

Simul viator et comprehensor:
The Filial Mode of Christ's Knowledge

NICHOLAS J. HEALY, JR.

*John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family
Washington, DC*

IN THE prologue to his treatise *Contra errores Graecorum*, Thomas Aquinas writes, “[T]here are some things in the sayings of the ancient saints which seem doubtful to moderns [*modernis*].”¹ He gives two reasons for these questionable statements. First, the emergence of new errors with regard to the faith requires Catholic theologians to speak with greater circumspection. Secondly, many things which sound right in the Greek language often do not sound right in Latin, since the Latins and the Greeks confess the same truth with different words. Responding to these difficulties, St. Thomas offers an important principle for interpreting theological texts. He writes, “If certain points in the statements of the ancient fathers seem incautious, their statements are not to be ridiculed or rejected; on the other hand neither are they to be overextended. One ought rather to interpret them reverently [*exponere reverente*].”² The reason for this reverence is not simply filial piety toward the fathers of the Church; it is grounded in something deeper and more objective; namely, the common faith that we confess.³

¹ Aquinas, *Contra errores Graecorum*, prol.

² Ibid.

³ In the twentieth century, Henri de Lubac rediscovered the central importance and fruitfulness of this principle of theological interpretation. The task of understanding and making known the “deep and permanent unity of faith” across the tradition is, he suggests, the unifying concern of his writings: “Without claiming to open up new avenues of thought, I have sought . . . to make known some of the great common areas of Catholic tradition. I wanted to make it loved, to show its ever-present fruitfulness. Such a task called more for a reading across the centuries than for a critical application to specific points; it excluded any overly

There is a teaching common to the medieval saints that has become doubtful to many, if not most, modern theologians. I am referring to the idea that the earthly Jesus possessed an immediate, or face-to-face, vision of God—the same vision which constitutes the blessed state of the saints in heaven. In the third part of his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas attributes a threefold human knowledge to the Incarnate Son.⁴ Through his beatific knowledge, the human soul of Christ, from the first moment of his conception, sees the divine essence and knows in the Word everything that has ever existed or that will exist in the future. In addition, Christ possessed infused knowledge—a prophetic knowledge arising from “the Word of God imprinting upon the soul of Christ, which is personally united to Him, the intelligible species of things” thus allowing his human soul to “know things in their proper nature by intelligible species proportioned to the human mind.”⁵ Finally, reversing his earlier view, Aquinas teaches in the *Summa* that Christ possessed “acquired knowledge,” or knowledge caused by the natural operation of the active intellect. “By this knowledge Christ did not know everything from the beginning, but step by step . . . and this is plain from what the Evangelist says, viz. that He increased in knowledge and age together.”⁶

preferential attachment to one school, system, or definite age; it demanded more attention to the deep and permanent unity of the faith, to the mysterious relationship (which escapes so many specialized scholars) of all those who invoke the name of Christ. . . . So I have never been tempted by any kind of ‘return to the sources’ that would scorn later developments and represent the history of Christian thought as a stream of decadences; the Latins have not pushed aside the Greeks for me; nor has Saint Augustine diverted me from Saint Anselm or Saint Thomas Aquinas; nor has the latter ever seemed to me either to make the twelve centuries that preceded him useless or to condemn his disciples to a failure to see and understand fully what has followed him. . . . What I have more than once regretted in highly regarded theologians, experienced guardians, was less, as others made it out, their lack of openness to the problems and currents of contemporary thought than their lack of a truly traditional mind (the two things are, moreover, connected)” (*At the Service of the Church* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993], 143–45).

⁴ ST III, q. 9, aa 1–4. For recent interpretations of St. Thomas Aquinas’s treatment of Christ’s knowledge, see Jean Miguel Garrigues, “La conscience de soi telle qu’elle était exercée par le Fils de Dieu fait homme,” *Nova et Vetera* (French edition) 79 (2004): 39–51; Matthew Levering, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation According to Thomas Aquinas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002); Romanus Cessario, “Incarnate Wisdom and the Immediacy of Christ’s Salvific Knowledge,” in *Problemi teologici alla luce dell’Aquinato, Studi Tomistici* 44:5 (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1991); Guy Mansini, “Understanding St. Thomas on Christ’s Immediate Knowledge of God,” *Thomist* 59 (1995): 91–124.

⁵ ST III, q. 9, a. 3.

⁶ ST III, q. 12, a. 2, ad 2.

