

Disciples of Christ-Catholic Dialogue
December 5-11, 2004
Bari, Italy

The Non-Eucharistic Presence of Christ in the Church

Robert Louis Wilken

In the Church's daily prayer the first psalm to be recited each morning after the opening versicles is Psalm 95. In the Latin version of this psalm the initial words read: "Venite, exultemus Domino; iubilemus Deo salutari nostro. Praeoccupemus faciem eius in confessione et in psalmis iubilemus ei." The Latin version as well as the Septuagint retain the Hebrew term "face", the idiom for coming into the presence of someone. The RSV renders the passage: "Let us come into His presence with thanksgiving" (Ps 95:2). The opening verses of Psalm 95 are a fitting prayer to begin the day and a good place to begin the discussion of the presence of Christ in the Church.

The expression "face of God" or in the "presence of God" occurs often in the Psalter. Here are a few examples chosen at random: "in thy presence there is fulness of joy" (Ps 16:11); "cast me not away from thy presence" (Ps 51:11); "the earth quaked, the heavens poured down rain, at the presence of God"; "the upright shall dwell in thy presence"(140:13). Other psalms simply say "face" of God: "Hear, O Lord, when I cry aloud, be gracious to me and answer me! Thou hast said, 'Seek ye my face.' My heart says to thee, 'The face, Lord, do I seek.' Hide not thy face from me" (Ps 27:7-8); "May God be gracious to us and bless us and make his face to shine upon us" (Ps 67:1); "Seek his face always" (Ps 105:4), a text Augustine loved.¹

¹ See for example De Trinitate 1.5; 9.1.15.1; 15.51.

The Bible is a book about the God's presence in the world and among his people. Even when the earth was without form and voice "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2). After Cain killed his brother the Lord put a mark on him and "Cain went away from the presence of the Lord" (Gen 4:16). When the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after leaving Israel God was present among them in the "tent of meeting", a kind of portable sanctuary in which was found a table with the "bread of presence" (Exod 25:30). When the divine cloud descended on the tent the "glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle" (Ex 40:34). God was also present in the pillar of cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. When Moses seeks assurance that God will guide his people the Lord answers: "My presence will go with you and I will give you rest" (Ex 34:14). The Ark of the Covenant was a concrete manifestation of God's presence (1 Kings 8:1-15).

In Leviticus the Lord says to the people: "And I will make my abode among you, and my soul shall not abhor you. And I will walk among you, and will be your God, and you shall be my people. I am the Lord your God, who brought you forth out of the land of Egypt. . . ." (Lev 26:11-13). This passage from Leviticus is cited in 2 Corinthians where it is introduced by St. Paul with the words: "For we are the temple of the living God; as God said, ' I will live in them and move among them, and I will be their God and they shall be my people.'" (2 Cor. 6:16).

These few texts illustrate that the presence of God is at the heart of the Biblical tradition. The God who created the world, who causes the mountain to shake and the earth to shudder, whose ways are past knowing, comes close to his people and dwells among them.

God's presence is no less central in the New Testament, but the mode of expression is different because God has come near in the person of his Son: "And the Word became flesh and

dwelt among us, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14); “For in him all the fulness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col 1:19); or the first reading at the Mass of Christmas Eve: “For the grace of God has appeared for the salvation of all men” (Titus 2:11). These and similar texts speak of the coming of Christ as an event that brought about a change in God’s relation to the world. Now God will be present among his people in a human being who lived among us. The epistle to the Hebrews begins: “In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son. . . .” (Heb 1:1). The New Testament depicts the coming of Christ as something that happened in historical time. Christ’s coming is unique and irrepeatable.

But there are many other passages that speak of God’s presence in Christ in the personal language of indwelling. Here the accent is not on singularity but on his continuing presence, not once but always. For example in Eph 3:17 Paul prays that God may grant the Ephesians “to be strengthened with might through his Spirit in the inner man, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith.” One could put together a little dossier of texts from the New Testament that speak of the presence of Christ in the believer: Gal: 2:20: “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”; Col 3:16: “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Rom 8:11: “If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you”; 1 John 1:26: “So we know and believe the love God has for us. God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him.”

And then there are those texts that speak of Christians being united to Christ as part of his body the Church: Rom:6:5: “If we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall

certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. . . .”; Rom 12:5: “So we though many are one body in Christ and individually members one of another;” Eph: 1:19: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit”; Col. 1:24: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is the church”.

These and other biblical passages provided Christians a language to speak about the presence of Christ in the Church and in the believer. The first point then is that the Scriptures have many ways of talking about the Christ’s presence to the believer. Second, Christ’s presence is sometimes depicted as indwelling in an individual person, at other times it is a union between Christ and the Church. This would suggest that even when personal or individual language is used it has an ecclesiological dimension. Third, the agency of Christ’s presence is also varied. In places Christ is present through the “word” (Col 3:16) and in other places through faith, as in the words of St. Paul: “that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith” (Eph 3:17).

