

Why Scheeben?

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The Cologne Professor

IN THE summer of 1888 Matthias Joseph Scheeben died in Cologne, having spent most of his fifty-three years teaching dogmatics and moral theology in the archdiocesan seminary there. Catholic Germany mourned his passing. He was well known as Germany's most persuasive scholarly defender of Vatican I's decision on papal infallibility and as a profound and impassioned advocate of the Church's freedom in the *Kulturkampf*, Bismarck's determined but finally unsuccessful effort to subject the Catholic Church to the control of his new German state. The theologically informed also knew him as the author of three outstanding works of dogmatic theology: *Nature and Grace*, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, and the massive *Handbook of Catholic Dogmatics*, left unfinished at his death.

Scheeben was a prodigious theological writer. In addition to these three major dogmatic works and several shorter books, he produced a continuous stream of articles, pamphlets, and reviews in learned and popular periodicals, many of them quite long. With an academic humility unthinkable today, most of these articles were unsigned, especially those in the two annuals he founded and edited, *Das ökumenische Concil vom Jahre 1869* [The ecumenical council of 1869], published 1869–1871, and its successor *Periodische Blätter zur wissenschaftlichen Besprechung der großen religiösen Fragen der Gegenwart* [Journal for the scholarly review of the great religious questions of the present day], published 1872–82.¹ He was deeply convinced, more-

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¹ Naturally this makes the precise extent of Scheeben's bibliography difficult to determine. Karl Eschweiler, author of what remains one of the most important

over, that rigorous dogmatic theology had great practical and pastoral value for ordinary Christians. It cannot be said that Scheeben himself ever quite succeeded at casting his theological insights into a form accessible to those outside the world of academic theology, though admirers of his early book *Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade* (*The Glories of Divine Grace*), first published in 1862) will contest that judgment. Others would later take up quite effectively the task of presenting his ideas to non-specialists.

Unlike many of his most prominent (or notorious) contemporaries, theologians like J. J. I. von Döllinger, Johannes von Kuhn, Anton Berlage, Franz Hettinger, Jacob Froschammer, or the young Herman Schell, Scheeben never held a university appointment. In their day the influence of others often exceeded his own, especially at the academic centers of the great renaissance in German Catholic intellectual life after the defeat of Napoleon, places like the universities of Tübingen, Munich, Mainz, and Würzburg. Despite this, and despite the sometimes lamented complexity of his theological writing, for generations Scheeben had more staying power than any other Catholic theologian of his time. His major dogmatic works were repeatedly republished in Germany up into the 1960s and enjoyed the rare privilege of new life in an annotated schol-

books on Scheeben, suggests that the Cologne professor wrote practically everything in these annuals over a period of fourteen years, save where an article is explicitly ascribed to someone else. "The first four of these fourteen volumes were almost entirely written by Scheeben himself, as was the greater part of the ensuing ten—and in the year 1873 appeared the first volume of his monumental *Dogmatics!*" (a publication that runs to 915 pages in its original edition and takes up two volumes of the later *Gesammelte Schriften*). Karl Eschweiler, *Die zwei Wege der neueren Theologie: Georg Hermes—Matth. Jos. Scheeben. Eine kritische Untersuchung des Problems der theologischen Erkenntnis* (Augsburg: Benno Filser, 1926), 306. This book is now available in an online edition prepared by Thomas Marschler of the University of Augsburg: opus.bibliothek.uni-augsburg.de/opus4/frontdoor/index/index/docId/1421; the quoted passage is on p. 125 of the digital edition, n. 10. On Eschweiler's own significance—he was a gifted historian of modern Catholic theology who ended his life an ardent Nazi—see Thomas Marschler, *Karl Eschweiler (1886–1936): Theologische Erkenntnislehre und nationalsozialistische Ideologie* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2011).

² Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 8 vols. (in 9), ed. Josef Höfer et al. (Freiburg: Herder, 1941–67; hereafter GS). This edition contains the four works already mentioned (*Natur und Gnade*, *Die Herrlichkeiten der göttlichen Gnade*, the *Mysterien*, and the *Dogmatik*), and a final volume of "collected essays" (*Gesammelte Aufsätze*). The latter is devoted mostly to the intricate controversy during the 1880s between Scheeben and Theodor Grandérath, S.J. over the formal cause of divine adoption, against the background of Trent's teaching on justifying grace. As such it presents only a small (though important) selection of Scheeben's vast output of essays and reviews.

arly edition.² They were also translated into other European languages, including English (the *Dogmatics*, alas, only in highly truncated form).³ Among the many outstanding German-speaking Catholic theologians of the nineteenth century, posterity has treated only Johann Adam Möhler with similar generosity. And unlike Möhler, Scheeben became the source of a substantial popular and semi-popular theological literature, especially in Germany during the time between the wars.⁴ After the Second Vatican Council interest in Scheeben vanished, almost without a trace. Now, however, signs of a revival are beginning to appear.⁵

³ As its subtitle indicates, Wilhelm and Scannell's *A Manual of Catholic Theology* is "based on Scheeben's *Dogmatik*," but is not a translation of that great work, which occupied Scheeben for the last twenty years of his life. It offers instead a drastically abridged English version of Scheeben's text that eliminates most of the exegetical and historical material, and includes sections on justification, the Church, the sacraments, and eschatology that were produced independently by Leonhard Atzberger to complete the work after Scheeben's death. Joseph Wilhelm and Thomas B. Scannell, *A Manual of Catholic Theology: Based on Scheeben's "Dogmatik"*, 2 vols. (3d ed., London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1906).

⁴ See, e.g., Jules Tyciak, *Gottesgeheimnisse der Gnade* (Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1935): "The present work . . . attempts to make use of the fruitful ideas of the great Cologne theologian M. J. Scheeben, and apply them to the religious life" (p. 5). This is the first in a series of books in which Tyciak sought to draw on "the fruitful ideas of the great Cologne theologian" in order to present the central topics of Catholic theology to a lay audience in a rich but accessible way. See *Christus und die Kirche* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1936); *Erlöste Schöpfung* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1938); *Mariengeheimnisse* (Regensburg: Pustet, 1940); *Die Mysterien Christi: Von sakramentaler Wirklichkeit* (Paderborn: Bonifatius Verlag, 1940), of which a second, revised edition appeared under the title *Der siebenfältige Strom: Aus der Gnadenwelt der Sakramente* (Freiburg: Herder, 1954); *Der Kelch des Heiles: Gedanken über die Opferwirklichkeit der Kirche* (Düsseldorf: Bastion-Verlag, 1947). In a similar vein, see Georg Feuerer, *Unsere Kirche im Kommen: Begegnung von Jetztzeit und Endzeit* (Freiburg: Herder, 1937), and other works of this author; also Carl Feckes, *Die bräutliche Gottesmutter* (Freiburg: Herder, 1936), a selection and paraphrase of the Mariological sections of Scheeben's *Katholische Dogmatik* (Book V, §§274–282). Popularizations of Scheeben on Mary appeared in other European languages as well. The two-volume English *Mariology* attributed to Scheeben (trans. T. L. M. J. Geukers; St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946, 1948) is based not on Scheeben's original German, but on a later Flemish rendering of the Marian material from the *Dogmatik* (see vol. 1, xxxiv). It therefore has to be used with caution, although it has the merit of aiming (unlike Feckes and others) to present the whole of Scheeben's mature theological treatment of the Mother of God.

⁵ See, e.g., Michael Stickelbroeck, ed., *Über die Eucharistie und den Messkanon* (Regensburg: Pustet, 2011), which presents two substantial essays by Scheeben on the Eucharist that originally appeared in the journal *Der Katholik* in 1862 and 1866. The first of these ("Das Geheimnis der Eucharistie") prepares the way for

There is, I think, no secret to Scheeben's endurance. When they know him, Catholic thinkers regularly see in Scheeben a uniquely gifted speculative theologian. The term "speculative" is Scheeben's own. It may give pause, suggesting a kind of theology untethered to the scriptural and traditional sources of Christian faith, and guided mainly by the theologian's own powers of invention. Modernity has made Catholic and Protestant theology alike rather too familiar with the figure cut by *this* sort of speculative theologian—the theological virtuoso restlessly ambitious to think new thoughts, to go where no one has gone before. For Scheeben, though, speculative theology is precisely the opposite of virtuoso invention. It is the mind's effort, directed by the light of faith and the teaching of the Church, to understand the Christian mysteries with as much rational rigor and breadth of vision as the half-light of this life will allow. "Speculative" theology is for Scheeben the same thing as dogmatic theology, with an accent provided by the Latinate resonance of "speculate"—to see clearly the truths of which one speaks. When carefully studied, Scheeben's writings not only yield rare insight into the mysteries of Christian faith; they draw the attentive reader, body and soul, ever more deeply into the mysteries themselves.