The principal reason why St. Thomas ascribes beatific knowledge to Christ is that human beings are brought to their final end of beatitude by the humanity of Christ. Hence, he argues, "it was necessary that beatific knowledge, which consists in the vision of God, should belong to Christ pre-eminently, since the cause ought always to be more efficacious than the effect."⁷ Far from denigrating or overlooking the true humanity of Christ, Aquinas' ascription of beatific knowledge is premised on the soteriological importance of Christ's humanity.

This traditional teaching regarding Jesus' immediate or beatific knowledge of God has been a flashpoint for several controversies within Catholic theology at least since the late 1930s, when Paul Galtier published a book on the unity of Christ.⁸ First and foremost, the question of Christ's knowledge brought into focus a divide or chasm separating exegetes (especially practitioners of historical critical exegesis) and dogmatic theologians.⁹ Both Raymond Brown and Karl Rahner called attention to this chasm, sometimes described as a contrast between a "Christology from below" versus a "Christology from above."¹⁰

⁷ ST III, q. 9, a. 2.

⁸ Paul Galtier, *L'Unité du Christ* (Paris: G. Beauchesne, 1939).

⁹ See especially the collection of essays edited by H. Vorgrimler, *Exegese und Dogmatik* (Mainz: Grünewald, 1962). For a survey of more recent literature, see Pablo T. Gadenz, "Overcoming the Hiatus Between Exegesis and Theology: Guidance and Examples From Pope Benedict XVI," www.stthomas.edu/spssod/pdf/quinn/Gadenz_Overcoming_th.pdf.

¹⁰ In an influential essay written in 1962 Rahner sought to bridge this chasm by shifting the terms of the discussion to a consideration of Christ's consciousness. Karl Rahner, "Dogmatic Reflections on the Knowledge and Self-Consciousness of Christ," *Theological Investigations V* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966), 193–215. In *Jesus, God and Man: Modern Biblical Reflections* (New York: Macmillan Publishing, 1967), Raymond Brown presents "the contribution that the biblical evidence makes toward our understanding of Jesus' humanity." In a chapter titled "How Much Did Jesus Know?" Brown advances his own tentative conclusions: "To sum up, the way in which Jesus speaks of God as Father certainly indicates that he claimed a special relationship to God. But it remains difficult to find in the Synoptic account of the public ministry any incontrovertible proof that he claimed a unique sonship that other men could not share. . . . Jesus had a human soul and thus a human intellect. Can theology admit that this intellect was also a *tabula rasa*, activated not by infused knowledge but by human experiences, as are other men's intellects? In this case it would have taken Jesus time to formulate concepts. . . . One would then be able to say that his knowledge was limited, but such limitation would not at all exclude an intuitive consciousness of a unique relationship to God and of a unique mission to men" (91–95).

The crucial question raised by Brown's minimalist position has been admirably formulated by Christoph Schönborn: "It is not irrelevant whether Jesus knew why he was dying. In what sense should we take Paul's statement,

Secondly, the question of Christ's beatific knowledge ignited a discussion within dogmatic theology regarding the mystery of the hypostatic union and the psychology of Jesus Christ, true God and true Man. Particularly in Germany, the 1500th anniversary of the Council of Chalcedon provided an occasion for reflection and debate on the ontological structure of Christ's divine and human consciousness.¹¹ In France, Jean Galot penned a series of books and articles that articulated a foundational criticism of the traditional view that Christ possessed the beatific vision.¹²

The debate concerning Christ's human knowledge has continued to generate interest as witnessed by the International Theological Commission's 1985 document on this theme and the recent exchange between Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. and Thomas Joseph White, O.P.¹³ In the words of the Theological Commission, "the Church attaches maximum importance to the problem of the awareness and human knowledge of Jesus. We are dealing . . . with the very foundation of the method and mission of the Church in all its intimacy."¹⁴ As Aquinas correctly discerned,

which obviously had great existential importance for him: 'He loved me and gave himself for me' (Gal 2:20)? Paul, and the primitive Church before him, believed Jesus' mission to be of universal significance and breadth. How far can we—must we, may we—assume a thematic consciousness of this breadth? What does 'pro me' or 'pro nobis' mean? The great figures in the history of salvation, from Paul to Thérèse of Lisieux (d. 1897), have understood this 'pro me' in such a concrete sense that they lived from a sure faith that Jesus 'loved me and gave himself up for me.' 'When he was dying,' Jesus must 'have known, in a mysterious but real way for whom he was giving up his life; otherwise it is not he who saves us, and his death remains an external event in relation to us [citing J. Guillet]' " (*God Sent His Son: A Contemporary Christology*, trans. Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010], 175–76).