There are several ways one might sort out the biblical teaching about Christ’s presence, but perhaps a distinction of von Balthasar’s between an “exterior” coming and an “interior” coming will be helpful. His terminology is modern, but the distinction he makes is rooted in the

ancient and medieval discussion of the “missions” of Christ. Von Balthasar writes: “Through a historical fact that is exterior, Christianity teaches us a historical fact that is interior.”²

Balthasar wishes to highlight that Christianity rests on the revelation of the divine Word in an event that was visible to all (though not discerned by all). When the fourth evangelist wrote, “The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us,” he was of course making a theological statement, but his next words indicate that he is thinking historically as well as theologically: “we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only son from the Father. John bore witness to him and cried, ‘This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me’”” (John 1:14-15). In the new covenant God is no longer present in the temple, nor simply in the inspiration of holy men and women as in ancient Israel, nor in the oracles of the prophets; God has now come near in a human being born of a woman, whose birth can be dated to the reign of emperor Augustus, who suffered under Pontius Pilate, died, was buried and now lives.

Even Christ’s Resurrection was an event to which one could bear witness, and it is noteworthy that in the Acts of the Apostles, the criterion for election as an apostle (to replace Judas), was that one had known Jesus when “he went in and out among us” and was a “witness to the resurrection” (Acts 1:22). Von Balthasar uses the term “exterior” to refer to this aspect of Christ’s coming. There is a givenness, a facticity, an objectivity to what happened in Christ and any discussion of God’s presence must begin with this new reality, this set of events. This seems to state the obvious, but it is essential to keep this in mind in the discussion of Christ’s presence. Christ is present among us as God made man.

² Hans Urs von Balthasar, Presence and Thought. An Essay on the Religious Philosophy of Gregory of Nyssa

But there is also a personal aspect to Christ's coming, a subjective dimension, what von Balthasar calls the "interior" fact, the coming of Christ to the human heart, as in the words of St. Paul: "may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith." These two comings, though distinct, cannot be separated from one another. They constitute "one sole event." Now it is obvious that the exterior event is brought about by the Incarnation. Christ was born of a woman and lived among us. But von Balthasar wishes to say that the "interior approach of grace" is also "produced by the Incarnation."³ This means that any discussion of the presence of Christ in the Church and in the believer can never be a presence of Christus extra carnem. Now that God has entered our world in his Son, fully divine and fully human, God is present to us in the fulness of a person, the Christ who is known from the gospels and celebrated in the Church's worship. The humanity of Christ leads us to God. In the words of St. Thomas, "Christ, as man, is our way to God (secundum quod homo, via est nobis tendendi in Deum)".⁴

With this distinction between "exterior" and "interior" comings in mind I turn now to some passages from the church fathers and St. Thomas to illustrate how they speak about the interior presence of Christ. I begin with the interpretation of Ephesians 3:17, "may Christ dwell in your hearts through faith." In his Commentary on Ephesians at this verse Origen notes that here Paul uses the term "glory" ("according to the riches of his glory"). Origen takes this to mean that God shares with us the wealth of his "divinity" and in this way "strengthens" the believer

(Ignatius: 1995), p. 133.

³ Presence and Thought, p.33.

⁴ I, q. 2 proemium.

“with power through the Spirit.” “What is most paradoxical of all is that Christ, being whole and living in and of himself, also dwells in those who partake of him”.⁵

Augustine too was drawn to this passage from Ephesians. For example in a sermon on Rom 8:30-31 Augustine asks: Where is Christ when we suffer tribulation, deprivation or persecution? To which he responds: “He is in you, because faith is itself also in you. Or is the apostle deceiving us, when he says ‘For Christ to live by faith in our hearts’ (Eph 3:17)? Now by faith, but then it will be by sight; now by faith as long as we are on the way, as long as we are on the journey in exile. For ‘as long as we are in the body, we are exiled from the Lord; for we are walking by faith, not by sight’ (2 Cor 5:6-7)”.⁶

Eph 3:17 was also used by St. Thomas to make a similar point. In discussing whether the “sacraments of the new law” derive their power from Christ’s passion, he quotes Paul and explains: “Christ dwells in us “by faith” (Eph 3:17). “Consequently, by faith Christ’s power is united to us. Now the power of blotting out sin belongs in a special way to his Passion. And therefore men are delivered from sin especially by faith in his Passion according to Rom 3:25: ‘Whom God has proposed to be a propitiation through faith in His blood. . . .’”⁷

As I have already indicated the New Testament sometimes speaks of Christ being present through a “word”, as in Colossians, “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly” (Col 3:16). Origen addresses the question of “how” Christ is present in a fascinating passage in the introduction to his Commentary on John. His comment comes in a discussion of the meaning of the term “gospel.” The task of the evangelist, he says, was not simply to narrate the events in

⁵ Commentary on Ephesians 3:17; text in J.A.F. Gregg, “The Commentary of Origen upon the Epistle to the Ephesians,” Journal of Theological Studies, old series 3 (1902), 410-411.

