

ST. PAUL IN MATTHIAS SCHEEBEN: THE PLENARY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INCARNATION

~: Andrew D. Swafford ~:

Benedictine College

For Matthias Scheeben, salvation is no less than the gift of divine sonship—we share in by grace what the Eternal Son has by nature. Salvation is the movement from being a son in Adam to becoming a son in Christ.¹ As St. Paul says, we have received the “spirit of sonship” (Rom. 8:15; see Gal. 4:6) and have been “conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29). That is, we share in the very same filial relation that Christ has eternally with the Father as the Only-Begotten Son. In truth, we become sons in the Son.

For Scheeben, theology principally concerns the study of the communication of the divine nature—first within the Godhead (that is, the eternal processions within the Trinity), and then God going outside Himself in the sending of the Son and the Spirit—resulting in the communication of the divine nature to creatures.² Here we come to the majestic splendor of the grace of salvation—namely, our sharing in the inner life of God.³

Introduction

After studying in Rome at the Gregorianum under Jesuits of the “Roman School,”⁴ Matthias Scheeben (1835–1888) became a professor at the seminary in Cologne at the age of twenty-five in 1860.⁵ By 1865, he had already written three of his most important works: *Natur und Gnade* (“Nature and Grace,” 1861), *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (“The Mysteries of Christianity,” 1865), and *Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade* (“The Glories of Divine Grace,” 1862).⁶ Toward the end of his life, he began a truly massive and integrative

1 See Council of Trent, session 6, chapter 4.

2 Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1946), 738.

3 Some of the following is adapted from my *Nature and Grace: A New Approach to Thomistic Ressourcement* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2014), 143–194. Used by permission of Wipf and Stock Publishers.

4 Aidan Nichols, *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Scheeben* (Denver, CO: Augustine Institute Press, 2010), 6.

5 Ibid., 9.

6 Ibid., 12–13. Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Mysterien des Christentums: Wesen, Bedeutung und Zusammenhang derselben nach der in ihrem übernatürlichen Charakter gegebenen Perspektive dargestellt* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1951). Scheeben, *Natur*

work entitled the *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik* ("Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics"), published between 1874 and 1887.⁷

Scheeben is exceptional in that his writings are unmarked by polemic either political or theological, a somewhat surprising feature given that he lived under the rule of Protestant Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), known for his *Kulturkampf* ("culture war" 1871–1887) against Catholics at the time.⁸ Nonetheless, Scheeben absorbs much of the Romantic spirit of the age, witnessed especially in his penchant for biological metaphors, especially his frequent use of the term *Leben* ("life").⁹ At the same time, he is uncompromising in distilling the supernatural character of Christianity.¹⁰

His serene intellectual temperament can also be seen by the way in which he handles an array of Christian sources. Though he is clearly at root a Thomist, he absorbs St. Thomas's thought in light of the teaching of the Church Fathers, especially the Greek Fathers.¹¹ It is in part for this reason that twentieth-century thinkers as diverse as Garrigou-Lagrange and Hans Urs von Balthasar cite him approvingly, as Aidan Nichols notes here:

The sympathetic citation of his work by twentieth century theologians as different as Hans Urs von Balthasar, a child of the so-called "new theology" of the 1940s and 50s, and Réginald Garrigou-Lagrange, champion, in the years im-

und Gnade: Versuch einer systematischen, wissenschaftlichen Darstellung der natürlichen und übernatürlichen Lebensordnung im Menschen (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1949). Scheeben, *Die Herrlichkeiten der Göttlichen Gnade* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1941). In English translation: Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1946); Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, trans. Cyril Vollert (St. Louis, MO: Herder, 1954); Scheeben, *The Glories of Divine Grace: A Fervent Exhortation to all to Preserve and to Grow in Sanctifying Grace*, trans. Patrick Shaughnessy (Rockford, IL: Tan Books, 2000).

7 Matthias J. Scheeben, *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, 3 vols., 1873–1887, *Gesammelte Schriften*, III–VII (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1945–1961).

8 See Nichols, *Romance and System*, 9–10.

9 See *ibid.*, 345. Nichols discusses the centrality of the Incarnation in Scheeben's thought along these very lines: "It fits with Scheeben's generous use of the language of life (*Leben*), indebted as this was . . . to the Romantic background of nineteenth-century German thought, that everything he has . . . said about the new dignity which accrues to humanity from its divine-human head he reiterates in terms of a new resource for super-abundant, overflowing life drawn from the Son through the Spirit (*ibid.*)" See also *ibid.*, 271, 381.

10 *Ibid.*, 1–2, 101.