Several generations of readers have been right, I think, to see the Cologne seminary professor as perhaps the finest dogmatic theologian Catholicism has produced in modernity, that is, since the great age of Catholic theology in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In fact his dogmatic accomplishments make Scheeben more important now than he has ever been. For Catholics in the last fifty years or so have almost completely ceased to do dogmatic theology. Save for a handful of admirable holdouts, we have practically given up the fruitful speculative enterprise of a millennium. The mind's effort to understand the Christian mysteries we now effectively treat as a thing of the more or less distant past, once done by others but no longer to be done by us. The deep things of God, the mysteries of his own life opened up to us in Christ, we think we need not, or fear we cannot, search out. Scheeben, more than any modern theologian, can show us how to get started again.⁶

Scheeben's fullest treatment of the Eucharist in *Die Mysterien des Christentums*, while the second ("Studien über den Messkanon") offers his detailed reflections on, among other things, the Eucharistic epiklesis and the Mass as sacrifice. Also encouraging is the appearance of a book-length study of Scheeben's theology in English: Aiden Nichols, O.P. *Romance and System: The Theological Synthesis of Matthias Joseph Scheeben* (Denver, CO: Augustine Institute Press, 2010). For a brief but helpful bibliography of Scheeben's major works and some of the most important secondary literature, see pp. 500–503 of Nichols's book.

⁶ By Scheeben's account, speculative theology had already fallen into widespread discredit in his own time, even among the theologically educated. "People see in

A Theologian's Virtues

Here I will sketch the character of dogmatic theology as Scheeben actually practiced it, by identifying the intellectual virtues embodied in his work—the virtues needed to write profound and enduring speculative theology. Scheeben himself offers an elaborate account of the nature of dogmatic theology as the science of the Christian mysteries, especially in the last section of the *Mysterien* and in the massive presentation of what makes for “theological knowledge” that constitutes Book I of the *Katholische Dogmatik*.⁷ I will advert to this explicit treatment of the aims and conditions of speculative theology, but my main interest lies in getting clear about the virtues manifest in Scheeben’s actual treatment of central dogmatic issues. Of these, five in particular stand out.

1. Scheeben habitually talks about God. He exhibits, to put the point more precisely, an intense focus on the supernatural mysteries of God’s own nature and life, the full range of divine mysteries at the heart of all Christian faith and teaching. Call this the virtue of pertinence, or relevance.
2. Scheeben is an immensely learned theologian. He knows intimately both Scripture and the normative teaching of the Church, not least the momentous doctrinal decisions of his own time. More than that, he knows at first hand a massive amount of the Catholic theological tradition, from the Fathers to the present, from East and West, especially the traditions of dogmatic theology originating in the medieval universities and continuing largely uninterrupted to his own day.
3. Scheeben’s theology is rationally rigorous. He makes precise and often elaborate conceptual distinctions, identifies relevant objections to his ideas and offers detailed replies to them, and articulates his

it nothing but difficult, abstract, uncertain, and unfruitful—if not positively dangerous—intellectual speculation. But,” he goes on to say, “I harbor the strongest conviction that precisely this kind of theology is of the greatest significance for the true and high formation of the mind and heart.” Matthias Joseph Scheeben, *Die Mysterien des Christentums* (GS II, ed. Josef Höfer, 3d ed. [Freiburg: Herder, 1958]), xii. Cyril Vollert, S.J., omits Scheeben’s Preface, and thus this passage, in his otherwise generally reliable translation of the work: *The Mysteries of Christianity* (St. Louis: B. Herder, 1946; hereafter *Mysteries*). I will provide references to this and other English versions when they are available, but all translations are my own.

⁷ See *Mysterien*, §§104–110 (*Mysteries*, 731–96); *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik: Erstes Buch: Theologische Erkenntnislehre* (GS III, ed. Martin Grabmann, 3d ed. [Freiburg: Herder, 1959]).

interpretation of the Christian mysteries by vigorous and frequently intricate argument.

4. Scheeben is a boldly speculative theologian. He seeks the deepest possible understanding of the mysteries of Christianity, not simply one by one, but as a whole and in their luminous interconnection.
5. Scheeben undertakes theology in humility, with reverence, joy, and submission before the divine mysteries he only seeks faithfully to serve.

I will say a bit about each of these virtues—the dogmatic virtues, we might call them—as they are manifest in Scheeben’s theology: pertinence, learning, rationality, boldness, and humility. This may help give us a sense of why Catholic dogmatic theology, certainly in its fullest and purest embodiments, requires not simply one or another of these virtues but a theologian in whom they are all conjoined. It may also help us appreciate how Scheeben offers a theological standard to which we once again ought to aspire.

(1) Theos and Logos

That theology should talk about God, and the theologian be the true “God intoxicated man,” may seem too obvious for comment. Scheeben thinks it essential, though, to specify the distinctive way in which dogmatic theology speaks of God. Dogmatics is a unique sort of discourse about God, in two ways.

In the first place, not all true statements about God belong uniquely or properly to dogmatic theology. A whole range of truths about God, countless in number, concern primarily the creatures upon whom God freely bestows existence. These truths concern, more precisely, the panoply of created natures. All such truths about creatures implicate truths about God, since God is the source from which every creature receives its existence and nature in toto, and the goal at which the existence of every creature aims in a way suited to its nature. This range of truths about God comes into view, we could say, on account of God’s communication or impartation to creatures of their own natures, and not on account of any communication of his own divine nature, especially a communication to creatures. Dogmatic theology considers truths of this sort, but they are not its own special province. Were this the only sort of truth about God available to us, there would be no need for theology properly speaking, that is, for dogmatics.

Another, immeasurably more sublime, range of truths about God concerns the communication and impartation of his own nature, of the

divine nature itself. These truths concern, in other words, not God's bestowal of a nature other than his own, a nature that by definition must be created, but God's bestowal of the one uncreated nature as such. This "communication, revelation, and glorification of the divine nature" happens, Scheeben argues, in three irreducibly distinct ways.⁸

1. Eternally and without any contingency, the Father communicates the one divine essence or nature in its substance and totality to the Son by generation, and Father and Son communicate their one nature in its substance and totality to the Holy Spirit by spiration or active procession. That the divine nature, source and goal of creatures, is and can be the nature of persons who are themselves originated or produced—that the one divine essence subsists as a Trinity of divine persons—is the most primordial of all mysteries and the source of any possible communication of the divine nature to creatures.⁹
2. Temporally and freely (thus contingently), the triune God makes his own uncreated nature that of a creature in the Incarnation of the Son. More precisely, the triune God joins a created nature—our own—to his nature in the person of the Son, so that God is this human being Jesus, and this human being is God. The personal and hypostatic union of the divine and human natures, whereby a divine person subsists in the nature of a creature, is the most complete and intimate way in which the divine nature can be communicated to, or shared with, a created reality.
3. Again temporally and freely, the triune God bestows upon the human creature a participation in his own nature by grace, and ultimately by the glory of immediate vision. By uniting us with the incarnate Son, grace brings about a participation in the divine nature so intimately deifying that we become even more than Jesus' brothers and sisters and the Father's adopted children. We become members of the natural Son,

⁸ On what follows see especially *Mysterien*, §104; the quoted phrase is from GS II, 621 (*Mysteries*, 737). Cf. *Katholische Dogmatik* I, no. 31 (GS III, 26–27).