⁶ Sermon 158.8.

Christ's life, e.g. healing a man blind from birth, but to present these events in a way that they bring joy to the hearer. "The gospel," he writes, "is a discourse (logos) containing a report of things which, because of the good they bring, make the hearer glad when he embraces what is reported." More precisely the gospel is a "word" that brings "the presence (parousia) of a good to the believer" or "promises that a good that is expected is present."⁸

Origen makes clear that the "presence" of which he speaks here came about only after the coming of Christ in the flesh. It is not proper to speak of "gospel" in the Old Testament because Christ had not yet come, nor even to speak of gospel with respect to everything written in the epistles because the gospel has to do with the "narrative of the deeds, sufferings and words of Jesus." Only when the Savior "dwelled among us was the gospel embodied in the gospel." It is striking that Origen uses the same term "dwell among us" (epidemeo) to designate the Incarnation, i.e. the exterior event, that he uses for the indwelling in the believer, the interior grace. "Everyone, then, in whom Christ dwelt (epidedeemeeken), worships God neither in Jerusalem nor on the mountain of the Samaritans."⁹

Next Origen draws a contrast between different kinds of indwelling. In the Old Testament, before he came in a body, Christ "dwelled spiritually" in certain people, notably the patriarchs, Moses, and the prophets "who beheld the glory of Christ." And even after his sojourn in the flesh he is only present spiritually in those who are still infants. He is still awaiting "the necessary formation that must take place in men of God who are going to receive him in the

⁷ III, q.62, a.4, ad 2.

⁸ Commentary on John 1.27.

⁹ Commentary on John 1.33-35.

fulness of his divinity.”¹⁰ In other words the dwelling of Christ in the believer differs from one person to another because not all provide a suitable resting place.

In these few brief paragraphs Origen helps to clarify what is meant by Christ’s presence in believers. First any discussion of Christ’s presence must begin with the Incarnation, or more precisely with the events of Christ’s life narrated in the Scriptures. The presence of Christ in the Church is not simply a spiritual presence as God is present in the world or in the holy men and women of ancient Israel. It is most decidedly a personal presence that was made possible because the divine Logos became human.

Second, the presence of Christ can be brought about through words. Not just any word, however! Christ is present through a word that proclaims the suffering, death and resurrection of Christ. This is perhaps the most striking feature of Origen’s discussion. The term gospel, says Origen, refers to a discourse, a logos, that makes present a good. The word of the Gospel is not simply an account of what happened in the past, it is a living and active word, a word that brings about something.

Third, the presence of Christ is neither coercive nor intrusive. Christ must be welcomed. When the word of the Gospel finds a receptive soul, fertile soil in which it can take root, it makes a dwelling place. Christ’s presence is always personal, the indwelling of a person who is known and loved. For the spiritual writers this is a matter of great moment. Christ’s presence requires an inner conformity in the soul of the believer.

That Christ can be present in the believer is of course rooted in the mystery of the Resurrection. When Origen says that the gospel brings a “good”, the good is the living Christ. As

¹⁰ Commentary on John 1.37-38.

in the words of the “mysterium fidei” in the Eucharist prayer: “Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again.” The foundation of Christ’s presence, then, is the Resurrection, that Christ lives and in his glorified body enters into the lives of the faithful in a way that was not possible when he was living among us on this earth. As Thomas says, Christ’s Resurrection has an “effective power not only with regard to the resurrection of bodies, but also with respect to the resurrection of souls” for in our souls “we must be conformed with the rising Christ.”¹¹ This is the teaching of the Gospel of John and it is not surprising that Origen’s comment on the meaning of “gospel” comes in his Commentary on the fourth Gospel.

To understand this interior presence of Christ Catholic theology makes a distinction between different “missions” of the Son (and also of the Holy Spirit). The distinction goes back to Augustine. In his De Trinitate Augustine observed that it is not proper to speak of the “sending” of the Father.¹² The term missio applies only to the Son and Spirit. The key text is Galatians 4:4-6: “But when the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons. And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father’”.

