

Christ as *Deus Absconditus* in Thomas Aquinas's Theology

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THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN the two natures in Christ is the subject of one of the greatest theological disputes. The way in which this relationship is defined determines the perception not only of Christ himself and his mission but also of the mystery of the divine nature and the Trinity and numerous other fundamental issues. For example, the statements that the Word's assumption of human nature causes changes in his divine nature and that whatever happens in Christ's human nature has an actual impact on his divine nature are obviously remote from what is called a "classical theism," known from the works by Augustine, Aquinas, Bonaventure, or Duns Scotus. Martin Luther was perfectly well aware of this when he put forward a new understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum* principle, making way for radical redefinitions not only in Christology but also, as a direct consequence, in the theology of the Trinity.¹

This trend, timidly introduced by Luther, was strongly reinforced by nineteenth-century kenoticists and later prevailed in a number of twentieth-century Christological and Trinitarian concepts. Some

¹ See: Marc Lienhard, *Luther: Witness to Jesus Christ* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1982), 337–45; Dennis Ngien, "Chalcedonian Christology and Beyond: Luther's Understanding of the *Communicatio idiomatum*," *Heythrop Journal* 13 (January 2004): 54–68; Bernhard Lohse, *Martin Luther's Theology: Its Historical and Systematic Development* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1999), 228–31; Klaas Zwanepol, "A Human God: Some Remarks on Luther's Christology," *Concordia* 30 (2004): 40–53; Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change? The Word's Becoming in the Incarnation* (Still River, MA: St. Bede's, 1985), 101–10.

of the key elements of this process were: introduction of a weaker notion of the divine transcendence, negation of the incarnate Logos's immutability, and redefinition of the relationships within the Holy Trinity. Some truly "human" characteristics were assigned to the triune Creator: he "became" mutable and passible, full of passions and experiencing history in his divine being. The general direction of these changes may be briefly characterized as a radical increase in blurring the ontic boundary between the Creator and the creation, the boundary that was "heroically" defended by classical and Thomistic Christology. But this modern and contemporary process of transforming the Trinitarian theology began with reflection on the Incarnation and was an attempt to find a new answer to the question on the nature of God and its relation to the human nature assumed in the Incarnation.

I do not intend in this article to discuss or criticize these new theologies of the nature of God and of the Trinity. This has been done many a time by Thomists, and to good effect.² I treat these contemporary trends only as a background that helps to emphasize one of the significant themes in Aquinas's Christology: the theology of the incarnated God as the God who hides himself, the *Deus absconditus*. This expression was derived from Isaiah 45:15: "Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself, O God of Israel, the Savior!" ("Vere tu es Deus absconditus, Deus Israel salvator"). It is worth it to note at the outset that, for Aquinas, *Deus absconditus* refers almost exclusively to Christ, to the incarnated Son of God. It is thought-provoking in itself that St. Thomas, who was so sensitive about accentuating divine *incomprehensibilitas*, very rarely uses this name in connection with the mystery of God's nature *in se* and limits its use mainly to the description of Jesus Christ, the God enfleshed.

The name *Deus absconditus* plays a significant role in Aquinas's Christology, as it defines the identity of the incarnated Son of God, who remains the "God who hides himself" despite the fact that he assumed human nature and allowed its unimaginable union with

² See: Michael Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2008 [originally 1986]); Matthew Levering, *Scripture and Metaphysics: Aquinas and the Renewal of Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004); Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2000); Weinandy, *Does God Change?*; Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015).

himself. For, even though “per carnem Filius Dei visibilis apparuit [through flesh, the Son of God became visible],”³ still, as Aquinas states:

The divinity of Christ is covered over [*occulta*], and it is apart [*separate*] from every creature because of its excellence: “God who is over all be blessed for ever” (Rom 9:5); “Truly, you art a God who hides yourself” (Isa 45:15).⁴

And in another place, he writes:

For the assumption of humanity . . . took place in a unity of person, not in a unity of nature, which might result in our agreement with those who held that God is not exalted above all things [*super omnia exaltatum*], and said that God was the soul of the universe, or something of the sort.⁵

Therefore Jesus Christ, the incarnated God, may be called *Deus absconditus* because his divine nature remains immutable and transcends the creation even in its hypostatic union with the human nature. I am convinced that this theme of Aquinas's Christology is definitely worth analyzing, especially when one has in mind the above-mentioned trends in modern theology.

