

TRINITY SPERMATIKÉ: THE VEILED PERCEPTION OF A PAGAN WORLD (PART 2)^{*}

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“[B]oth the stark denial and the more thinly veiled perception of a pagan world reflect . . . the irrepressible irruption of a divine presence that cannot be but trinitarian.”



4. THE DARKER VEIL: DENIAL AS AFFIRMATION

The ultimate paradox of the age of paradox is that paradox (in the sense of the word’s etymology, “beyond normal opinion”) leads inescapably to aporia (a blocked argument, one that, etymologically, “has nowhere to go”). The Augustinian restlessness of soul, which the modern and postmodern worlds so fully embrace on a collective scale, does eventually come to its place of rest, however different that place may be for each of us. For we moderns embrace either horn of the dilemma—a trinitarian perception whereby the absolute is confronted as wholly simple

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and yet endowed with the dynamics of life; or a polytheistic perception, whereby the absolute is accepted as a static underlying matrix of which we can progressively define the constitutive fabric by breaking it down into its component parts.

We have followed the paradox in section 3. We will now face the aporia. Here, instead of an apprehension of trinitarian reality sensed through the paradox, we find the explicit negation of its very possibility. But there is much to learn even from denial, for the categorical definition of the non-trinitarian puts in bolder relief the configuration of the trinitarian. Thus, both the stark denial and the more thinly veiled perception of a pagan world reflect, I believe, the irrepressible irruption of a divine presence that cannot be but trinitarian. Common human experience is seared by this irruption, however veiled, however denied. And our Christian experience, however timid, is profoundly indebted to that sensibility. We are indebted because the trinitarian mystery is revealed to us not as a concept, but as a living reality whose presence haunts all humans. Thus we learn greatly from the many ways in which our fellow humans are touched. Both the paradox that senses, and the aporia that denies, help us to define more lucidly the terms of our own perception of that dynamics, in a trinitarian mode. The sharper the denial, the clearer become the contours of the trinitarian image we seek to bring into focus in our consciousness, as we aim to go beyond our own veil.

For our Christian perception is veiled as well. If we have touched the Trinity in the Word made flesh, we have then been robbed of this very flesh, once the Word was resurrected and returned to the Father. The Ascension is that most modern of mysteries, because, on the one hand, it tells us that our flesh has now, as if in counterpoint, seared the inner dynamics of the absolute in a wholly new way: in the human Jesus, it is our humanity that “sits at the right hand of the Father.” But it also tells us, paradoxically, that this fellow human is beyond our sensible experience. He became veiled again at the very moment that he had lifted all veils. The denial, as well as the veiled perception, of a pagan world underscores our own veiled perception as Christians. We can advance beyond the timidity. But we do share the veil. For, while it is true that we not only *sense*, but in fact “*see*,” the Trinity, we do so through a glass, darkly. Let us conclude, then, by

reviewing some of the cracks in the darker veil of denial, cracks that seem to let a gleam shine through more brightly. In this effort we are stimulated by the depth of the confrontation which, we have witnessed, colors human encounters however far they may be from a conscious trinitarian perspective.

I will look at six aspects that are as if concatenated in a progressive sequence, and in each case I will point out the clash between the two respective aporias.

4.1 The personality of the Logos

That truth should have a personality is seemingly a troubling thought. For personality entails idiosyncrasies and specificities, i.e., a variability at odds with the expectation that truth should reside in regular and predictable patterns. If the essence of a person is defined by a non-repeatable and irreplaceable individuality, can universal truth be reduced to a condition of identity with just such a kind of person?

The negative answer to this question, at the heart of today's secularism, opts for the safer dimension of repeatability. There is, seemingly, no risk in the ultimate stasis of a composite and controlled matrix. It is, undeniably, a safer conceptual world, one in which there is no advent, but only progress. We do not wait, we progressively appropriate.

But if safety resides in the age-old primacy of patterns,⁴⁶ the one pattern that escapes safety is in the question about the ultimate unity of all patterns, about their deeper congruence, about the coherence of the dynamics resulting from their interaction. The very emphasis on repeatability nudges us towards the unrepeatable. True, we moderns do not wait for an encounter to come and meet us. But we are anxious nevertheless (*inquietum est cor nostrum*). As we encase reality in our own finite logos, in the well construed, all encompassing frame of a static matrix, we come up against the ultimate aporia: precisely because we have nowhere to go, we point unwittingly beyond the ultimate barrier (*donec requiescat in te*). Thus the clash is between

46. See Stanley L. Jaki, *Patterns or Principles and Other Essays* (Bryn Mawr: ISI, 1995); *The Limits of a Limitless Science and Other Essays* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2000).

the *aporia of the Logos* and *that of the logos*.⁴⁷ By its very denial, our static logos puts the sharpest contours on the dynamic Logos, the impersonal on the personal. This is not in the way of a demonstration, a proof. It is the other way around: the deeper and the more sincerely we identify with the secular aporia, the more we are led to experience the hushed explosion of the *quies* of which St. Augustine speaks.

Then, also, we are made to confront more seriously the time-bound dimension of this Logos our hands have touched. The “historical Jesus” emerges in our perception as more than the object of historiographic analysis. He is historical because he is within history, however poorly we may be able to recognize his face in the chronological, institutional, psychological contours that our research evokes. The so-called quest for the historical Jesus is, in effect, a search for the *historiographic* Jesus, and while the two are by no means in opposition, it is myopic to confuse the two levels. We must not, in other words, let the quest for the historiographic Jesus blind us to the discovery of the historical Jesus. It is against the background of the great secular aporia that we can recover the sense of surprise at facing a named human like us (Jesus), circumscribed by concrete and time-bound events and customs (historical), who is, at the same time, the embodiment (incarnation) of the supreme dynamics of the absolute (the trinitarian Logos). Again: lest we develop a counterproductive defensiveness towards the great secular aporia, we may find it very productive to savor it instead. First of all because we, too, Christians, are far from denying the validity of patterns: we rather seek them avidly as being at the core of our own scholarly search. But then also because it is when looking up from them that we are struck anew, each time, by the ingrained explosion of what the historical Logos really means. The highest node and the deepest root of our ever expanding tree of patterns, of our science, is not another pattern, is not the logos, but the

47. From a different perspective (causality seen in function of the importance of the whole over the parts), a similar point is very insightfully developed by Glenn W. Olsen, “The Return of Purpose,” *Communio: International Catholic Review*, 33 (Winter 2006): 666–81. An interesting sideline to his argument is the current use, in digitally based categorization systems, of the concept of “ontologies,” which, in the plural, wholly negates the fundamental valence of the concept (see below, 4.6).

Logos—and the historical Logos at that. It is precisely when we come to see with stupefaction how the supreme “it” is in fact a “he” that we can sense more fully the many dimensions of his mystery. Indeed, his personality was so full that it anteceded his own conception (being just as steeped in history as for any of us, but virginal by ontological necessity⁴⁸). His death (as real as for any of us) did not mark the collapse of our wonderful tree of science only because this very dead and very historical human could reaffirm, risen, the continuity of his being as the personal foundation of all ontology. His sitting at the right hand of the Father constituted the supreme validation of all our human science, however poor, because he (it, if you will, under erasure) sank science as everything else in the trinitarian depths. We owe a great debt, indeed, to the great secular aporia for making all of this stand out so vividly, as if an electric shock, in our otherwise possibly dormant Christian consciousness.

4.2 Grace as creation

That the world of laws should turn out to be not a static ensemble of finite and controllable pieces of logic is bad enough, from a secular point of view. But not as bad as what comes next. This Logos who replaces the logos is not a remote entity, however personal, to be looked at from afar. Rather, his dynamics, which we are called to recognize as properly trinitarian in *his* divine life, unfolds irresistibly to involve *us* personally. His intent is to intervene in *our* human life, and make us not the observers of a static logos, but rather an integral part of his very life as Logos. We are challenged to rise from logicians to the very status of Logos—through sacramental grace.