11 See *ibid.*, 19. Nichols writes: "His . . . habitual references to the Greek patristic sources, Cyril of Alexandria above all, in far more than a merely illustrative sense, and his reliance on the power of images, both biblical and more generally cosmic, differentiated him from many modern Schoolmen" (*ibid.*). Nichols comments on Scheeben's preference for Cyril this way: "Cyril's thought is key to Scheeben's doctrine of the Incarnation and of the Eucharist, but more widely, he admired Cyril as a defender of Christianity's supernatural character against a version of theological rationalism" (*ibid.*).

mediately preceding the Second Vatican Council, of “strict observance” Thomism, attests to his mediating role.¹²

Part I: Incarnation and Divine Sonship

For Scheeben, the grace of divine adoption unquestionably surpasses the natural order, since supernatural grace engages man from without, inviting him into a sublime and supernatural participation in the very life and beatitude of God. That is, moral perfection in the natural order could not attain anything like divine adoption, as Scheeben understands it. He writes:

We could never, in all eternity, attain to such an intimate, spiritual union with God even by the most perfect development of our natural spiritual powers and by the conformity of our natural life with the divine will. This union is contained only in the supernatural grace of divine sonship which makes us, as children of God, partakers of His nature and His life.¹³

He points to the Incarnation as the ultimate foundation of the supernatural order of grace. For the entering into time and space of the Eternal Son (and the gifts flowing to man therefrom) imply a divine condescension which inaugurates something new into human existence, over and above the order of nature. Indeed, the Incarnation constitutes a veritable “hypostatic” order of reality—where the intra-Trinitarian life has gone outside of itself in order to draw creation into the inner heart of God. Scheeben writes:

We must mount above the natural order of things, and even above the order of grace as considered in itself, and think of the Incarnation not as a factor in another order, conceivable apart from it, *but as the basis of its own proper order, of a special and altogether sublime order of things*, in which the orders of nature and of grace are absorbed.¹⁴

12 Ibid. Contemporary Lawrence Feingold also cites Scheeben favorably in his *The Natural Desire to See God* (Naples, FL: Sapientia Press, 2010), 118–119.

13 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 489. Regarding the absolute gratuity of grace with respect to merit, he writes: “If you suffer all that Christ suffered, you could not merit even the least degree of grace” (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 65). And similarly: “Indeed, we can by no means acquire grace for ourselves through our own efforts. No more than we can call ourselves out of nothingness and give to ourselves natural being or existence could we bring forth in ourselves supernatural life. For grace does not grow out of our natural powers as plants from their roots, *but it comes to our nature from without*” (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 315), emphasis added.

14 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 356, emphasis added. The communication of divine

Since the grace of sonship constitutes a real participation in Christ's filial relation to the Father, Scheeben seeks to distinguish God's presence as *Creator* from *His supernatural presence through grace*. For him, the grace of divine sonship brings man into a relationship with the Father analogous to that of the Eternal Son:

In the ordinary created thing, God is present only as its maker and conserver. Without His presence in this way, things could not exist. But in the soul having grace He is present as sanctifier, giving Himself to the creature and sharing with him the holiness of His own being. *That recalls the way in which God the Father is in His only-begotten Son.* The Holy Ghost is in us by reason of the gracious sharing of the holiness which is proper to the Divine Nature. *Thus, as the presence of the Father in His Son is different from His presence in creatures, similarly the presence of the Holy Ghost in the souls of the just is different from His ordinary manner of dwelling in creatures.*¹⁵

He makes this same point by distinguishing God's "creative" power from His "generative" power; the latter refers to the eternal generation of the Son—a filiation in which man shares through the grace of divine adoption, as we have said. For Scheeben, God the Father *begets* children by grace after the model of his begetting of the Eternal Son. As ineffable as this sounds, he does not back away from it in the least. Indeed, this familial begetting and generation within the Godhead provides the archetype for understanding the full grandeur of man's salvation in Christ. Accordingly, he writes:

life proceeds as follows, according to Scheeben: "First, by the substantial and total communication of the divine essence in the Trinity; secondly, by hypostatic union in the Incarnation of the Son; and thirdly, by participation in grace and glory on the part of men" (Scheeben, *ibid.*, 738). For Scheeben, "[the] order of grace . . . proceeds from the Trinity" (Scheeben, *ibid.*, 146). The Incarnation is the exemplar and cause of man's graced elevation: "The hypostatic union is the ideal, as well as the principle and end of the union by grace. It is the principle, because by it the Godhead is brought close to all mankind in inseparable union; the fullness of divinity was united with one individual of human nature, to be communicated to all others by participation" (Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 328). Similarly, he writes: "The God-man . . . is the principle of the supernatural order in virtue of His personal and natural dignity. Grace belongs to Him essentially as His own, and through Him it belongs to the race as its own" (Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 386). See also: "The Incarnation places man, in Christ, upon God's throne, inaugurates his fellowship of dignity with the divine persons, and ushers him into relations with the Trinity" (Scheeben, *ibid.*, 395–396).

15 Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 74, emphasis added.

