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The Twofold Incarnation

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THE TWOFOLD INCARNATION

The present issue of *Marian Library Studies* deals in variations of the Incarnation. Incarnation is the cornerstone of Christianity. For Christianity without the Incarnation neither past nor future makes sense. The Old Testament would be an empty promise, Redemption a hoax, and eschatology the paradise of agnostics. Thus, the following reflections and contributions attempt to foster a deeper understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation and its impact on the life of the faithful. Indeed, Incarnation is not limited to Christ's own coming into the flesh; it also entails the embodiment of his message and person in our lives. A truly incarnational trajectory of our faith leads from theology to evangelization. The bridge joining theology and evangelization is spirituality. It gives life to theology, and purpose to evangelization. The major contributions of this issue have this bridge function inasmuch as the function is not a function but a person. They all deal with the question of how Mary becomes instrumental to make the Incarnation of her Son a "second incarnation" for our own person. The answer to this question, a question regarding Mary's spiritual maternity, received over time a variety of answers influenced by varying cultural contexts and theological trends.

Deyanira Flores' major article on Bl. Gueric Igné's (†1157) contribution to the doctrine of Mary's spiritual maternity reconfirms the ongoing importance and reality of the double Incarnation stated by the Fathers of the Church since Origen.¹ According to Gueric it is important to know Christ according to the spirit, and it is Mary who describes Him to us according to the spirit. It is our sublime vocation to live according to the spirit,² and it is Mary's desire to form Christ in us. Mary's spiritual maternity is based on the Incarnation. She has given birth to our life, who is Christ. She embraces the "Only begotten of hers in all his members ... and so can be truly called Mother of all in whom she recognizes her Christ to have been formed, or in whom she knows that he is being formed."³ It is Gueric's conviction that Mary brings us forth every day until we reach the stature of the perfect Christian, the maturity of her Son. She does it by desire and merciful solicitude. Like the Virgin Mary, we are called to conceive Christ by opening to the Word of God. God comes to us as a tender child

¹ Hom in Lucam 22,1: PG 13, 1857 B-C.

² Rom. 8:4.

³ I Assumption.

that needs to grow and has to be looked after "with great vigilance and care. He has to be formed in us, just as He was formed in Mary's womb." In sum, we have to form Christ in us according to the example of His life and conduct.

Centuries later Pierre Cardinal de Bérulle (1575-1629) consecrated the members of the Oratory to the contemplation of the mysteries of Jesus and Mary. Bérulle's theology is characterized by an extraordinary emphasis on the Incarnation. He explored and pondered all the mysteries of the Incarnate Word and of his blessed mother. He devoted the members of the Oratory to the same work, and was convinced that the reform of the clergy would be greatly helped by a better understanding of this fundamental reality of the Christian faith. The Oratorian does not belong to himself but to Jesus and Mary, and Bérulle proposes the relation to Jesus and Mary as a marriage (*alliance*). The relation to Jesus and Mary is preceded by an even deeper relationship between Jesus *and* Mary. Mary should never be separated from Jesus, so Bérulle, "in honor of the connection (*liaison*) she has with her Son God as Mother."⁴ Both Son and mother are inextricably united in the mystery of the Incarnation and have to be honored together. The following article by Fr. Vincent Vasey (1916-1985) explores the association between Jesus and Mary. In an article about "Mary in the Doctrine of Bérulle on the Mysteries of Christ,"⁵ Vasey quotes Guitton about Bérulle's theology: "No one has ever worked more to bring together all truths, illuminating each single truth by the others and the ensemble of truths illuminating each order of reality by other orders"⁶ In the conclusion of the same article Vasey quotes: "Bérulle's Mariology ... rests in the great tradition of studying Mary, not apart, but always in relation. She is related to Jesus, to the persons of the Trinity, to the Church, to individual members of the Church."⁷ The same relationality is underpinning Vasey's contribution to this issue of *Marian Library Studies*. Grounded in the reality of Incarnation it highlights Mary's dependency and sovereignty. All the states and nature of the Virgin seem founded in this double disposition of relation. It follows from this double relationality that Mary has the right and power to give Jesus to souls.

Like a red thread the Incarnation runs through many and varied forms of spirituality, old and recent ones. The third contribution to this issue examines the place of Mary in the beginnings of the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (1971-1978). CCR developed out of the desire and experience of Catholics eager to receive an *infilling* of the Holy Spirit able to empower and transform them. The movement was inspired initially by the vast Pentecostal awakening of the

⁴ O.P. CXCI, 1272 (Oeuvres de Piété).

⁵ *Marian Studies*, vol. XXXVI, 1985, 60-80. (Hereafter cited as Vasey)

⁶ Vasey, 80.

⁷ Vasey, 79.

1950s, of people receiving the “Pentecostal experience.” The Protestant roots of this trend were not naturally compatible with a Marian coloring of the baptism in the Holy Spirit. It is not until May 1975 that *New Covenant* carries the first article on Mary; the 1973 *Pecos Benedictine* called her “The Spirit-filled Mary.” Progressively, Mary is discovered as a model of faith in God’s Word, and docility to the Spirit. She is also described as someone who helps people to respond more fully to the Holy Spirit. The central biblical references are those of the Annunciation and the Pentecost both closely related to the double role played by the Holy Spirit and Mary in the twofold Incarnation. Thus, this third contribution exemplifies the intimate relation between Jesus, the Spirit, and Mary highlighted already in the contributions of Deyanira Flores and Fr. Vincent Vasey.

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The following reflections, thought as introduction to the three articles here presented, are a modest attempt to situate Incarnation within the context of recent Christological developments.

Incarnation is one of the key words to an adequate understanding of Christianity, but it unites and separates. Incarnation presents a common denominator for the many scattered and frequently conflicting views on who Christians are and what constitutes their identity. While there are no Christians who reject Incarnation there are differing opinions about its meaning and scope. On the other hand, Incarnation drives a wedge between Christianity and some of the major monotheistic religions. How can the shining light of eternity be broken in the prism of time and space? Who can imagine the Infinite dwelling in the humble abode of finite reality? Even more disturbing is the thought of Absolute Perfection involving itself with a far from perfect world. For many re-incarnation seems to make better sense than Incarnation. It leaves God alone and concentrates on what we know best: human hardship and struggle. Re-incarnation offers redemption without making it too easy. Depending on one’s life in the present, there is always a chance according to this view to attain a better form of life in the future.