How Does God Hide Himself in Christ?

When do we say that something is concealed (*abscondo*) from us? It may be “concealed” when our intellect is too weak to recognize it.

³ *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 5, a. 3, ad 1, in *Summa Theologiae: Tertia Pars*, 1–59, trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P. (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of the Sacred Doctrine, 2012), 70. All further English translation from the *tertia pars* of ST will come from this edition.

⁴ *Super Ioanmem* 20, lec. 1 (no. 2483), in *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 9–21*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P. (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013), 459. All further English citations of the commentary on John will be taken, depending on location in the Gospel, either from this volume or from *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John: Chapters 1–8*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P. (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2013).

⁵ *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 55 (no. 3938), in *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith Contra Gentiles, Book Four: Salvation*, trans. Charles J. O’Neil (Garden City, NY: Image Books, 1957), 235–36. All further English of SCG IV will be from this edition. See also *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 2, ad 15.

Or perhaps some veil (*velamen*) separates us from the object of our cognition. Thus, the candle cannot be seen because of one's blindness or because it is covered and hidden from view.⁶ These are precisely two ways in which, in Christ, the incarnated Word of God, "are hid [*sunt absconditi*] all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:3). These treasures are concealed from us both by the illness of our eyes and by the fact that they are covered (*velatum*) with two veils. The first of these veils is that of creatureliness (see Rom 1:20): "At this time our intellect cannot come to this knowledge [knowledge of God] except through the likeness of creatures."⁷ The second is being veiled in flesh (*velatum in carne*), for the Word "became flesh" (John 1:14). So, even if we do partially see God, we cannot see him in his entity, for he exists as *Deus absconditus* (Isa 45:15).⁸ God hid himself in the infirmity of humanity (*occultus in infirmitate humanitatis*):⁹

Christ is called a fish insofar as his divinity is hidden, for it is characteristic of fish to remain hidden in the water: "Truly, you are a God who hides yourself" (Isa 45:15).¹⁰

Such concealment is characteristic of the Lord's first coming, while his second coming will be evident.¹¹

The nature of this concealment may be described in various ways. In the beginning, we may distinguish between what is being hidden and what hides it, between what has been veiled and the veil itself. Considering the assumption of human nature in the Incarnation and

⁶ See *Super Colossenses* 2, lec. 1 (no. 82), in *Commentary on the Letters of Saint Paul to the Philippians, Colossians, Thessalonians, Timothy, Titus, and Philemon*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, O.P., ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón (Lander, WY: Aquinas Institute for the Study of the Sacred Doctrine, 2012). Further English from these commentaries of Thomas will be taken from this volume.

⁷ *Super Colossenses* 2, lec. 1 (no. 82), 104.

⁸ See *Super Colossenses* 2, lec. 1 (no. 82).

⁹ See *Super Psalmos* 49, no. 2, in *Commentaire sur Les Psaumes*, 628 (because the French edition of the Latin of the commentary on the Psalms is considered to be much better edited and more faithful to Thomas's manuscript than the other major editions, such as Parma [which *corpusthomisticum.org* uses for the commentary], I provide the French edition page numbers in parentheses for all subsequent citations of the commentary).

¹⁰ *Super Ioanmem* 21, lec. 2 (no. 2599).