⁹ That the divine essence as such subsists as the Trinity of persons, and therefore cannot be adequately known save by knowing the three persons, is also the teaching of St. Thomas: "In the manner in which it is presently known to us by its effects, the supreme goodness of God can be understood apart from the Trinity of persons. But when it is understood as it really is, in the way the blessed see it, [the divine goodness] cannot be understood apart from the Trinity of persons" (*prout videtur a beatis, non potest intelligi sine Trinitate personarum*). *Summa theologiae* II–II, q. 2, a. 8, ad 3. What Thomas says of the *bonitas Dei* goes, of course, for the divine essence itself, in all of its perfections.

and therefore “really enter into the very same personal relationship in which the Son of God stands to his Father.” As members of the incarnate Son “we are, in a sense, one Son of the Father with him,” so when we call upon the Father of Jesus as “our Father,” we lay claim to filial relationship not merely similar to that of Jesus himself, but “to one and the same relationship by which [God] is the Father of Christ.”¹⁰ Rooted in Romans 8:14–30, this understanding of divine adoption as full membership in Christ is of recurring importance in Scheeben’s theology. God freely gives us, his servant creatures, the entire deifying inheritance of his natural Son (cf. Rom. 8:17 and 29) and so really makes us no longer his servants but his children, those upon whom he has poured out by grace “what eye has not seen and ear has not heard.” By supernatural grace we receive from God what we could not even suspect there was to give until it was actually given: all that he has eternally bestowed upon his only-begotten Son by nature.¹¹

This direct share in the one filiation of the natural Son of God is irreducibly trinitarian; it is complete only in the unique or proper mission, and thereby the personal indwelling, of the Holy Spirit. “We become similar to the natural Son in the highest way precisely because we are not only conformed to him but also personally possess the same Spirit within us whom he possesses.”¹² Our union with the natural Son, perfected in the possession of his Spirit, is the most complete and intimate way the divine nature has been, and probably could be, communicated to created persons, that is, persons who are not themselves divine. This mystery of grace and glory gathers around it a wider field of teachings pertaining to the communication of the divine nature to created persons, including the luminous mysteries of original justice, the Eucharist, the Church and the sacraments, justification, transforming consummation, and predestination, and also the “dark” mystery of sin.¹³

These mysteries of the divine nature “in itself,” beginning with the supreme mystery that the divine nature exists as substantially communicated, as given and received, form the truths about God unique to dogmatic theology. Dogmatics has its own domain, not shared with any other science,

¹⁰ *Mysterien*, §57 (GS II, 318; *Mysteries*, 383).

¹¹ For a particularly rich elaboration of this idea, see *Natur und Gnade*, ch. 3, §2 (4th ed., in GS I, ed. Martin Grabmann [Freiburg: Herder, 1949], 69–90); English trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J., *Nature and Grace* (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1954; reprint Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 116–49.

¹² *Mysterien*, §30 (GS II, 145; *Mysteries*, 169).

¹³ See *Mysterien*, §104 (GS II, 622; *Mysteries*, 737–38).

that is, with any other rationally rigorous way of knowing, especially of knowing about God.

This suggests the second way in which dogmatics forms a unique sort of discourse about God. Dogmatics properly treats of God not as his nature is distantly reflected in the natures he creates but as his nature is in itself, in the innermost trinitarian depths of his own life. The divine mysteries of which dogmatic theology treats are therefore beyond the reach of any created nature when left to its own powers. If we are to know of them, God himself, whose interior mysteries they are, must tell us of them, as a friend discloses his inmost heart to a friend. This God does, above all in the Church's sacramental life and teaching. That God opens up his innermost life to us is sheer generosity on his part, a gift to which no creature has any natural claim. As a result, we can apprehend as true what God teaches us about his own life only by faith, that is, by a light beyond nature which God himself must give us, and not by the natural light of reason itself.

As reason cannot reach, or even suspect, these mysteries on its own—that God is triune, that God is incarnate, that God deifies the creature by grace are truths alike unavailable to it—so reason, once guided by faith in these mysteries, cannot form concepts adequate to an understanding of them. To be sure, some understanding of the truths God teaches us about his inner life is available to us here and now, but we see only dimly, as in a mirror. The mysteries of God appear to us in the half-light of dawn, still shrouded in a divine darkness which we cannot remove by faith, still less by reason. “A Christian mystery,” as Scheeben defines it, “is a truth made known to us by Christian revelation, which we cannot attain by reason alone (*mit der bloßen Vernunft*), and of which reason cannot take the measure with concepts, after we have attained it by faith.”¹⁴ Dogmatics, which knows these mysteries and seeks to understand them, therefore has not only a domain or subject matter unique to it but also a distinctive way of knowing and understanding the truths with which it is properly concerned.

Scheeben underlines the point that speculative or dogmatic theology, in order to be a rationally rigorous body of knowledge that stands on its own (a science), needs not simply a way of knowing, a perspective, we might now say, unique to it among the sciences; it needs something of its own to know. Theology's way of knowing depends, in fact, on the nature of what it knows.

¹⁴ *Mysterien*, §2 (GS II, 11; *Mysteries*, 13); cf. §104: a mystery of Christian faith is a truth that natural reason on its own “can neither know as real nor grasp in its essence, other than through analogous, and therefore always dark and inadequate, concepts” (GS II, 615; *Mysteries*, 733).

Theology needs the light of faith just because what it knows is beyond reason's grasp. Even when the supernatural mysteries with which theology properly deals are created realities—and both the hypostatic union and sanctifying grace are created things (respectively a relation and a quality belonging to a creature)—these creatures are accessible only to theology's way of knowing. As the term or outcome of the temporal missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit, these twin mysteries of saving history found a supernatural order of divine self-giving. In their innermost reality the missions of the Son and the Spirit are, as Scheeben likes to put it, the free “extension” (*Ausdehnung*) or “continuation” (*Fortsetzung*) of their eternal processions. Knowledge of the missions and their created outcomes therefore requires knowledge of the processions on which they depend. It presupposes faith's apprehension of the original mystery: that there are processions in God. Only theology's way of knowing, its access by faith to the mystery of the Trinity, opens up the further field of supernatural mysteries that are uniquely its own to know.¹⁵ If theology differed from other intellectual disciplines only by knowing from faith's perspective the same things other disciplines know by reason, it would be hard to see why theology need exist at all. It would only see in the half-light of faith created realities that other disciplines see in the full light of day.¹⁶

From this we can perhaps discern how essential a lucid distinction between the natural and the supernatural is to the very possibility of dogmatic theology. Lacking a clear distinction not only between nature and grace but between the whole domain of the supernatural and everything natural, we will, at best, be unsure what our enterprise as theologians is supposed to be about. For whatever reasons or motives, Catholic theology since Vatican II has generally exhibited confusion about what distinction, if any, to make between the natural and the supernatural, even when it has deliberately used the terms. As a predictable result, theologians now talk about anything and everything, on the assumption, or in the hope, that they are thereby already talking about God, or at least providing a relevant basis for such talk.

Among the most common topics for theological discourse in this unsettled situation are (1) formative personal experiences, whether of the individual theologian or (more likely) of the group with which she or he most

¹⁵ The missions of the Son in Incarnation and the Holy Spirit in grace, Scheeben argues, “call forth an order of things which becomes apparent as a real unfolding and revelation of the inner core of this mystery [of the inner relationships of the divine persons], and which can be thoroughly understood and fully conceived only in and from this mystery.” *Mysterien*, §24 (GS II, 115; *Mysteries*, 136).

¹⁶ On this cf. *Mysterien*, §104 (GS II, 618–19; *Mysteries*, 735).

identifies; (2) social, political, and economic conflict; and (3) other theologians. It sometimes seems as though such discourse is meant to count as theology simply because psychological description or social theory is overlaid with a patina of piety, expressing our anxious hope that God will keep trauma and disaster from being the last word in our personal and social existence. Or because the theologian we are repeating or expositing (Rahner or Balthasar, for example) was, we assume, a formative dogmatic thinker, our exposition of him is also supposed to count as dogmatic theology.

