

SEMINAR ON CHRISTOLOGY

In our seminar's first meeting Mary Ann Fatula, O.P. (Ohio Dominican College), discussed Thomas Aquinas' reflections on the mystery of the Incarnation. She proposed the thesis that, "when viewed in its properly pneumatological context, Aquinas' christology opens to a theology of human meaning that promotes relationships of friendship among us and with God."

Three major points served to develop this thesis. First, because scripture forms the constant source for his theology, Aquinas envisions our human goal and fulfillment as "full participation in divinity" (*ST* III, 1). Aquinas uses the idea of friendship, as does the Gospel of John, to express this relationship of radical equality and mutuality with God, which is given to us in Jesus Christ: "No longer do I call you servants . . . but friends, for I have told you all that the Father has revealed to me" (*Jn* 15:15). Aquinas understands friendship as love between equals, based on mutual communication of and communion in not simply intellectual information but also our heart's word (*ST* II-II, 23, 1) and secrets (*IV CG* 21, 7). In this context, Aquinas views the Incarnation as the mystery of God's intimate friendship with us, making us friends and equals with God in Jesus Christ (*IV CG* 54, 6).

Second, according to Aquinas the Logos is more than an idea. In Fatula's words, for Aquinas "the Logos is not a merely intellectual word but is the word of the Father's heart" (*Jn* 1:18; *IV CG* 46, 2). Endlessly "breathing forth the love" who is the Spirit (*ST* I, 43, 5 ad 2), Jesus Christ pours out this Spirit upon the world. Indeed, the Holy Spirit is the "fullness" of Jesus Christ "from whom we have all received" (*Jn* 1:14; *Comm. on Ps* 44:5; *Comm. on Eph* 2, lect. 5). As love in person (*ST* I, 37, 1), the Spirit is the "content of the new law" (*ST* I-II, 106, 1 & 2). The Spirit dwells in our hearts to make us friends of God (*IV CG* 22, 3). From this Spirit we are meant to draw our every breath (*Comm. on Jn* 3, lect. 1, 5), availing "ourselves of the Spirit in all that we do" (*Comm. on Gal* 5, lect. 7). Thus, the mystery of Christ is inseparable from the Holy Spirit, who renews the world in Christ (*ST* II-II, 2, 9).

Third, the love that we share with God is the same love that we give to each other (*ST* II-II, 25, 1). This is the case because our love of God and neighbor springs from our intimate participation in the Spirit (*ST* II-II 23, 3, ad 3). This charity is love between friends, between equals (*ST* II-II, 23, 1). In the vulnerability of communicating to one another not only our mind's ideas but also our heart's word, we experience the Spirit given to us through Christ. Sharing in the paschal mystery, we are drawn into friendship with one another and with God. To sum up, when seen in its pneumatological setting, Aquinas' Logos christology promotes the themes of equality and mutuality.

In response to these ideas the seminar's participants pursued a few related topics. Since Aquinas stressed that the Incarnation occurred because God's love overflowed in divine self-communication with humankind, it is too simplistic to say that for Aquinas the Word became flesh simply in order to remedy sin. According to Aquinas the Incarnation springs from God's desire to reveal God's very self to the human family.

Our discussion of the Holy Spirit raised the issue of what it means to speak of the Spirit as "person." It was observed that some Christians find it difficult to speak of the Spirit as "person," for this says little to them. It might be more helpful therefore for us to use the word "relation" when speaking about the Holy Spirit. It may be too that Christians use "person" in one set of ways when speaking of the Holy Spirit and another set of ways when speaking of Jesus Christ.

Our consideration of christology and pneumatology also led to another question: How are we to conceive of the relationship between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit? On some occasions, Christians identify Jesus Christ and the Spirit. We convey the understanding that to know Jesus Christ is to know the Spirit. At other times, we distinguish between Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, as when we speak of Jesus being filled with the Spirit. Finally, our comments on Aquinas' sense of the mutuality and equality between God and humankind prompted us to ask about an appropriate notion of divine transcendence. How can we speak of God's otherness without conveying a sense of subordinationism? How can we talk about divine transcendence without implying the kind of relationship to which some can appeal when arguing for hierarchical relationships within the church? At this point, our first meeting came to an end.

Michael L. Cook, S.J. (Gonzaga University) led our seminar's second gathering in a discussion of theological method in christology. He developed the thesis that our talk about Jesus Christ is primarily metaphorical. While christology needs to employ conceptual or discursive language, it must recognize the primacy of the use of narratives and metaphors. Why? Just as we know one another through stories and images, so too "our access to this Jesus is mediated," said Cook, "by the evocative power of symbols expressed in narrated metaphor."

Four key points will be noted here. First, human language is inherently metaphorical. In our effort to understand one reality we frequently speak of it in relation to another with which we are already familiar. "The metaphoric act," observed Cook, "is the simple but fundamental human linguistic act of associating one thing with another in a new and previously unforeseen way." Second, the Christian community's experience of the risen Christ, its "kairoitic moments," have generated the church's language—a language dependent on narratives and metaphors. More specifically, the church's encounters with the living Christ have produced four types of metaphors: "biblical image" (e.g., Gospel of Mark), "credal image" (e.g., the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed), "systematic image" (e.g., the christology of Thomas Aquinas), and "social transformation image" (e.g., recent christologies of liberation).

Third, these different types of images lose their meaning when they are separated from their underlying narratives. For example, to grasp what the title "Son of God" means in the Gospel of Mark, we must see how it functions within Mark's narrative of Jesus' ministry, suffering, death and resurrection.

Fourth, as we gain an appreciation of the centrality of metaphorical language in christology, we can better understand the relationship between the particular and the universal in Christian faith. That is, the universal truths of revelation are spoken of within the particular narratives and metaphors which help a local church express its experience of the risen Christ. This line of thought allows one to shed new light on the topic of Christian faith and inculturation. The history of the church's adoption of biblical, credal, systematic and social transformative images can be described as "a process of inculturation in which the value and efficacy of each faith image will vary according to the cultural conditions that have fostered it and could do so again if there is to be a contemporary retrieval."

In response to these ideas, our seminar's participants discussed the following issues. Talk about the primacy of metaphorical language for theology presupposes a bond between experience and story. But is narrative the category in which we always view and share our lives? It would seem, for example, that intimacy between spouses or between friends relies on something more than the telling of narratives.

A discussion of theological language as metaphorical could become confused by ambiguities in our use of the word "narrative." It may be helpful therefore to distinguish between narrative as a linguistic category and the narrative character of experience. Once we make this distinction, we can even specify different kinds of stories in theology, for example, history, myth, parable and biography.

The meaning of the word "image" may also need to be clarified when we consider theology's metaphorical language. Is it accurate to say that Christians always possess "images" of Jesus Christ? To be sure, Christians have views or understandings of Jesus Christ, but they may not always rely on images. There may be occasions when the church's experience of the risen Christ is immediately expressed as an idea, as a reality capable of being adequately communicated in discursive language.

Finally, our attempts to renew our narratives and metaphors regarding Jesus Christ run the risk of making relative the metaphorical language found in the Christian tradition. If the contemporary church's relationship with the risen Christ is to be conveyed in fresh stories and images, then these could seemingly be given greater weight than the church's longstanding testimonies, for example, the gospels and the creeds. What is the relationship between the new narratives and the ancient ones? What are the norms by which we sort out and appraise our narratives and images of Jesus Christ? And, how can we nurture a metaphorical language that is both truly alive and at the same time wholly faithful to God's revelation in Jesus Christ? After exploring this issue, our seminar's second meeting concluded.

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