The aporia was just as strong for his contemporaries as it is for us: “This is harsh reasoning (*sklērós . . . ho lógos hoútos*).” And

48. On the ontological necessity of the virginal conception see my articles “Religious Vows and the Structure of Love,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 23 (Fall 1996): 570–2; “The Prophetic Dimension of Joseph,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (Spring 2006): 82f. See the stark rendering of this concept by J. H. Newman, *Select Treatises of St. Athanasius in Controversy with the Arians* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1890), 293: “His manhood had no personality, but was taken up into his divinity as second person of the holy Trinity.”

so, “many of his disciples gave up and no longer walked with him” (Jn 6:60–66). This was in response to Jesus’ summons that “he who eats (*trōgōn*, literally: chews) me will live through me” (Jn 6:57). The climax of the aporia, then, is in the concreteness of the proposal, a concreteness that emerges very clearly from the broader context of John’s recollections. Grace is not a state of mind, it is a new creation that changes the core of our human being, a creation that affects our perception of the truth. The very act of knowing is rooted in a sacramental relationship to the Logos: “only if you *dwell* (*meinēte*) in my word (*lógos*) will you truly be my pupils, and you will know the truth, and the truth will give you freedom” (Jn 8:31). To be at his school, then, to be his disciples, is not just to listen to the word, but to absorb his very being—sacramentally.

How can this be so—such is the secular view of the monotheistic aporia—when, obviously, human reasoning can proceed in a perfectly logical manner without any recourse to the incarnate Logos and to his grace? And yet how can this *not* be so—this is the monotheistic view of the secular aporia—if our logical reasoning only allows us to string fragmented pieces in a neat sequence, but never to gain the sense of the foundational origin of the sequence itself? The clash is between the *aporia of origins* and the *aporia of creation*.

Grace is the interface between two domains, the intangible domain of the absolute on the one hand, and the very tangible one of our world of finitude on the other. The primordial moment when this interface comes into being, and thus the primordial sacrament, is creation itself. With his inimitable “harsh reasoning” (*sklérós lógos*), Jesus first proclaims the link between creation and sacramental rebirth when he meets, secretly and early on, with Nicodemus (Jn 3:3–8). Creation is the first irruption of grace—in fact, not just the first, but the perduring confrontation, one that sustains all that exists. Grace not only perfects nature, it effects it in the first place. Nor is grace an abstract principle, discoverable and definable. It is rather the unfolding manifestation of divine dynamics, of that trinitarian dynamics that calls us into being and chooses to touch us beyond our choices, unendingly, through signs (the sacraments) as concrete as our own personal existence.

Now, that is indeed harsh reasoning for our instinctive-

ly secular mindset, a mindset that aims to touch rather than be touched, to control and codify as law the very wellspring of being, to suspend judgment when a beyond is sensed that claims we should let go rather than forever grasp. Hence the denial of creation, which is more profoundly, really a denial of grace, i.e., of communication between the domains of the tangible and the intangible. With the recent passing, in 2009, of the 200th anniversary of Darwin's birth and the 150th of the publication of *The Origin of Species*, the topic is particularly timely.⁴⁹ What is especially interesting in our context is the reaction elicited by his thought. For there can be little quarrel with some of the aspects of the book's argument (its "one long argument," as the author was fond to say⁵⁰), namely that diversification is the intrinsic by-product of the dynamics of life, and that the moments along the evolutionary scale are the ones we can document scientifically. Nor with the very last sentence: "There is grandeur in this view of life, with its several powers, having been originally breathed by the Creator into a few forms or into one; and that, whilst this planet has gone cycling on according to the fixed law of gravity, from so simple a beginning endless forms most beautiful and most wonderful have been, and are being, evolved." The several references to "the Creator" (nine, to be exact, in *The Origin of Species*—it is a different story with *The Descent of Man*) need not be taken as perfunctory, and seem rather to reveal a sensible awareness of both the power and the limits of the scientific endeavor.

The aporia emerges clearly in the reaction to Darwin's otherwise reasonable position.⁵¹ It is the aporia of origins, a belief

49. On Darwin and his epigones, see the insightful article by Michael Hanby, "Creation Without Creationism: Toward a Theological Critique of Darwinism," in *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30 (Winter 2003): 654–94. He shows, *inter alia*, how Darwin operates within an inarticulate philosophical system that "simultaneously performs what it denies" (675), i.e., it affirms universality within the confines of an atomistic nominalism that cannot in and of itself be universal.

50. Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, 6th ed. (London: John Murray, 1872), 404 (the beginning of the last chapter); *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin 1809–1882*. With the original omissions restored. Edited and with appendix and notes by his grand-daughter Nora Barlow (London: Collins, 1958), 140 (referring to *The Origin of Species*).

51. In Darwin's early work, there is an attitude of surprise towards crit-

in an endless cycle whereby the origin of species presupposes our discovering the origin of genera, and so on backwards, with the unstated, but firm, belief, that the long chain itself will never have a single and ultimate point of origin—not the genera, not the big bang itself. The result is clearly an aporia, a no exit argument, accepted as much on faith as the aporia of creation, for both presuppose moments inscribed in a non-moment.⁵² In our present context, I wish to point to the benefit we can draw from it. The seriousness of creation and of its relationship to grace, as the foundational origin of reality, is sharply brought home by the contrast between the two aporias. Where do we situate the original creation of human beings along the evolutionary chain that paleontology and prehistory are slowly and unmistakably unraveling,⁵³ where the first opportunity to resist grace—the “original” sin? The core of our response should be colored by the kind of awareness that we bring to our search for grace: Where is the moment in our personal history, where the spot in our physical configuration, in which grace emerges as tangible and visible? There is no such moment, and yet there is; no such place, and yet

ics who infer more than he seems to have meant; see already in *The Origin of Species*, 421: “I see no good reason why the views given in this volume should shock the religious feelings of any one.”

52. It is interesting to note Darwin’s attitude towards general laws. On the one hand he stresses the great importance that the discovery of general laws has for him (“My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for *grinding general laws* out of large collections of facts” [*Autobiography*, 139]; “From my early youth I have had the strongest desire to understand or explain whatever I observed—that is, to *group all facts under some general laws*” [ibid., 141, emphasis mine]). On the other, he does not project an open-ended chain of origins: “To my mind it accords better with what we know of the *laws impressed on matter by the Creator*, that the production and extinction of the past and present inhabitants of the world should have been due to secondary causes, like those determining the birth and death of the individual. When I view all beings not as special creations, but as the lineal descendants of some few beings which lived long before the first bed of the Cambrian system was deposited, they seem to me to become ennobled” (*The Origin of Species*, 428 [emphasis mine]). On the Newtonian model behind this interest in general laws see Hanby, “Creation without Creationism,” 667–73: he argues on the one hand for the intrinsic ontological weakness of the model, and on the other for Darwin’s inability to measure up even to those standards.

53. See Gil Bailie, “Raising the Ante: Recovering an Alpha and Omega Christology,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 35 (Spring 2008): 83–106, especially 85 and 92.

there is. Grace creates us not only at conception, but, anew, each moment of this time we call ours, it touches us at every spot in this physical being and surrounding we also call ours. Creation, as grace, is the interface between the two domains, it is the interaction between the intangible and the tangible, or the tangible intervention of the intangible. The modality escapes our analysis, but the impact of the touching is demonstrable.