Even when theology that takes these currently common topics as basic is clearly in earnest about speaking of God, however, ambiguity about the proper subject matter of theology dims its chances of success—or, more precisely, of being able to tell when it had succeeded. The interior mystery of the divine nature, the mystery of the substantial communication of the Father's nature to the Son and the Spirit, and so the mysteries of the Father's will to share that nature with rational creatures by the missions of the Son and the Spirit, are simply not accessible to us from our apprehension of created substances, their natures, and their activities, including our own. The mysteries are intrinsically supernatural, and as a result suprarational.

Consequently, no analysis of psychological and social reality, or of any created nature as such, no matter how rationally rigorous and inventive, can provide us with a knowledge of God as he is in his triune self, and as he has generously willed to be for us. For God has, within the counsel of his inner life, determined to be the giver of a supremely intimate share in his own triune life as the final goal of our existence, by the Incarnation of the Son and the grace of the Holy Spirit. Theology can never succeed in speaking of God as Christians know him by drawing the supernatural mysteries of God's nature and will down into the sphere of creatures and our naturally available knowledge of them. At best it can speak of God by this means only as the remote source of creatures and provider of their natural goal. Understandably, no Catholic theologian will be satisfied with these limited conclusions, however justly warranted.

Of course anything and everything, including every aspect of experience and society, nature and history, can be an appropriate subject matter for speculative theological reflection. Precisely as a theologian, Scheeben himself wrote extensively on the social and political problems of his time, especially as they bore on the Church's resistance to the state under the *Kulturkampf*, and the persecution that resulted.¹⁷ But as he saw clearly,

¹⁷ See, for example, his long essay "Das Martyrium," in *Periodische Blätter* 2 (1873): 353–76, 385–403, 504–23, 548–65. Scheeben's teaching at the archdiocesan seminary in Cologne came to a halt in November 1875, when the seminary was closed by the Prussian government for refusing to comply with the "May laws"

nothing becomes a genuinely theological topic for reflection save by being drawn into the sphere of the supernatural mysteries that are the proper subject matter of theology. Or better, created substances, natures, and activities, open as such to reason's gaze, belong to theology just insofar as they can be drawn into the light that shines from the sphere of the interior mysteries of the divine life, and can thereby be placed in an intelligible relationship with these mysteries. The light radiating from the supernatural mysteries is, in fact, the light of faith, which as such alone gives us access to the mysteries themselves. Genuinely theological talk of creatures presupposes faith's knowledge of the divine mysteries, a knowledge that cannot stem from creatures and that no creature can provide for itself.

(2) *Learning*

The reader of Scheeben soon becomes aware that he was a staggeringly erudite theologian. This is immediately obvious in the *Dogmatik* or *Natur und Gnade*, but Scheeben cannot keep it entirely hidden in the *Mysterien*, even though that book was intended for a less specialized audience.

Developing his distinction between being the Father's adopted daughter or son, and the yet more intimate relationship that comes with being a living

of 1873. Among their provisions, these statutes placed Catholic seminaries under the direct control of the state in all matters, from their curriculum to the daily ordering of their internal affairs. Having already served a prison sentence for refusing to cooperate with Bismarck's regime, Paul Melchers, the Archbishop of Cologne, was again threatened with arrest after the seminary was closed. He left Germany to spend the next ten years living in a Franciscan monastery in the Netherlands, his ancient see effectively vacant. The 55 students were put out in the street; Scheeben and the rest of the small faculty and staff were allowed to continue living in the building. The seminary did not reopen until October 1886, less than two years before Scheeben's death.

For an account of these events see Norbert Trippen, ed., *Das Kölner Priesterseminar im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert* (Siegburg: Verlag Franz Schmitt, 1988), 103–23. See also Nichols, Scheeben, 10–12, which draws on David Blackbourn, *Marpingen: Apparitions of the Virgin Mary in Nineteenth-Century Germany* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994). Blackbourn offers a vivid depiction of Catholic life and its struggles in Bismarck's Germany, centering around the Marian apparitions in the Saarland village of Marpingen in the summer of 1876. (These Scheeben defended effectively in the Catholic press, while sharply criticizing the Prussian government for its heavy-handed efforts—including the military occupation of Marpingen by a detachment of the Prussian army—to repress the devotion spawned by the apparitions. For this he was charged and tried under the May laws, but acquitted.) For a recent description of the *Kulturkampf* in the wider context of Church-state conflict in nineteenth-century Europe, see Michael Burleigh, *Earthly Powers: The Clash of Religion and Politics in Europe, from the French Revolution to the Great War* (New York: HarperCollins, 2006), 320–36.

member of the Father's natural Son made flesh, Scheeben refers to the *Oeuvres de piété* of Pierre de Bérulle, whose work remained widely known in the Catholic world of Scheeben's time. He further observes that particular insight into this matter may be found in the writings of Jacobus Naclantus (in the vernacular, Jacopo Nacchianti, O.P., c. 1500–1569). The substantial quotation he offers from Naclantus's *Enarratio augustissimi Regni Christi* both clarifies his own meaning and indicates added precedent for his views: "Having been given the Spirit of adoption, and by him not only established as brothers and coheirs of Christ, but transformed into his branches and members and even (if it is permitted to speak this way) absorbed into him . . . we go from being adopted sons to being, in a way, natural sons, and we entreat the Father not only by grace but, in a sense, by nature."¹⁸

Articulating his idea that the mission of the Holy Spirit culminates in "the substantial hypostatic outpouring of the Holy Spirit into us," and thereby in our "possession of his substantial being" as hypostatic divine love, the person who is the perfect fruit of the love of the Father and the Son for one another, Scheeben suggests that we study Luis de la Puente's *Expositio moralis et mystica in Canticum Canticorum*.¹⁹ This mammoth commentary on the Song of Songs—really a series of discourses (*exhortationes sive sermones*) "according to the tropological sense," and running to well over a thousand folio pages—Scheeben praises as the finest work of its author, a Jesuit spiritual writer of the early seventeenth century whose name he assumes his readers will know.²⁰ He does not leave us to forage alone in the wilds of this vast commentary but points to a specific passage that develops his point about the immediate union of the just with the Holy Spirit in the Spirit's personal or hypostatic uniqueness.²¹ Scheeben's citations are not merely

¹⁸ *Mysterien*, §57 (GS II, 318, n. 24; *Mysteries*, 384). For this passage in its original context, see *Iacobi Naclanti Clugiensis Episcopi Operum*, vol. 1 (Lyon: Sumptibus Antonii Baret, 1657), 480bB. Scheeben's proximate source, however, is the Oratorian Louis de Thomassin (1619–95), of whose vast *Dogmata theologica* Scheeben makes frequent and fruitful use. For the passage just quoted, see *Dogmata theologica Ludovici Thomassini*, vol. 4, ed. Pierre-Félix Écalte (Paris: Vivès, 1868), 114a.

¹⁹ *Mysterien*, §29 (GS II, 138, and n. 8; *Mysteries*, 162, n. 13); cf. *Katholische Dogmatik* II, no. 1071 (GS IV, 451).

²⁰ R. P. Ludovici de Ponte . . . *Expositio moralis et mystica in Canticum Canticorum, continens exhortationes, sive sermones, de omnibus Christianae religionis mysteriis atque virtutibus*, 2 vols. (Cologne: Apud Ioannem Kinckium & Paris: D. de la Noüe, 1622; reprint Siegburg: Verlag Franz Schmitt, 1987). The phrase "secundum sensum tropologicum" comes from de la Puente's Preface, where he gives a precise explanation of how he is going to read the Song.

²¹ When Jesus prays to the Father that "the love with which you have loved me may be in them" (Jn 17:26), this should be understood, de la Puente argues, in

decorative but informative, and his readers today are virtually certain to learn much about the history of theology that they did not know.