God can give existence to finite beings because He is infinite being itself; in the contemplation of His perfection He finds the exemplar and ideal of their essence . . . but the case is otherwise with the grace of divine filiation . . . the gratuitous communication of the divine nature to creatures. God's power to communicate His nature externally and to beget children by grace is conceived by us not on the ground of His *creative* power, but as correlative to the infinite *generative* power by which He communicates his nature substantially and begets a Son equal to Himself. Not God's creative power, but His generative power enables us to apprehend that the generation of adoptive children is possible *The doctrine of the generation of the Son of God from the Father provides us with the key to understanding our elevation to the status of children of God.* Nothing is truer than this; and we need feel no misgiving in maintaining that God has revealed the inner life of the Trinity for the very purpose of enlightening us concerning our supernatural relationship to Him.¹⁶

The Incarnation, according to Scheeben, prolongs the very procession of the Eternal Son; and the same is true of the sending of the Holy Spirit (which prolongs the spiration of the Spirit from the Father and the Son). The supernatural order of grace, therefore, brings man into the very Trinitarian heart of God. And so Scheeben writes:

The divine Trinity, consisting in the substantial communication of the divine nature to several persons, is the beginning, the middle, and the end of the supernatural economy of salvation. For this economy is based on the communication of the divine nature to man through the gift of grace. It consists in a union of man with God as his Father; and this is analogous with the union which the only-begotten Son of God has with the Father in the Holy Spirit. And it leads us back to the Trinity; for, as St. John tells us, it introduces us into a fellowship, a companionship with the Father and

16 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 141–144, emphasis added. Similarly, in *Nature and Grace*, he writes: "It [grace] requires a communication which, much more than creation, resembles that inconceivable, heavenly production and generation by which God the Father communicates His entire nature and essence to His only-begotten Son. . . . By the grace flooding his soul he becomes a son of the heavenly Father and a brother of the only-begotten Son, that, like the latter, he may embrace the Father with filial love, reposing with the Son on the heart of the Father . . ." (Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 102–103).

with the Son in the Holy Spirit (see I John 1:3), in which we love and glorify the divine Persons and share in their happiness.¹⁷

Elsewhere, he makes the same point without qualification, noting that the Incarnation is a “prolongation” of the Son’s eternal procession from the Father. Scheeben writes:

The mystery of the Godhead, the inner communication of the divine nature, prolongs and reproduces itself exteriorly. . . . Thus by a prolongation of His eternal procession from the Father, the Son of God goes forth from the Father and enters into the human race as a real member thereof. . . . Thus our participation in the divine nature and divine life becomes a reproduction of the fellowship in nature and life which the Son of God has with His Father.¹⁸

17 Scheeben, *Nature and Grace*, 339–340. In a different work, he likewise states: “If the internal divine relations and processes are externally imitated and reproduced by the communication of the divine nature to rational creatures . . . the Trinity is clearly the basis for the possibility, as well as the exemplar and goal of the supernatural order of grace as we actually find it among creatures. The very essence of the Trinity consists in the substantial communication of the divine nature from the Father to the other two divine persons. Hence the true meaning of the Trinity for creatures raised to the supernatural order must be apprehended in the fact that on its basis, according to its model, and for its glorification, a participation in the divine nature is gratuitously communicated to them. Consequently, the Trinity is the root from which arises the order of things called forth by this communication” (Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 141).

18 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 481. The result is that the gift of divine sonship approximates a state of “natural” sonship: “Our adoption is rooted in this procession for the very reason that it is rooted in the procession of the Son from the Father and in the Son’s relationship to the Father” (ibid., 143). The gift of the Holy Spirit is a “real prolongation of His eternal procession” (Scheeben, ibid., 386). Aidan Nichols comments on some of the sources of Scheeben’s thinking here: “In the Alexandrian theology, the descent of the Son of God through the acceptance of human nature has its counterpart in the exaltation of that humanity through sharing in the divine nature, such that the Incarnation brings about a supernatural *Gottesgemeinschaft* (‘community with God’) for humankind at large. Scheeben, who has in mind in particular Cyril’s great commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, is insistent that in no way can this doctrine be considered a local peculiarity of Lower Egypt. His favored Latin Father, Peter Chrysologus, teaches no differently in the Ravenna sermons which celebrate, in addresses to neophytes, the ‘lifting up of man to adoptive sonship in a wonderful sublimity which emulates the hypostatic union in Christ’” (Nichols, *Romance and System*, 82–83). Nichols’s quotation is from Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, III/IV, 314: “die Erhebung der Menschen zur Adoptivkindschaft Gottes an wunderbarer Erhabenheit wetteifere mit der hypostatischen Union in Christus.” Similarly, Scheeben writes: “The communication of divine life to the creature and to mankind is to be regarded as an extension and continuation of that communication of life which is transmitted from the Father to the Son in God” (Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 391–392). See also *Mysteries of Christianity*, 138–146, and *Nature and Grace*, 339–340. With remarkable daring, he writes further: “Every child

Hence, the gift of divine sonship entails a real ontological share in the filiation of the Eternal Son. Indeed, the grace of divine sonship, for Scheeben, is no mere metaphor. Rather, like the order of nature, the order of grace constitutes its own a metaphysical order of reality—wherein God becomes truly our Father in Christ, in a manner incomprehensible apart from the Incarnation:

Thus the Incarnation of the Son of God is the real basis for the divine adoption of the human race, and likewise conducts that adoption to a consummation that is unique in its sublimity. It is the bridge leading to the extension of the divine Trinitarian fatherhood to the race. This fatherhood is not merely imitated in God's relationship to man, out of sheer grace, but is joined to man substantially. . . . The Incarnation sets up a real *continuity* between the Trinitarian process and the human race, in order that this process may be prolonged in the race. *The Incarnation raises the human race to the bosom of the eternal Father that it may receive the grace of sonship* with all its implied dignities and rights by a real contact with the source, rather than by a purely gratuitous influx from without.¹⁹