Although the term *incarnation* is used by many religions to designate some presence of the divine in this world, for Christians it conveys an altogether different reality. The very center of Christian faith is more than a message of God, it is the divine messenger himself. Messenger and message blend into one. Christianity is not a religion of the book or some wisdom tradition but the religion of the person of Jesus Christ. It contrasts with other monotheistic or so-called “high” religions. Judaism, for example, remains essentially a religion

of the book. For Islam, Muhammad is not “God incarnate” but the depository of the divine message, the prophet through whom God speaks. Buddhism knows innumerable incarnations of the transcendental Buddha, but, upon death, every incarnation enters Nirvana and is replaced by a new incarnation. Similarly, in Lamaism the Dalai-Lama assumes the worldly appearance of Buddha. Gautama and subsequent incarnations receive the light that allows them to show the way and act as teachers of wisdom. For Hinduism, Krishna represents Vishnu and appears repeatedly on earth to guide and instruct; for example, as Govinda in the Bhagavadgita, he teaches Arjuna in the ways of Brahma. In comparison and contrast, Christianity has something final and irreversible: “if...the Word had become man in Jesus Christ, it was clear that this event could not but be one and have universal, cosmic implications and repercussions.”⁸

Experience of Salvation

Christianity clashes with views of God and the human person where heroic self-redemption replaces *gratia gratis data*. Whereas religious philosophy from Socrates to late Platonism adhered to a God who is infinitely superior to all the apparitions found in the world, Christianity perceived God as the one who steps “forth onto the world stage as a particular and special character vis-à-vis other particular and special characters.”⁹ Incarnation, indeed, is in part a matter of retrospective perception. The driving force behind theological inquiry about Jesus, from Ignatius of Antioch to the first Council of Constantinople (381), is the disciples’ experience of salvation. Jesus, the proclaimer of the Kingdom and a failure in the eyes of the world, had been miraculously vindicated. God raised Jesus¹⁰ from the dead; he is alive¹¹ and exalted.¹² The New Testament’s primary claim¹³ is that Christ has been personally raised and so justified the personal authority by which he had spoken of the Kingdom. He had not only been divinely vindicated in himself, but his self-sacrifice had also been accepted by the God whom he called “Abba.”¹⁴ For the Jewish disciples this meant rethinking their view of the divine plan of human salvation. Divine Redemption was no longer synonymous with deliverance from Egypt, the Sinai Covenant, and entrance

⁸ J. Dupuis, “The Uniqueness of Jesus Christ in the Early Christian Tradition,” in: *Religious Pluralism*, Jeevadhara 47 (1978), 406/407.

⁹ H. U. v. Balthasar, *Theodrama II. Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, Ignatius Press 1990, 189.

¹⁰ cf. 1 Thess. 1:10; Gal. 1:1; 1 Cor. 6:14, e.a.

¹¹ Lk. 24, 15:23; Rom. 14,9.

¹² Phil. 2,9; Acts 2:33; Rom. 8:34; Pt. 3:22; 1 Tim. 3:16, ea.

¹³ Particularly in 1 Cor. 15:3-5, where description (he was buried—he appeared) and explanation (he died—he was raised) complement and support each other.

¹⁴ Gal. 3,13.

into the Promised Land. Resurrection consecrated *Jesus* as the new and decisive factor of Redemption, and the disciples were faced with the disconcerting reality "that their relationship to him was determinative for their state before God here and hereafter."¹⁵ This realization of salvation in and through Jesus Christ leads to the rediscovery of his person and work. All at once his words are important again. The disciples are sifting through memories in order to recapture his face and his promises. They are led to reassess their understanding of who he is and where he comes from. This is where the theological reflection about the Incarnation begins.

1. *Victorious Combat*

This reflection bears many names and presents a variety of facets, but they all converge in the question: Who is this Jesus to whom we owe salvation? Raised by the Father, he must be Son of God; divine redemption would otherwise not be possible: "...if it had not been God to give us salvation we would not have received it permanently. If the human being had not been united to God, it would not have been possible to share in incorruptibility." However, in the same passage of his *Adversus Hareses*, Irenaeus insists on genuine Incarnation: "If a human being had not overcome the enemy of humanity, the enemy would not have been rightly overcome." This is what genuine mediation is all about: "that God should assume humanity and human beings offer themselves God." The Church Fathers' thinking in this regard is compensatory and symmetric. It is inspired by the Adam/Christ contrast. In Adam the human race experienced defeat; in Christ we rise up to new life.¹⁶ Healing or redemption could not have been accomplished if Jesus Christ had not been truly and fully human. Current in the second century, this conviction finds its classical expression in the well-known words of Gregory of Nazianzus, "Quod non est assumptum non est sanatum" (What is not assumed cannot be healed).¹⁷ Christ needed to take on humanity in fullness, for "if the Lord did not assume that over which death reigned, death would not have stopped from effecting his purpose, nor would the suffering of the God-bearing flesh have become our gain: he would not have slain sin in the flesh."¹⁸ The battle between God and Evil rages, and as long as God does not reach deep inside the recesses of evil there can be no redemption. The redemptive battle has to be fought within human nature. For Gregory

¹⁵ G. O'Collins, *Christology. A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (New York: Oxford University Press 1995), 104. The author is indebted to G. O'Collins for insights and references regarding this section. (Hereafter cited as O'Collins)

¹⁶ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer. III*, 18.7; V, 21.1, including previous references.

¹⁷ Ep. 101, 32.

¹⁸ Basil of Caesarea, Ep. 216, 2.

the Great there were two conditions for achieving this goal: 1) The new man (Christ) had to take our old nature ("made in the likeness of sinful flesh"), and 2) the one in substance with the Father had to accept to be one in substance with the mother.¹⁹

2. *Divinization*

Incarnation is not only a prerequisite to victory over the powers of evil and deliverance from sin and death,²⁰ it is also an expression of freedom and life. Functional Christology has an ontological foundation. Jesus not only took on himself what is ours he also shared with us what is his. A marvelous exchange between God incarnate and humanity takes place in the course of which we partake in his divine sonship. In the words of Irenaeus, "the Word of God became man and the Son of God the Son of Man, that man might enter into communion with the Word of God and, receiving the adoption, might become Son of God."²¹ Athanasius points out that we are "deified" or "divinized" in this *admirabile commercium* (marvelous exchange): "He (the Word) became man that we might be divinized."²² The experience of becoming godlike indicates not only a personalist but also a universalist tendency. As Vatican II stated: "...by his Incarnation the Son of God in some sort united himself to every man;"²³ he encompasses the whole of Creation transforming it into a "new creation," thus establishing an unbreakable bond between Creation and Redemption. The latter observation was already formulated by Athanasius, for whom it was through the same Word that God created at the beginning and effected human renewal in the New Creation.²⁴ Later centuries lost sight of the experience of salvation as a "wonderful exchange" in which the Incarnation of the second person of the Trinity brought divinization. The language of soteriology settled either on Christ's victorious combat against evil and/or explains salvation as an act of ransom (paid to the devil) to set us free.²⁵ With Anselm and subsequent Western theology, Redemption centers on a model of satisfaction drawn from both Roman law and feudal practice in Western Europe.

However, the two foundational experiences of salvation here described ("victorious combat" and "divinization") are firmly rooted in Incarnation. Whether experienced as freedom from sin or new life in God, salvation is un-

¹⁹ Gregory the Great, Ep. 31, 2.

²⁰ See e.g. Mk. 3:27; Jn. 16:33; 1 Cor. 15:24-26, Col. 2:14-15.

²¹ *Adv. Haer.* III, 19.1.

²² *De Inc. Verbi*, 54 (Known to us in His works, we recognize in them His deifying mission).

²³ GS, 22.

²⁴ *De Inc. Verbi*, 1.14.

²⁵ See sources in Scripture: 1 Pt. 1:18; Gal. 3:13; 1 Cor. 6:20.

derstood as descending Christology, meaning that in the man Jesus God has taken a human face.²⁶ In the person of Jesus Christ we encounter God humanized and not man divinized. "The Incarnation is an event of which God is the source and agent: It is God's becoming human; not a human being made into God. The authentic humanization of God in Jesus Christ is at once the foundation of God's self-communication to humankind and the revelation to it of the mystery of God."²⁷

Theological Approximations

Incarnation and the humanity of Jesus Christ stand and fall with their rootedness in soteriology. In order to be what he is for us (soteriology) he needed to be who he is: the Son of God. In the beginning, Christ's divinity presented a lesser problem. It is the discussion on his true humanity, his coming "in the flesh,"²⁸ that led to the first heresies (e.g., gnostic docetism). Indeed, how do we put into words the event and the reality of authentic Incarnation?