Here I will not try to canvass the full range of Scheeben's engagement with the theological tradition but will only make a few observations. His regular and sometimes extensive use of the Greek Fathers, not only Athanasius and the Cappadocians but later writers as well—especially Cyril of Alexandria, whose work he knows in detail, and for whom he has an obvious affinity—should perhaps lead us to question the common assumption that an interest in the Eastern tradition, and in the Fathers more generally, entered modern Catholic theology only with the *ressourcement* theologians of the mid-twentieth century.²² He draws more or less constantly on the great theologians of the Middle Ages, from Anselm to Bernard of Clairvaux and the Victorines, and from Alexander of Hales (that is, the *Summa Halensis*) to Bonaventure, Albert, Aquinas, and Scotus. Only the intellectual tradition stemming from Ockham fails to elicit a sympathetic hearing from him. Scheeben shares in the general disregard for “nominalism” in the Catholic theology and philosophy of his time, which typically saw Ockham and his school as a destructive force that could not be assimilated into the revitalization of scholastic thought, and especially Thomism, then underway.²³

the following way: “He did not say, ‘May you love them with a love *like* that with which you have loved me,’ although this would also have been true, but he exalts this love even more highly by saying, ‘May the very uncreated love by which you have loved me from all eternity be in them.’” This uncreated love is the person of the Holy Spirit, with whom believers, as Paul teaches, are “sealed” (2 Cor 1:22). “This signing and sealing,” de la Puente observes, “is nothing other than the union of the Holy Spirit with the soul. Just as a seal, when joined to wax, imprints its own shape (*figuram*) upon the wax, so the Holy Spirit, who is uncreated charity, imprints grace and created charity, which is a likeness of the Spirit himself, upon the soul when he is joined to it and kisses it (Song 1:1).” *Expositio moralis et mystica in Canticum Canticorum*, 75A–B (my emphasis).

²² The Greek Fathers, Scheeben argues, had a clearer appreciation than the Latin Fathers of the properly supernatural character of grace, which they saw as first of all the supreme perfection of created rational nature and not only as a healing remedy, however needed, for nature's wounds. See *Natur und Gnade* (GS I, 1–2, 58–60, 65–78); *Nature and Grace*, xviii–xix, 94–98, 109–29 (the latter with numerous texts from Cyril and the Cappadocians). See also *Mysterien*, §76 (*Mysteries*, 530–35), focused on Cyril's account of the Eucharist as a nexus of all the supernatural mysteries of Christianity.

²³ Nominalism caused “the rich and fruitful ideas of the thirteenth century to evaporate, [and] destroyed the living content and harmony of Christian truth by frivolous arbitrariness and hair-splitting precision” (*Katholische Dogmatik* I, no. 1064 [GS III, 466]). Scheeben here briefly summarizes a narrative of which his Roman teacher Joseph Kleutgen was the chief originator, though he also cites

In particular Scheeben's use of the thirteenth-century scholastics (including Scotus) is remarkably catholic. He does not as a rule play them off against one another, or adhere to a particular school, but makes constructive use of all of them, usually in mutually reinforcing ways.²⁴ This is quite clear, for example, in his nuanced treatment of the motive of the Incarnation and its relation to sin, where he follows St. Thomas in holding that the Incarnation is contingent on the fact of sin but, with Bl. Scotus, sees the Incarnation as realizing goods beyond the remedy of the evil which occasioned it, in particular, creation's glorification of the Creator *quo maius cogitari nequit*.²⁵

Perhaps most impressive to the contemporary reader, though, is Scheeben's vast knowledge of early modern scholasticism, from Cajetan to Cano and Soto, Medina, Bañez, Gregory of Valencia, Suarez, Bellarmine, Ruiz de Montoya, and Ripalda, and on to eighteenth-century scholastics like Gotti, Viva, and the Wirceburgenses. To this must be added Scheeben's extensive assimilation of the "positive theology" of Denis Petau (Petavius) and Louis de Thomassin, who synthesized the explosion of scholarship on the early Church in the seventeenth century into large-scale biblical and patristic renderings of the chief doctrines of the faith.²⁶

All this learning was not the work of an unusually superannuated lifetime. Much of it was already in place by the time Scheeben published the *Mysterien* in 1865, at the age of 30. Yet this only stands to reason, Scheeben

the contemporary historians of philosophy Albert Stöckl and Karl Werner as sources for it. On this reading, later associated especially with Étienne Gilson, Ockham and nominalism mark the more or less willful demolition of the whole scholastic enterprise that had reached its high point in Aquinas. For an informative account of the way specific philosophical commitments of the time shaped this influential (though now widely rejected) narrative of the medieval scholastic tradition, see John Inglis, *Spheres of Philosophical Inquiry and the Historiography of Medieval Philosophy* (Leiden: Brill, 1998). Russell L. Friedman offers a balanced appreciation of the merits and limits of "the Gilsonian paradigm" in *Medieval Trinitarian Thought from Aquinas to Ockham* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), chapter 4.

²⁴ Scheeben's practice consistently makes this clear, but he is in any case explicit about it. Thus, e.g., the Preface to Book I of the *Katholische Dogmatik*: "[I]n the choice of our own sources and models, we have especially followed St. Thomas and the schools more or less closely dependent upon him, but have also taken into account everything good and valuable that we have found, particularly the works of the undiluted and original Franciscan school, which was so worthily and brilliantly advocated by Alexander of Hales and St. Bonaventure" (GS III, xxxiv).

²⁵ See especially *Mysterien*, §64 (*Mysteries*, 418–30). For more on this, see the next section.

²⁶ For Scheeben's appreciation of these two "epoch-making" practitioners of "patristic-historical theology," see *Katholische Dogmatik* I, nos. 1098–1099 (GS III, 481–82).

seems silently to suggest. If we want to do speculative theology, we must learn how from those who have done it especially well, not only at one time or another, but in every age of the Church. These are the deep wells from which we must drink.

Remarkable as it is, Scheeben's erudition is not simply the work of a genius whom few of us can hope to emulate. His learning did not differ in kind from that expected of any academic theologian in the European Catholic world of his time. It was the work not only of Scheeben but of the rich theological culture he inhabited, when that culture met with an unusually capable and receptive mind. The theological culture that produced Scheeben and many others has largely disappeared. With it has gone much of the possibility of dogmatic theology such as he was able to write.

The virtual disappearance of the theological culture apparent on Scheeben's pages, itself the labor of centuries, has many causes. No doubt one of them is the bright line Catholic theologians have habitually drawn for several generations between the time after Vatican II and the time before it. The theology of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, up to the time of the Council itself, is for the most part labeled "neo-scholasticism," and thereby dismissed. The theology of earlier centuries, having been written before the Enlightenment, may sometimes be of real interest, but the interest is purely historical. Any such theology comes from a world too different from our own to help us address our present needs and problems, at least in any direct way. To the extent that theology between the Enlightenment and the Second Vatican Council retains any value, it lies in having prepared the way for the changes the Council would later bring. This is obvious in the case of the theologians working in the generation before Vatican II, who were themselves among the formative figures at the Council, such as Congar, Rahner, and de Lubac. But a few nineteenth-century theologians are sometimes counted as more distant preparers of the way to the world of postconciliar theology, including Scheeben himself.²⁷ Only the theology of the recent past, it seems, has intrinsic value. All other theology matters only in relation to where we are now, and a theologian's learning is measured mainly by the extent to which she or he draws on extra-theological texts—in (continental) philosophy, literary theory, postcolonial theory, and so forth.

²⁷ Thus a volume of snippets from Scheeben's writings appeared as part of a German series with the title *Wegbereiter heutiger Theologie* [Those who prepared the way for today's theology], along with volumes on Möhler, Hirscher, Döllinger, and others: *Matthias Joseph Scheeben*, ed. Eugen Paul (Graz: Styria Verlag, 1976).

Scheeben, however, views the relationship between theology past and present quite differently. He practices what has lately come to be called, with reference to the Church before and after the Council, a hermeneutic of continuity. On his reading, a very broad swath of theological material is relevant to present speculative work, from the ante-Nicene Fathers to his own contemporaries. Unlike his teacher Joseph Kleutgen, he does not have a preference in principle for “the theology of earlier times” (in Kleutgen’s case, primarily a Suarezian reading of St. Thomas) over that of his own day. Conversely, unlike some of his own near predecessors and contemporaries (Georg Hermes and Döllinger come to mind), he sees no bright line in time, before which theology cannot address our present questions—whether that line be the Enlightenment, Kant, Hegel, or whatever. The speculative theologian may find either old tools or new ones useful in his task of understanding the faith. He has no reason to assume in advance that only one sort of tool will do the job.