¹¹ See *Super Psalmos* 9, no. 1 (French ed., 113). See also: *Super Psalmos* 49, no. 2 (French ed., 628); *In IV sent.*, d. 47, q. 1, a. 1, qcl. 3, ad 1; *Super Matthaeum* 16, lec. 1 (no. 1358).

the *humiliatio* of the Cross, in both these events were hidden: God himself;¹² his great dignity (*maiestas*);¹³ his face (*vultus*);¹⁴ his glory (*gloria*);¹⁵ and the divinity (*divinitas* or *deitas*)¹⁶ and *claritas* of the Son of God (John 17:1).¹⁷ Meanwhile, the cover or veil itself is the weakness (*infirmetas*) of the assumed human nature,¹⁸ meaning the infirmity of humanity (*infirmetas humanitatis*)¹⁹ and its smallness (*parvitas*).²⁰ This weakness may be further specified as weakness of flesh (*infirmetas carnis*),²¹ which is a “veil of divinity” (*velamen deitatis*),²² such as mortality²³ or the weakness revealed by experiencing hunger, thirst, physical pain, and sadness.²⁴

In other words, the Son of God and the true God, by assuming the smallness and weakness of the human nature, has hidden himself “according to [with respect to] divine nature” (*secundum Divinam naturam*).²⁵ Aquinas therefore refers Ezekiel 32:7—“I will cover the sun with a cloud”²⁶—precisely to the Incarnation:

Origen says: . . . “the light [that] shines in the darkness,” is Christ coming into the world, having a body capable of suffering and without sin, but “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom 8:3). The light is in the flesh, that is, the flesh of Christ, which is called a darkness insofar as it has a likeness to sinful flesh. As

¹² See *Super Isaiam* 9, vv. 110–15.

¹³ See: *Super Isaiam* 53, vv. 71–79; *Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 1 (no. 1746).

¹⁴ See *Super Isaiam* 53, vv. 71–79.

¹⁵ See *Super Psalmos* 9, no. 1 (French ed., 113).

¹⁶ See: *Super Psalmos* 9, no. 1 (French ed., 113); *Super Ioanmem* 5, lec. 1 (no. 708); 20, lec. 1 (no. 2483); *Super Hebraeos* 10, lec. 2 (no. 502).

¹⁷ See SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434a).

¹⁸ See *Super Ioanmem* 5, lec. 1 (no. 708).

¹⁹ See *Super Psalmos* 49, no. 2 (French ed., 628).

²⁰ See *Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 1 (no. 1746).

²¹ See: *Super Isaiam* 53, vv. 71–79; SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434a).

²² *Super Hebraeos* 10, lec. 2 (no. 502).

²³ See *Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 1 (no. 1746).

²⁴ See *Super Isaiam* 53, vv. 71–79.

²⁵ SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434–35): “Filius est occultus secundum divinam naturam: nam Patri et Filio commune est quod dicitur Isaiae 45,15: *Vere tu es Deus absconditus, sanctus Israel, Salvator* [the Son also is hidden according to the divine nature, for common to both Father and Son is the saying of Isaias (45:15): ‘Verily Thou art a hidden God, the God of Israel, the savior’].”

²⁶ The whole verse goes as follows: “When I blot you out, I will cover the heavens, and make their stars dark; I will cover the sun with a cloud, and the moon shall not give its light” (Ezek 32:7).

if to say: The light, i.e., the Word of God, veiled about by the darkness of the flesh [*circumvelatum tenebris carnis*], shines on the world; “I will cover the sun with a cloud” (Ezek 32:7).²⁷

Of course, the fact that the divine nature is hidden in the “cloud” of the human nature does not mean that there has been any change in the former. The assumption of human *infirmity* did not cause the integrity (*integritas*) of the Word’s divine nature to lose its perfection,²⁸ or the Word to abandon his greatness (*magnitudo*)²⁹ and diminish his dignity (*dignitas*).³⁰ The Logos is unchanged in his divine nature, though he is hidden behind the veil of flesh.

This mysterious concealment may be explained only by the theology of the hypostatic union: although the divine and human natures are most widely apart, they “come together” (*conveniunt*) in one *suppositum*.³¹ Jesus Christ is thus a union of two natures, and the existence of *suppositum* allows us to predicate of him both divine and human properties, even if they are contrary to each other: mortal *and* immortal, corruptible *and* incorruptible, simple *and* composite, and so on. Still, the properties of the two natures do not mix, as both remain themselves.³²

It is impossible for contraries [*opposite*] to be predicated of the same in the same respects [*secundum idem*], but nothing prevents their being predicated of the same in different aspects [*secundum diversa*]. And thus contraries are predicated of Christ, not in the same, but in different natures.³³

²⁷ *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 3 (no. 105). See also: *Super Psalmos* 17, no. 11 (French ed., 203); 49, no. 2 (French ed., 628).