1. *Variations on Incarnation*

There were many attempts but none of them without at least some danger of ambiguity. Incarnation was understood as a *mingling* of humanity and divinity; it effected the mingling and uniting of God and man.²⁹ However, as Tertullian points out, the union of humanity and divinity does not entail a mixture.³⁰ Used by some (Cappadocian Fathers) and rejected by others (Cyril of Alexandria), the "mingling"-theory would impact on the terminology of Chalcedon as a warning against medley and jumble. Other early explanations of the Incarnation are more solidly grounded in Scripture. The letter to Titus, for example, refers to the *appearing* of Christ,³¹ meaning that he manifested himself in human appearance, but this passage could also be interpreted in a Docetic sense as mere appearance. Similarly, the image of *indwelling* was borrowed from Scripture. Christ is perceived as the one in whom the fullness of God dwells embodied;³² in the words of Athanasius, the Word of God dwells in the flesh as in a temple.³³ Cyril of Alexandria argued against this formulation of the Incar-

²⁶ See Jn. 14:9.

²⁷ J. Dupuis, *Who Do You Say I Am? Introduction to Christology*, (New York: Orbis, 1994), 91. (Hereafter cited as Dupuis)

²⁸ 1 Jn. 4:2-3.

²⁹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* IV. 20.4.

³⁰ See: *Adv. Praxeam*, 27.

³¹ Tit. 2:11.

³² Col. 2:9.

³³ *Ep. Ad Adelphium*, 7.

nation. It suggested a possible confusion with the condition of Christians who are the temple of God in which the Holy Spirit dwells.³⁴ Still another attempt described incarnation as *clothing* the Word of God with a human nature. Athanasius, and before him Tertullian, spoke of "Putting on the flesh" or "Wearing a body,"³⁵ Cyril of Alexandria used the expression "Putting on the flesh" to signify Christ's likeness with us in the biblical sense of a full humanity through which he could suffer.³⁶ The same Cyril denounced the Nestorians for reducing Incarnation to a "clothing thrown over" the word.³⁷

These examples denote more than a mere struggle for words or a battle over terminology. "Mingling," "Indwelling," "Putting on the flesh" and "Human appearance"—all of these attempts to explain the Incarnation mark an early and continuous determination to present Jesus Christ as Son of God and one of us. The incarnational thrust of Christianity is not a simple downward movement where God loses himself in human reality. Christology is the never-ending struggle to present *Jesus-Christ*, and the Church confesses "that Jesus is inseparably true God and true man. He is truly the Son of God who, without ceasing to be Lord and God, became a man and our brother."³⁸

2. *Balance of Tensions*

Early doctrinal developments intuit and develop the delicate balance between "true God" and "true man," and articulate, e.g., the double generation of the Son, born of the Father before all ages and born of the Virgin Mary in the last days.³⁹ Slowly but surely, Patristic theologians also came to grips with the twofold mode of *being* in Jesus Christ. They call it "double consubstantiality."⁴⁰ Against misinterpretations of the fourth gospel and attempts to present a divided Jesus, they insist that he was one and the same,⁴¹ and proclaim the unity of Christ as subject.⁴² Since humanity and divinity came together in the one person of the incarnate Son of God, Patristic writers attributed to one nature of Jesus Christ what in fact was proper to the other. For Ignatius of Antioch, for example, the *Son of God* was truly born and crucified.⁴³ This sense

³⁴ DS, 262.

³⁵ *Ep. ad Serapionem*, 4, 14; *Adv. Praxean*, 27.

³⁶ *Quod unus sit Christus*, 775 d; 766 d.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 774 d.

³⁸ CCC, 469.

³⁹ DS, 301; see the development that leads from Paul to Ignatius, Irenaeus, Lactantius, Cyril of Alexandria, Leo the Great to Chalcedon.

⁴⁰ See Tertullian, Nicaea, Constantinople I, and Chalcedon.

⁴¹ Irenaeus, *Adv. Haer.* III, 16.

⁴² DS, 301-2.

⁴³ *Ep. Smyrn.* 1 and 2.

of interchange of properties (*communicatio idiomatum*) was still another way of illustrating the firm belief that divinity and humanity are united in the one person of Jesus Christ.

It should not be overlooked that these attempts to capture the Incarnation in some kind of *balance of tensions*, perfected over the centuries and officially proclaimed at Chalcedon (451), focused attention on the *Person* of Jesus Christ, thus promoting an ontological Christology. Do these ontological determinations produce any redeeming quality or does Jesus Christ fall victim to the hypostatic union? This question, frequently asked in the present, amounts, in fact, to a criticism of depersonalization. The assumption of the humanity of Jesus by the Person of the Word cannot be a depersonalization. Rather it is an *impersonalization*, "inasmuch as the personhood of the Son of God is communicated to and extends to the humanity of Jesus, whereby the Son becomes truly human."⁴⁴ Likewise there does not exist a rift between Jesus' Person and his work, between functional and ontological Christology. Jesus' Person is the necessary foundation for his salvific work.

3. *Wisdom and Word*

Contemporary trends in Christology highlight sometimes *e contrario* (in spite of themselves) the crucial importance of Incarnation. This applies to the discussion concerning Wisdom- and/or Logos-Christology.⁴⁵ Among the essential contributions of the Old Testament to New Testament Christology are the terms *Wisdom* and *Word*. Both are powerful semantic vehicles to designate God's self-communication in the Christ-Event. However, classical Christology—leading up to Chalcedon and beyond—opted for *Logos* rather than *Sophia*. *Sophia* is the breath of God's power, it was present when he set the heavens in place. *Sophia*—as female figure—lives among humans. She is teacher,⁴⁶ lover,⁴⁷ central institution of Hebrew faith and master of history.⁴⁸ The New Testament authors use strands of this wisdom tradition to penetrate the mystery of Jesus. He is the teacher of wisdom.⁴⁹ Like wisdom, he manifests the power of God's breath (glory, light, image of God).⁵⁰ Although endowed with cosmic significance as God's agent in this world, Christ, not unlike divine wisdom, is folly for

⁴⁴ Dupuis, 91.

⁴⁵ E. Schüssler-Fiorenza, *Jesus; Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology*, (New York: Continuum, 1995); B. Witherington, *Jesus the Sage: The Pilgrimage of Wisdom*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994).

⁴⁶ Prov. 4; Sir. 1:17-20

⁴⁷ Sir. 6:26-28.

⁴⁸ Sir. 24:22-27.

⁴⁹ Mt. 7:28; 13:54.

⁵⁰ 1 Cor. 1: 17-18, 24-25; 1 Col 1:15; Jn 1:9; Heb 1:3.

the wise of this world.⁵¹ Scripture does not attempt to identify Jesus with *Lady Wisdom*, but presents him as the wisdom of God.⁵²

Some of these designations⁵³ come close to a simple identification between Jesus and wisdom; however, they designate God's eternal plan of salvation as it appears in Jesus Christ and not so much his person. *Wisdom-Christology*, or at least some relation between Jesus and wisdom, is a common topic among the early Fathers, but so is *Logos*. Like wisdom it expresses God's active power and self-revelation. It is with God from the beginning,⁵⁴ and as God's personified self-expression⁵⁵ the word has powerful and creative dynamism. It may be added that in pre-Christian Judaism *Word* and *Wisdom*, as well as *Spirit*, are near alternatives. Why then did John choose *Word* and not *Wisdom* to describe Incarnation? Earlier New Testament witnesses had prepared the way for John's prologue (Paul, Luke's Acts) by their use of *Logos* for God's revelation in Jesus Christ. More important, wisdom personified as Lady would have seemed awkward to designate a male Messiah "being made flesh." Still another reason why John preferred *Word* over *Wisdom* has to deal with a potential confusion between wisdom and law. In Hellenistic Judaism the law of Moses had been identified with Wisdom,⁵⁶ so that a Sophia-Christ could have suggested the Incarnation of the Torah instead of God's own Son.