For this reason, Scheeben is fond of describing man's natural state before God as that of a *creature* and *servant*;²⁰ whereas through grace, man becomes a true *son*: "through the grace of sanctity and deification, the creature becomes a child of God."²¹

that is born receives its nature from its father. Therefore, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity is called Son and the First is called Father, because the Latter has shared His own Divine Nature of being with the Former. . . . When through grace we receive a sharing of the Divine Nature and of the divine life, it is then true in a strict sense that we are born of God" (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 100).

19 Ibid., 384–385, emphasis added. In context, Scheeben's reference to "substantial" union (as opposed to "sheer grace") refers to the implications of the Incarnation, in contrast to the hypothetical gift of grace *without* the Incarnation. See Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 382.

20 "The creature stands to God in the position of a servant" (Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 245). Scheeben cites St. Irenaeus, who states: "The Word became man for this reason, that man, by accepting the Word and receiving the grace of sonship, might become the son of God" (*Against Heresies*, 3.2, cited in Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 380). He also cites from St. Cyril of Alexandria, who writes: "Through the Word, who joined human nature to Himself by means of the flesh united to Him, but who is by nature joined to the Father . . . *servitude is raised to sonship*, being summoned and elevated by its participation in the true Son to the dignity which pertains to Him by nature" (*Commentary on Gospel of John*, 1.9, cited in Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 380, emphasis added).

21 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 245–246. Likewise, he writes: "Through grace an entirely new world is opened to it [the soul], and an entirely different activity is made possible. Through it the spirit is made capable of knowing God Himself, not only in His

According to Scheeben, if God's only aim in the economy of salvation is to redress the disorder of sin, then the Incarnation becomes virtually incomprehensible; rather, as we have stated, the sending of the Son into time has, for Scheeben, a proportionate end in no less than bringing us into the inner heart of God, making us sons in the Son:

The personal sending of His Son has meaning only if God no longer wishes to treat us as His thralls and servants, only if He wishes to speak to us with the greatest familiarity, in most tender intimacy, as His friends and children, and to elevate us to the dignity of His friends and children.²²

Familial "Equality" with God

For Scheeben, this order of supernatural grace has such an ontological density that he goes on to speak of a certain "equality" between man and God: "Grace gives us, not only the freedom necessary for true friendship with God, but also the other condition of friendship, *equality*."²³ While such "equality" between man and God could never be the case, strictly speaking, nonetheless—provided we recognize that our sonship is always participatory by grace—Scheeben means what he says. As an analogy, the moon *participates* in the light of the sun (by reflecting its light); that is, the moon does not have its own source of light. Similarly, we are never the source of our "equality" with God or of our own divine sonship. That said, Scheeben uses such provocative language in order to emphasize the realism of grace and the realism of this new relationship with God. For Scheeben, grace is not merely divine "favor," but has a real metaphysical and transformative bearing upon us.

Thus, for Scheeben, mystical and mysterious as it may sound, this divine sonship is no mere figure of speech or exaggerated hyperbole. Rather, this supernatural elevation and transformation is simply the outworking of the majestic grace of the Incarnation:

By reason of nature, God loves us as His creatures and servants. But the distance between Him and us is infinite and is therefore too great to allow us to be called His true friends. Consequently, it is understandable that the pagan philosophers said that a true friendship between God and

external works, but in His infinite holiness . . . *in His own inner life*. By grace the soul is put in position to love God and to deal with Him, not only as the creature with the Creator . . . *but as the child with its father*" (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 86, emphasis added).

22 Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 341.

23 Ibid., 116, emphasis original.

man is impossible. Only grace raises man to such a high degree of similarity—even to a certain equality with God—that the distance between God and man is spanned, and friendship between them no longer appears unbecoming.²⁴

Scheeben so exalts man's graced status before God that man can now lay claim to certain "rights" before God. Though this language is provocative, his purpose is simply to accentuate the full reality of this graced sonship. Consider for example, the natural begetting of a child: the child does nothing to bring himself into existence, since his natural begetting is pure gift; but once in existence certain proprieties do follow, and to a large extent as a matter of justice—a familial justice, as it were. For Scheeben, then, if the reality of grace is as real as he describes, the same is true of man's supernatural begetting before God: while utterly gratuitous, his graced sonship brings about a new filial relationship with God, one in which certain "rights" or proprieties do follow. Scheeben states:

The divine dignity which falls to man's portion by his incorporation in Christ, gives him a *right* to deification, that is, to divine transfiguration of his nature that corresponds to this dignity. . . . The natural consequence of the Incarnation is to confer on men the *right* and power to become children of God.²⁵

In fact, because of Christ, our graced sonship is no longer merely "adoptive." Though our sonship could never equal that of Christ (since ours is always a graced participation in what Christ has by nature), still, the language

24 Ibid., 116, emphasis added. Similarly: "Thus we belong to God's kind [by grace] in the same manner as the palm tree belongs to the class of plants, and the lion to that of animals" (ibid., 21). He also writes: "Insofar as grace implies divine sonship, it raises us high above the state of servitude. It removes the condition of estrangement, the relation of slavery and the immeasurable inequality that exists between God and us by nature, and places us in a condition of freedom as members of God's family, and thus gives us a certain equality with God" (ibid., 114), emphasis added.