²⁸ See SCG IV, ch. 41 (no. 3791).

²⁹ See: SCG IV, ch. 34 (no. 3715c); *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, ad 14.

³⁰ See ST III, q. 5, a. 1, ad 2.

³¹ See ST III, q. 16, a. 1, ad 1.

³² See *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 5, ad 9.

³³ ST III, q. 16, a. 4, ad 1 (obj. 1 reads: “Impossibile est enim opposita de eodem praedicari. Sed ea quae sunt humanae naturae, sunt contraria his quae sunt propria Dei: Deus enim est increatus, immutabilis et aeternus; ad humanam autem naturam pertinet ut sit creata, temporalis et mutabilis. Non ergo ea quae sunt naturae humane, possunt dici de Deo [For contrary things cannot be said of the same. Now, what belongs to human nature is contrary to what is proper to God, since God is uncreated, immutable, and eternal, and it belongs to the human nature to be created temporal and mutable. Therefore what belongs to the human nature cannot be said of God]).”

If we take these properties—for instance, man as “mortal,” “passible,” and “sad”—in the abstract (*in abstracto*),³⁴ in isolation from the hypostatic union, then we can by no means apply them to God. It would be a blasphemy and derogatory to his honor.³⁵ However, if these properties are predicated of one hypostasis in which the human nature was assumed, then it is not a blasphemy and not ungodly to predicate them *in concreto*.³⁶ Therefore, predicating human properties of the *suppositum* of the Son of God is not a blasphemy, though it does not change the fact that this one *suppositum* exists in two natures whose properties are completely separate; the Word “assumed flesh too, which is something far removed (*elongatus*) from the simplicity of his nature.”³⁷

Thus, it is right to say that the divine nature is indeed hidden in the human nature, for the properties of the latter, especially the defects (*defectus*)³⁸ assumed by the Logos, are radically different from the properties of the former. Therefore, it is the theology of the hypostatic union that allows us to recognize that the properties of the unified natures remain different even in the unimaginable union in which human nature becomes the very own nature of the Word.³⁹ Due to this theology, it is also valid to state that some of the properties of the human nature assumed by the Word cover the

³⁴ See *ST* III, q. 16, a. 5, corp.

³⁵ See *ST* III, q. 16, a. 4, ad 2.

³⁶ See *ST* III, q. 16, a. 2, ad 2; a. 5, corp.

³⁷ *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 7 (no. 169).

³⁸ See *Super Philipenses* 2, lec. 2 (no. 60): “. . . defectus omnes et proprietates continentes speciem, praeter peccatum, suscepit. Et ideo habitu inventus ut homo, scilicet in exteriori conversatione, quia esuriit ut homo, fatigatus fuit, et huiusmodi [. . . he assumed all the defects and properties associated with the human species, except sin; therefore, he says, and in habit found as a man, namely, in his external life, because he became hungry as a man and tired and so on].” See also *ST* III, q. 14, q. 15.

³⁹ See: *SCG* IV, ch. 34 (no. 3703): “Ipsi igitur Dei Verbo corpus aptatur, ut scilicet sit proprium corpus eius. Quod dici non posset nisi esset eadem hypostasis Dei Verbi et illius hominis [It is, then, to God’s very Word that a body is fitted; namely, so as to be His own body. And one could not say this if the hypostasis of God’s Word were not identified with that of the man]”; *SCG* IV, ch. 41 (no. 3794): “Verbum in humana natura sicut in sibi propria facta per incarnationem, subsistere ponatur; ut et corpus illud vere sit corpus Verbi Dei; et similiter anima; et Verbum Dei vere sit homo [Let the Word be set down as subsisting in a human nature as in one made His very own by the Incarnation; and in consequence that body is truly the body of the Word of God, and the soul in like manner, and the Word of God is truly man].”