Whatever the determining factor for this choice, John's option for the Logos-Christ highlights an early personalist understanding of the Incarnation. It opens the reflection on a personal pre-existence of the Logos-Son. The *Word* is, it did not become. It is the expression of divine utterance from the beginning. Coming into this world it reveals the speaker and offers heavenly knowledge, the wisdom of God. The *Word* is *of* the speaker, it was with the speaker from eternity, and makes the speaker present to the hearer. The *Word* expresses thus both identity and distinction. Identity links the *Word* to the Father in eternal pre-existence as well as in earthly apparel. Distinction, on the other hand, allows for a true coming in the flesh, human identity as Son of God and the continuous resonance of the *Word* in human history. Identity and distinction point to the realm of persons, their mode of interaction among themselves and with God. Finally, identity and distinction characterize human growth as the result of unceasing interplay between autonomy, dependence and interdependence.

⁵¹ 1 Cor. 1:18-25.

⁵² 1 Cor. 1:24; 1:17; 2:13.

⁵³ Lk. 2:40; 11:49; Mk. 6:2; Mt. 11:19.

⁵⁴ Gn. 1:1.

⁵⁵ Wis. 18:14-16.

⁵⁶ Bar. 4:1-4; Sir. 24:23.

The personal concretization of God's revelation finds in the Logos-Christ both expression and protection, for in Incarnation Sophia has grown into the Son of Man, the poor crucified love of God. Wisdom has received a face, a name, and a heart in Jesus our Christ. Sophia has grown taller than the cedars of Lebanon, the cypress trees on Mt. Hermon, the palm trees in Engedi, and the rose bushes of Jericho⁵⁷—in Jesus Christ she becomes the tree of life eternal. Reformulating Logos-Christology in terms of Sophia-Christology does not seem to further the purpose of Incarnation understood as personal relationship between God and the human person. Sophia offers a comfortable but vague role relationship with divine numinosity. God's *Logos* in Jesus Christ extends an invitation to personal encounter which bears the name of friendship. Two people are friends because they enter as persons—with the concrete reality of their whole being—into this new challenging relationship.

The Two Pillars of Incarnation

Many are the words and images used to capture the mystery of Incarnation. They all attempt to fathom the unfathomable, the meeting and interaction between the divine and the human in the event of Incarnation. The part of the divine is played by the Spirit; the role of humanity is assumed by the courageous young woman of Nazareth. The hermeneutical key—real and not merely theoretical—is to be found in the virginal conception. Whatever theological, spiritual or poetic approximations of this mystery were coined in the past or retrieved and reformulated in the present, Incarnation stands or falls with these two pillars: the power of the Spirit and virginal conception.

1. Virginal Conception

The focal point of Incarnation is without doubt the virginal conception. Traditional doctrine states that Mary conceived Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit and without the cooperation of a human father. Christ's Incarnation did not follow the ordinary ways of human procreation. It was the fruit of a special intervention by the Holy Spirit.

The most common difficulty raised against a virginal conception concerns Christ's full and true humanity. If Christ did not have a human father—only a human mother—can he be truly human? Can he be one of us? The question is almost as old as Christianity and has been answered repeatedly in the sense of "totus in nostris."⁵⁸ The tendency to flatten the profile of Jesus Christ in order to make him as we are in every way presents a serious flaw. Not only is there

⁵⁷ Sir. 24:13-14.

⁵⁸ DS, 293.

no generally agreed upon criterion in determining what is meant by "as we are," but there also remains the unbridgeable gap between the ordinary human condition and Christ's sinless humanity. Any comparison between Christ and us necessarily surfaces both continuity and difference. A further distinction is to be made between essential and common property. Must we say that having a biological father is not only a common but also an essential property? It goes without saying that biological fatherhood does not automatically stand for appropriate human fatherhood. In Jesus' case, nothing prevents us from thinking that he had received more than adequate fatherly care from Joseph. Similar difficulties with the virginal conception arise from exaggerated anthropomorphic curiosity concerning Christ's conception and birth. There exists in this behalf a tradition, that reaches from the early apocryphal gospels to A. Mitterer and in the recent past to Jane Schaberg,⁵⁹ and beyond which detracts people's attention from the deep religious significance of these events. Finally, there is a common misinterpretation of the virginal conception which is related to Jesus' unique holiness. It is one thing to explain the original flaw of our human condition through the passing on of human life and its conditioning in procreation, but it is another thing altogether to say that Jesus had to be virginally conceived because sexual intercourse is impure.

On a different level, we find opposition to the virginal conception based on hermeneutics. Did Matthew and Luke put forth a historical reality, or was their intent not rather to arouse faith in Christ's status as Messiah? This question is frequently presented as an alternative: you either consider the virginal conception as historical reality *or* as symbolic interpretation, as empirically discernible data *or* as food for theological reflection.⁶⁰ We do not see why historical event and symbolic interpretation are mutually exclusive. Authentic symbolic religious language has solid roots in both human and divine reality. Further, it needs to be pointed out that Luke and Matthew follow different standpoints in presenting the infancy narratives. However, they both regard the virginal conception as historical, as an event that took place through a special intervention of the Holy Spirit, and not through normal sexual intercourse.⁶¹

At this time, the classical argument of Deism concerning secondary divine interventions seems to have little impact on contemporary religious debate. Nevertheless, its basic assumption—that God may have created the universe at some point in time, but no longer intervenes in the affairs of this world—is

⁵⁹ Jane Schaberg, *The Illegitimacy of Jesus: A Feminist Theological Interpretation of the Infancy Narratives* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

⁶⁰ See, e.g., H. Küng, *Credo*, (London: SCM Press, 1993), 43.

⁶¹ See: R. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke*, (New York: Doubleday, 1977), 517.

deeply ingrained in contemporary mentality. It goes beyond the specific problem of the virginal birth and concerns the whole of Christ's existence and mission. Without going into considerations about primary and secondary causality in God, we may note in passing that God, who is intimately present everywhere and in every situation, acted with life-giving power in Jesus' Incarnation. Studies in comparative religion have pointed out similarities between the virginal conception and the birth of Jesus, and stories in pagan mythology. Aside from the fact that the latter are essentially mythological constructs, the alleged parallels are usually based on sexual intercourse and are frequently accompanied by incidents of violation.⁶²