The aporia of origins awakens us to a greater awareness of what it means to experience creation as grace in our daily lives. Here is the contrast. Having redefined the absolute as vectorial, there develops in the secular point of view an inability to accept the absolute as relating to vectoriality, whereas trinitarian monotheism views the absolute as positing vectoriality in the first place (creation) and then maintaining it through a dynamic interaction (grace). On the one hand, the secular view tells us that, while we may well have a specific point of origin in time (each of us having been conceived at a given moment, and not another), that moment is part of an amorphous developmental chain, within which we are absorbed anonymously. On the other hand, the trinitarian view tells us that not for a single moment are we abandoned to an anonymous whirl, that, rather, at every such single moment we are faced with a personal call that posits us as created at that very moment. Herein lies the primary experience of grace, and of the Spirit as the conveyor, personally, of this creative energy that forever calls us into being: “*Veni Creator Spiritus . . . imple superna gratia quae tu creasti pectora*” (see Part 1, 3.5.2).

4.3 The kingdom as personal adherence to creation

It is a progression of impossibilities. First, that the rationale of all reality should have a personality, that the logos should be the Logos. Next, that the Spirit should display an operative power and intervene as an independent agent in *our* world in order to transform us into the Logos. Then, that we should in fact be called to act accordingly and shape the world to match the Father’s will. For, if “grace” signals the outward impact of trinitarian dynamics (i.e., if creation is not merely a temporal event, but the absolute’s atemporal and ever present intervention in time), then “king-

dom” signals the acceptance of this grace, hence of creation, on the part of the creatures.⁵⁴ Jesus is the channel through whom, and through whom alone, this acceptance is ultimately truly possible. The first part of the Our Father is the pertinent manifesto. We may see an interesting gradation of themes, which, in Matthew’s version, is repeated specularly:⁵⁵

| | | |
|-------------------------|--|---|
| 1 God in himself | <i>Our father, who are in the heavens,</i> <i>may your name be acknowledged as holy,</i> <i>may your kingship be realized,</i> | <i>Father, who are in the heavens,</i> <i>may your name be acknowledged as holy,</i> <i>may your kingship be realized.</i> (Lk 11:2) |
| 2 creature’s adherence | | <i>may your will be done</i> |
| 3 result | <i>upon the earth</i> | |
| 1' result | | |
| 2' creature’s adherence | | |
| 3' God in himself | <i>as in heaven</i> (Mt 6:9–10) | |

The heavenly reality is (1) the starting and (1') the end point: heaven is where there is no contrast to the absolute. More importantly, there is no contrast, no strife, *within* the absolute. A trinitarian reality free of contrast is implied where the heavens are set as the point of reference for the earth: God’s essence, his (2) name, should be recognized as holy on earth (2') because it is holy in the heavens (the dynamics of God’s inner life does not entail strife, as was the rule in polytheism). This adherence of the creature to God’s inner life proclaims, and effects, the implementation of God’s inner life on earth, his (3) “kingdom” or “kingship.” In the longer version, as recorded by Matthew, the coming of the kingdom is considered equivalent with the implementation of the Father’s will (3'): not a vectorial willfulness, but the creative act that inscribes time within eternity.

The theme of the kingdom is a leitmotiv in Jesus’ preaching,⁵⁶ and that he would be king in this kingdom was a

54. In his book, *Jesus of Nazareth* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2005), Benedict XVI emphasizes that the “kingdom” is in fact the “lordship” of God.

55. The sequence of earth–heaven, instead of heaven–earth, is given in early versions (as well as in the current English one), and is clearly secondary, but is chosen here to emphasize the inverted parallelism.

56. See on this topic the Spring 2007 issue of *Communio: International Cath-*

widely held perception on the part of his contemporaries. So widely, in fact, that besides many nuances in the understanding of what he meant, there arose just as many outright misunderstandings. Prime among these was the political interpretation, a misunderstanding which was, after all, not so surprising in the light of the historical tradition of what God was said to have performed for Israel in the distant past. But the deeper message of that very tradition of ancient Israel was the need to adhere to God's participation in the evolving mesh of history, not the modality of the various (more or less glorious) configurations that mesh had assumed at any given time in the past. In this light, Jesus is king because he relates in the most perfect way to the kingdom, the kingship; he is king because he perfectly adheres to the Father as king. To be the king of the Father's kingdom means being the Logos, the person who shares in the perfect non-strife of the inner life of God. It means, at the same time, being the human who adheres perfectly to the Father's will, and through whom all humans are called to adhere just as perfectly (!) to the inner trinitarian life of God. The kingdom is, one might say, the "trinitarianization" of the world, not imposed, but adhered to as fulfillment.⁵⁷

Just as the Father's will is not willfulness, but the creative confrontation of the eternal with time, so Jesus' obedience is not submission to a capricious will. While profoundly rooted in the psychology of humility, obedience is at the same time the affirmation of a metaphysical reality. Jesus, *qua* Logos, lives fully the life of the heavenly kingdom, i.e., of the Trinity. He adheres to the Father with the perfection with which "two" absolutes can relate without being numerically two. Obedience means, in this case, *perichoresis*. It is this same obedience that we are called to, the perfect adherence to the Father's creative will, the acceptance of his kingdom. The "kingdom" is, in this respect, creation as the Father wills it. And it is, conversely, our acceptance of being created, our acceptance of the perfection of his plan. The reason why Baptism makes us share in Jesus' kingship, makes us a "roy-

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57. This matches the "call to sonship" in Benedict XVI's life of Jesus, on which see the lucid analysis by Roch Kereszty, "The Challenge of Jesus of Nazareth for Theologians," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34 (Fall 2007): 454–74.

al” race, is because it allows us, grafted sacramentally onto Jesus, to identify with his own will to be one with the Father, and thereby to adhere to the Father’s creative will. To enter trinitarian life. To truly say “thy kingdom come, thy will be done.” To be kings ourselves (the “royal” race) as partakers of the kingship.

The aporia of the kingdom is such because it builds, of its very nature, on the previous two aporias. We can will the kingdom, we can will the implementation of the Father’s will only if we accept the Logos above the logos, only if we accept grace as the creative energy that undergirds our every effort. In a very terse and dense way, the “*Veni Sancte Spiritus*” hymn expresses this by saying “*da virtutis meritum*,” “give (us) the merit of virtue”: it expects the Spirit to make it possible for us to earn our very effort, an effort which is both ours and his. Rather than handing over “virtue” as an extrinsic accoutrement, the Spirit gives us the gift of the effort. So *we* are the ones who build the kingdom, but only because *grace* suffuses our effort by constituting this very effort in the first place. Herein the *aporia of the kingdom*, which clashes with the *aporia of progress* (see already Part 1, 1.4).

In the secular notion, progress is neither guided nor aimed, it is rather amorphous and aimless. It exists for its own sake, as a built-in forward thrust, which unfolds blindly. There is the comfort of factuality, for evolution is in some ways progress, at least in a quantitative sense (there is a sure growth of complexity). But how can there be a directional sense in the thrust forward if there is ultimately no direction, no declared aim to be achieved, no firm goal to be reached? The polytheistic, secular notion of progress is anonymous: it does not tend towards a named end, it only builds on itself. Secular progress is also independent of external values or standards. It is its own intrinsic dynamics that rises to the level of a standard. Inevitably, progress becomes an end in itself, it is change for change’s sake. Genocides and holocausts, war and disease are all inscribed into this notion of progress, as much as peace, new medical treatments, or economic prosperity—as might be, eventually, euthanasia or infanticide. And that is because the moment one adheres to no external criterion of valuation, one accepts as valid any fragment of that absolute that one is intent on denying. Herein, the aporia of progress.