25 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 378, emphasis added. Similarly: "If, then, the human race . . . becomes the body of Christ, and its members become the members of God's Son, if the divine person of the Son of God bears them in Himself as His own, then, with due proportion, *must not the divine dignity of the Son of God flow over to men, since they are His members? Must not God the Father extend to these members the same love as that which He bears for His natural Son, must He not embrace them in His Son with one and the same love, inasmuch as they belong to Him?*" (ibid., 377–378, emphasis added). See also: "Since grace makes us partakers of the Divine Nature, we are taken into the very family of God. God becomes our Father, His only-begotten Son our brother, and we ourselves children of God" (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 91).

of “adoption” is not strong enough for Scheeben to describe the full reality of this grace:

Because of Christ this sonship is no longer a mere adoptive sonship, since we receive it not as strangers, but as kinsfolk, as members of the only-begotten Son, and can lay claim to it as a right. The grace of sonship in us has something of the natural sonship of Christ Himself, from which it is derived. *Because we are not mere adoptive children; because we are members of the natural Son, we truly enter into the personal relationship in which the Son of God stands to His Father.* In literal truth, and not by simple analogy or resemblance, we call the Father of the Word our Father, and in actual fact He is such not by purely analogous relationship, *but by the very same relationship which makes Him the Father of Christ.* He is our Father in somewhat the same way He is Father to the God-man in His humanity by the same relationship whereby He is Father of the eternal Word.²⁶

Now we turn directly to Scheeben’s use of St. Paul—both with respect to the gift of the Spirit (and its relationship to our sonship in Christ) and to the cosmic significance of Christ for all of creation, as found in St. Paul’s Letter to the Colossians.

26 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 383, emphasis added. He writes: “As children of God, we have a far more intimate relation with God than adopted children have to their father. We are children of God, not only because we have been accepted and considered as children, but also because He shares His Divine Nature and life with us and because He fills and enlivens us with His own Spirit. We are His *heirs* and we have a *right* to the inheritance. This *right* is based on our [re-] birth” (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 100–101, emphases added). Scheeben writes: “The grace of divine sonship [makes us] children of God . . . brothers of Christ” (Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, VIII, 39, 33 respectively: “die Gnade der Kindschaft” and “Kindes Gottes und Mitbruders Christi”). Supernatural grace transforms the creature into child, bride, and friend of God: “kindliche, bräutliche oder freundschaftliche” (ibid., III/IV, 376). Also: “For by reason of Sanctifying Grace, which makes us partakers of the Divine Nature, we are true sons of God, and the works that we perform in virtue of this grace are divine, heavenly works. Thus, we stand in a relation of equality to heavenly glory, and when God actually promises this to us, He promises it as an *inheritance* and as a reward that is not above the dignity of our person and the value of our works” (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 236–237, emphasis added).

Part II: St. Paul on the Gift of the Spirit and the Cosmic Significance of Christ

Gift of the Spirit as the Seal of our Divine Sonship

In Sacred Scripture, the grace of divine sonship is connected with the gift of the Spirit, as in St. Paul's Letter to the Romans:

For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of *sonship*. When we cry, "Abba! Father!" it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God, *and if children, then heirs*, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him (Rom. 8:14–17).²⁷

The New Testament speaks of the Holy Spirit as the seal of man's divine sonship: "In him . . . [we] were sealed [ἐσφραγίσθητε] with the promise of the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13),"—a seal that is the "guarantee of our inheritance" (Eph. 1:14). In this light, Scheeben sees the indwelling of the Spirit as the "constitutive" element of man's graced sonship:

The indwelling of the Holy Spirit [is] absolutely the most important constitutive moment of sonship with God in this sense: that therein is contained a partaking in the substance of the divine nature, a substantial fellowship and unity in connection with God. In this indwelling, the Spirit of God . . . appears in a certain sense as a "form informing the soul" . . . and as a result, in the adoptive children of God the fellowship of dignity and of life with God is established in a way analogous to the natural son of God.²⁸

27 Emphases added. Scheeben himself makes this connection by alluding to this passage: "We are through grace children of God, consequently His heirs and co-heirs with Christ" (Scheeben, *Glories of Divine Grace*, 148). At the conclusion of *Gaudium et Spes* 22, we likewise have an allusion to this passage in Rom. 8:15, referencing the gift of divine sonship: "Christ has risen again, destroying death by his death, and has given life abundantly to us so that, *becoming sons in the Son*, we may cry out in the Spirit: *Abba, Father!*" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22, emphasis added).