The virginal conception needs to be read against the overall direction of divine revelation and the broader context of its presentation in the Gospels. It takes its true significance from Jesus' divine origin. Born of a woman he is a human being; born of a virgin his origin is divine. This realization is part of the progressive discovery of Christ's person and work by his post-Pascal disciples. Starting from the Resurrection event and the experience of salvation, the disciples' attention focuses first on Jesus' relation to his Father, who declared him to be "my beloved Son."⁶³ Later in Matthew and Luke, the connection with his divine origin is formulated as virginal conception. This means that not only is the present status of Jesus marked by the seal of God, but the very origin of his earthly existence is also the fruit of a unique divine intervention. In fact, there was never a moment in Jesus' life when he was not Son of God. This leads (in John 1:1-18 and Hebrews 1:1-3) to the acknowledgment that the one who was made flesh was previously with God. Thus the Risen Lord and the newly conceived Emmanuel are one and the same, the fulfillment of God's presence with humanity. In conclusion: "the event of the virginal conception provided a further link between what began at the end with his risen 'post-existence' and finished at the beginning with his eternal 'pre-existence.'"⁶⁴

From the first formulation of faith to its present *Catechism* (nos. 496-511), the Church has confessed, with the words of Ignatius of Antioch and those of countless other believers: "You are firmly convinced about our Lord, who is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, Son of God according to the will and power of God, truly born of a virgin...he was truly nailed to a tree for us in his flesh under Pontius Pilate...he truly suffered, as he is also truly risen."⁶⁵ The virginal conception as special mark of Incarnation pointedly reminds us that Christ inaugurated the New Creation. He is the New Adam conceived

⁶² See, e.g., the history of the origins of Romulus and Remus.

⁶³ Mk. 1:11.

⁶⁴ O'Collins, 277.

⁶⁵ *Ad Smyrn.* 1-2.

by the Holy Spirit in Mary's virginal womb. The first man was from the earth; the second and new Adam is from Heaven.⁶⁶ To the new Adam God has given the Spirit without measure, and from his plenitude we have received "grace upon grace"⁶⁷ There exists a direct relationship between Incarnation, virginal conception and new creation. New creation finds its noblest expression in the new birth of children "adopted in the Spirit through faith," who are not of any human origin, but of God.⁶⁸ The *Catechism* states: "The acceptance of this life is virginal because it is entirely the Spirit's gift to man. The spousal character of the human vocation in relation to God is fulfilled perfectly in Mary's virginal motherhood."⁶⁹

2. *The Role of the Spirit*

Virginal conception points to the Holy Spirit as the prime *artifex* of Incarnation. "In Mary, the Holy Spirit *fulfills* the plan of the Father's loving goodness. With and through the Holy Spirit, the Virgin conceives and gives birth to the Son of God."⁷⁰ Not only divine filiation, but the whole life and mission of Jesus Christ is a "joint venture" of the Son and the Holy Spirit. Jesus Christ is anointed by the Father's Spirit from the Incarnation on; the face of the Holy Trinity is imprinted upon his whole existence.

The relationship between Christ and the Spirit is in fact so close that one may wonder whether the two are interchangeable, at least in the believer's experience.⁷¹ This would apply foremost to Paul's letters, where the Christians' experience of the Risen Christ merges with the experience of the Spirit: "Having the Spirit of Christ" amounts to the indwelling of the Spirit of God in us, and our being "in Christ" is practically synonymous with the Spirit "in us."⁷² In Pauline understanding, the Spirit acts as Christ's medium in his relationship with human beings. The same loose distinction between Sender (Christ) and Sent (Spirit) can be observed in Luke and John.⁷³ This "functional identity" (Dunn) between Spirit and Christ designates a typically Christian way of thinking about the Spirit which contrasts somewhat with the more traditional Jewish perspective on the Spirit as dynamic power of God, having its impact on Jesus and others through him. During the time of his ministry, Jesus speaks

⁶⁶ 1 Cor. 15:45, 47.

⁶⁷ Jn. 1:16; Col. 1:18; Jn. 3:34.

⁶⁸ Jn. 1:13.

⁶⁹ CCC, 505.

⁷⁰ CCC, 723.

⁷¹ See: J. Dunn, *Christology in the Making*, (Norwich, U.K.: SCM Press, 1989²), 132 ff.

⁷² See, e.g., Rom. 3:5; 6:3; 16:11; Gal. 4:6; 1 Cor. 12:3; Phil 3:1; 4:1-2.

⁷³ See Acts 8:29; 10:19; 16:6-7; John 14:16-17.

haltingly about the Spirit in conversations with the disciples,⁷⁴ Nicodemus,⁷⁵ the Samaritan Woman,⁷⁶ and the participants in the Feast of Tabernacles.⁷⁷ It is not until after the Resurrection that he reveals the Spirit more fully promising his coming, even breathing the Spirit on his disciples.⁷⁸ Risen from the dead and glorified, Jesus shares in the divine prerogative of being the sender of the Spirit.⁷⁹

The pervasive presence of the Spirit and his “functional identity” with Christ in Paul does not lead subsequent theologians to declare a Gnostic Christ. Jesus remains the one who faces us and with whom we are faced. Jesus is not—in spite of Augustine’s “interior teacher”—the one who witnesses the Spirit and dwells in us uttering “Abba.” This is the Spirit’s work, just as it was through his power that Jesus was conceived, and the Word became flesh. The law of Incarnation forbids ultimate identification between the Spirit and Christ not only in the name of Trinitarian theology, but also for the sake of historical truth. Salvation becomes visible and tangible in the person of the one who was sent in the likeness of sinful flesh, was given up for us all, and became the Firstborn of a new eschatological humanity.⁸⁰ Salvation is dealt with in confrontation with the *concretissimum ens*, Jesus Christ, while the Spirit sent by the Son prepares, fulfills and manifests the healing and recreating presence of God’s likeness in Jesus Christ.

Based on what precedes we reluctantly conclude that there is no real case for Spirit-Christology, at least not as long as the indwelling of the Spirit is considered synonymous with the divinity of Jesus (as seems to be the case for some Spirit-Christologies).⁸¹ Is Jesus a man preeminently filled with God as Spirit? This would mean that there is in him no pre-existent divine subject, no eternal Son who has become a human being and actor in human history. “In Christian experience, Jesus is Lord, the mediator of God’s saving action, the incarnation of God’s love, power and wisdom in the world.”⁸²

⁷⁴ Lk. 11:13; Mt. 10:19.

⁷⁵ Jn. 3:58.

⁷⁶ Jn. 4:10 f.

⁷⁷ Jn. 7:37-39.

⁷⁸ Jn. 20:22; 14:16-17; 15:26; 16:7-15.

⁷⁹ Acts 2:33; Lk. 24:29.

⁸⁰ Rom. 8:3; 8:29; 8:32.

⁸¹ See: R. Haight, “The Case for Spirit Christology,” in: *Theological Studies* 53 (1992), 257-287.

⁸² J.H. Wright, “Note: Roger Haight’s Spirit Christology,” in: *Theological Studies* 53 (1992), 729-735, 734

Incarnation as Sacrament

God's coming in the flesh has changed forever the Christian understanding of time and history. The Word that became human is the Word in the beginning; in Him we have been chosen before the foundation of the world. It is the Alpha, but it is also the Omega in which everything in heaven and on earth will be brought together. The power of God's Word spanning the beginning and the end of time gives new meaning to the present. New meaning points further to "full" meaning. Incarnation cannot be reduced to myth, cypher or spurious data because it has an essentially sacramental character. This sacramental character imprints itself upon time as presence and revelation, pointing beyond the figure of a merely historical Christ. Indeed, the sacramental character of Incarnation may never be severed from *Christus totus*, the total Christ.