4.4 *The sacrality of mechanics*

The aporia of progress is starkly articulated in Nietzsche's thought, which provides an alluring mythological underpinning for the exaltation and exultation of that early moment in modernity when the potential of the technical dimension began to be perceived as unlimited, or limited only by human timidity. Confidence in the success of the technical is the powerful motor that drives, ironically perhaps, the presumed discovery of the superhuman—ironically, because technicality is only indirectly human, and yet it becomes the paragon of humanity, robbing it, in the process, of its very humanness. Hence the aporia. Its core lies in the fact that we do not control, or even know, the direction of progress: today's progress increases the complexity of what was known yesterday, it builds on the cracks that open up in the known and let us have a glimpse of the yet unknown. But the catch is that the technical may, and does, feed on itself in order to discover the path to follow, and all too often entraps us humans in defining the non-human goal we end up serving, making us a-human instead of super-human. This aporia can best be appreciated in the light of what was noted earlier (1.4) about the reality of conditions that inexorably limit us: we do not set these conditions, so how can we claim control on our final destiny?

Thus the aporia of progress leads us to yet another: the *aporia of technology*. The tool is sacralized because it is perceived as having power in itself, a power that is operative of its own accord, somehow capable of transcending limits. Such mental posture vis-à-vis the tools of our own making has taken roots over the millennia of human development, its impact becoming more and more momentous as we grew progressively more distant from the connection between the maker and his or her product. Humans have distinguished themselves as toolmakers since their earliest beginnings, and have progressively increased the degree of complexity of their own creation to the point that the link between the maker and the user is no longer perceptible. The production sequence required in making a pot was clearly perceivable by anybody who watched, even if only a few (the potters) could in fact control the full chain. But as material culture developed further and further, such perceptual overview came to be lost to all but the few specialists. Theirs was the understanding, theirs

the control—but always limited to their own sphere of expertise.

Let it not be taken as irreverence if I propose a link with sacramentality. The material element in the sacraments is very much tied to, precisely, the material sphere; it is more than a poetic symbol. The water, the oil, the touching through the laying of hands, the articulation of one's own conscience in words, the spousal physical interaction, and above all the bread and the wine are not sentimental images. They are carriers of a reality that cannot be conveyed otherwise. Hence the aporia—the *aporia of sacramentality*: the spiritual dimension is inescapably bound with the material. It is a stumbling block, a no exit situation, even for those Christians who cannot accept such a deep level of incarnation: in this respect, the aporia of technology may indeed help us to understand their reaction as it found expression especially in the Reformation. They see sacramentality as a form of that mechanics over which one pretends to claim control without in fact even knowing what the ultimate goal truly is (see Hegel's comments about the Eucharist mentioned in Part 1, 3.1.1). Such a realization can helpfully jerk us out of a humdrum acceptance that indeed would validate the critique. Sacramentality asks for a startled assent to the sacrality of the material medium that is placed wholly in our human hands. This sacrality is not sacralization, in the sense that it is not our invention. It comes from the truly sacred. And yet it cannot be actualized without *our* participating in the many acts that make it possible. The final control is beyond us, we are wholly conditioned, but we are at the same time the *sine qua non* condition through which the sacrament can be effected.

Seen in this light, sacramentality can be better understood in its trinitarian meaning. The Incarnation is the locus where we humans confront the dynamics of the absolute, truly and fully bound by the physicality of all the participants, by the established mechanisms through which we carry out our own life. Just so, the sacral dimension of matter, sacral when elevated to sacrament, tells us that this “elevation” to sacral status can only take place through human co-participation in the divine dynamics. Our dynamics are grafted onto the divine, trinitarian dynamics—and conversely. It is our hands that effect the mechanics God “needs” to implement his trinitarian dynamics in our physical world: “Through your goodness, we have this bread

to offer, which earth has given and human hands have made. . . . Through your goodness, we have this wine to offer, fruit of the vine and work of human hands.”

4.5 Search beyond the threshold

Even more radical than artificial heavens (Part 1, 3.5) is artificial reasoning—we strive, as humans, towards constructing our own absolute, upon which we may be able to exercise control at the same time that we presume it to be, *qua* absolute, beyond control. The hubris, here, is that we can ascend, mechanically, from the parts to the whole, the whole being no more than the sum of these constitutive parts. The result is far more sophisticated than, say, what a mechanical doll represented in the nineteenth century, hence it is more seductive as well. But is it fundamentally different?

The power of digital control over data encourages a much more far-reaching revolution in human thought than one may suspect: digital thought provides ways of linking instantly the minutest atoms of any given intellectual universe with the whole it represents, and vice versa. It is a dynamic construction that seems to meet the problem on which deconstruction focuses: wholeness and fragmentation can coexist. The Christian perspective proposes the alternative of a wholeness greater than the sum of fragments, a personal wholeness “who” posits the fragments and seeks to be found. Next to the *aporia of the limit* there is the *aporia of the search*.

In retrospect, one of the major chapters in a future intellectual history of our times may concern, precisely, the way in which human thinking patterns have been transformed by the impact of the digital medium. One can reasonably argue that not since the advent of writing, some five millennia ago, has anything happened that is even remotely similar. Writing brought about the extrapolation of thought outside human brain and memory.⁵⁸

58. I have developed this theme in a number of articles dealing with the historical dimension as we know it from ancient Syro-Mesopotamia, see especially “The Origin of Writing and the Beginning of History,” in *The Shape of the Past: Studies in Honor of F. D. Murphy*, Giorgio Buccellati and Charles Speroni, eds. (Los Angeles: Institute of Archaeology and Office of the Chancellor, University of California, 1981), 3–13; “The Perception of Function and the

This extrasomatic reification of thought made it possible to deal with the intangible within our mind as a tangible object, one that could be analyzed, dissected, and recomposed at will, by the one who first conceived of that particular thought in the first place, and then by any other, present or future.

The computer is the first technical innovation that has impacted human reasoning with the same forcefulness. For, as a result, it is not only the content of thought as a static entity that is “extra-posed” outside our brain. Rather, the very function of thinking acquires a reified, extrasomatic identity. Dynamic connections among constitutive elements of thought are established outside our mind, and can be inspected and manipulated at will. Proper digital thought is being developed as a wholly new way of reasoning, one that exploits fully the potential of the medium, and develops a deeper relationship with this new way of assembling arguments. The forays we witness are timid premonitions of vastly more radical transformations. As of now, we have taken for granted the results of the operations (especially the search function through enormous quantities of data). We still need to shape a digital authoring and a matching digital reading that let new levels of analysis unfold, in such a way that alternative narratives and arguments may emerge from variable clusterings of data. Critical thought consists in developing parallel registers, parallel, that is, to the one proposed by the author. Digital thought will let such alternatives emerge on their own. Critical thought will thus come to be embedded in these extrasomatic workings, and develop thereby into a digitally critical thought.

It will be, therefore, an ever stronger factor in giving us humans a complacent sense of control over what conditions us ultimately and hiddenly. It will foster the feeling that we are the

Prehistory of the State in Syro-Mesopotamia,” in *Archaeology Without Limits: Papers in Honor of Clement W. Meighan*, Brian D. Dillon and Matthew A. Boxt, eds. (Lancaster: Labyrinthos, 2005), 481–92. I have articulated the specifics of the new dimension in the article “On the Question of Digital Thought,” in T. M. Nikolaeva, ed., *Studies in Linguistics and Semiotics: A Festschrift for Vyacheslav V. Ivanov* (Moscow: Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Slavic Studies, 2010), 46–55. It should be stressed that I am not speaking of artificial intelligence, which could be described as mechanical thought, i.e., the projection of analytical and synthetic procedures onto a machine. Rather, digital thought refers to the way in which human reasoning and perception is altered by its relationship to such mechanical procedures.

ones to construct the absolute, since we are the ones who produce the tools that can establish unending relationships in the totality of the known. The great potential deception that is in store for us is the presumption that we may, in the process, reach the outer edge of the known, beyond which nothing unknown can lurk, a threshold to nowhere, to where nothing remains that is unknown, a point where our steps turn inward to the totality of the already known—hence not a threshold, but the edge of a cocoon.

