cyril identifies physis [nature] and hypostasis [a thing], is beyond question; he often uses the one for the other, and thus shows that he regards them as synonymous. That he gives them the sense of person, is just as evident."[1]

[1] Translated from the Fifth French edition by H.L.B. *Nihil Obstat*: Sti. Ludovici, die 17, Nov. 1913, F.G. Holweck, *Censor Librorum*. *Imprimatur*: die 19, Nov. 1913, + Joannes J. Glenon, Archiepiscopus St. Ludovki. Herder Book Co., 1923. Vol 3, c. 6 sec. 1, pp. 59-59.

> *The Dyophysite Christology of Cyril of Alexandria*, Hans Van Loon,, 2009: "According to Karmiris, 'the terms "nature", "hypostasis" and "person" were equated at that time since they were regarded as synonymous and identical'. As for the meaning of these three terms, Cyril 'understands the one person to be the bearer of both natures', that is, of divinity and humanity. The phrase 'nature of the God-Logos' testifies to the divine nature, the word 'incarnate' testifies to the human nature, and the term 'one nature' testifies to the one hypostasis or person of the incarnate Word."[2]

Hence, in context, St. Cyril's words "one incarnate nature of the Word" means "the one incarnate person of the Word," and thus not two persons as the Nestorians believed. But he also taught that the one person (nature) of the incarnate Christ has two distinct natures, a divine nature and human nature, which refuted the Monophysites who believe Jesus' divine nature and human nature merged into one nature. And it refutes the Arians who believe Jesus only has a human nature.

Here is a quote from the Holy Roman Emperor St. Justinian's *Confession of the True Faith* that defends the orthodox meaning of St. Cyril's words "the one incarnate nature of the Word":

> Emperor St. Justinian I, *Confession of the True Faith*. 551: Interpretation of Cyril's Formula: One Nature of God the Word Incarnate:
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> "In confessing these things we also receive St Cyril's formula 'One nature of God the Word incarnate' together with his other teachings concerning the true faith, and we confess that 'one Christ' is produced from the divine nature and the human [nature], and not 'one nature' as some have sought to say who improperly understand this formula. For the fact of the matter is that whenever this father said 'One nature of the Word incarnate' he used the term 'nature' in this formula for 'person.' In the writings in which he makes use of this formula, he frequently follows it by adding either the terms Son, or Word, or Only-begotten, which are not [names] that indicate nature, but the person. So then, when the person of the Word was incarnate there was produced not one nature, but one composite Christ, the same God and man.
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> "But when we confess that Christ is God and man, it is impious to say that only one nature or essence exists in him for it is impossible that our Lord Jesus Christ is simultaneously and in one and the same nature both before the ages and in time, or impassible and passible; rather we correctly confess these things by referring them to his one person.
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> "Let us demonstrate from the writings of St Cyril himself how clear his teaching is concerning this expression. In the first epistle to Succensus, after saying
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> > 'One nature of God the Word incarnate,'
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> he immediately adds:
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> > 'Therefore, inasmuch as we are able to understand and to see with the eyes of our soul how the Only-begotten became man, we say that there are two natures, but one Son, or Christ, or Lord who is the Word of God, who became man and was incarnate.'
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> "By these words the father wished to set forth the manner of the Incarnation and to maintain [that the union] is indivisible and without confusion. Therefore, he indicated the number of natures that have come together and proclaimed one Christ, but not one nature of Godhead and flesh. He teaches us the same thing in the second letter to the same Succensus; he writes:

[2] 4.4.5.1, p. 238.

> ‘If, when speaking of the nature of the Word, we have not added the term ‘incarnate’ but have set aside, as it might seem, the Economy, perhaps their statement would become credible to them when they pretend to ask: “How is he perfect in his humanity, or how has our essence subsisted in him?” But by saying ‘incarnate’ we bring to view the completeness of his humanity and disclose his [human] essence, so they should cease supporting their arguments with their sticks of bamboo, for he who takes away from the Son his perfect humanity is justly accused of rejecting the dispensation and denying the Incarnation.
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> ‘But if, as I said, to say that he was incarnate is a clear and unambiguous confession of the fact that he became man, then nothing prevents us from thinking that the Christ is only one Son and that the same is God and man; just as he is perfect in his divinity, so also he is perfect in his humanity…’
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> “In the thirteenth chapter of his ‘Scholia,’ St Cyril follows the same argument in opposing those who introduce two sons [Arians] and those who say one nature of Christ constituted of Godhead and flesh [Monophysites]. He writes:
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> > ‘Therefore, we should not differentiate the one Lord Jesus Christ into man and God separately, but we speak of one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, recognizing the difference of the natures and holding them together without confusion.’
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> “So if our Lord Jesus Christ is one as St Cyril teaches, the same perfect in Godhead and perfect in humanity, and if the father says that he did not suffer in his divine nature, but in his earthly nature, and he also knows that the difference of the natures is preserved while they are united together without confusion in one person, then it is clear that he means that he is known both in his divine nature and in his human [nature], and that he is also composed of each nature that is in him. And no one would be so foolish as to think that they believe aright who say there is in Christ one nature or essence of flesh and divinity, the same [nature] being divine and earthly, passible and impassible [the monophysite heresy]…”

St. Justinian goes on for several pages with many other proofs. And he also defends St. Cyril in his work titled the *Dogmatic Treatise against the Monophysite Monks of Egypt*, 542 or 543.

For the glory of God; in honor of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St. Michael, St. Joseph, Ss. Joachim and Anne, St. John the Baptist, the other angels and saints; and for the salvation of men

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