1. *Sacrament of Presence*

A number of current ideologies reject the present—either in the name of the past, the future, or the present moment. Take those who live a life of instant gratification. For them the present has lost its existential weight and gravity. It has dissolved in sensationalism or apocalyptic mania. Sensationalism, based on the imperative of "everything, at once, now," suggests—alas only suggests—a massive dedication to the present. In fact, it constitutes a form of evasion or "sentimentalism" (Ann Douglas). Where true understanding of Incarnation works to desentimentalize the present and our religious culture, the ideology of the "present moment" is unmasked as distraction from life's deeper mysteries. It promotes the art of titillation and a way of life centered on privatization and self-indulgence.

On the other hand, apocalyptic mania, widely experienced in and beyond the approach of the third millennium—an experience sometimes called "millenarist obsession," consciously or unconsciously takes a radically anti-incarnational stance. Lobbying in the name of eschatology, apocalyptic mania causes people to turn their backs on a broken world. It prods them to check out of God's stony and unyielding vineyard, and to abandon the sheep to mercenaries. Apocalyptic mania builds on anxiety rather than on the confident entrusting of doubts, discouragements and temptations of despair to the healing presence of the incarnate and risen Lord. Confronted with sentimentalism and apocalyptic mania we are reminded that the historical dimension of our religious existence is shaped essentially by the Incarnation.

This rule applies to views of human history for which the present is untruth. Here existence, as lived in the present cannot be true or right. It is alienated from itself, and the beginning of wisdom is the denial of the "Now." The

classical temptations with regard to existence in the present (and historical existence as such) are either the negation of the present and of history, or the absolutizing of history as a self-induced and unending process. What comes to mind when speaking about the negation of concrete existence are forms and methods of introspection or recollection in oneself, the pursuit of mysterious paths that lead into the depths of “universal consciousness” and, by the same token to flight from self and reality. The second temptation mentioned—viewing history as self-induced and unending process—has roots in inverted Idealism and some forms of secularism. These attitudes are based on the assumption that God is no longer alive or present, that humans have to hasten into an endless future and organize their own fulfillment. In both Marxist and capitalist *Weltanschauung*, the understanding of human existence is expected to promote “absolute action,” to profess faith in the radical openness of human beings, and the absolute dialogical structure of the human psyche.

Instead, Christian *Weltanschauung* compels us to enter ever more deeply into history as the proper *locus incarnationis*, with eschatology as direction and goal. In Mary’s “yes” at the Annunciation Christian philosophy and theology finds a permanent and unwavering point of reference for its thoroughly incarnational ethos. Thanks to Mary’s “yes” in her own time, two things become clear for Christians: 1) Faith that is based on Incarnation cannot have recourse to flight from the world, and 2) faith that relies wholly on God’s initiative is prohibited from hastening salvation by its own efforts. This may be one of the more confusing chapters in the difficult logic of Incarnation. In spite and because of it, Christians will not leave the responsibility for the Kingdom exclusively to God. We must responsibly employ the freedom we have gratefully received, and double the talents entrusted to us. A truly incarnational vision of our existence deals humbly and courageously with the inevitable alternation of falling and rising. Both are important conditions for personal and collective survival and growth: “It is—says John Paul II—an unending and continuous transformation between falling and rising again, between the man of sin and the man of grace and justice.”⁸³

Concentration on the present as the focal point of the whole time continuum (past and future) receives its deepest meaning from the very presence of Christ in history. “There neither is nor can be any situation without Christ.”⁸⁴ The presence of Christ sustains everything; it symbolizes for all times his solidarity with humanity in pain and in its need of many ways of redemption. He is Savior not only for his own but also for the whole world, and he exercises

⁸³ RM, 46.

⁸⁴ O’Collins, 306.

his saving power over all of creation—persons and things.⁸⁵ Christ's presence is woven into the fabric of human existence through the gift of the Spirit and the new life of Church communion. Presence is closely linked to tradition. It brings together history and faith, and reconciles the Jesus from below with the Christ from above. O'Collins has attempted to construe a Christology of presence based on Jewishness, feminine characteristics, and the connection with mystical and pastoral spirituality. He reaches the following conclusion: "A Christology of presence can thus endorse a prime tradition within the community of believers. It can also help to face a challenge coming from without: revelation and salvation for those who do not (yet) believe in Christ. ...Respect for the multiform variety of his presence allows us to acknowledge Christ as everywhere present but in an infinite variety of ways."⁸⁶

Incarnation is the linchpin in this infinite variety of ways to describe and experience Christ's presence. In a very special way it reminds us that Christ's presence is *for us* (pro nobis). But presence *to* (or *for*) somebody does not happen without reciprocation or, as Augustine put it: "He who made us without ourselves will not save us without ourselves." Incarnation comprehends ontology and soteriology: Jesus Christ is the true man and true God into whose transforming presence we are at once called and integrated. In short, conversion and rebirth are not only needed but offered.

2. *Sacrament of Totality*

One of the most important consequences of Incarnation and the incarnational reading of Christology is to attract attention to the *Christus totus*, the Jesus Christ as presented in Hebrews: "Jesus Christ is the same, yesterday, today and forever."⁸⁷ We must grasp the meaning of the words "I am the way, the truth, and the life."⁸⁸ *Christus totus*, whom theologians like Balthasar and Rahner used to describe as *concretissimum ens*, is both transtemporal and actively present today. From the vantage point of his eternal *Truth*, he exercises a critical function in regard to the partial and fragmented truths of our time. As our *Way*, he plays a liberating role leading us beyond the old ways to separation, re-orientation, conversion and new connectedness with his person. In union with Christ, we have *Life* and are exposed to his transformative action, modeling our lives according to his own and shaping them to serve his mission. "As the living one, he (Jesus Christ) was always already the one who is to come. The message of his coming and remaining belongs essentially to the

⁸⁵ 1 Cor. 15:20 f.

⁸⁶ O'Collins, 322.

⁸⁷ Heb. 13:8.

⁸⁸ Jn. 14:6.

image of himself... If we deny ourselves an existence which allows itself to span these dimensions, we cannot understand him.”⁸⁹

Much of contemporary Jesus-literature would eye this comprehensive portrait of Jesus Christ with suspicion, committed as it is to the search of the historical Jesus only. At first glance, one would expect convergence between Incarnation and history. In fact, the search for the historical Jesus leads to a strict concentration on the past, theoretically at least, reducing the meaning of Incarnation to a purely factual matter, namely the existence of Jesus at some point in the past. Reason, origin and consequences of Incarnation are only sporadically dealt with, sometimes not so much from a historical as rather from an ideological vantage point.

The *Jesus Seminar*, e.g., mentions among his “seven pillars of scholarly wisdom” one especially that reflects this narrow sense of Incarnation. It stipulates that Jesus was not an eschatological figure, and that his understanding of mission was limited to a “kingdom” of strictly temporal dimensions.⁹⁰ In some instances, the quest for the historical Jesus turns out to be a tiresome attempt to free him from ecclesiastical hegemony. Bishop John Spong did not hesitate to express his detestation of the institutional church; he practiced an inverted literalism which left no place to “incarnation.” His Jesus is born illegitimately and might have been married to Mary Magdalene—“much to the dismay of literalists who desperately hold on to the relic of the virgin birth!”⁹¹ “Incarnation” may be confused with ordinariness, so when A. N. Wilson, after having dismissed the Pauline invention of Jesus, discovers the “real” Jesus as a “recognizable Jew of the first century.”⁹² We are presented with a different kind of ordinariness in B. Thiering’s *Jesus and the Riddle of the Dead Sea Scrolls: Unlocking the Secrets of His Life Story*.⁹³ Based on the assumption that the history of *Qumran* and of early Christianity are the same, Jesus is now the “wicked priest” who opposed John the Baptist, “Teacher of Righteousness.” He is punished by his people and crucified at *Qumran*, survives thanks to Simon Magus, and spends the remainder of his earthly days directing the Church. If Spong’s key to the “historical” Jesus is *midrash*, so Thiering uses *peshar* to retrieve the real Jesus from behind the “arcane symbolism” of the Gospels. In similar fashion, John Dominic Crossan considers extra-canonical materials⁹⁴ equal in value

⁸⁹ J. Ratzinger, “Jesus Christ Today,” in: *Communio* 17 (1990), 69. (Hereafter cited as Ratzinger)

⁹⁰ See: *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus*, Macmillan, 1993.