¹¹ Cf. *Das Konzil von Chalkedon: Geschichte und Gegenwart*, 3 vols., ed. A. Grillmeier and H. Bacht (Würzburg: Echter-Verlag, 1951–54); Engelbert Gutwenger, *Bewußtsein und Wissen Christi* (Innsbruck: Rauch, 1960); Helmut Riedlinger, *Geschichtlichkeit und Vollendung des Wissens Christi*, *Quaestiones Disputatae* 32 (Freiburg: Herder, 1966).

¹² Cf. Jean Galot, *La conscience de Jésus* (Paris: Duculot-Lethielleux, 1971); *Vers une nouvelle christologie* (Paris: Duculot-Lethielleux, 1971); *Who is Christ? A Theology of the Incarnation*, trans. M. Angeline Bouchard (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1981); "Le Christ terrestre et la vision," *Gregorianum* 67 (1986): 429–50.

¹³ In chronological order: Weinandy, "Jesus' Filial Vision of the Father," *Pro Ecclesia* 13 (2004): 189–201; White, "The Voluntary Action of the Earthly Christ and the Necessity of the Beatific Vision," *Thomist* 69 (2005): 497–534; Weinandy, "The Beatific Vision and the Incarnate Son: Furthering the Discussion," *Thomist* 70 (2006): 605–15; and White, "Dyothelitism and the Instrumental Human Consciousness of Jesus," *Pro Ecclesia* 17 (2008): 396–422.

¹⁴ "The Consciousness of Christ Concerning Himself and His Mission," in *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents 1969–1985*, ed. M. Sharkey (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989).

the question of Jesus' human knowledge is eminently soteriological. What would Jesus' death and Resurrection mean if he did not know for whom he was giving up his life? Our hope for eternal salvation hinges on our being able to confess with Paul that "the Son of God loved me and gave himself up for me" (Gal 2:20).

My aim in what follows is to consider some of the recent objections raised against the idea that Christ possessed the beatific vision and then to suggest a line of reflection that responds to these difficulties. Accordingly, Part I will introduce the current state of the question by considering two objections to the traditional view as represented by Thomas Aquinas. Parts II and III will sketch an initial response to these difficulties by way of reflecting on the filial mode of Christ's human knowledge. The core thesis I want to defend is that the earthly Jesus possessed the beatific vision, but that the nature of this vision or knowledge cannot be determined simply on the basis of general considerations about knowledge pursued apart from meditation on Christ's filial communion with the Father in the Holy Spirit. The point is not that the metaphysics of knowing is irrelevant, but that what it means to know and to be known by God is supremely revealed in Christ's life-giving death and Resurrection.

I. Two Objections to Christ's Beatific Knowledge

The first objection is the most widespread. It is rooted in an assumption that the true humanity of Jesus Christ precludes beatific knowledge. A few citations will serve to illustrate the logic of this objection, which often functions more like an atmosphere rather than an argued position. The French theologian Jean Galot writes, "[A] Jesus whose soul would have been continually immersed in the beatific vision would have only assumed the exterior appearances of our human life . . . His resemblance to us would only have been a facade."¹⁵ Wolfhart Pannenberg concurs: "[T]o attribute to the soul of Jesus a knowledge of all things, past, present, and future, and of everything that God knows from the very beginning, in the sense of supernatural vision, makes the danger more than considerable that the genuine humanity of Jesus' experiential life would be lost."¹⁶

In the eyes of these authors (and many more examples could be cited), the condescension of the Incarnation involves the acceptance of the limits of the human condition. Human consciousness is always situated in a particular historical and cultural setting. The claim that Jesus knew everything that has ever existed from the first moment of his conception seems to make of

¹⁵ Galot, "Le Christ terrestre et la vision," 434.

¹⁶ Pannenberg, *Jesus—God and Man* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), 329.