28 Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, III/IV, 398: "Sie betrachtet die Einwohnung des Heiligen Geistes geradezu als das wichtigste konstitutive Moment der Kindschaft Gottes in dem Sinne, daß darin eine Teilnahme an der Substanz der göttlichen Natur, eine substanzielle Gemeinschaft und Einheit resp. Zusammenhang mit Gott enthalten ist, worin der Geist Gottes seiner Substanz nach in gewissem Sinne eine forma informans animam und eine forma constitutens esse divinum erscheint und wodurch in

The Spirit's indwelling leads Scheeben to declare that this grace of divine sonship is so mysterious and profound that it actually "interlaces" between "adoptive" and "natural" sonship:

[The Holy Spirit] seals the relationship in which we stand to the Father not only alongside the only-begotten Son, but in Him as one Christ. Here He is given to us . . . as the pledge of the fatherly love with which the Father loves us in His only-begotten as His members, and as the pledge of the Son's love for the Father, which love the Son offers to the Father in behalf of us too, since we are His members. Hence the relationship whereby the Holy Spirit dwells in us as the *Spiritus Christi* is a hypostatic relationship through and through. . . . Moreover, it is the foundation and the crown of the divine sonship contained in grace itself: the foundation because our right to the pledge of God's fatherly love must draw down upon us the effects of that love; and the crown, *because it so closely interlaces the adoptive sonship with natural sonship*.²⁹

For Scheeben, the Holy Spirit is the culmination of the Trinity—the culmination of the processions within God—from the Father to the Son, and then from the Father and the Son to the Holy Spirit.³⁰ The Son stands, as it

den Adoptivkindern Gottes die Gemeinschaft der Würde und des Lebens mit Gott in analoger Weise begründet wird wie im natürlichen Sohne Gottes." Similarly, Scheeben writes: "It is, as Thomas and Bonaventure say, not merely a love freely giving, but also a love freely accepting, as a result of which the creature is so blessed by God and favored by God, that it is received into the deepest friendship, adopted to childhood, and chosen unto bridehood. And this love especially goes by the name of *gratia Spiritus Sancti* (grace of the Holy Spirit) because in it God spreads out his love over the creature, with which he embraces his only begotten Son and out of which the Holy Spirit proceeds, and through it his own life is poured out on the creature" (Scheeben, *Handbuch der Katholischen Dogmatik*, III/IV, 276: "sie ist, wie Thom. und Bonav. sagen, nicht bloß ein amor liberaliter *donans*, sondern auch liberaliter *acceptans*, wodurch die Kreatur so von Gott begünstigt und zum Günstlinge Gottes gemacht wird, daß sie zur innigsten Freundschaft aufgenommen, zu Kindschaft adoptiert und zur Brautschaft auserwählt wird. Und diese Liebe führt auch ganz besonders den Namen *gratia Spiritus Sancti*, Gnade des Heiligen Geistes, weil in ihr Gott diejenige Liebe über die Kreatur ausbreitet, mit welcher er seinen eingeborenen Sohn umfaßt und aus welcher der Heilige Geist hervorgeht, und durch sie sein eigenes Leben, dessen Odem der Heilige Geist ist, in die Kreatur ausgießt"). Scheeben writes: "For we are made like the natural Son of God not only because we are conformable to Him, but most of all because we personally possess within ourselves the very same Spirit that He possesses" (Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 169).

29 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 385, emphasis added.

30 Ibid., 111–112, 393.

were, in the “middle” of the Trinity,³¹ and so in the sending of the Son in the Incarnation, it is the Holy Spirit that completes our sonship in Christ, a point that Scheeben sees in Romans 8:15:

For we are made like the natural Son of God not only because we are conformable to Him, but most of all because we personally possess within ourselves the very same Spirit that He possess; and our union with the heavenly Father is so glorious because of the fact that He has incorporated His own Spirit in us. This is why the Apostle calls the Holy Spirit the “Spirit of adoption of sons, whereby we cry Abba (Father)” [Rom. 8:15], i.e., the Spirit by whom our adoption is effected, and by whom the relation of sonship evoked by this adoption is constituted or, better, sealed.³²

In Christ—in the supernatural economy rooted in the work of the Son and the sending of the Spirit—God the Father looks down upon us and loves us *as He loves His Only-Begotten Son*; we are loved *in* the Son and have been conformed to him. In Scheeben’s treatment, one can readily hear the echoes of Romans 8, especially verse 29:

In Christ and on account of Christ, God has extended to us the fatherly love He bore toward Christ as His Son and has made us *coheirs* with Christ. Through this love God has destined us for a supernatural end. . . . He has loved us all in His Son, and has predestined us to be *made conformable to the image of His Son*.³³

31 Ibid., 116: “He [the Son] is the product of the Father and principle of the Holy Spirit. As such He occupies a central position, and is thus a link which joins the other persons in Himself to form a golden chain. His procession from the Father is the essential prerequisite, as it were the point of intersection, for the procession of the Holy Spirit, so much so that the latter’s relationship to the Father cannot even be conceived without the Son. The union of the Holy Spirit with the Father, like His distinction from the Father, is conceivable only in the Son and through the Son.”