⁹¹ J. Spong, *Born of a Woman: A Bishop Rethinks the Birth of Jesus*, Harper 1992.

⁹² A. N. Wilson, *Jesus*, W. W. Norton 1992. xvii.

⁹³ Harper 1992.

⁹⁴ E.g., Gospel of Thomas, Gospel of Peter, Secret Gospel of Mark.

to the canonical Gospels for the reconstruction of Jesus' teachings. His portrait of Jesus is that of a "Mediterranean Jewish Peasant" who represents a vision of "countercultural egalitarianism," not unlike that of ancient Cynic philosophers and their social criticism of hierarchy and establishment. According to L. T. Johnson, "Crossan's peasant Cynic who preaches inclusiveness and equality fits perfectly within the idealized ethos of late-twentieth century academe: he is nonpatriarchal and noninstitutional; his kingdom consists of an open table where everyone accepts everyone else."⁹⁵ Incarnation is reduced to the brief lapse of time of Jesus' ministry which does not have an explicitly religious character, little talk about God, no reference to salvation and forgiveness of sin. What remains is the invitation to reinstate Christianity as a "brotherless kingdom" and thereby to reject Jesus the "broker" of the "brokered Empire,"⁹⁶ meaning an institutional and power hungry Church. Marcus Borg, not unlike Crossan, uses social sciences to portray Jesus. He is the founder of a renewal movement based in first century Judaism, a sage and a healer, but primarily intent on changing the ruling (religious) ideology from "politics of holiness" (emphasizing requirements pertaining to diet and purity, laws, and the practice of exclusion) to a "politics of compassion." Jesus' "politics of compassion" has the ring of prophetic counter-culturalism, and happily coincides with the agenda of late-twentieth-century enlightened Christianity concerning freedom, equality and inclusion.⁹⁷ Borg wants to share his enthusiasm for the historical Jesus and his allegiance to Christianity, but he warns his reader against the "popular image of Jesus" as "divine or semi-divine," since "the image of the historical Jesus ... who saw himself as the divine savior whose purpose was to die for the sons of the world, and whose message consisted in preaching that, is simply not historically true."⁹⁸

The main purpose of "incarnation" in some of the more representative samples of contemporary Jesus literature seems to be geared toward Jesus' re-incarnation in today's culture and his contribution "to the urgent task of cultural critique where it seems to matter most—understanding the social consequences of Christian mythology."⁹⁹ Eager to break the taboo of Christian myth as per-

⁹⁵ L. T. Johnson, *The Real Jesus*, Harper 1996, 46.

⁹⁶ See: J. D. Crossan, *The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991); *Jesus: A Revolutionary Biography*, Harper, 1994; *The Essential Jesus*, Harper, 1994.

⁹⁷ M. Borg, *Jesus, A New Vision: Spirit, Culture, and the Life of Discipleship*, (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1987), 97-171. See also his: *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith*, (Harper, 1994); *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship*, (Trinity Press International, 1994).

⁹⁸ M. Borg, *Jesus*, 7.

⁹⁹ B. Mack, *The Lost Gospel: The Book of Q and Christian Origins*, Harper 1993, 258.

petuated by mainline Christian denominations, authors of recent Jesus books offer as antidote the “real historical Jesus,” who often turns out to be a “historical cypher” (Johnson) into which they can pour their own vision. Jesus is then like a mirror showing us who we are; e.g., for Stephen Mitchell, he is “a man who has emptied himself of desires, doctrines, rules—all the mental claptrap and spiritual baggage that separates one from true life—and has been filled with the vital reality of the unnameable.”¹⁰⁰ With this last remark about the “vital reality of the unnameable” we have come full circle. Jesus is no longer the historical Jesus, but he falls victim to the search of the Jesus of history which, incidentally, happens to be not so much his history but our own historical and existential situation. We are back to the Jesus of faith—the faith of our own personal convictions—and what is left of Jesus is either unnameable or matter for new myths to replace old ones. Incarnation is part of a system of cyphers, little more than a residual myth. Against this backdrop of contemporary Jesus-topography, the following Ratzinger statement takes on new meaning: “Whoever wants to see only the Christ of yesterday will not find him; and whoever wants to have him only today will likewise not encounter him.”¹⁰¹

3. *Sacrament of Revelation*

Jesus Christ’s coming in history reveals more than his individual and social reality. In his godliness, humanness and salvific work, we encounter—condensed and articulated in the Eucharist—“the primordial sacrament” of the Church, the Trinity and of ourselves.

Thanks to a comprehensive understanding of Incarnation, Christian theology is essentially christocentric. This means that Jesus Christ is the center, the source and the end of what Christianity stands for and announces to the world. The same applies to theology: its disciplines all converge on the person and event of Jesus Christ, in him they find unity and coherence. In Jesus Christ Christians read and understand the role of the Church as it attempts to serve both God’s plan of salvation and human needs. The Christian mystery is not ecclesiocentric, it is by definition christocentric. However, it is part of the logic of Incarnation that Jesus Christ gives himself in and through the Church. This is the meaning of Vatican II’s description of the Church as “the universal sacrament of salvation.”¹⁰² Jesus Christ is the “primordial sacrament” of encounter between God and humankind, but it is in the Church that we are given the sacrament of encounter with the Risen Lord. “Since Christ himself may be called

¹⁰⁰ Stephen Mitchell, *The Gospel According to Jesus*, (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1991), 13.

¹⁰¹ Ratzinger, 69.

¹⁰² LG, 48.

"the sacrament of God," the Church in an analogous way may be called the 'sacrament of Christ.'"¹⁰³

The spatial representation of the God-human relationship sometimes leads us to picture Jesus Christ as a go-between bridging the gap between the natural and the supernatural. Jesus does not stand somewhere between two worlds desperately trying to pull them together. In Jesus Christ the finite and infinite, the natural and supernatural, Godhead and humanity, are irrevocably united, because he is at once one and the other. In Jesus' humanity we come in contact with God; Jesus the man is the sacrament of encounter with God. On the other hand, Jesus Christ does not exhaust the mystery of God. Rather he points toward it and calls for it. He is the way to the Father; he is also the exegete of the Trinity.¹⁰⁴ The mystery of the Trinity remains unseen by human eyes, but in Jesus Christ it is revealed. We know about it; we find ourselves gifted with its incarnate love. Conversely, in Jesus' Incarnation and human presence, we contemplate his origin and his pre-existence. They are constant reminders that the birth of Jesus is also the birth of the Messiah. The Son can reveal the Father only if he is not his creature, and only as Son of God could he truly give himself away.¹⁰⁵ The importance of Christ's preexistence is clearly documented in John's writings,¹⁰⁶ but it appears already much earlier.¹⁰⁷

The Incarnation of the Son of God affords us a Trinitarian epiphany, and its ongoing character materializes in the historical and spiritual reality of the Church. There is more: Jesus Christ is the "example and the sacrament of the new humanity": "Jesus Christ is the perfect human being: he lives entirely from and for God the Father. At the same time, he lives entirely with human beings, and for their salvation, that is, for their fulfillment."¹⁰⁸

These words echo the manifold but somewhat scattered teachings of Vatican II about the relationship between Christology and anthropology. It describes human vocation as incorporation into Christ and life in him, and fulfillment of that vocation through incorporation in the Body of Christ *en route* to ultimate plenitude.¹⁰⁹ The deeper meaning of this teaching is that humanity's final and ultimate vocation is its divine vocation. This vocation was revealed

¹⁰³ ITC, "Select Themes of Ecclesiology on the Occasion of the 20th Anniversary of the Closing of the Second Vatican Council," in: *Texts and Documents* 1969-1985, ed. M. Sharkey, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 296.