Jesus a superman standing outside of history. Did Jesus have nothing to learn from Mary about the faith and the prayers and the hope of Israel?¹⁷

This concern for the true humanity of Christ finds support in a number of passages in the New Testament. Not only did Jesus, in the words of Luke's Gospel, "increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man" (Lk 2:52), but Jesus seemed to be ignorant of certain things. According to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, the Incarnate Son had to "inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience. This corresponded to the reality of his voluntary emptying of himself, taking 'the form of the slave.'" ¹⁸ In this context the *Catechism* cites Mark 6:38, where Jesus asks his disciples, "How many loaves have you? Go and see." And John 11:34, where Jesus, referring to Lazarus, asks, "Where have you laid him?" We could add the scene recounted in Mark's Gospel where Jesus asks the woman who was healed by touching his clothing, "Who touched my garments?" (5:30).

Finally, there is the celebrated text of Mark 13:32, "But of that day or that hour no one knows, not even the Son, but only the Father." It is significant that both Irenaeus and Origen had no difficulty ascribing ignorance to the incarnate Son. Irenaeus took this to be the plain meaning of this passage from Mark's Gospel.¹⁹ In the wake of Arian theologians casting doubt upon Jesus' divinity by emphasizing especially the imperfection of his knowledge, it became extremely difficult for subsequent authors to admit any ignorance or growth in knowledge on the part of Jesus. This statement that not even the Son knows the hour was commonly interpreted to the effect that Jesus did, in fact, know the hour, but he did not wish to reveal it. Even as careful and sympathetic a reader of patristic theology as Christoph Schönborn suggests that "this attempt by most Church fathers to gloss over the ignorance of Jesus is unsatisfactory."²⁰

¹⁷ In *ST* III, q. 12, a. 3, Thomas Aquinas explicitly rejects the possibility that Christ "learned from other human beings," arguing that "it did not befit his dignity that he should be taught by any man." There are many reasons why this teaching of Aquinas cannot represent the last word on the subject, the most important being that it is difficult to reconcile with an adequate understanding of Mary's mediation (both at the natural level and in terms of introducing Jesus to the faith and prayer of the Jewish people). Developing an insight of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Christoph Schönborn argues that "[h]uman self-awareness is inconceivable without relationships with others. . . . Openness to and dependence on others are an essential part of human self-awareness: first of all, to the mother, the first person to whom one relates. . . . [W]e may and must assume that Jesus came to know himself through others, and, like any child, especially through his mother" (*God Sent His Son*, 188).

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 472.

¹⁹ Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, II, 28; cf. Origen, in *Matth.* PG 13, col. 1686f.

²⁰ Schönborn, *God Sent His Son*, 167.

In summary, the true and unabridged humanity of Christ, confirmed by the Council of Chalcedon and clearly evidenced throughout the New Testament, involves a voluntary accepting of the limits of the human condition in time. The truth of the Incarnation seems to be at odds with the idea that the earthly Jesus had an immediate vision of God and knew everything in the Word.

The second objection, which is closely related to the first, is based on the argument that the beatific vision is incompatible with the reality of Christ's suffering on the Cross. Galot writes: "[H]ow can we attribute to a Savior who is filled with heavenly beatitude these words: 'My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?' . . . The cry of Jesus on the cross makes manifest the depths of a suffering that is incompatible with the beatitude of vision."²¹

This objection touches a profound mystery. Most would admit that it is difficult to reconcile the mortal anguish of Jesus in Gethsemane—his extreme fear and sadness—with the supreme blessedness and peace that is the fruit of seeing God. The Dominican exegete François Dreyfus, rightly in my opinion, draws a connection between Jesus' mortal anguish in his Passion and the words of Paul that Jesus "was made sin for us" (2 Cor 5:21) and "became a curse for us" (Gal 3:13). The testimony of Dreyfus is particularly significant because he is a strong proponent of the idea that Christ possessed the beatific vision. He writes: "Jesus wanted to place himself in solidarity with sinful humanity by sharing not in the sin but in its consequences: weakness, doubt, sadness, anguish, distancing from God. . . . Jesus really wanted, on Golgotha as in Gethsemane, to undergo the consequences of the sin which distanced and separated from God."²²

Recent magisterial teaching has confirmed this line of reflection. In his apostolic exhortation *Verbum Domini*, Pope Benedict XVI writes:

As the cross of Christ demonstrates, God also speaks by his silence. The silence of God, *the experience of the distance of the almighty Father*, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father.²³

²¹ Galot, "Le Christ terrestre et la vision," 434.

²² François Dreyfus, *Did Jesus Know He Was God?* (Chicago: Franciscan Herald Press, 1988), 122–24.