(3) *Rigor* and (4) *Boldness*

As a theologian’s virtues, rational rigor and speculative boldness go together. Careful distinction and inference alone can make for speculative developments genuinely warranted by Scripture and Church doctrine. Warranted speculative reflection is the ordinary means by which we come to see more clearly the fathomless riches of the divine mysteries presented to us by Scripture and Catholic teaching. Without rational rigor, speculation easily degenerates into arbitrary invention. Rigor without speculative audacity, while fine as far as it goes, is unlikely to help us move beyond the articulation and defense of individual doctrines to a perception of the luminous interconnection of all the divine mysteries, what Scheeben calls their “wondrous harmony.”²⁸ When rigor and boldness come together, dogmatic theology is—among the other characteristics it acquires when practiced well—deeply systematic. At just this point, dogmatic theology is perhaps also at its most creative, though, as we shall see momentarily, true speculative creativity comes not from trying to be creative—from self-conscious virtuosity—but from humbly seeking to understand the divine mysteries as God wills in love to make them known. Creativity is a mere byproduct of this effort.

There is much to be said, of course, about the role of reason in theology, and the significance of argument, rather than mere temporal proximity (or, for that matter, distance), first person authority, or pragmatic usefulness in sorting out true theological claims from false, and pertinent

²⁸ *Mysterien*, §4 (*Mysteries*, 19).

from irrelevant. Likewise there is much to be said about the distinctive illuminating power of speculative reason in theology, when applied with rigor and boldness to understanding the mysteries of faith. For the moment, though, a brief example from Scheeben's treatment of "the significance and motivation of the incarnation" may help to give a sense of what can happen when rigor and audacity come together.²⁹

Among the more arresting features of recent Christology, both Catholic and Protestant, is a marked shift away from traditional understandings of the cross. For many contemporary theologians, the Passion and cross of Jesus are not primarily about redemption or liberation from sin, if indeed the suffering of Jesus is seen to have anything at all to do with our deliverance from sin. Instead the cross has come to be chiefly about the problem of evil. Where it was once assumed to be the cornerstone of Christian teaching about redemption from God for sinful humanity, the cross is now often the cornerstone of a certain sort of theodicy, a certain manner of justifying the ways of God to suffering humanity. It is no longer about (or chiefly about) what we must offer God in order to be acceptable to him, but about what God must suffer in order to be acceptable to us, and worthy of our worship. The cross is mainly, if not solely, where God himself fully identifies with and experiences our suffering, even to the point of God-forsakenness, and so becomes a God in whom we suffering humans can believe.³⁰

With this goes an important corollary, a widely asserted speculative connection: Jesus cannot have had the immediate vision of God in his earthly life. Had he possessed the *visio*, it would have impeded, if not entirely eliminated, his real identification with our suffering on the cross—above all, the very possibility of an experience of the hopeless absence of God. But this compassionate identification with us nothing may be allowed to impede. So the claim that Jesus must have had the *visio* from the outset of his human existence, shared by Catholic and Protestant theology alike from the Middle Ages well into modernity, has to be wrong. If Jesus did have the direct vision in this world, the earliest it could have come was at his resurrection from the dead.³¹

²⁹ The phrase is from Scheeben's title to *Mysterien*, §64 (*Mysteries*, 418).

³⁰ For more on this Christological outlook and some of its main advocates, see my essay "The Dereliction of Christ and the Impassibility of God," in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 246–98.

³¹ These now common ideas about the cross and the limits of Christ's human knowledge may reflect deeper shifts in Christian piety over the last century or more. But they are in any case theologically widespread.

In one way Scheeben agrees with this current Christological trend. The chief purpose or end of the Incarnation of the Logos is not humanity's redemption from sin. At this point Scheeben embraces a claim commonly made in the Franciscan theological tradition since the middle of the thirteenth century and subject to many interesting variations. In Scheeben's own version (and here he differs from many in the Franciscan tradition), the Incarnation remains contingent on sin, and is occasioned by sin, even though repair of the damage wrought by sin is not its primary purpose. In God's ordering of the world he has actually made, the Incarnation thus remains intimately linked to the cross. As a result, the chief purpose of the Incarnation (however that purpose is understood) will have to be realized or accomplished on the cross, and not apart from it.

At this point, though, Scheeben parts company with the current Christological trend. The primary purpose of the Incarnation, even at the point of the cross, cannot be God's identification with our misery, real though that is. Still less can it be God's subjection to that misery at its most extreme point, the paradoxical acceptance by God of the human experience of the absence and silence of God. Precisely the cross attests that the ultimate purpose of the Word's becoming flesh is "the glory of Christ and of God himself," such that by way of the Incarnation, even the creature offers up "the infinite glorification of God."³²

Having thus distinguished the Incarnation's overarching purpose from the particular manner in which the purpose is realized, Scheeben confronts the speculative challenge of explaining how the cross accomplishes the ultimate aim of the Incarnation when that aim could have been fully realized without sin, and so without the cross. This speculative challenge has its roots in the Bible, and not simply in Scheeben's theology. At "the hour" of his Passion and cross, Jesus entreats the Father to glorify him and promises to glorify the Father in return (Jn 17:2), completing the glorification of the Father he has accomplished "on earth" (17:4). Jesus' imminent Passion is evidently at once the Father's glorification of him and his own glorification of the Father. Yet the glory about to be visible in Jesus' Passion is just that glory he had in the Father's presence "before the world was made" (17:5).

Current Christology regularly unites Jesus' eternal glory to his temporal glorification of the Father on the cross by suggesting that some form of proto-Calvary, a primordial kenosis or distance from the Father, is already constitutive of Jesus' eternal glory with the Father, and is now simply manifest on the cross. Had Scheeben no other reason to reject this recourse, mere consistency would be enough. Assuming (as he does) that

³² *Mysterien*, §64; the quoted phrases are from GS II, 346–47 and 350 (*Mysteries*, 419, 423).

suffering and death are inseparably linked to sin, to hold that the chief purpose of the Incarnation is not the conquest of sin rules out the possibility that intimations of suffering and death might seep into God's original intention to become incarnate in the world, let alone into the eternal, glorious being of the Son with the Father before the world was made. The cross must accomplish, in its own way, a divine purpose that could be accomplished without it.

From before the foundation of the world the Son fully possesses the Father's glory. The Son becomes flesh, Scheeben argues, in order that creation too may radiate the glory of God, by joining in the Son's infinite glorification of the Father. To the mediatorial office of the God-man, in particular to his priesthood, belongs the work of bringing humanity to share in his own eternal glorification of the Father. And since humanity includes both the material and spiritual sides of creation, the whole creation glorifies the Father in this act of the incarnate Son. "As mediator for creatures before God, he offers up to God the hymn of an honor and praise equal to his glory."³³ This, the creature's perfect praise of the creator, certainly involves self-donation and subjection to the Father, but as such it does not include, let alone require, suffering and death. In fact, suffering may seem to diminish the creature's praise and to occlude the presence of the God he seeks to glorify.

That might be true if we considered suffering only in terms of its impact upon the creature who undergoes it against his will. For ourselves—that is, when it comes to our own happiness—we rightly decline to suffer willingly except to acquire some benefit that outweighs the suffering. Since God incarnate has no benefit to acquire, it might seem unfitting, if not morally unworthy, for God not simply to assume flesh, but to assume flesh susceptible to suffering and death. For *others*, however, we hope we would be willing to suffer not only to acquire some good for them but above all simply out of love for them. Why else, strange as it seems to us, would "the saints love suffering, and nothing more than suffering," unless willingly to suffer for others is most fully to offer ourselves to them in love, and so "to show them by suffering our love and admiration, more than by all the works we do for their benefit, or all the goods we give them"? This is not only the noblest, the morally purest, form of suffering but "the purest self-sacrifice and the most exalted virtue."³⁴

³³ *Mysterien*, §62 (GS II, 340; *Mysteries*, 411).

