

JESUS IN TRINITARIAN PERSPECTIVE

Since Yves Congar it has become a commonplace that there can be "no Christology without pneumatology and no pneumatology without Christology." Implied in Congar's adage is that it is no longer possible, or at least not desirable, to pursue questions in either Christology or pneumatology apart from a trinitarian perspective. At a minimum this means considering together (1) Jesus in relation to God (Unoriginate Origin [Father]); (2) Jesus in relation to the Spirit and the Spirit to Jesus; and (3) Jesus in relation to us and we to him. This last element might not be obvious, but inasmuch as the doctrine of the Trinity is soteriological, it naturally entails the question of Jesus in relation to us.

This afternoon, in order to provoke discussion of our topic, I would like to offer a few brief thoughts about each of these three elements, and also something about how they entail and require each other. I will draw attention to some striking parallels between trinitarian theology and Christology as they emerge today from the legacy of substance ontology and the scholastic arrangement of doctrines. I will end by suggesting that making sense of redemption through Christ is unintelligible apart from trinitarian theology and pneumatology.

RECONCILING HIGH AND LOW CHRISTOLOGIES

In trinitarian theology, a gap developed in speculative thought between *oikonomia* and *theologia*, making it inordinately difficult to hold together, at one and the same time, "God as such" and "God for us."¹ The christological offspring of this breach has taken the form of a dualism between a high/low, above/below, divine/human Christ. This dualism is in the end untenable, and all along it has been at odds with Christian experience, art, and prayer, and even with the better instincts of dogma. It is entirely misleading to disjoin the "being" of Jesus Christ (what he is in himself) and his "function" (what he is for us), whether based on a historical-critical reading of the difference between the synoptics and John or on a dogmatic arrangement of separate treatises. In fact, the above/below schema leads to a monistic Christ, wrongly considered as if he were separate either from God and/or from the Spirit.

In contrast, considering Jesus Christ from a trinitarian perspective means affirming that the being of Jesus Christ is the ground of his person, his history, and his words and deeds; likewise, the history and the person of Jesus Christ constitute his being. But neither Jesus as a person nor his "being" can be understood apart from his origin in God and the fact that he lives wholly out of the Spirit of God.

¹For a full treatment of this issue, see Catherine Mowry LaCugna, *God for Us: The Trinity and Christian Life* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1991).

The Christian artistic imagination has expressed this far better than dogmatic theology. Take, for example, any of a hundred versions of the *Gnadenstuhl* (Throne of Mercy). There we find a wonderful collision of the eternal and temporal, heavenly and earthly, above and below, a collision that occurs happily and without contradiction only because God, Jesus Christ, and the Spirit are imagined together. In fact, every *Gnadenstuhl* challenges us to hold together in our imaginations the human Christ who truly suffers on the cross, yet who is exalted and whose suffering is redemptive because God the Father is holding Christ in his suffering. It is not always easy to tell where God's holding of Christ takes place, whether in heaven or on earth. Presumably in both. The Spirit is often depicted in this image as a dove whose wing tips unite the mouths of Father and Son—the image of breath and life or even a kiss between them. The Spirit who animates Jesus Christ in his ministry and who accompanies him in his suffering is the Spirit of the Father as well; thus the Spirit emerges as a sublime artistic depiction of the unity of heaven and earth.

Similarly, icons of Christ the Pantocrator challenge us to contemplate at one and the same time the human Christ who wears the robes of a servant, and the Christ who is exalted as the divine Word through whom all creation came into being. The regions of above and below, divine and human, are to be held together in a synchronous vision of Christ. Mystical language, too, as well as the public prayer of the Church (e.g., as given in the Eucharist and the Divine Office) present a unified Christ whose power, glory, lordship, and redemptive efficacy are never separated from his humanity nor from the work of God and of the Holy Spirit. The Christian artistic imagination has much to teach dogmatic theology. I am suggesting that the authentic teaching office of the Church extends beyond the hierarchical magisterium and beyond the magisterium of theologians to the liturgical, artistic, and mystical realms.

Christology must overcome the duality between ontology and function, just as trinitarian theology has had to do, by reclaiming the biblical, liturgical, creedal, and authentic dogmatic sense of the *true* unity of divine and human. For Christology this means Jesus Christ cannot adequately be understood apart from his origin in God, his identity with God, and his union with God; nor apart from the fact that he lived entirely by the Spirit of God; nor apart from the fact of his union with every human being and, indeed, as the Orthodox also like to emphasize with the depiction of the cosmic Christ, his union with every last creature.