In its primary sense the “sending” of the Son refers to an event in space and time, his birth of a woman, the Incarnation, what von Balthasar calls the “exterior” fact. But Augustine says there is another “sending”, when Christ is received by someone. In his words: “he is sent to someone when he is known and perceived by him”, to which he adds “as far as he can be perceived.” Unlike the “sending” of Christ into the world, this sending cannot be seen with the

¹¹ III q. 56, a. 2, corpus.

senses; it is an interior knowing and receiving. As biblical support Augustine cites a passage on the sending forth of Wisdom (who is identified with Christ): “Send her to be with me and labor with me” (Wisdom 9:10). For Augustine this sending is always personal, when Christ “is known by someone in time.” It is also a coming that hinges on the capacity of the believer, for Christ dwells in a soul that is “either making progress towards God or is already made perfect in God.” The reason then for Christ’s “mission” according to Augustine is “purification”.¹³

The distinction of missions was taken over by medieval theologians. In his Sentences Peter Lombard cites the passage from De Trinitate 4 and Thomas draws on the text in his Commentary on the Sentences and in the Summa to show that there are two kinds of missions of the Son: In the Sentence Commentary Thomas writes: “Ecce distincti sunt duo modi missionis Filii”.¹⁴ The one is the sending of the Son into the flesh in time, only once, when the Son “appeared visibly in the world clothed in flesh” the other is when Christ “enters into pious souls and is perceived and knowed by them.” The one is once for all (semel tantum), the other is “often” (saepe), a sending that happens also “today” (quotidie). The first is visible, the second invisible.¹⁵

Thomas takes up the same question in the Summa at IaIae q. 43, a.5. As he formulates the matter it is a question whether it is proper to speak of the Son and not only the Holy Spirit being sent “invisibly”. If all gifts of grace belong to the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12:11), it would seem, he says, that only the Holy Spirit is sent “invisibly”. A second objection is that if the sending of the Spirit is the cause of sanctification, the sending of the Son would be superfluous. But Thomas

¹² De Trinitate 2.8.

¹³ De Trinitate 4.20-24.

¹⁴ Scriptum Super Libros Sententiarum, Distinctio 15 (ed. Mandonnet; Paris: 1929), p. 334.

responds by citing Wisdom 9:10, the same text cited by St. Augustine in De Trinitate, to argue that the Son is sent. It is clear that he has the passage from Augustine's De Trinitate before him as he writes since he quotes it later in the article. His answer then it is that it is possible to speak about an invisible sending of the Son, for sending here means that a person of the Holy Trinity (in this case the Son), "dwells in a new way within him [the believer]. . . ."

Although all gifts of grace are attributed to the Holy Spirit, since he is by definition "gift", some gifts are given specifically by the Son. Thomas then cites Augustine: "The Son is sent to anyone invisibly, whenever He is known and received by anyone"¹⁶ The term "invisibiliter" is not in Augustine's text, but Augustine says as much when he explains that this "mission" of the Son takes place "non sensibiliter".

For Thomas as for Augustine and Origen the reason for the invisible mission of Christ is the transformation of the believer. Origen spoke of the "formation" that must take place in the one who receives Christ, Augustine said that it was only as we conformed to eternal things that we could be "purified", and Thomas says that "there must be a likening of the soul to the divine person who is sent. . . ." Quoting Augustine, who said that the Son is sent when he is "known and perceived", he explains that "perception implies a certain experiential knowledge (experimentalem quandam notitiam significat)." ¹⁷ The invisible mission of Christ to the believer brings about an interior confirmity to the incarnate Son, a presence that leads to the divinization of the human being. Faith in Christ is the beginning of sharing in God's life and through Christ's presence we are brought near to God. Christ is the fulness of grace and through his actions he

¹⁵ Ibid, pp. 333-334.

¹⁶ De Trinitate 4.28.

¹⁷ IaIae 43.5 ad 2.

“causes grace in us” moving us inwardly to be united with God.¹⁸ “It belongs to [Christ] as man” says Thomas, “to unite men to God by communicating to men both precepts and gifts, and by offering satisfaction and prayers to God for men.”¹⁹

In the most extensive discussion of the “presence of God” in the world in the patristic period, Augustine takes up the question posed by the word to the thief on the cross, “Today you will be with me in paradise?” (Lk 23:43): how could Christ be in heaven when he hung on the cross.²⁰ Augustine argues that since God is everywhere (*Deus totus ubique semper*), “the man who is in God, is spread out (*diffusus*) everywhere as well”²¹ As God Christ “is always everywhere” (*ubique semper est*).²² Yet, Augustine goes on to say, though God is wholly everywhere, through Christ God dwells in certain persons, as Paul writes: “Do you not know that you are the temple of God and that the Holy Spirit dwells in you” (1 Cor 3:16). Then he explains: “Now who except someone utterly ignorant of the inseparability of the Trinity would dare to suppose that the Father or the Son could dwell in someone in whom the Holy Spirit does not dwell or that the Holy Spirit could dwell in someone in whom the Father and the Son do not? Hence we must say that God is everywhere by the presence of his divinity but not through the indwelling of grace.”²³

Here Augustine confirms what we have already observed, namely that God’s dwells in those who perceive and know him. But he also introduces another theme, that Christ’s presence in the believer is also the indwelling of the Holy Trinity. He does not, however, pursue this line

¹⁸ III 8.1 corpus and ad 2.