It is against this scenario that the Christian experience of the Trinity emerges with stark clarity. We rush not towards an outer limit from which we can only turn back inwards, but towards a veritable threshold to and from the beyond. Not the mirage of something that is in fact not there, but the point of suture where we do effect that *metábasis eis állo génos* (“rising to another genus,” Part 1, 1.2 and 1.3) that taunts and haunts everyone of us in however many different degrees of clarity and awareness. And what is beyond the limits is not another set of limits. Nor is it a cage that hopelessly hems us in. It is, rather, a wholly other totality, the trinitarian absolute who also forever searches, but searching for what is always already found, the personal selves of a non-plural, yet distinct personal reality. As for us, we do not have to reach “our limits” to experience this other totality: rather, we peer across a threshold that ushers us into that other totality, letting us be drawn across the threshold. It means touching, through the Incarnation, the Trinity.

Through the Incarnation. That is the bridge across the limit, across the threshold. The trinitarian interaction, the dynamics within the absolute who lives beyond our limits, would seem to address our very limits, as the unfragmented fragment, the Son, crosses the threshold in the one search for what is indeed, without him, not only not ever found, but forever lost. Tragically, sin manages to bring the aporia to the doorsteps of the Trinity: the Son who comes can hardly find us. As we refuse him, he seems to have nowhere to go. Worse than the concept of the death of God, or perhaps identical with it, is to recuse his search.

4.6 “Extra ecclesiam nullum ens”

The Son’s answer is the Church. In responding to the refusal of

the search, the Church is proposed as the foundational element in the constitution of reality. This is no small claim. And it is the *ultimate aporia*.

In this perspective, the concept of salvation may be seen in a special light. Primarily, the concept applies to the order of morality: we are saved from sin. Redemption means to “buy back” from damnation, and in this respect the Church is the vehicle that perpetuates through time the redemptive action of Christ: through it, all humans are given the opportunity to “be with him in Paradise” (to quote the words of his last promise from the Cross). But—this is the claim proposed here—redemption means also the securing of the order of ontology, made possible because Jesus withheld the temptation to sin. In the tempter’s view, the possibility that Jesus might succumb to temptation would have caused a seismic rupture such as to rent asunder (again, in his view) the very core of trinitarian life, hence the order of being in its integrity (see 3.2.2). If so, it was by avoiding sin that Jesus saved the whole of reality from ontological collapse. In this perspective, the Church is the constitutive mechanism of this new order. In a trinitarian dimension, it is the operational gift to the Father, by the Son through the Spirit, of a world newly im-maculate (i.e., freed from the stain of sin *and* of ontological collapse). Upstream of *preaching* the “good news” to the end of the earth (in fact, of the universe), the Church *is* the good news: for it is the constitutive mechanism of this new order. Herein, the aporia: ontology, *qua* integrity of being, is secured by a culturally embedded, sacramental, dimension.⁵⁹

The trinitarian implications are profound. While the Church is viewed as the foundation of ontological coherence, it is, precisely, *qua* a genuine human society, fully enmeshed in turbulence, fully exposed to sin, fully open to risk. The divine gamble of a temptable humanity is magnified exponentially in the Church. And this gamble re-proposes the dynamics of freedom within the absolute, the trinitarian interaction of non-plural absolutes. The Church as the body of Christ, as the cluster of branches that are grafted onto him as the vine, brings the sap

59. I have expressed this with the seemingly hyperbolic statement “*Extra ecclesiam nullum ens*”; see my article “Sacramentality as Culture,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 30 (Winter 2003): 532–80, section 5c.

of the Logos, hence of the Trinity, to the whole. It is true that the summons of Jesus is for the branches to adhere of their own volition, and so is the explanation of Paul for the members of the body: in the first place, the Church is the community of those who explicitly respond to grace and are, through a Baptism administered expressly, incorporated in the explicit sacramental reality of the Church. And yet: if Jesus is the Logos through whom creation not only took place at the beginning, but through whom it is constantly unfolding as well; and if the Church is the vehicle through which Jesus *qua* the Logos has chosen to interact with reality; then the Church is, at the same time, the vehicle through which the positing of being within creation takes place.

This is, undoubtedly, a *sklērós . . . lógos*—an aporia, precisely. But so is the secular *aporia of the ontologies* (see also above, note 47). The plural of the term has become entrenched in the literature about digital systems, and it may seem at first like an innocuous lexical inaccuracy: it refers to the varieties of categorizations that make up the structure of the data. “An” ontology is the representation of a shared conceptualization of a particular domain. From the standpoint of classical philosophy, this may be said to be simply a terminological “abuse,” not all that significant because, used in this sense, “ontology” does not refer to multiplicity within being, but rather within the phenomena. But it is more, I submit, than a mere example of a cavalier usage, or even a gross negligence, of a classical concept. It is instead indicative of a deeper intellectual posture, which I view as a reflection of the polytheistic matrix of our culture. The concept of plural ontologies is consonant with the belief that there is no fundamental integrity to being as such. It affirms, in other words, a relativism that touches the very core of reality—it relativizes being as such. The kernel of the aporia is analogous to what we saw with regard to the relativization of the absolute. Both poles (absolute vs. relative, integrity vs. aggregation of being) are proposed as being valid at one and the same time.

Subtle though it may be, this is a form of supreme polytheism, revealing not so much ignorance of a basic tradition of thought, but, in fact the negation of its foundational meaning. By being proposed as a mere categorization system, the secular and anonymous acceptance of multiple “ontologies” debases “being” by denying its integrity, by fragmenting it into crumbs that pro-

claim concreteness in the name of abstraction. The contrast with the aporia of the ecclesial ontology is enlightening, and it provides, at the same time, a close correlation of results. For ecclesial ontology, too, ties “being” to a concrete, historical dimension, by seeing it incarnate in a physical person and in the equally physical continuity he has established in time and space with the Church. But while the polytheistic ontologies crumble an abstract unity into concrete fragments, ecclesial ontology presents a coherent concrete mechanism through which concrete moments and aspects cohere into the overriding unity of ‘being.’

5. SENSING VS. FACING

5.1 *The human experience of the Trinity*

In the preceding section I have outlined a progression of six impossibilities, or aporias, which can be summarized as follows:

| SECULAR, POLYTHEISTIC VIEW | vs. | TRINITARIAN, MONOTHEISTIC VIEW |
|---|-----|--|
| <i>logos</i> as an impersonal concatenation of arguments | vs. | <i>Logos</i> as a single, live person who is the very foundation of logic |
| <i>origins</i> as self-determination without an original self | vs. | <i>creation</i> as the interaction of the intangible with the tangible |
| <i>progress</i> seen as attribution of meaning without a goal | vs. | <i>kingdom</i> as acceptance of responsibility in constructing the goal |
| <i>technology</i> as a mechanism of control without concern for who is in control | vs. | <i>sacramentality</i> as a mechanism which is the exclusive vehicle of sanctity |
| the <i>limits</i> of the known as defining a self-contained totality | vs. | the <i>search</i> as piercing through the limits of a totality that is not total |
| the concept of <i>ontologies</i> affirms plurality at the core of being | vs. | the unity of being is <i>grafted onto the Church</i> as a sacramental reality |

The assumption that the burden of proof pertains, as it were, only to the positions listed on the right is quite unfounded. The aporia pervades just as deeply the polytheistic view. There is no escape. That postmodern sensitivities should have developed a flare for aporia is no justification for allowing evasion from standards of rationality. Rather, postmodernity should help us appreciate both sides of the equation. We humans face a world of aporia no mat-

ter what our posture may be. Postmodernity tells us we cannot remain in a state of denial, but it tells *all* of us—polytheists as well as trinitarians. Polytheists can no more be in a state of denial than the others: they, too, are, in the final analysis, but “believers.” (Remember that in our present context this includes atheists as well.)