properties of the divine nature like “a veil” (*velamen deitatis*).⁴⁰

However, it would be wrong to assume that the weakness of the human nature in which God hides himself is something essentially hostile and contrary to him, ontologically excluding the possibility of any union with God. The human nature assumed by the Logos is a creation, and thus comes from him and is dependent on him. The Logos is the pattern of the whole creation, the original exemplar of the created order, like the conception of the product of art in the intellect of the artist.⁴¹ Created things are the expression of what is contained in the Logos himself, and therefore represent the Word in a created way. Certainly, the created human nature of Christ is different from the nature of the Creator, but this fundamental difference has been willed and established (*instituta*) by the Creator and is essentially ordained (*ordinata*) to his goodness.⁴² God, who is uncreated, immutable, and incorporeal himself, produced mutable and corporeal creatures for his own goodness. The evil of punishment (*malum poenae*) was also introduced by God’s justice for God’s glory.⁴³ Hence, the created nature of Christ in its deepest essence is good and ordained to God’s goodness. Consequently, even though any union of the human nature with the divine, which takes place *in persona*, is a grace given gratis,⁴⁴ radically exceeding the natural abilities of human nature, the two realities this union concerns are not essentially and invincibly hostile to each other. It is *malum culpae*, or the evil of fault, that is truly hostile to God,⁴⁵ and this fault is committed by withdrawing “from the art of the divine wisdom” (*ars divinae sapientiae*) and breaching the order of the divine goodness.⁴⁶ Consequently, while it was by no means fitting to the Word to assume the evil

⁴⁰ See *Super Hebraeos* 10, lec. 2 (no. 502): “... oportet intrare per carnem Christi, qui fuit velamen deitatis. Isa XIV, 15: *Vere tu es Deus absconditus* [...] must enter through Christ’s flesh, which was a veil of his divinity: ‘verily, you are a hidden God’ (Isa 45:15)]” (*Commentary on the Letter of Saint Paul to the Hebrews*, trans. Fabian R. Larcher, ed. John Mortensen and Enrique Alarcón [Lander, WY: The Aquinas Institute for the Study of Sacred Doctrine, 2012], 219; all further English from Thomas’s commentary on Hebrews will be from this edition). This is a commentary on Heb 10:20: “The new and living way which he opened for us through the curtain (*velamen*), that is, through his flesh.”

⁴¹ See SCG IV, ch. 42 (no. 3803).

⁴² See ST III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴³ See ST III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁴ See ST III, q. 6, a. 6, corp.

⁴⁵ See ST III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁶ See ST III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3.

of fault, it became him to assume a nature that is created, mutable, corporeal, and subject to penalty.⁴⁷ These remarks play a significant role in explaining the essence of God's concealment in Christ. The divine nature of Christ is indeed hidden in the human nature, but this concealment does not consist in "hiding the goodness in something hostile and sinful," but in "hiding the uncreated goodness in the created goodness."

It is worth it here to indicate one more characteristic of this concealment: it may be more or less intense, depending on the nature of a given mystery of the life of Christ. In other words, the degree of manifestation (*manifestatio*) of the Savior's divinity may vary, being conditioned by the role of a given mystery of his life in God's salvific plan. For example, in the mystery of Christ's nativity, his divinity was not supposed to be proclaimed to all, but rather be hidden in the defects of infancy.⁴⁸ However, when the Savior attained to the perfect age and began his mission of teaching and working miracles, then the Father's clear testimony attesting Christ's Godhead was needed to draw people to him (John 5:37).⁴⁹ The degree of the concealment of Christ's divinity varied according to the mystery: his temptation by the devil in the desert differed from the later mysteries of his life such as his Passion and resurrection;⁵⁰ his discussions differed from his performance of miracles;⁵¹ and the Cross differed from the Transfiguration, where the *claritas* of the divine nature and Christ's soul overflowed into his body.⁵² Thus, whether the divinity of Christ was manifested in his human nature more or less clearly depended on certain divine dispensation (*dispensatio*).⁵³ For, the incarnated Son of God had power over the degree to which the grace derived from his divine nature and the dignity of his soul had an impact on his

⁴⁷ See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 3.