¹⁹ III 26 2 corpus.

²⁰ Letter 187. In his *Retractationes* Augustine called this letter a “little book on the presence of God (*de praesentia Dei*)” (*Retract* 2.49).

²¹ Letter 187.2.3.

of thinking but instead explains how it is that God is more fully present in some believers than in others. “Why in all the saints,” he asks, “are some holier than others except by having God dwelling in them more abundantly?” Though God is present everywhere, some are far from him because they have become “unlike” God by sinning, and others draw near to “receive his likeness” because they conform to him.²⁴

In these passages from Augustine and in Thomas the discussion of the invisible mission of the Son is treated at a very high level of abstraction. But it is well to recall that what is presented here in the technical language of scholastic theology was first and foremost an affair of personal experience, as Thomas himself notes. So it might be helpful to provide an illustration of how the “invisible” mission of Christ, the presence of Christ in the heart of a believer, worked itself out in the life of one of the great saints of the Church, St. Bernard. In his sermons on the Song of Songs Bernard speaks of the presence of Christ in the soul in intimate personal language.

Here for example are a few citations from his homily on the Song of Songs. The text is Song 2:17: “Turn back [or return] my Beloved, and be like a gazelle, or a young stag on the mountains of Bethel.” The bride is speaking here and Bernard takes the word “return” to mean she is calling back the bridegroom who is not there, but had been there before. “The Word of God, God himself, the Bridegroom of the soul, comes to the soul and leaves it again as he wishes [“as he wills” 1 Cor 12:11]” but his coming and going depend on the “soul’s sensitivity.” When the soul realizes Christ is gone she “mourns his absence” and “seeks again his presence.” When

²² Letter 187.3.7.

²³ Letter 187.5.16.

he is absent she calls him back and the “Word is recalled by the longing of the soul who has once enjoyed his sweetness.”

After setting forth the sense of the text Bernard then speaks to his fellow monks about his personal experience. The “Word has also come to me – I speak as a fool – and has come many times. But although he has come to me, I have never been conscious of the moment of his coming. I perceived his presence, I remembered afterwards that he had been with me; sometimes I had a presentiment that he would come, but I was never conscious of his coming or his going.” Then he explains that his coming was not perceptible to my eyes, nor did I hear a sound, nor was he tasted, nor was he touched. “How then did he enter? Perhaps he did not enter because he does not come from outside? He is not one of the things which exist outside of us. Yet he does not come from within me, for he is good, and I know that there is no good in me.” How then is he present? In response Bernard quotes the words of St. Paul in Acts: “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

If his “presence” cannot be traced, how is he with us? As “life and power”, says Bernard. When he enters “he awakens my slumbering soul’ he stirs and soothes and pierces my heart, for before it was hard as stone, and diseased.” How then is his coming recognized: “Only by the movement of my heart. . . did I perceive his presence.”

When the Word departs I become “weak and faint and begin to grow cold as though you had removed the fire from under a boiling pot”. When he returns my heart is kindled, says Bernard. It is no wonder, then, that when he is gone “I take to myself the words of the Bride, calling him back when he has withdrawn.” Thus, “from the burning desire of my heart I will not

²⁴ Letter 187. 5.17; “God who is present everywhere and wholly everywhere, does does not dwell in all but only in

cease to call him, begging him to return, as if after someone who is departing, and I will implore him to give back to me the joy of his salvation, and restore himself to me.”²⁵

I now turn more briefly to the ecclesial aspects of Christ’s presence in the Church. The Church, in the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church is “the sacrament of the inner union of men with God.”²⁶ In support of that teaching the Catechism quotes from the opening words of Lumen Gentium: “The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, or communion with God and unity among men.”²⁷ Drawing on Gal 4:19, “until Christ be formed in you” Lumen Gentium goes on to say: “All the member must be made into his likeness until Christ is formed in them. Therefore we are taken up into the mysteries of his life, we are made like to him, we die and are raised to life with him until we reign together with him.”²⁸

Accordingly though Christ has an invisible mission to individual believers as they know and love him, his grace is conveyed within the fellowship of the Church among those who have been baptized. For it is through Baptism that we are incorporated into the Church. “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body” (1 Cor 12:13). It is then as head of the Church that Christ’s grace is communicated to the faithful.