32 Ibid., 169. He continues with reference to Gal. 4:6: “For in another passage the same Apostle says: ‘Because you are sons, God hath sent the Spirit of His Son into your hearts, crying: Abba, Father’” (ibid.). And finally: “The indwelling of the Holy Spirit seals the relation of adoptive sonship in us much as His procession from the Father and the Son crowns and completes the relation of the natural sonship” (ibid.).

33 Ibid., 709, emphasis added.

Cosmic Significance of Christ in Colossians 1:15–20

In Colossians 1:15–20, we find St. Paul's teaching that all of creation is ordered to Christ—that in Christ all of creation holds together and finds its reason for being:

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation; *for in him all things were created*, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or authorities—all things were created *through him and for him*. He is before all things and *in him all things hold together*. He is the head of the body, the Church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross (Col. 1:15–20).³⁴

For Scheeben, the “double significance” of God's going out of himself in the missions of the Son and the Spirit are (1) the “communication of the divine nature” and (2) the “resulting infinite glorification of God.”³⁵ On Scheeben's account, God acts outside of himself in order to communicate his divine nature to creatures and to glorify himself in and through creatures. Now of course, God has nothing to “gain” by “glorifying himself” through creatures. But by this very means, the elevation and glory of the creature comes about—enabling the creature to participate in the infinite glory of God. Scheeben explains:

In all God's external works utility comes to the creature, glory to God. Utility to the creature and glory to God go hand in hand. The utility to the creature is greater the more God communicates Himself to him; but the more God communicates Himself, the more He manifests and therefore glorifies Himself. The higher He elevates the creature, the higher He thereby elevates Himself, not by any augmentation, but by the unfolding of His greatness.³⁶

34 See also Eph. 1:9–10: “For he made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.”

35 Scheeben, *Mysteries of Christianity*, 361.

36 Ibid., 130. Scheeben writes further: “The infinite communication and self—glorification of God in the Trinity are continued and prolonged in the Incarnation and are effected not only in the God-man but also in His entire mystical body” (ibid., 398).

That is, the glory of God is not “augmented” by virtue of his external glorification in creatures; rather, the infinite glory that he always had is simply unveiled and manifested in a fuller way. And it is the height of the creature’s glory to participate in this manifestation.

The significance, for Scheeben, of God becoming man in Christ is that man is the microcosm of all creation; that is, man embodies the two great realms in himself, the material and the spiritual, both the angelic realm and the material universe.³⁷ Accordingly, if God is to communicate his divine nature to all of creation, he can do so by summing up all of creation in and through mankind, as he has done in the Incarnation. Scheeben writes:

The mysterious import of the Incarnation comes to this, that the God-man, as the Christ par excellence, and as the noble head primarily of the microcosm which is mankind, and thereby also the macrocosm which is the universe, realizes the highest aim and the most sublime idea that God can have in His external works. This is the idea of the highest and most comprehensive communication of Himself to creatures, and the idea of the highest and most extensive glorification of Himself through creatures.³⁸

By joining himself to a human nature, the Son gathers up all creation in himself—glorifying God through all of creation (including the angels). This enables finite creation to glorify God *infinitely*. In the following, Scheeben makes explicit his reliance on the Colossians hymn we are discussing:

The fact that the God-man is the head of mankind makes Him directly the head of material nature, whose natural head is man. At the same time He becomes the head of angels, since in His divine dignity He towers infinitely above them. . . . He is “head of all principality and power” [Col. 2:10]. “The first-born of every creature” [Col. 1:15] unites in Himself and around Himself the whole of creation in one mystical body. . . . As God, He is before all things, and all things hold together in Him, inasmuch as He, the Word of the power of God, upholds all things, and hence, according

37 Ibid., 401.

38 Scheeben, *ibid.*, 404. For this reason, Scheeben finds plenty of motivation on God’s part for the Incarnation, even apart from sin: “Hence we must categorically reject as untenable the opinion that the Incarnation would have been unworthy of God apart from the anguish of mankind that resulted from the Fall, and that God could not have been induced to effect it unless He had been, as it were, forced thereto by man’s distress” (*ibid.*, 422–423).

to the Apostle, in His humanity He is the head of His body, the Church.³⁹

Indeed, for Scheeben, through the Incarnation, all of created nature is drawn up into Trinitarian life:

The God-man, in whom are focused the rays of the Trinitarian process in its external unfolding, necessarily becomes a sun for the entire world, a sun which draws all creatures to itself . . . in order to confer the riches of the Trinitarian communications upon the whole world, and there also to admit the world to participation in the Trinitarian unity. The God-man is associated with all creatures into whose society He has entered, and must on His part catch up all creatures into the mystery of the divine Trinity and Triunity.⁴⁰

Conclusion and Implications

As we have seen, the mystery of God's pouring forth outside himself is about much more than simply dealing with the problem of sin, as important as that is. God acts outside himself to communicate the divine nature to creatures and to glorify himself through creatures.