²³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Verbum Domini*, 21 (my italics). In *Deus Caritas Est*, 12, Pope Benedict describes Jesus' death on the Cross as the "culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him."

The precise question that needs to be probed is whether and how the beatific vision is compatible with what Pope Benedict calls “the obscurity of death” and “the experience of the distance of the almighty Father.”

There are, of course, several other objections to the thesis that the earthly Jesus possessed the beatific vision. Thomas Weinandy, for example, develops an argument based what he claims is necessary for a proper understanding of the hypostatic union. He suggests that the conventional way of asking and answering the question of whether Christ possessed a vision of the divine essence unwittingly makes the human nature a second subject alongside the Son.²⁴ Weinandy also develops an argument based on the biblical teaching that the mystery of Christ’s Resurrection is essential for perfect beatitude. Just as our final blessedness with God includes our resurrected bodies, Christ’s humanity, which is the instrumental cause of our salvation, attains its final perfection of beatitude only by undergoing death and rising to new life. In the Letter to Hebrews we are told that the Incarnate Son “learned obedience” and was “made perfect” (2:10, 5:9, 7:28) through suffering and death. It is the crucified and Risen Christ who is the “source of eternal salvation” (Heb 5:9) and the “mediator of the New Covenant” (Heb 9:15).

In light of these difficulties, it is perhaps not surprising that many contemporaries reject as untenable the traditional thesis that Jesus possessed the beatific vision from the first moment of his conception. The Jesuit theologian Gerald O’Collins stands for many when he writes: “The comprehensive grasp of *all* creatures and *all* that they can do (which Aquinas holds to belong to the beatific vision) would lift Christ’s knowledge so clearly beyond the normal limits of human knowledge as to cast serious doubts on the genuineness of his humanity.”²⁵ “[H]ow could he have genuinely suffered [and how could he have truly endured trials and temptations] if in his human mind he knew God immediately and in a beatifying way? . . . For these and related reasons it is hard to endorse Aquinas’s thesis that the earthly Jesus’ knowledge included . . . the beatific vision.”²⁶ Jean-Pierre Torrell and Joseph Ratzinger (among others) share this reservation regarding the Thomistic account of Christ’s beatific knowledge.²⁷

²⁴ Cf. Weinandy, “Jesus’ Filial Vision of the Father,” *Pro Ecclesia* 13 (2004):189–201.

²⁵ Gerald O’Collins, *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 256.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 255–56.

²⁷ Jean-Pierre Torrell, “S. Thomas d’Aquin et la science du Christ,” in *Saint Thomas au XXe siècle*, ed. S. Bonino (Paris: Éditions St. Paul, 1994), 394–409; Joseph Ratzinger, “Bewußtsein und Wissen Christi: Zu E. Gutwengers gleichnamigen Buch,” *Münchener theologische Zeitschrift* 12 (1961): 78–81.

II. Filial Knowledge

In what follows, I would like to sketch an alternative approach to the traditional teaching that in my view promises both to deepen our understanding of it and to overcome the typical objections to it as it were from the inside.

I begin by recalling the principal reason Thomas offers for Christ's beatific knowledge of God. The humanity of Jesus Christ is the instrumental cause by which God brings us to our final end, the *visio dei*. But a cause must be more potent than the effect; therefore, the soul of Christ enjoyed the immediate knowledge of God. This soteriological teaching has ample support in the New Testament, particularly in the Gospel of John, where we are told, "no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, has made him known" (Jn 1:18). According to John, eternal life consists in knowing God the Father and Jesus Christ whom the Father has sent (cf. Jn 17:3). At the same time, these passages from John open a perspective that situates Thomas's teaching on the *visio dei* within a more explicitly trinitarian context.

When the Gospel of John refers to Jesus' knowledge of God, the object of his knowledge is not simply the divine essence but the Person of the Father. In terms of both his self-awareness and his relation to God, Christ's deepest identity is to be the Son of the Father.