In the patristic period this union between Christ and the Church is developed in several ways and I will discuss two, Augustine’s understanding of the totus Christus as developed in his expositions of the Psalms and Gregory of Nyssa’s interpretation of the 1 Corinthians 15:28.

those whom he makes his most blessed temple” (12.35).

²⁵ Homily 74.2 on the Song of Songs

²⁶ Par. 775.

²⁷ Lumen Gentium 1.

²⁸ Lumen Gentium 7.

In one of his sermons Augustine said that Christ can be known in three ways: as God according to the divine nature which is equal with the Father; as man after he assumed flesh yet at the same time God; and as Christ who is present on earth in the fulness of the Church, that is “head and body. . . the man in whom we are each of us members.”²⁹

Christ is the head of the body, says Augustine, not only in so far as he is the Word, the only Son of the Father, “but also in the very man whom he took on, and with whom, he is both God and man together.” As biblical support he offers an ingenious interpretation of Isaiah 61:10: “As a bridegroom and bride he has bound a turban on my head, and as for a bride he has decked me out with ornaments.” Augustine observes that the same person is speaking and is called bridegroom as well as the bride, that is Christ calls himself bridegroom as head and bride with reference to the Church, his body.³⁰

Augustine’s phrase for this understanding of Christ and the Church is totus Christus. By this he meant that in the Psalms Christ prays either in his own person or in our person transforming us into himself. He speaks not only as “head” but also as “body”. “He who deigned to assume the form of a slave, and within that form to clothe us with himself, he who did not disdain to take us up into himself, did not disdain either to transform us into himself (transfigurare nos in se) , and to speak in our words, so that we in our turn might speak in his. This is the wonderful exchange, the divine business deal, the transaction effected in this world by the heavenly dealer. He came to receive insults and give honors, he came to drain the cup of suffering and give salvation, he came to undergo death and give life. . . . When he said that his soul was sorrowful to the point of death, we all unquestionably said it with him. Without him, we

²⁹ Sermon 341.1.

are nothing, but in him we too are Christ. Why? Because the whole Christ consists of Head and body.”³¹

Augustine was led to this interpretation of Christ and the Church because in expounding the Psalms – all one hundred and fifty! – he found that certain psalms were hard to interpret if they were seen solely as psalms in which Christ is the speaker. For example in the Latin rendering of Psalm 22 (21), the first verse reads: “O God, my God, look upon me, why have you forsaken me? The tale of my sins leaves me far from salvation.” According to the gospels, the cry “My God, why have you forsaken me?” was the word of Christ on the cross, hence this psalm was understood as a psalm spoken by Christ. But how, asks Augustine, can Christ speak of his “sins”? Augustine agrees that the words are indeed the words of Christ but here it is Christ as the Church who speaks. In other words the solution to the exegetical dilemma is that the psalm gave us the words of the totus Christus, Christ speaking at times in his own voice, at times in the voice of his body the Church.

As he pursued this line of interpretation in his Expositions on the Psalms he developed in some detail a comprehensive understanding of the psalter and of Christ’s relation to the Church. For example in a homily on Psalm 31, he observes that some things are said that are inappropriate for Christ “even in his form as a servant”³² Yet he insists that “it is Christ who is speaking because in the members of Christ there is Christ. I want you to understand that Head and body together are called one Christ.”³³ In support of this interpretation he cites Eph 5:31-32. “They will be two in one flesh. This is a great mystery, but I am referring to Christ and the

³⁰ Sermon 341.11

³¹ Exposition 2.3 of Psalm 30.

³² Augustine is thinking of the phrase “let me not be put to shame” which suggests fear.

Church.” Out of two people one person comes to be and speaks in one voice. “In Christ the Church speaks, and in the Church Christ speaks.”³⁴

For Augustine the identification of Christ with the Church meant that Christians must never think of themselves as “alien from Christ, since we are his members.” As support he cites Eph 5:31-32, the “two will be one flesh.” His point is that it is only if the psalms are prayed as the voice of the Church can they have meaning for the individual Christian. For the words of the psalm are not our words but Christ’s words. “Head and members form one Christ.”³⁵ Augustine’s interpretation of the psalter in terms of the “*totus Christus*” is of great significance for the life of prayer. For in praying the psalms the Christian as member of the body of Christ prays the psalms with Christ and in the way Christ prays them.