¹⁰⁴ Jn. 1:18.

¹⁰⁵ Mt. 11:22; Jn. 1:18; Rom 8:15 f; Jn. 3:16.

¹⁰⁶ Jn. 1:14; 1 Jn. 1:2; 2 Jn. 7; Col. 1,16.

¹⁰⁷ Phil. 2:6f; Heb. 1:2; Gal. 4:4; 2 Cor. 8:9; 1 Cor. 8:6.

¹⁰⁸ ITC, *Texts and Documents* 1969-1985, 194.

¹⁰⁹ See, e.g., DV 2; SC 6; AG 3; LG 3,48-51.

to us through the Incarnation and the whole of Christ's life. The major texts of *Gaudium and Spes* dealing with human destiny clearly state that anthropology finds in Christology both its foundation and culmination. Christ is presented as the center of humankind and as the goal of history. Perfect man himself, "the Lord is the goal of human history, the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the center of the human race, the joy of every heart, and the answer to all its yearnings."¹¹⁰

The key text of *Gaudium and Spes* on anthropology brings this into even sharper focus when it states: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate word does the mystery of man take on light. For Adam, the first human being, was a type of the one who was to come, Christ the Lord. Christ the new Adam, in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and of his love, fully reveals humankind to itself and brings to light its high calling."¹¹¹ We may formulate that whatever is asserted of humanity is also eminently affirmed of Christ. However, this is not a matter of simple juxtaposition or parallelism. Adam does not explain Christ; it is Christ who explains Adam. Christ is the "image of the invisible God,"¹¹² and it is through his perfect humanity that he reveals God to us, as well as our divine vocation. In some way, all humankind was assumed by the Son, as predicated already by the Fathers,¹¹³ and thus he restored in human beings the divine likeness that had been disfigured by sin.

Other specific aspects of our identity in Christ could be mentioned, e.g. concerning human freedom and our communitarian vocation. More could be said about our likeness with Christ at the time of creation and/or that of redemption. The most important statement is made if we acknowledge that Jesus Christ is the object of all things. Who knows him knows the reason for everything (Pascal).

Judas' and Peter's treasons are both the fatal consequence of not knowing who Christ really is. For Judas, Jesus Christ was not convincing enough, certainly not as obsessively convincing as his own egotistical appetites. For Peter, Jesus Christ sounded convincing enough, so much so that Peter overestimated his abilities to follow the Lord. In both situations, the main actors failed to know Jesus as the *reason for everything*.

The only rightful response in facing Jesus Christ—the only way to avoid betrayal—lies with humility, because humility is an experience of the absolute, the experience of an absolute boundary and of absolute greatness beyond it. In truth, to cite a fine thought of Cardinal Journet, *humility is already adoration*.

¹¹⁰ GS, 45.

¹¹¹ GS, 22.

¹¹² Col. 1:15; GS, 10.

¹¹³ See, e.g., Clement of Alexandria, *Pedagogus*, II.20.

What then does Christian humility mean? It means to endure God as He is. Consequently, no anthropology can claim to be Christian if it does not seek ultimate meaning in Jesus Christ. This is what is meant by: "There is no Christian anthropology without Christology."¹¹⁴

Incarnation needs to be understood historically and personally. The very logic of Christ's birth in time and space exacts a rebirth in our hearts. If the Messiah were born a thousand times but not in my heart (Angelus Silesius), Incarnation would not have reached its intended term. The historical truth about Christmas (R. Brown) constitutes the foundation of our faith, but it must precisely be that: a foundation of *faith*.¹¹⁵ According to S. L. Jaki, this leads to the heart of what is at stake in the Christmas story: "Even if revelation were a purely doctrinal message, scholarly interpretation of texts embodying it must render justice to its special nature, a communication of the supernatural. While that communication cannot be contradictory to nature, it has to transcend the limits of sheer nature. Otherwise it would not be supernatural."¹¹⁶ Indeed, it transcends nature in two directions: 1) toward the divine source of its presence, but also 2) toward its personalization in human hearts and souls, and attention to a spirituality of Incarnation.

4. A Spirituality of Incarnation

It is with the twentieth century—before and after World War II—that Incarnation becomes a major theme in spiritual literature and is formulated in terms of *devoir d'incarnation* (incarnational task). Incarnational spirituality had many sources of inspiration, from the launching of Catholic Action¹¹⁷ to the theology of the Mystical Body, passing through *earthly realities* to the spirituality of the body and of marriage. It was influenced by twentieth-century humanism, anthropology, existentialism, and historical consciousness. Keywords of the incarnational period are *witnessing*, *mission*, *commitment*, and the famous *signs of the times*. Among the key ideas is the notion of the ongoing incarnation, at all times and in all places, and the penetration and transfiguration of human reality by uncreated love.

Incarnational spirituality called for a new style of holiness, materializing in sanctification of daily life and worldly realities. It reached out to the social and cultural order in a generous and somewhat romantic gesture before it eventual-

¹¹⁴ See: R. Latourelle, *Vatican II: Assessment and Perspectives*, vol. II, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), chapters 36-38.

¹¹⁵ R. Laurentin, *The Truth of Christmas beyond the Myths: The Infancy Narratives of Christ*, (Baltimore: St. Bede's Publications, 1986). Such is the overall tenor of this book!

¹¹⁶ S. L. Jaki, *Catholic Essays*, (Front Royal, VA: Christendom Press, 1990), 52-53.

¹¹⁷ Pius XI, *Quas primas*, December 11, 1925.

ly became *social gospel*, *preferential option for the poor*, call for *inculturation*, and a multitude of liberation movements, each carrying its own agenda. Needless to say the principal values of incarnational spirituality found their way into the major documents of Vatican II.¹¹⁸ Although questioned and challenged after World War II by a spirituality of transcendence, incarnational spirituality came back in force only to be challenged later by the charismatic movement (and others) in quest of spiritual realities to counterbalance a lopsided understanding of Incarnation.

The spirituality of Incarnation is a constant challenge. It leads us to the heart of the world, but instead of discovering there the face of Christ, we are frequently confronted with the hideous mask of evil. We then realize that this cannot be the heart of the world, and that we must have lost our sense of direction. So we try again. Incarnational spirituality is the Christian way of dirty hands and no shortcuts. We are privileged—travelling lightly—to have in our baggage and before our eyes the icon of Christ incarnate guiding, directing and redirecting our steps.

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¹¹⁸ *Lumen Gentium, Gaudium et Spes, Apostolicam Actuositatem.*