The Gospel of John is resolutely centered on the Father. It is not, in the first place, christocentric but patro-centric. The Father is the origin and goal of everything. His eternal love of the Son, which constitutes the Son through the gift of eternal glory, gives to everything its inner logic and dynamism. . . . In the first place, the Father's love shapes and determines the identity and life of Jesus as the Son who receives himself from the Father and accordingly holds himself completely at the Father's disposal in his mission to the cross. The mission of Jesus is an expression of this identity: it expresses his life as the eternal Son and it is the concrete mode in which the Father's love is extended and continued in the world.²⁸

Within the hypostatic union, then, Christ's distinctly human consciousness and knowledge unfold and develop within his mission and as an expression of his mission—a mission which is a prolongation of his eternal procession from the Father. François Dreyfus offers a concise summary of Christ's filial identity and filial knowledge:

²⁸ Michael Waldstein, "The Mission of Jesus and the Disciples in John," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17 (1990): 311–33, at 332.

If we return to the Gospel . . . there is one thing which is quite striking. Jesus doesn't speak of himself, his own greatness, his own dignity, but only of his relationship with the Father. . . . Jesus does not manifest himself directly as God, but as Son of God, Son of the Eternal Father. . . . This is absolutely essential. Jesus doesn't have an awareness of being God by some sort of reflexive consciousness, but through his glance and look of filial love toward his Father. . . . In his look of love toward the Father Jesus sees that the Father has given everything to him . . . and that this total gift is completely reciprocal: 'All I have is yours all you have is mine.'²⁹

This last point is crucial. Jesus' relation to the Father is characterized by reciprocal self-giving or self-communication. Both as God and as man, Christ receives himself as a boundless gift from the Father and he offers his life back to the Father in gratitude.

Let us shift back for a moment to the metaphysics of beatific vision. According to Aristotle, knowledge involves an identity or union; the identity in act of knower and known.³⁰ Along the same lines, Aquinas writes that "vision is made actual only when the thing seen is in a certain way in the seer."³¹ Usually, this presence of the seen in the seer is mediated by a species, either sensible or (in the case of intellectual vision) intellectual. Because, however, it is not possible for the essence of God to be seen by any created likeness or similitude, God himself must be both the object and the "species" mediating beatific knowledge. Finally, because the natural power of the created intellect is not sufficient for a vision of the divine essence, "it is necessary that some supernatural disposition should be added to the intellect in order that it may be raised up to such a great and sublime height": the *lumen gloriae* or light of glory.³²

The tradition has always been mindful of the mysterious character of the *visio dei*, in which God is both object and medium of knowledge. Heavenly beatitude is nothing less than a deifying participation in God's own life and knowledge. The key question concerns the nature or form of the union between God and the human intellect. What must we say about this form if we take seriously the words of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* that the "innermost secret" of God's revelation is that "God himself is an eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and he has destined us to share in that exchange"?³³

²⁹ Dreyfus, *Did Jesus Know He Was God?*, 106–7.

³⁰ Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* III, 4.

³¹ Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 2.

³² Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 12, a. 5.

³³ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 221.

Here, too, it is the Gospel of John that gives us the key to answering this question. For John one of the privileged images for the union of knower and known is an exchange of life and love that entails mutual indwelling. "The glory which thou has given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and thou in me, that they may become perfectly one" (Jn 17:22–23). The perfect communion of knower and known is reciprocal indwelling characterized by giving and receiving.³⁴ Emphasis on this indwelling does not imply rejection of Thomas's teaching concerning God's presence to the beatified intellect as both its object and its "species" but, on the contrary, reveals its most concrete meaning.³⁵ The identity in act at the heart of knowledge includes all of the modalities proper to an inter-personal exchange of love.

III. Response to the Objections

We are now in a position to reconsider the two objections noted previously, beginning with the second. In a nutshell, this objection holds that the vision of God is incompatible with the mystery of Christ's suffering on the Cross. The answer to this objection is that Christ's life-giving death (viewed in light of the Resurrection) is the supreme expression of what it means to know God and to be known by him. This is why John uses the language of "glory" to describe the crucifixion of Jesus. Several passages in the Fourth Gospel draw a connection between Christ's hour of glory and his "laying down his life" (Jn 10:17) in death.³⁶ This is the "hour" when his human existence speaks plainly and eloquently of the mystery of the

³⁴ D. C. Schindler has elaborated the philosophical underpinnings for this ideal of knowledge as communion in *Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Dramatic Structure of Truth* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004); and *Plato's Critique of Impure Reason: On Goodness and Truth in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008). See also Adrian J. Walker, "'Sown Psychic, Raised Spiritual': The Lived Body as the Organ of Theology," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33 (2006): 203–15.