Another example of Augustine’s understanding of the *totus Christus* can be found in his exposition of psalm 63 (62). This psalm, says Augustine, was spoken in the person of Christ as head of the Church. “He, the one man who was born from Mary, and suffered, and was buried, and rose again, and ascended into heaven, and now sits at the Father’s right hand to intercede for us – he is our head. If he is the head, we are the limbs.” Accordingly “whatever he suffered, we too suffered in him, and whatever we suffer, he too suffers in us. Think of an analogy: if your head suffers some injure, can your hand be unaffected? Or if your hand is hurt, can your head be free from pain?”³⁶ For Augustine the psalms become the prayer of the Church because they are the prayer of Christ, the voice of the Church in distress, under persecution, in hope, of gratitude, of longing.

³³ Exposition 2.4 of Psalm 30.

³⁴ Exposition 2.4 of Psalm 30. see also Exposition of Psalm 87.13.

³⁵ Exposition of Psalm 54.3.

This identification between Christ and the Church is no less evident in Eastern Christian writers. In his major theological work the Orations against the Arians Athanasius's shows that the deification of the Christian in Christ was possible because the Church is the mystical Body of Christ. Through the Incarnation we have been "united to God".³⁷ Through water and the Spirit we are regenerated and made alive in Christ. Because the divine Word took on our body "he has come to be in us." Athanasius here draws on the passage in John: "that they all may be one, as Thou, Father, art in Me, and I in Thee"(John 17:22). Since we participate in the Son, says Athanasius, we "become one body having the Lord in ourselves." It is not, as the Arians, claim, that we are like Christ through a similarity in nature, but that we are one with the Lord possessing the Lord in ourselves.³⁸

But perhaps the most profound development of the Church as the body of Christ in eastern Christian writers is to be found in Gregory of Nyssa. Gregory had an organic understanding of Christ's relation to humanity and to the Church. Though Christ is an individual human being, and the Logos assumed a concrete human nature, as the second Adam he is united to all men. This union takes place through the Incarnation, but Gregory insists that the renewal of humanity comes about through Christ's Resurrection. Because our nature constitutes "a living human organism, the resurrection of one part of it extends to the whole."³⁹ By rising from the dead Christ raises the whole of humanity with him. He who is called the "author of life" has "saved all who are in communion with him through the identity of flesh and blood."⁴⁰

³⁶ Exposition of Psalm 62.2.

³⁷ Contra Arianos 2.69.

³⁸ Contra Arianos 3.22.

³⁹ Oratio Catechetica Magna 32

⁴⁰ Antirrheticus Adversus Apollinarem 2 (PG 45:1156d).

Gregory develops this unity between Christ and the Church in one of his lesser known writings (because untranslated), an exegetical essay on the difficult passage in 1 Corinthians 15: “When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subject to him who put all things under him, that God may be all in all”(1Cor 15:28).⁴¹ This passage caused problems for the defenders of Nicaea because it seemed to suggest that at the culmination of all things the Son would be “subject” to the Father in the way all things will be subject to God. For that reason it was seized by the Arians to support their view that the son is a creature. The meaning of the passage was vigorously debated and the phrase “and his kingdom will have no end” was inserted into the Nicene Creed to exclude an Arian interpretation..

In his essay Gregory provided a detailed exegesis of the text. In answer to the conundrum posed by the text he proposed that Paul was speaking of Christ as the Church. That is Christ is said to be subject to the Father because the Church his body is subject to God. He observes first that Paul’s argument rests on the parallel between Christ and Adam. The first man was of the earth because of sin and all who had their origin in this first man became earthly and mortal. As evil extended to all through one person so the good brought by Christ’s resurrection “extends to all” through one person.⁴² Thus Paul writes: “The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As it was with the man of dust, so are those who are of the dust; as is the man of heaven so are those who are born of heaven” (1 Cor 15:47-48).

Paul’s central contention, says Gregory, is that there will come a time when evil will be wholly destroyed. It will be reduced to “non-being”, blotted out completely from existence. How will this happen? By taking on human flesh Christ mingled with the whole of humanity as “a

⁴¹ Gregorii Nysseni Opera 3.2, pp. 3-28.

kind of first fruits from a common lump of dough” and all of humanity was engrafted into him. In Christ’s triumph over death all evil was destroyed and those who are joined to him will one day also be victorious. On that day we will attain “the final stage of our hope when nothing contrary to the good will remain and the divine life will permeate all things. . . .”⁴³

Like the other writers I have considered Gregory was aware that there are degrees of closeness with Christ depending on how fully one’s life conforms to his. He envisions the faithful following in the train of Christ, some closer to him, some more distant. “In turning away from the good some have departed further from the original good and some not so far. Each one, according to his own merit and ability, trails the one who goes before. That is to say, we follow the man Christ, who beame the ‘first fruits’ of our nature (11 Cor 15:23) when he received divinity in himself. . . . First comes Christ, who was wholly free from sin and had abolished the power of death in himself and destroyed ‘all its rule and authority and power’” (1 Cor 156:24). Then follows anyone who like Paul imitated Christ as closely as possible (1 Cor 11:1) in casting off evil. . . . Next I suppose might come Timothy who imitated his teacher as much as he was able (1 Cor 4:17), or someone like him. Then would come, each in his turn, all who to one degree or another are lesser than those who go ahead until we reach those in whom evil predominates over good. In this way the sequence of those moving toward the good will proceed from those less evil to those who are more so, until the procession of goodness reaches the extreme of evil and obliterates it.”⁴⁴ The closer one is to Christ the more one is free of evil.