My own work has been concerned with rethinking the meaning of "person" and therefore of the hypostatic union in light of a trinitarian notion of person. According to the relational ontology I developed in *God for Us*, personhood is defined in terms of relationship, which shifts Christology away from the ontology of substance. To be specific, a substance ontology focuses on being-in-itself, essence, or *ousia* understood as an interior property of something—hence the effort to know God *in se*, or, in Christology, the effort to know the nature of Christ as he is in himself. But as Rowan Williams has pointed out,

knowledge of *any ousia* "in itself" is quite unthinkable . . . there is nothing to know. What is known is "substance-in-act," the properties of a thing experienced as affecting the knowing subject, the *esse*, the actual existent in relation. *Ousia*,

to borrow Heidegger's language, is always *parousia*.²

In a relational ontology, person, not substance, is the supreme category. Because being is supremely personal, being is seen as ecstatic (other-oriented). The divine persons are understood as relations of origin: personal identity arises in relation to the person from whom one comes, and in relation to the persons toward whom one is oriented. This is a way of indicating that personhood emerges in and indeed is comprised by relationship to others.

It follows that Jesus Christ can be known only as the one who comes from God, and who is filled with the Holy Spirit. Yet Jesus is known not only in relation to God and to the Spirit but in relation to those with whom he lived and to whom he ministered. To draft a portrait of him as a person requires seeing how he acted, what he said, how he related to other human beings and to the goods and creatures of the earth. Whatever we say about him on the basis of the Gospels, whether it is that he wore sandals when he traveled from Galilee to Jerusalem, or that he healed the ill, applies to Jesus as a person. We cannot artificially assign some experiences, such as suffering, to a human nature, and others, such as the ability to forgive sin, to a divine nature. This form of attribution is what originally led within the doctrine of the Trinity to the breach between *oikonomia* and *theologia*. The christological form of this gap is typified, for example, by Athanasius's argument against Arius that the sufferings of Christ were feigned, or belonged to the flesh but not to the soul. For Athanasius, all signs of weakness or limitation were denied to the Logos. In fact, Athanasius explained away all scriptural passages that indicate Jesus' weakness or ignorance.³ Gregory of Nazianzus followed suit:

What is lofty you are to apply to the Godhead, and to that nature in him which is superior to sufferings and to the body; but all that is lowly to the composite condition of him who for your sake has been made of no account. —*Orat.* 29.18

If classical Christology foundered on the question of the suffering of the divine Christ, Christology today founders on the question of the impassibility of the human Christ. The instincts of Chalcedon were correct: dogma, like art, and indeed religious experience, forces the mind to hold together the impossible: the total union of divinity and humanity, heaven and earth, suffering and impassibility, in the person of Jesus Christ.

How might these polarities be integrated? Although communion has emerged as the building block of contemporary trinitarian theology, this has not been the case (yet) in Christology. The doctrine of the Trinity emphasizes communion in all its forms: God with Christ in the Spirit; God with us; our communion with God; our communion with others and with all of creation. Jesus Christ is of course the communion of divine and human, insofar as he is God incarnate. The

²"The Philosophical Structures of Palamism," *Eastern Churches Review* 9/1-2 (1977) 27-44, at 40.

³See *God for Us*, 38.

person of Jesus Christ is the meeting point, the true *perichoresis* of *oikonomia* and *theologia*.

But note: Jesus Christ is not the only means of communion between divine and human. The Spirit is communion itself, being first of all the eternal bond of love between God and Christ; second, the principle of union between God and creature; and third, the bond among human beings and indeed all creatures. Art aims at showing the same: that Jesus Christ cannot be grasped at all apart from the work of the Spirit, nor apart from the God with whom he is essentially united, nor apart from ourselves whose humanity he fully shares.

In accord with Chalcedon, we might describe Jesus Christ as the one who, by the power of the Spirit of God, lives out of a center in God, and in so living, fulfills what it means to be human. To be saved by God *through* Jesus Christ in the power of the Spirit means that in Christ there is now the possibility that we, too, by the power of the Holy Spirit, might live out of a center in God. This could not be said except that the profoundly soteriological element of Christology is inseparable from trinitarian theology and pneumatology, and vice versa. Putting on Christ in baptism, creates the possibility that we, too, may become *enhypos-tasized*, living entirely out of a center in God, living entirely as Christ, deified by the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ.

Finally, although I cannot develop it here, this trinitarian basis for Christology establishes a profound connection between Christology and ethics. Precisely because of Jesus Christ's relationship with God and his being filled with the Spirit of God, he is able in his *person* to reorder creation and to overcome all barriers to communion, notably, sin, death, and despair. Insofar as we live in Christ, as Christ, we become persons in authentic communion, also overcoming all barriers to communion.

SUMMARY

Christology from a trinitarian perspective, then, means (1) that on the speculative front there be a genuine unity between Christology from above/below; (2) that Jesus Christ not be understood monistically, separate from the Spirit who animates him nor from the God who sends him; and (3) that Christian redemption be understood as the becoming-divine of the human person, as the person is more closely united with Christ and animated by the Spirit of God, Spirit of Christ.

CATHERINE MOWRY LaCUGNA
University of Notre Dame
Notre Dame, Indiana