³⁴ *Mysterien*, §64 (GS II, 352 [the saints], 351; *Mysteries*, 426, 425). Some strains of current theology will perhaps see here a masochistic (or sadistic) exuberance about suffering, but Scheeben obviously declines to offer any valorization of suffering for its own sake, or even for the sake of the sufferer. Suffering that

Jesus' glorification of the Father, the perfect completion of the work he took flesh to do, is his free acceptance of fathomless suffering out of love for others. In Gethsemane and on Golgotha, the other whom Jesus loves in total surrender and donation of self is the Father who sent him, and this love of the Father unto death is precisely his perfect glorification of the Father. He accepts this suffering out of love for us too, of course—but the love for us that he enacts on the Mount of Olives and on the cross above all offers us a share in his own prior love for the Father, and so in his perfect glorification of the Father.

The glorification of the Father that comes to pass in the Passion and death of Jesus thus has, as it were, several layers. At the heart of the matter is the only-begotten Son's ceaseless glorification in love of the Father from whom he is, a love the same now and forever as it was before the foundation of the world. Now, though, the Son offers this glorification in our flesh, as an act not only of divine but of specifically human love. He makes, in fact, that total gift of self which every creature at heart longs to offer the Father in thanksgiving and gratitude. As the human act of the only-begotten Son, this gift of God incarnate succeeds in being a human offering of infinite worth, adequate to the Father's glory. So far suffering and death have not entered the picture. The incarnate Son's total self-donation to the Father does not as such require suffering and death, and in a world without sin that donation would take place without the Passion and the cross. In the world we actually inhabit, though, disfigured as it is by sin, the incarnate Word's human act of total self-giving to the Father will take place by way of suffering freely accepted, and will be complete only in death. What glorifies the Father in the garden and on the cross is not, then, Jesus' suffering as such but the fearsome intensity of the love, for the Father and so for us, with which he accepts it.

Thus Scheeben employs the traditional idea that the chief end of the Incarnation is to realize goods not contingent on the conquest of sin—on his account, creation's unsurpassable glorification of its God—to solve the speculative problem posed by John 17. The cross repairs, indeed, the damage done by sin, but it does so precisely by being the Son's enactment

comes upon us against our own will, whether at the hands of others or from impersonal forces (such as those that cause our bodies to decay) simply diminishes us. Suffering we accept for the sake of a good that results may enhance rather than diminish us (e.g., aerobic exercise, which contributes to bodily health), but since voluntary suffering of this kind ultimately stems from self-interest, its moral worth, while real, is necessarily limited. The suffering Scheeben really does valorize—the suffering that comes to pass on the cross, and in the hearts of the saints who take up the cross—is of supreme moral worth just because it is neither involuntary nor self-interested.

in our flesh, under the conditions of sin, of his eternal glorification of the Father. “The revelation of the glory and love of God reaches its summit” when, on the cross, God “makes sin cooperate with its own defeat even in its greatest triumph. Sin celebrated its triumph when it strove to, and really did, slay God’s anointed. But when Christ apparently succumbed to [the power of sin], at the same instant he undertook the supreme act of adoration and glorification of God, which not only compensated for sin but drew from the poison of its sting the most precious honey. His act turned sin’s intention into its opposite, and humiliated sin more deeply than even the eternal torments of hell could do—and thereby prepared for God a triumph such as would not have been possible without sin.”³⁵

Among the merits of Scheeben’s solution to this particular speculative problem is his success at uniting the cross with the Son’s eternal glorification of the Father, while not allowing any taint of suffering and death, let alone any proto-Calvary, to enter into the person-constituting relationships between the Father and his only-begotten, and so into the Son’s eternal glorification of the Father. Keeping any hint of the cross out of the processions of the divine persons also helps him avoid the temptation to see the chief purpose of the Incarnation as the divine identification with our misery that undoubtedly does take place in it. Theologians who give in to this temptation tend to look for ever more extreme forms of suffering for the incarnate Son to undergo, ending in the Son’s abandonment or rejection by the Father. Seen in this way, the cross becomes the final outworking of a primordial conflict and opposition within God’s own being—a proto-Calvary.³⁶

In Scheeben’s theology of the cross, by contrast, Jesus not only loves God in his Passion and death (as theologians of divine abandonment also

³⁵ *Mysterien*, §64 (GS II, 353; *Mysteries*, 427–28). Here, it should be observed, Scheeben fundamentally follows St. Thomas. Christ’s Passion is a more than sufficient recompense for the whole offense of humanity against God, Thomas argues, not simply on account of “the magnitude of the suffering he assumed,” but above all “on account of the magnitude of the love (*caritas*) with which he suffered” (*ST* III, q. 48, a. 2, c). St. Thomas is speaking of the satisfaction that Christ accomplishes in his Passion, which of course presupposes sin; Scheeben’s gloss is that satisfaction is the fruit Christ’s love for, and glorification of, the Father bears under the conditions of sin. “The fruit [of Christ’s moral action] is found in the supreme glorification of God at which Christ’s actions aim; satisfaction for all the dishonor done to God comes with this” (*Katholische Dogmatik*, Bk. V, no. 1005; GS VI/2, 41).

³⁶ The Hegelian provenance of this modern theological trope is important to understanding it; see my essay “The Absolute and the Trinity,” *Pro Ecclesia* (forthcoming).

insist) but out of this love offers up to God on the cross the supreme creaturely act of adoration and glorification. An experience by Jesus of the most extreme possible Godforsakenness, his entering into the abyss of nothingness where God is not, might be compatible with a certain kind of love for God, with the servant creature's acceptance and endurance of all that comes from the hand of God (thus Job 1–2). It is not, however, compatible with the perfect love of charity, with the filial friendship with God that rejoices above all in the adoration and glorification of the Father, and offers up to him at this moment, on Calvary, the supreme glory and praise due to him as God. A radically forsaking Father presumably cannot be the object of this act of love, but only the Father in his supreme goodness, in his infinite glory as God. And a radically forsaken and abandoned Son cannot offer this act of love, but only a Son whose human soul is filled with the glory of God, who knows exactly what he is offering and to whom he is offering it—a Son who, *above all* on the cross, lives in the possession of the immediate vision of God, and sees the face of the Father.

Thus Scheeben is deeply right, I think, to say that the cross and death of the incarnate Word can only be the apparent triumph of sin. They cannot put Christ in hell (or beyond), infinitely far from the Father. As he willingly enters into death, Christ has already offered to the Father the act of perfect love and adoration of which the devil sought, by that death, to deprive him, and all creation with him. When his friends lay Jesus in the tomb, sin has already been forever humiliated, the devil is disarmed, and death “no longer has any power over him.”

(5) *Humility*

Reading Scheeben gives one the clear sense that he thought of humility as a speculative virtue, indeed the virtue *sine qua non* of the dogmatic theologian.

Modern theology has made familiar to its practitioners the figure of the virtuoso theologian. The theological virtuoso, at his best a thinker of great learning, surveys the whole of the Christian tradition, especially in its reflective moments, with an earnest desire to improve upon the past. He seeks an insight previously unpossessed, or possessed by only a few, in the hope that by it he can set right unresolved problems in the tradition, or problems heretofore unrecognized. Such problems, those worthy of the virtuoso's effort, will naturally be systemic in nature, not mere isolated difficulties of the sort that a good doctoral dissertation suffices to clear up. In modern Protestant theology, virtuosity has been pretty much a vocational obligation for the dogmatic theologian, since only systemic insight making

good the shortcomings of the past justifies writing a dogmatics in the first place. But Catholic theology has not been without its own virtuosos.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Scheeben's theological writing, at least to this reader, is his utter humility before the divine mysteries he seeks to understand. Like all real humility, it stems not from timidity or abjectness but from love and gratitude to the God who, solely for the good of his creatures, has exalted us beyond all that we could otherwise ask or imagine by opening up to us the innermost treasures of his own life. Immensely learned though he is, Scheeben is wholly indifferent to virtuosity. He seeks in love to understand with all the resources of mind and reason what he knows, above all, can be understood only by the poor in spirit.