⁴⁸ See: *ST* III, q. 39, a. 8, ad 3; q. 36.

⁴⁹ See *ST* III, q. 39, a. 8, ad 3.

⁵⁰ See *ST* III, q. 44, a. 1, ad 2.

⁵¹ See *ST* III, q. 13, a. 4, corp.: "Alio modo voluit aliquid ut implendum virtute divina: sicut resurrectionem proprii corporis, et alia huiusmodi miraculosa opera. Quae quidem non poterat propria virtute: sed secundum quod erat instrumentum divinitatis [Second, He wished things to be brought about by the Divine power, as the resurrection of His own body and such like miraculous deeds, which He could not effect by His own power, except as the instrument of the Godhead]."

⁵² See *ST* III, q. 45, a. 2, corp.

⁵³ See *ST* III, q. 45, a. 2, corp. and ad 1.

body.⁵⁴ Hence, he was able to hide his divinity more or less effectively, depending on the intended salvific impact of a given mystery of his life, Passion, and resurrection.

I am aware of the fact that the above description of the grounds for the theology of Christ as *Deus absconditus* is a very perfunctory one. Still, I am convinced that this brief summary outlines the main ideas behind such theology: in the Incarnation, the Son of God assumes the human nature, which is united with his divine nature *in persona*, but this kind of union does not blur the differences between the two natures. Since the created human nature possesses properties different from those of the uncreated divine nature, one may say that the latter is hidden in the former, and this concealment has its own dynamics: Christ's divinity is more or less visible, depending on the stage of his salvific plan.

The Meaning of Concealment

The fact that God has covered himself with the veil of flesh entails a number of significant theological consequences. The divine *absconditio* is not some "by-product" of the hypostatic union, but an intended way in which God redeems men. Now I shall analyze more closely this salvific meaning of God's concealment.

Three Main Objectives of Concealment

There are three reasons for Christ's existence as *Deus absconditus* that may be considered as central. They can be recognized by analyzing the degree of manifestation (*manifestation*) of Christ's divinity in the mystery of his nativity.⁵⁵ In other words, when we look at the way in which Christ's nativity was proclaimed to the world, we can recognize three main meanings of God's concealment, meanings that can then be referred also to other mysteries of Christ's life, though it is obviously necessary to take into account the level of manifestation in the specific mystery.

(1) Had God not hidden himself, the redemption of man, accomplished by means of the Cross, would have been impossible.⁵⁶ According to St. Paul:

⁵⁴ See: *ST* III, q. 7, a. 1, corp.; q. 13, a. 3, corp.; q. 14, a. 1, ad 2; q. 45, a. 2, corp. and ad 1.

⁵⁵ See *ST* III, q. 36.

⁵⁶ See: *ST* III, q. 36, a. 1, corp.; *Super Ioannem* 8, lec. 8 (no. 1292).

But we impart a secret and hidden wisdom [*sapientia abscondita*] of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification. None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. (1 Cor 2:7–8)

The crucifixion of “the Lord of glory,” or the work of redemption, would not have been possible if “the rulers of this age” had clearly recognized Christ’s divinity,⁵⁷ but they did not understand this divinity, for it was unified with a human nature marked by weakness.⁵⁸ “The Lord of glory” became a man capable of suffering (*homo passibilis*),⁵⁹ and thus he hid his divinity. For our redemption, the Son of God became *Deus absconditus*, hiding his divine nature, in order to make man’s redemption through the Cross possible. Therefore, this concealment is especially visible in the mystery of the Passion. According to the Vulgate of Isaiah 53:3: “Quasi absconditus vultus eius et despectus [His look was, as it were, hidden and despised].”⁶⁰ The countenance of the Son of God and his glory have been hidden in the corporeal weakness and signs of his lowering: physical pain and sadness.⁶¹