The aporia aspect dominates either of the two columns, and a fine balancing act is required when we seek to assess for ourselves the contrast and take our own stand, accepting the full truth of the situation. If we espouse the secular polytheistic view, we may paint it as an exalted and exalting myth, as the expression of a pride that projects the presumption of a lack of limits beyond those very limits. But the limits do not go away by just pretending we have gone beyond. We do, in the end, accept this beyondness on nothing else but faith. Let us not be blind to this.

But let us not be blind to the converse either. Even if we espouse a Christian, trinitarian perspective, we may well end up savoring the aporias triumphalistcally, the expression of an arrogant pride that pretends the aporia has vanished, a pride that wants to own the mystery as property. Instead, the proper Christian call to “logofication”⁶⁰ is a call to sonship,⁶¹ which entails, in us, all the humility (no triumphalism here) and all the surrender (no myth either) of the Son. Which entails, fully, the Incarnation.

What modern (and, even more, postmodern) sensitivity has done has been to bring to a climax of awareness the implications inescapably present in the deep human posture towards trinitarian reality. It cannot be controlled yet it is sensed, it cannot be seen yet it is denied. Both the paradox and the aporia speak loudly, if “in the wells of silence.”⁶²

5.2 Revelation as confrontation

So where does revelation fit in? If revelation has taken place,

60. More properly than deification, see my article “Yahweh, the Trinity: The Old Testament Catechumenate (Part 1),” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 34 (Spring 2007): 38–75, especially 71.

61. See Kereszty, “The Challenge of *Jesus of Nazareth* for Theologians,” 55.

62. From the 1963 song “The Sounds of Silence” by Paul Simon and Art Garfunkel, a song that gives voice to a stark yet sad search beyond anonymity.

how can there remain any aporia? The answer lies perhaps in this simple change of perspective. The secular polytheist assumes that all that is needed is to frame the aporia: once that is done, the aporia is conquered. A stated presupposition emerges as the quies of Augustine's search. It is a frozen quies. The trinitarian monotheist, on the other hand, assumes that the aporia is more than a principle. Hence the expectation of a relationship. The aporia is in truth a mystery. It discloses a reality that pulsates with life, a life we cannot frame. And it offers a dynamic quies.

It is true that revelation is a form of communication, because our understanding of divine reality can be formulated in words; it takes on the shape of concepts, not just images, much less fantasies. But more than formulation, revelation is confrontation: we face a reality, we respond to it and we become incorporated in it—or, rather, in him. In this process we do come face to face with a supreme uniqueness, one that suddenly makes sense of all our human sensing, one that sheds a piercing light on the ultimate object of our intentionality. It is a revelation indeed—of the unexpected, of the surprising, of the fulfilling. But it is definitely and emphatically not our construct.

Baudelaire's grand theologian (3.2.1) serves as a warning against overstating revelation, as if we owned it, having constructed it. Thus it is that the paradoxes and the aporias to which I have pointed help us in that they define the spiritual dimension of the required inner attitude, they shock us into a starker realization of what confrontation means. The logos does not in and of itself lead to the Logos, nor does a sense of origins to creation, nor the expectation of progress to the acceptance of the kingdom, nor the delight in mechanics to an appreciation of sacramentality, nor the recognition of limits to their acceptance as a threshold. But being entrenched in a logos-based discourse gives us an unexpected sense of liberation when we sense the Logos beyond the logos; the seeming immeasurability of the time frame of our human development dares us, violently, to think beyond measurability; the comfort of an unbounded progress haunts our very sense of comfort, as we somehow sense the lure of a higher purpose lurking behind all future time; the sense that the very tangible *techne* is imbued with intangibility reminds us of the inextricable bond between matter and spirit; the identification of boundaries entails the realization that we are bounded by a be-

yond for whom our search will never be exhausted. We are jolted out of complacency. We come to realize how secularism can in fact be spiritually and morally uplifting.

And it is “we” in the plural indeed. For there is a deep coherence in the experience, there is a sharing of the same confrontation, across the boundaries of space and time. The profound coherence in confronting the mystery validates the referentiality of what is being confronted. It is the intentionality to which I referred earlier (1.4). The coherence of our perception points to the coherence of the great referent, God, the dynamic absolute who founds and conditions all that we are. He reveals himself by confronting us and letting us confront him: he elicits an experience that is as multifaceted as it is coherent.⁶³ The countless ‘we’ across space and time have confronted the same trinitarian dynamics, all over the world, from time immemorial.

5.3 The Christian experience of the Trinity

Yet, for all the sensing, it is the explicit facing that affords us humans the possibility of a live interaction. And thus Christian experience emerges, properly, as the culmination of *human* experience. As Christians, we are asked to train our sensitivity to this facing. To face the Trinity.

Far from being sterile, doctrine and dogma inform experience. The spiritual impact is immense, and it transforms human self-understanding, however inarticulate it may remain. In our groping, we, the poor, sinful, plodding Christians of everyday life, face ontology as a live experience. It lies in the pained acceptance of hurts, of intrusions, of violence—accepted as the “will of God.” It also lies in the exhilarated acceptance of beauty, of love, of joy—equally accepted as the will of God. Whether crushed and numb, or buoyed and uplifted, we learn to see in the dynamics of our lives the dynamics of the absolute; we learn that,

63. This coherence of the divine throughout the biblical text is put forth by Jack Miles in his two influential books *God: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995); *Christ: A Crisis in the Life of God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2001). What seems to me to be a profound inconsistency in his reasoning is that he postulates an overriding coherence of the perception *without* any corresponding coherence of the referent.

in all things, we can always see the flicker of a will that interacts with us at the same time that it posits us. The humblest and least articulate of Christians lives the reality of a tensional relationship with the absolute experienced as somehow alive and dynamic; he or she, too, learns through obedience (Heb 5:8), the obedience to a creative call that deeply affects our experience. None of us is, then, an anonymous Christian. Blurred, hazy, and mired—yes. But no more anonymous than the most clear-sighted of theologians. We do have a name. Because, however much in the dark, we face a face.

The practice of Christian life, at its most basic and simple, can indeed illuminate the theological search for spiritual realities. The attitude towards providence is a concrete embodiment of this fact. It is in our everyday life struggle that we see, etched deeply in our experience, what, abstractly, we may call the trinitarian dimension of trans-vectorial dynamics. When we can see no further than anguish allows, i.e., not far at all, we Christians instinctively sense that there is a far distance that is not distant, a dynamics that does not pivot around a fixed point, a providence, precisely, which, however darkly, bends over us without bending, and thus gives meaning to our anguish. It is an experience which knows both that we are not stuck, statically, in a no exit situation, and yet, at the same time, that this is not a computer game where vectorial dynamics is bound to provide the eventual exit. Therein the difference between trust and reliance on providence on the one hand and, on the other, the wishful expectation that statistics will somehow be the palliative that moves us on to a different state of mind. The Christian experience of providence is profoundly and inescapably trinitarian.

In this respect, a proper imitation of Christ is more than imitation. It is, indeed, a transformation. Not just on the psychological level, important though that is.⁶⁴ It is a more radical transformation, which is expressed well by the notion that Baptism infuses a *character*. However conscious we may or may not be of its implications, we are grafted onto Christ as branches onto a vine. Filiality is the hallmark of this character. And to

64. This aspect is especially explored in the classic work by Dietrich von Hildebrand, *Transformation in Christ: On the Christian Attitude of Mind* (New York: Helicon Press, 1948).

be a son means to become one with the Son, to be “logofied” (see above, 5.1). Thus at the root of all psychological attempts to imitate Christ there must be the fundamental presupposition of *being* Christ through sacramental grafting—of thereby living the trinitarian dimension of filiality as one of essential availability to his creative will.