⁴² GNO 3.2, p.11, lns. 16-19.

⁴³ GNO 3.2, p.16, lns. 4-5.

⁴⁴ GNO 3.2, p. 15.

Gregory's argument then is that in 1 Cor. 15 the term "subjection" refer to the ultimate victory when evil is completely destroyed. Then the "whole of our nature's lump of dough, intermingled with the 'first fruits' and having become 'one body' (1 Cor 12:12-20) because of its intimate union with Christ" will welcome the rule of the one who alone is good (Matt 19:17). Hence, when the whole body of our nature has been mingled with the pure divine nature, there will take place through us what Paul calls the subjection of the Son (1 Cor 15:28)." This subjection which is "accomplished in his body" is "attributed to him" because he is the one who works this grace in us.⁴⁵

The aim of the essay, then, is to show that when Paul mentions the subjection of Christ to God in 1 Cor. 15:28 he is referring to the Church as the body of Christ. Because of the union between Christ and the Church, between Christ and his body, when the Church is fully subject to God, that is free from the evil that alienates it from God, one can say not only that the Church is subject to God but Christ, the head of the Church, is also subject to the Father.

Gregory further explains that when Paul says God will be all in all this means that God will be for us food, drink, clothing, shelter, air, space, wealth, enjoyment, beauty, health, strength, wisdom, glory, happiness, and everything that we need. Whoever is "in God possesses all things in possessing him. For possessing God is nothing else than to be united with God." But this is only possible if we are one body with Christ as Paul writes in Ephesians and 1 Corinthians (Eph 3:6 and 1 Cor 12:12). When the good has penetrated all things then the body will be subject to the "power that gives life" and the subjection of his body is said to be the subjection of the Son. For that reason Paul can write in Colossians: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings. . . ." And in 1

⁴⁵ GNO 3.2, p. 16, lns. 19-22.

Corinthians “Now you are the body of Christ. . . .” (11 Cor 12:27) And again in Ephesians: “Rather speaking the truth in love. . . .” (Eph 4:15-16). This will come to fulfillment when all built “upon the foundation of the prophets and the apostles” (Eph 2:20) and all have been added to the faith, as the apostle writes, “we all attain . . .” (Eph 4:13).⁴⁶

Again von Balthasar can help us appreciate the significance of Gregory’s discussion of Christ and the Church. Earlier I cited him to show that Christ’s coming can be understood as an historical fact that is “exterior.” Here he makes an equally significant point: “The theological fact of Christ’s coming” . . . is radically social. For if the exterior fact and the interior fact constitute one solitary history, the social character of the exterior fact (the Church) demonstrates the social character, as well, of the interior fact (the Mystical body).”⁴⁷

The Church, then, is in the words of the Catechism “the sacrament of the inner union of men with God.”⁴⁸ The Catechism quotes from the opening words of Lumen Gentium: “The Church, in Christ, is like a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among men.”⁴⁹ Drawing on Gal. 4:19, “until Christ be formed in you” Lumen Gentium explains: “All the members must be made into his likeness until Christ is formed in them. Therefore we are taken up into the mysteries of his life, we are made like to him, we die and are raised to life with him, until we reign together with him.”⁵⁰

Finally let me close with a passage on the Church from the Decree on Ecumenism from Vatican II (cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church). Though the Church is one in

⁴⁶ GNO 3.2, p. 19.

⁴⁷ Presence and Thought, p.134.

⁴⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, par. 775.

⁴⁹ Lumen Gentium 1.

⁵⁰ Lumen Gentium 7.

Christ, in the course of its history this unity has been torn and ruptured. “However, one cannot charge with the sin of the separation those who at present are born into these communities [that resulted from such separation] and in them are brought up in the faith of Christ, and the Catholic Church accepts them with respect and affection as brothers. . . . All who have been justified by faith in Baptism are incorporated into Christ; they therefore have a right to be called Christians, and with good reason are accepted as brothers in the Lord by the children of the Catholic Church.”⁵¹

⁵¹ Decree on Ecumenism 3.1; Catechism, par. 818.