Unsurprisingly, then, Scheeben concludes the *Mysterien* by finding in Mary's humility "the ideal of reason," precisely the reason of the speculative theologian. "As the call to be the mother of the God-man . . . raised Mary from a lowly handmaid to the Queen of all things," he writes, "so there is no greater distinction for reason than its call to cooperate with faith in producing theological knowledge. In this way reason is raised above its natural lowliness to the highest nobility. Yet as Mary also . . . was taken up to be the Mother of God precisely through the humble obedience of the handmaid of the Lord, and as Mother of God retained the humility of the Lord's handmaid, so reason can take faith into itself only through a humble recognition of the rights of revelation, and an obedient submission to the call of God."³⁷

Why Scheeben?

More by what it did than by what it said in so many words, Vatican II urged a renewed engagement with the scriptural and patristic sources of the faith, a *ressourcement*. Of this there has been much, and historical study of the Fathers and the medievals flourishes among Catholic theologians.³⁸ The Council certainly did not recommend, either by what it said or by what it did, an abandonment of dogmatic theology or of the scholastic traditions which have so deeply informed Catholic theological speculation since the Middle Ages. Yet Catholic theology quite soon began to take the Council as proclaiming a release from captivity to "neo-scholasticism," an opprobrious designation of uncertain, but often

³⁷ *Mysterien*, §109 (GS II, 662–63; *Mysteries*, 786).

³⁸ Whether Catholic biblical scholarship exactly flourishes is another matter, due mainly to continuing perplexity (hardly unique to Catholics) about how to integrate historical-critical exegesis into a properly ecclesial and theological interpretation of Scripture.

very broad, meaning and application. Coupled with this was a cheerful dismissal of the innumerable “manuals” or “handbooks”—many, like Scheeben’s *Handbuch der katholischen Dogmatik*, actually far too bulky to be carried about by hand—which had been the standard literary form for comprehensive dogmatic theology in the Catholic world since at least the early nineteenth century.

The thought, no doubt, was that new and more fruitful forms of speculative theology would rise up to take the place of the scripturally barren and rationalistic, crabbed and hairsplitting manuals. This has not happened. The rejection of established dogmatic traditions and approaches has led not to new and more vital forms of Catholic systematic reflection but to the effective disappearance of dogmatic theology altogether. While the decades since Vatican II have certainly seen a renewal of Catholic theology on many fronts, it would be hard for even the most optimistic among us to claim that speculative theology has been one of them.

Here I will not try to reflect on the causes of this unanticipated development, or to belabor the unwelcome consequences for the Church when Catholic theology loses much of its ability to articulate the meaning or content of the faith as a whole in a precise and persuasive way. I simply want to underline the absence of dogmatic theology as an obvious fact of Catholic intellectual life today.

Of course many Catholic theologians will deny that it is a fact and will point in proof to Rahner, Balthasar, or Lonergan (perhaps all three) as undeniable examples of renewed, post-scholastic forms of dogmatics. The standard Scheeben sets for dogmatic reflection may cause one to wonder, though, about the extent to which any of these formative figures of recent Catholic theology ought to count as a dogmatic theologian in the first place.

A brilliant and searching theological essayist (before he began, in the 60s and 70s, repeatedly to travel the same well-worn tracks and, not coincidentally, to leave his scholastic past ever farther behind), Karl Rahner’s one late attempt at a more comprehensive dogmatic statement, the *Foundations of Christian Faith*, even his admirers mostly regard as unsuccessful. In both style and substance, the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar is at once remarkably original and, to put it gently, eccentric. He is Catholic theology’s leading recent candidate for a modern-style virtuoso, and it belongs among the curious developments of the postconciliar era that some now hold him up as the norm and model for all Catholic theology. Whatever their intrinsic merits (on which the jury is out and will remain so, I suspect, for many years), Balthasar’s theological proposals do not so much renew dogmatics as require a genuine dogmatic renewal in order for us to assess them adequately.

Bernard Lonergan clearly was a dogmatic theologian of remarkable gifts, at least in his writings on the Trinity, Christ, and grace. But he too produced only pieces of a dogmatic theology, and the genuinely dogmatic parts of his corpus are also those which have had the least influence. No doubt this is due in part to their having been until recently available only in Latin, but it has to be said that Lonergan's impact as a whole has been considerably less than that of Rahner or Balthasar.

For the moment, though, let us grant that, as many now hold, the dogmatic contributions of these three exceptional theologians (or at least one of them) will prove to be of enduring value. If so, this only underlines the disappearance of dogmatic theology as a fact of contemporary Catholic intellectual life. Rahner, Balthasar, and Lonergan have certainly produced followers, but their followers have not done dogmatic theology. Whatever their own intentions, all three of them have been influential not primarily in prompting others to talk about God but in prompting others to talk about them.

Why, it might fairly be asked, should the disappearance of dogmatic or speculative theology be thought of as a problem? The sort of work Scheeben did may be gone, or nearly so, but whether Catholics, or anybody else, should care about getting it back is another matter.

We ought to care. Dogmatics is the application of human reason, at once rigorous and submissive, to the highest matters of divine truth. It is often argued, not least by Pope Benedict XVI, that when religious belief rejects the proper ministrations of reason—when it tries to carry on without the dogmatic virtues—it offers an open door to moral abuse in the name of religion, and at worst to murderous fanaticism. With at least equal vigor (though with considerably less support from the wider world) Benedict has argued that reason, when it rejects the light that faith alone can provide, cannot help falling into relativism, moral and otherwise. Without the transcendent purpose provided by the dogmatic virtues, reason—submitting not to the gentle light of faith but to the nihilism that reduces reason to a sinister technical instrument in the hands of the will to power—eventually inflicts upon itself a mortal wound.

That faith and reason need each other, though in different ways, is of course a deep laid principle of dogmatic theology—in a sense, the originating principle of the whole enterprise. In the influential formulation of St. Thomas Aquinas, robustly embraced by Scheeben, the grace of faith does not eliminate natural reason but presupposes it, since divine teaching presupposes a reasoning being who, as such, can be taught. At the same time reason finds its perfection in the knowledge faith gives, which heals reason's wounds and lifts reason up to know the deep things of God.

Different religions may have different ways of looking at the role of reason in relation to what they believe. In Catholic Christianity, though, the deep things of God are *meant* to be searched out by the rational creature, as the rational creature is meant by God to find its perfection in the knowledge and love of the divine depths. God reveals the secrets of his innermost life, and the sublime destiny he holds out to us there, so that the mind can receive them, ponder them, and begin here and now the journey toward its destiny in God. The deep things of God can be revealed to us in no other way.

To give up on the most diligent and comprehensive application of human reason to the highest mysteries of Christian faith is not to honor these mysteries but to hold them at a safe distance. Seen only from afar, the divine mysteries may seem vague to us and so make no intellectual and moral demands on us. Our distance gives us the impression that we can make of them what we will yet still know them as they are, or know them as much as we need to do. But we deceive ourselves. If we would receive the mysteries of God, we must allow ourselves to be drawn close to them with Mary's humility and to ponder them—as she has done—to the furthest limits of our creaturely reason. Failing to cultivate the dogmatic virtues does not leave us free to approach the mysteries of faith in other ways. It is not to receive them at all.

In the deepest sense the value of dogmatic theology, and the need for it, lie in the interior of the Church's faith itself. But what flows (or fails to flow) from the Church's interior life has a deep impact on her flourishing as a public communal and institutional reality. Vital speculative theology enables the Church to articulate the meaning and content of her faith as a whole, and down to the most beautiful detail, in a precise and persuasive way. When speculative theology languishes, the Church loses much of her ability to say clearly what should be believed and why it should be believed—not only to outsiders whom she hopes to invite in, but above all to herself and her own members.

We cannot create, or re-invent, an almost vanished theological culture at will. As we cannot reproduce by mere effort the learning Scheeben found necessary for speculative theology, so we cannot generate by mere effort the balance of rigor and boldness by which he carried it out. But we can read what he left us, let him lead us to others, and pray for the humility he brought to the task. The way back to a renewed and vital theological culture is long, but this is surely a good place to start. **N-V**