Sacramental practice is truly the locus where Christian trinitarian experience is found at its clearest. It is not that we should expect an exposition of theory by the normal practicing Catholic, but that therein lies the kernel around which the proper Christian confrontation pivots. However inarticulate, there is a high degree of specificity in the common Christian posture vis-à-vis some of the sacraments in particular. For it is clear to everyone that in the Eucharist we are grafted very specifically onto the Son; that in Confirmation we are enabled and vivified very specifically by the Spirit; that in Baptism, at the start of it all, our position of utter creaturely dependence acquires the character of sonship vis-à-vis, very specifically, the Father. We all live these sacramental experiences: they do not just imprint us with the mark of character and graft us onto the core vine of our existence as branches; they are also moments when the intangible touches us tangibly, and lets himself be experienced, however minimal our degree of awareness may be. For, however muted, it does remain a real experience which we should help to nurture and re-discover. “Ressourcement” should in fact be seen as the rediscovery not only of a textual tradition, but, as well, of the live experience that simmers hidden within the tradition of sacramental practice.

5.4 The chrism of apostolate

Part of this constant rediscovery of hidden riches entails living the sacraments not just as events, but as states. Just as marriage is lived beyond the moment of the wedding, all the while being defined by that very moment, just so all other sacraments imbue us with an identity and a reality which we are called to re-discover and make our own ever more deeply in the experience of daily life.

Such a reflection on the sacrament of Confirmation is pertinent to our topic in a special way. Built into the facing I

have described, there is, inevitably, a dimension of communion. The trinitarian dynamics on which I have insisted is real and alive, so that facing it brings us as well into a mode of profound dynamics. Communing with the dynamic absolute elicits communion with other seekers, it elicits the need to share. We can only share what we have faced, this is clear enough. But there is more: the target of our sharing is himself operative in the urge to commune. The target is not an object, and communication is not the transfer of information. The target is the live dynamics within the personal absolute, and communicating the experience we have of this dynamics means letting the absolute himself do the sharing. That is, it seems to me, one fundamental and specific aspect of the sacrament of Confirmation. It is the sacrament of apostolate, and the chrism with which we are anointed is, indeed, its chrism.

Confirmation is the moment and the state of empowerment. We are absorbed within a dynamics that, while shared, makes us sharers in turn. Were we called to convince, we would end up affirming *our* point of view and, ultimately, our egos. But apostolate is not an exercise in logic, and not at all an opportunity for pride to assert its superiority in an effort to have others come around and accept our position. No, we are only called to share. We share what transcends us and onto which we are but windows. We share our perception, however miserable and limited, of a reality that through its own dynamics reaches out to be shared. In this delicate interaction we are indispensable and yet utterly irrelevant. We are the diapason, not the music, the single note that helps, for all its worthlessness, to achieve a tune.

We help elicit a music that is already there—that is the central point of our considerations. As missionaries, we must learn to display the inner space where we are touched, so it can be shared. The Marian litanies express this well when they address Mary as the *vas divinae gratiae*, the vessel and channel through which grace flows and speaks, even if those spoken to do not respond in an articulate way. From the little we know, Mary (and Joseph) never felt they had to talk about, much less broadcast, the mystery of Jesus' birth as if to validate him. It was the secondary reflection of the apostles and their immediate followers that probed for evidence of the earlier stages in the life of the man they had known for such a short period of time. Had

it been their literary invention, the resulting legend would have been embellished to the degree we see in the apocryphal gospels. The sobriety of the gospel text has the hallmark of a report that is communicated as if reticently. Mary's Confirmation had been the Annunciation, and Joseph's had been Mary's disclosure to him and the modest vehicle of a dream. Their shared stark confrontation with trinitarian reality, the virginal conception, was the chrism that marked them.

5.5 *The Christian missionary ethos*

The primacy of the confrontation colors all missionary urges. Just as we do not explain a person, but rather help one to make contact with another; just as the act of saying: "I want you to meet someone," and the subsequent effort at effecting the presentation, outdoes all other possible efforts at describing in words that particular someone; just so, the missionary mandate is not to describe and convince, but to become vehicles that facilitate a confrontation based on experience. It is thus, then, that a properly Christian, i.e., trinitarian, culture can illumine the path along which our contemporary culture seeks to trod, if in the dark. It is an extension of the trinitarian dynamics, whereby instead of the static transfer of information it is the inner momentum of things felt and apprehended that breaks down the barrier between individuals and establishes the deeper contact of mutual understanding.

We are called to give witness to a reality, which presupposes that first we must experience that reality—for we can only share what we in truth have. And then, sharing builds on what ground we already have in common. In presenting the God we have confronted we do not put an alien on the stage. We do not proclaim the Trinity as a stranger hailing from a strange beyond. Rather, we help disclose a reality that is sensed already but closed and veiled. We awaken an already existing intentionality (1.4), the stirrings of which are all already felt in the veiled perception of a Trinity that touches us *qua* humans before touching us *qua* Christians. What we proclaim is the paradoxical compatibility of the seeming incompatibility of a dynamics within the absolute. Thus posited, the mystery is universally real for all. As humans, we all *sense* God as Trinity. As Christians, we come to *face* the

Trinity as God. The missionary goal is to communicate the impact and experience of this “facing,” to help confront the urgent claim of that personal whirlwind within the absolute that strikes the most personal chord in our being as humans. In this sense, and in a counter-intuitive sort of way, trinitarian reality is perhaps even more readily part of our shared human longings than the fully human face of Jesus.

It is for this reason that the missionary ethos should permeate Christian life, whomever we are expected to be missioning to. The striking choice of Thérèse of Lisieux as the patroness of the missions reminds us vividly of this. We are, to each other, vehicles for God’s confrontation with all humans. As missionaries, we are all, in however minor a key, a diapason, a tuning fork that helps in developing the confrontation to the point that the sensing might somehow become a facing. This even applies to us intellectuals, who for the most part have so little to offer in a material sense, but who can at least make our own the anguish of the others’ search, and help identify its darkly unsuspected target. The missionary spirit is imbued with circularity, the ability to be open even while wishing to convey and transmit. It is a great lesson for the intellectual spirit as well—to be open to the depth of the others’ sensing, and learn to appropriate the urgency of their yearning.

Since God is the absolute and live dynamics, and since we must, correspondingly, be ever ready for the encounter with the unsuspected, so, too, in missioning to others we are only to serve as conduits for such an encounter to take place at God’s own bidding. Being called to adhere to his creative will, we are not passive and negligent, but co-active with his pervasive and perennial creation. It is only conscience that can be the meeting point with truth, and access to the awesome freedom of everyone’s conscience is God’s most jealous claim. The fundamental respect of conscience is central to any and all Christian missionary effort. It is significant in this respect that a pope as authoritarian as Innocent III should have issued, in the year 1199, the so-called Magna Carta of tolerance towards Jews,⁶⁵ in which he

65. Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 772f. Interestingly, the tone is starker, and the provisions more specific, than in Vatican II’s declaration *Nostra aetate*, 4.

very explicitly condemned not only any intolerance against their religious traditions (to the point of excommunicating those who would even only damage a Jewish cemetery, let alone open the graves and disperse the buried), but, specifically, any attempt to force them to receive baptism against their will.

5.6 Parallel lives

In our lives we witness, daily, a tale of two worlds—one of sensing, one of facing. They seem like parallel trajectories: while *we*, Christians, perceive all of reality through the dynamics of an explicitly trinitarian absolute, *they* are perfectly satisfied to accept that altogether different dynamics which allows a relativization, hence a safe control, of the absolute. The world, ultimately, makes sense to them in this perspective. What is the point of missioning?