³⁵ This will appear to be a category mistake only to those who are committed to the proposition that specifically supernatural truths, as such, have nothing intrinsically to do with metaphysical truths. But granting that our mode of access to these truths is different, and granting that truths having to do with God's inner being cannot be derived from truths about created being, or even being in general, how does it follow that truths about God's inner life, once revealed, should have no intrinsic bearing either on how we approach creaturely being or on what we discover through our study of it? Does God's being Trinity, then, have nothing to do with the way in which he is *ipsum esse subsistens*, the transcendent first principle of the being studied in metaphysics?

³⁶ See, especially, Jn 2:19–22; 3:14; 7:39; 12:23–34. For an analysis of John's understanding of Jesus' death, see Ignace de la Potterie, *The Hour of Jesus: The Passion*

Father. As Ratzinger shows, Christ's dying is an act of prayer, a receiving and handing over of himself to the Father.³⁷ The point, then, is not that Christ does not undergo what Pope Benedict calls an "experience of the distance of the almighty Father." The point is rather that even this experience is an expression, adapted to the economy of the Incarnation, of Christ's filial mode of knowing. It is sheltered within, and reveals, the perfect communion of Father and Son, precisely as the concrete meaning of beatific cognitive union.

It is helpful to contrast this interpretation of the filial knowledge of Jesus with two alternative accounts of how to reconcile the *visio dei* and the paschal mystery. The first is represented by Jean Galot, who claims that in order for the suffering and the abandonment of Jesus to be real, the beatific vision must be absent or lost during his Passion. I think this position is mistaken, although it contains an element of truth. The suffering and the experience of abandonment are real, but precisely as ensheltered within and revealing to the eyes of faith the Incarnate Son's perfect and beatifying love and knowledge of the Father.³⁸

and the Resurrection According to John: Text and Spirit, trans. Gregory Murray (Middlegreen, England: St. Paul Publications, 1989), 11–39.

³⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 24–25.

³⁸ An important passage from John Paul II sheds some light on the mysterious simultaneity of a real abandonment and perfect knowledge of the Father. In *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 25–26, he writes: "'For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God' (2 Cor 5:21). We shall never exhaust the depths of this mystery. All the harshness of the paradox can be heard in Jesus' seemingly desperate cry of pain on the Cross: "'Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?" which means, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"' (Mk 15:34). Is it possible to imagine a greater agony, a more impenetrable darkness? In reality, the anguished 'why' addressed to the Father in the opening words of the Twenty-second Psalm expresses all the realism of unspeakable pain; but it is also illumined by the meaning of that entire prayer, in which the Psalmist brings together suffering and trust, in a moving blend of emotions. In fact the Psalm continues: 'In you our fathers put their trust; they trusted and you set them free. . . . Do not leave me alone in my distress, come close, there is none else to help' (Ps 22:5, 12). Jesus' cry on the Cross, dear Brothers and Sisters, is not the cry of anguish of a man without hope, but the prayer of the Son who offers his life to the Father in love, for the salvation of all. At the very moment when he identifies with our sin, 'abandoned' by the Father, he 'abandons' himself into the hands of the Father. His eyes remain fixed on the Father. Precisely because of the knowledge and experience of the Father which he alone has, even at this moment of darkness he sees clearly the gravity of sin and suffers because of it. He alone, who sees the Father and rejoices fully in him, can understand completely what it means to resist the Father's love by sin. More than an experience of physical pain, his Passion is an agonizing suffering of the

The second account, which is closer to the position of Aquinas, claims that Jesus continued to have the beatific vision in the upper regions of his soul, but he freely decided not to allow the bliss of this vision to overflow into the lower levels of his soul. Although this account has the merit of safeguarding the essential truth of Jesus' perfect communion with the Father, it remains one-sided. It is not one-sided on account of some general consideration regarding the incompatibility of beatitude and suffering, as with Galot's account. Rather, it is one-sided because it does not sufficiently take account of the fact that the Father and the Son wish not only to overcome the sinner's alienation from God, but also freely to use that alienation—against its own inner logic—to express the filial dimension of the Son's knowledge of the Father, and, in particular, what might be called the infinite refusal to grasp that is a constitutive feature of that filiality.

If the consummate form of beatific knowledge is a participation in the "eternal exchange of love, Father, Son, and Spirit,"³⁹ then there are good grounds for claiming that Jesus possessed and revealed beatific knowledge in his paschal mystery. By the same token, the common mistake in both of the interpretations of the paschal mystery sketched just now is to assume in advance an over-determined conception of what it means to know and to be known by God, and then to ask how it is possible for Jesus to see the divine essence while suffering abandonment and death. In other words, the usual way of posing the question precludes the possibility that the mystery of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection is the final measure of what it means for a creature to participate in God's knowledge.