The communication of the divine nature begins in God himself in the internal processions of the Trinity; this communication of the divine nature continues *ad extra* through the Incarnation and the sending of the Spirit. In his analysis, Scheeben exquisitely portrays the utter munificence of God—the absolute gratuity of salvation. Here he sums up his thought, echoing the patristic and Pauline fonts from which he draws:

In general the Fathers regard the elevation of man to divine dignity and glory as the counterweight corresponding to the infinite condescension of God, and hence as an objective worthy of the latter. As a rule they express this by saying that the Son of God has become the Son of man in order to make the children of men children of God; and

39 Ibid., 401. Scheeben writes: "Consequently, in His person He raises the world up to closest proximity, the most intimate union, with the eternal Father; on the other hand, the union which He has with the Father, He extends outside of God, and conveys to the entire world" (ibid., 406).

40 Scheeben, ibid., 364. Alluding directly to Col. 1:15, Scheeben writes, "For this reason, He is called the first-born of all creatures and the head of the heavenly powers, which in itself makes Him immensely superior to Adam, who is merely the head of the human race" (ibid.).

that the natural consequence of the Incarnation is to confer on men the right and power to become children of God. Sacred Scripture had pointed out this truth to them in explicit words. "God sent His Son, made of a woman," the Apostle said, "that we might receive the adoption of sons" [Gal. 4:6].⁴¹

While this volume of Letter & Spirit is devoted to the reception history of St. Paul, it is worth noting that Scheeben sees the same reality taught in the Gospel of John (supplemented again by the Fathers)—whereby we are transformed from mere creatures and servants to sons and daughters of God:

[T]he disciple who more than any other had been initiated into the secrets of the God-man [St. John], emphasizes as its chief effect that the Logos, in coming unto His own, gave to all who received Him the power to be made the sons of God [John 1:12]. Thus in his day Irenaeus could teach: "The Word became man for this reason, that man by accepting the Word and receiving the grace of sonship might become the son of God. . . . St. Cyril of Alexandria explains in ample detail: "Through the Word, who joined human nature to Himself . . . but who is by nature joined to the Father . . . servitude is raised to sonship."⁴²

The utter gratuity of salvation in Scheeben's account strikes an ecumenical chord: with the Protestant Reformers, Scheeben can unabashedly acknowledge that there is nothing man can ever do to "earn" salvation; that is, moral perfection could not earn one drop of the grace of this divine sonship, so understood.

But this radical gift of divine sonship entails an ontological transformation of our very being from the inside out.⁴³ Indeed, for Scheeben, one can rightly say that the mystery of Christianity boils down to this: for the Holy Spirit to reproduce and recapitulate the entire Paschal Mystery in and

41 Scheeben, *ibid.*, 380.

42 *Ibid.*

43 "The infusion of supernatural justice . . . produces in the sinner something more than another moral relation to God. It produces a new, ontological quality, which inheres in his soul not only morally but physically" (Scheeben, *ibid.*, 617). And further: "Christian justification cannot be understood unless we realize that its term is more than just a supernatural justice, that of God's adopted children. We must associate with this a copossession of the personal justice and sanctity of Christ, the natural Son of God made man, and of the Spirit who proceeds from Him" (*ibid.*, 628).

through each and every one of us—bringing about a sanctification that is ultimately God’s work in us.

The primary analogue for salvation, then, is not so much juridical as it is familial. It is a new begetting unto supernatural life—a share in the Son’s eternal begetting from the Father. And in this, God becomes truly our “Father.” Indeed, God’s fatherhood is seldom referenced in the Old Testament (though we do find it with respect to the nation of Israel [see, for example, Exod. 4:22] and connected with the Davidic King [see, for example, 2 Sam. 7:14]). But in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus refers to God as “Father” seventeen times—in just three chapters! Based on Scheeben’s analysis, we could rightly say that God’s Fatherhood in the Old Testament is more metaphorical. God becomes truly and really our Father only in Christ—whereby the Eternal Son has entered time and has extended his relation of Sonship to us. This is part and parcel of what the New Covenant—the “hypostatic” order accomplished by the Son and the Spirit—is all about.

This new supernatural begetting incorporates us into the very life of the Son, such that what the Son has eternally by nature, we receive by grace.

And provided that we remember that our sonship is always *participatory*—sharing in what is not ours by nature—Scheeben has no qualms about exalting the majestic and divine work that God has wrought in us: we have become really and truly (and not merely metaphorically) children of God. To say anything less is to fail to acknowledge the true splendor and munificence of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Jesus did not merely “die for our sins.” He united himself in solidarity with us—not just to atone for our sins—but to infuse His very life in us, enabling us to be “conformed to the image of the Son,” so that he would become “the firstborn among many brethren” (Rom. 8:29).⁴⁴

For Scheeben, this is the view taught by St. Paul and the Church Fathers. We have received the “spirit of sonship” (Rom. 8:15)—and have become nothing short of “heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ” (Rom. 8:17).

44 See the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nos. 457–460, which proposes four reasons for the Incarnation: (1) in order to reconcile us back to God (that is, atone for sin); (2) that we might know God’s love; (3) to be a model of holiness; and (4) to make us “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). CCC 460 goes on to cite three very powerful quotes from Saints Irenaeus, Athanasius, and Thomas Aquinas regarding the sublimity of our divinization/deification in Christ.