The parallel presence in itself is part of the answer. We are, at the very least, witness to the trinitarian alternative. In a humble posture, without the pretense to win over a consensus, but with the simple openness to a reality that imbues our lives, we live, and offer, the savoring of a reality. That is the simplest dimension of the missionary effort. An essential component of this posture is the acceptance of the fact that trinitarian dynamics, truly *beyond* us, reaches out *through* us to elicit a facing. We can thus serve as sacramental conduits, simply by virtue of being what we are called to be, by living our own facing. For, in untold ways, these parallel lives do, indeed, seem to converge, revealing how they are, in the depths, irresistibly interlaced. We all walk through life sharing in both dimensions, to a different degree. As sinners, *we* abandon the clarity of the facing. Touched by grace, *they* are struck by unexpected rays that pierce through the veil, however occasionally. Along both trajectories, we are carried by that same dynamics which holds the absolute in that mysterious trinitarian balance we sense and face, alternatively. We are spiritual twins. And to mission means, in this respect, to display our awareness of trinitarian explicitness.

How to help bring about the convergence is the practical question of a commitment to apostolate, broadly, and a commitment to missioning, more specifically. If the most elementary way is indeed the parallel presence I just sought to describe, a

practical implementation is the humble adherence in prayer to our parallel register of existence. The sets of presuppositions from which either side comes are so disparate that casual encounters and conversations do not allow a reasoned confrontation of the systems of thought. Reasoned conversations, when they occur (as with Nicodemus “who first came to him at night” or with the unnamed Samaritan woman at the well), are indeed moments when grace short-circuits the interstices. But the parallel presence is ultimately the primary means.

Through such a stance, we come to share in the ontological dimension of redemption, we affirm the trinitarian claim to uphold life and existence. As missionaries, we validate their being. The innumerable ways in which the real missionaries, the wonderful field ministers of the missioning Church, care for the equally innumerable failings of the physical and societal existence of our vast humanity (hospitals and clinics, schools and training places, counseling and legal centers), all of these activities validate the being and dignity of even the most remote and abandoned men and women and children. They proclaim the reach of redemption to the core of being itself, they affirm being by making existence possible. It is our field missionaries who show in practice how ultimately true is the claim that “*extra ecclesiam nullum ens*” (4.6).

5.7 The dynamics of communion

Even when walking along the same track, we are far from being monolithic. For we are neither frozen into a stone-like inertia, nor are we absorbed into a oneness that deprives us of personality. Far from it. True communion depends on alterity, and on the converging dynamics that unifies without liquefying.

Sponsality is the paradigm for this dynamics. And that it be enshrined in a sacramental venue is especially meaningful in this regard, because the sacrament grounds the psychological in an ontological and teleological dynamics. The rapport between spouses is exclusive on the one hand, and yet it is open—open (ontologically) to the divine “intrusion” that raises the union to the higher plane of trinitarian communion, and open (teleologically) to co-creation of a person. Not that such sponsality is to be

found only where the sacrament is administered explicitly, since the instinct of love between non-sacramental spouses can affirm just as strongly the alterity of real communion, since children are obviously persons, regardless of how sacramental their conception may or may not have been. But it may be said that the sacramental dimension imbues the reality of spousal communion with the impact of the higher level of alterity in communion, the trinitarian presence. The facing of trinitarian dynamics within the sacramental bond illuminates and undergirds its sensing wherever a deep human communion of love is realized.

The dynamics of trinitarian communion extends well beyond the sponsal paradigm. It extends even beyond the consonance found in friendship and the syntony of minds, to embrace confrontational and dissonant situations. Complementarity can only be based on differentiation, and the genius of a communion founded in love is that it can accept disagreement and build on it. In Acts 15:2 the gathering which is known as the first council results from “no small case of standoff and search” (*stásis* and *zētēsis*) and out of these contrasting feelings and thoughts there develops a series of reasoned arguments, aimed at discovering the best course of action. Elsewhere, Paul writes to Philemon anticipating a difficulty on his part to accept his position (Paul says that the slave Onesimus, whom he is sending back to Philemon, is a “beloved brother,” v. 16), and he aims at convincing him. That we should thrive on difference and alterity is our own, vectorial, way of discovering and implementing the dynamics of communion as an echo, however poor at times, of the supremely trans-vectorial dynamics of the trinitarian absolute.

5.8 Beyond the veil

The missionary experience is, we have seen, a two-way street. We disclose our own personal confrontation, but at the same time we also absorb the reflex of God as it shimmers unexpectedly through the personal confrontation of others. The missionary proposes his or her own confrontation, but teaches us at the same time to learn to be confronted. The missionary is “missioned to” as much as he or she missions to others. And that is because God confronts all humans. All of us. If the very term “Trinity” seems

to evoke an abstraction, if most of the issues I have addressed in this article are intellectual in nature, ultimately the sense of a dynamic absolute haunts all of us indeed at the deepest of human levels. The beauty of the missionary and, in general, the apostolic effort is that it tunes our sensitivity to the least intellectual of levels. In the abyss of torture, in the tragedy of irreparable personal losses, in the downward spiral of artificial heavens, in the fear elicited by the approaching threshold of death—everywhere each one of us senses, in however inarticulate a way, that we confront an absolute who is way beyond us, and yet bends over across the threshold to touch us from that beyondness. Because we sense that the beyondness, far from being static, is itself imbued with the dynamics of life. Of trinitarian life.

Thus it is that, through our missioning to each other, we, each and all, witness, however unwittingly, the shimmering reflex of the universal trinitarian confrontation. But how can we, then, lend sharper definition to the shimmer? How can we see through even the darkest veils of the veiled perception? Where do we discover the trace of the indelible trinitarian impact on our shared human experience? The traditional effort along these lines has been to focus on various threefold aspects of human life. Augustine laid the groundwork by focusing on the psychological dimension. Idealism (see 3.1) deepened the analogy along the lines of intellectual life, with Rosmini, in particular, giving a Christian interpretation of the three modes of being (3.1.2). Of others, let me mention only Edith Stein, who develops in depth the study of personhood: “The spirit in its purest and most perfect actualization is found in the total self-giving of the divine persons, a self-giving in which each person totally divests itself of its nature [*Wesen*] and yet totally retains its nature, in which each person is totally within itself and totally in the others.” Personhood is then the perspective from which we can “see a triune unfolding of being in the entire realm of reality.”⁶⁶

My effort has been along different lines. The primordial sensing of the Trinity, I suggest, is not so much in the discovery

66. See especially Edith Stein (Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross), *Finite and Eternal Being: An Attempt at an Ascent to the Meaning of Being*, trans. Kurt F. Reinhart (Washington: ICS Publications, 2002), ch. 7. The two quotations are from pp. 360 and 361.

of vestiges of an underlying “three-ness,” but rather in the confrontation with a dynamics that, impossibly, suffuses the absolute. It is thus not an explanation whereby the Trinity becomes a model to describe the known. It is rather the uncomfortable recognition of a paradox and of an aporia that conditions our deepest spiritual posture. It is more the *inquietum cor nostrum* of Augustine’s *Confessions* than the threefold dissection of our psychology in his *De Trinitate*. This “inquietude” is caused not so much by a generic beyond, as rather by the awareness of an absolute that transcends us wholly and immeasurably in its pure simplicity, and yet is seared from within by a dynamics that does not translate into change. Rather than a triadic pattern suffusing nature, the trinitarian “model” for our age may be seen in the hustle and bustle of our lives, in that very vectorial dimension that we must avoid projecting onto God’s dynamics, but which may serve as a pointer to his infinite vitality. In a way, I have inverted the terms of the approach: it is not so much that reality is “hiddenly” trinitarian, and that from the vestiges we go back to their source; but rather that we sense from the very start how the full depth of the mystery, this dynamic absolute, is agonizingly haunting for all of us humans. That we should find an explicitly trinitarian articulation to this haunting sense of the beyond is the blinding effect of the “revelation.”

In our own diverse and even contradictory ways, we are all a humanity of seekers who sense the Trinity, a humanity of secretly longing trinitarian catechumens. □

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