Put another way, both of the positions sketched above tend to affirm a strange juxtaposition between the earthly life of Jesus of Nazareth and the promise of eternal communion with God. Jean Galot, for his part, claims that "Christ did not live a heavenly life here on earth either in the intellectual or in the affective sphere. He did not have the immediate vision [of God]."⁴⁰ It is worth pondering exactly what Galot means by "heavenly life" in this context. Did the Son leave the bosom of the Father in becoming man and going to the end of love? Is our hope for "heavenly life" something other than the hope of participating in Christ's life,

soul. Theological tradition has not failed to ask how Jesus could possibly experience at one and the same time his profound unity with the Father, by its very nature a source of joy and happiness, and an agony that goes all the way to his final cry of abandonment. The simultaneous presence of these two seemingly irreconcilable aspects is rooted in the fathomless depths of the hypostatic union."

³⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 221.

⁴⁰ Galot, *Who is Christ?* 357.

death, and Resurrection and thereby entering into the life and love of Father, Son, and Spirit?

On the other side of the modern debate, Romanus Cessario offers an interpretation of Aquinas's teaching that Christ is *simul viator et comprehensor*—a wayfarer and a beholder. He writes: "If we affirm that Christ possessed the beatific vision during his earthly life, we do not therefore maintain that the beatific vision directly influenced his daily life. The beatific vision remains paralyzing, and no creature can act as a result of it."⁴¹ If we think of the beatific vision in terms of Christ's knowledge of the Father, the New Testament teaches us exactly the opposite: "the Son can do nothing of his own accord; he *does* only what he sees the Father doing" (Jn 5:19). His food is to do the will of the Father who sent him. His daily life and his prayer are permeated with beatific knowledge of the Father. If Cessario's words were true simply as stated and without qualification, it would be difficult to maintain the soteriological significance of the daily life and human action of Jesus of Nazareth. But it would also be difficult to maintain the beatifying character of heavenly beatitude: how, in fact, could a beatific vision that "paralyzed" creaturely action be at all beatifying for a free intellectual being? Doesn't Thomas describe our beatific knowledge as the "highest" operation of our created intellect?⁴²

Instead of claiming that the *visio dei* is unrelated to Jesus' daily life, a more promising and more traditional approach is to re-conceive the meaning or *logos* of eternal beatitude in light of the mission of the Son. The mission of the Son, which involves accepting the limits of a genuine human existence and human knowledge, is a prolongation and expression of his eternal procession from the Father.⁴³ It is not just that Christ is simultaneously *viator et comprehensor*, as it were on two juxtaposed levels of his human consciousness. Rather, it is in being a pilgrim that he is also a beholder, and it is in being a beholder that he is also pilgrim—without confusion and without separation. Christ's vision of the Father is "missional": filial knowledge adapted at every moment to the mission that extends the Son's eternal procession as man within the limits of space and time.

In his final encyclical letter, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, John Paul II describes the Eucharist as "a straining towards the goal, a foretaste of the fullness of joy promised by Christ (cf. Jn 15:11); it is in some way the

⁴¹ Cessario, "Incarnate Wisdom and the Immediacy of Christ's Salvific Knowledge," 338.

⁴² Aquinas, *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1.

⁴³ Cf. Aquinas, *In I Sent.*, d. 6, q. 1, a. 1: "Sicut processio temporalis non est alia quam processio aeterna essentialiter, sed addit aliquem respectum ad effectum temporalem, ita etiam missio visibilis non est alia essentialiter ab invisibili missione."

anticipation of heaven, the 'pledge of future glory.'"⁴⁴ "Those who feed on Christ in the Eucharist," he writes, "need not wait until the hereafter to receive eternal life: they already possess it on earth, as the first-fruits of a future fullness which will embrace man in his totality. . . . With the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the 'secret' of the Resurrection."⁴⁵ This teaching applies analogously to the mystery of beatific knowledge of God. In the Eucharist we digest, as it were, the secret of the *visio dei*. In this gift of communion, we are initiated into the Son's interior disposition of gratefully receiving himself from the Father and offering himself back to the Father in knowledge and love. N.V

⁴⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 18.

⁴⁵ Ibid.