(2) The second reason is that, had God not hidden himself in Christ, the merit of faith would not have been possible.⁶² John 5:3–4 speaks of an angel who descended into the pond, moving its healing waters. Only the movement of the water was visible, not the angel who set it in motion:

⁵⁷ There are some necessary distinctions to be made with regard to the issue of recognizing Christ as the Messiah and God. We have to distinguish between the reasons for ignorance in the cases of both the Jewish elders and the ordinary followers. The first could have recognized clear signs of Christ’s divinity but been unwilling to believe them due to their culpable ignorance. See: *ST* III, q. 47, a. 5, corp.; *In III sent.*, d. 19, q. 1, a. 1, qcl. 2, ad 5; *In IV sent.*, d. 9, q. 1, a. 3, qcl. 4, corp.; *Super Ioanmem* 15, lec. 5 (no. 2049); 7, lec. 3 (no. 1054); *Super Romanos* 9, lec. 5 (no. 812); *Super Psalmos* 34, no. 11.

⁵⁸ See *Super Ioanmem* 8, lec. 5 (no. 1227).

⁵⁹ See *ST* III, q. 46, a. 12, ad 1.

⁶⁰ *ST* III, q. 36, a. 1, sc.

⁶¹ See *Super Isaiam* 53, vv. 71–79.

⁶² See *ST* III, q. 36, a. 1, corp.: “Si enim manifestis indiciis, Christo nascente, eius nativitas omnibus appareret, iam tolleretur ratio fidei, quae est *argumentum non apparentium*, ut dicitur *Heb.* 11[:1] [For if, when Christ was born, His birth had been made known to all by evident signs, the very nature of faith would have been destroyed, since it is ‘the evidence of things that appear not,’ as stated, *Heb.* 11:1].”

So Christ was not known as to his divinity, for “If they had known, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory” (1 Cor 2:8). For as Isaiah (45:15) says: “Truly, you are a hidden God.” And so the motion of the water was seen, but not the one who set it in motion, because, seeing the weakness of Christ, the people did not know of his divinity. And just as the one who went into the pool was healed, so a person who humbly believes in God is healed by his passion.⁶³

Because of God’s concealment in the human weakness, a humble faith is needed to accept truth about Christ, both in his divinity and in his humanity. However, two things might obstruct the presence of faith: either a thing might be perfectly manifest (*totaliter manifestum*), and then faith is unnecessary because it is transformed into seeing, or the thing might be entirely unknown because there are no witnesses who could spread it, making faith absent because nothing is proposed for belief.⁶⁴ And so, Christ as *Deus absconditus* reveals the truth about his divinity in a way that does not destroy the merit of faith by making it redundant of sight but, of course, also does not prevent men’s access to this faith. This motive was beautifully developed in the third stanza of the *Adoro te devote* hymn, where it was also tied with the Eucharistic theology:

On the Cross lay hidden but thy Deity,
Here is hidden also Thy Humanity:
But in both believing and confessing, Lord,
Ask I what the dying thief of Thee implored.

(3) Finally, had God not hidden himself in Christ, the truth about his humanity could have come into doubt.⁶⁵ The faith that leads to salvation should take into account both his divinity and humanity. Without recognizing the authenticity of Christ’s humanity, this faith would be imperfect.⁶⁶ And recognition of Christ’s humanity is a path to recognition of his divinity: “Christ wished to make his Godhead known through his human nature.”⁶⁷ For, just as the priest of Israel entered the holy of holies through the veil, we too reach salvation—

⁶³ *Super Ioanmem* 5, lec. 1 (no. 708; citation from the Vulgate).

⁶⁴ See *ST* III, q. 36, a. 2, ad 1.

⁶⁵ See *ST* III, q. 36, a. 1, corp.

⁶⁶ See: *ST* III, q. 14, a. 1, corp.; q. 36, a. 4, corp.; *Super Ioanmem* 7, lec. 2 (no. 1027).

⁶⁷ *ST* III, q. 40, a. 1, ad 1.

or the holy of glory—through the veil (*velamen deitatis*) that is Christ's flesh (Heb 10:20):⁶⁸

The infirmity assumed by Christ did not impede, but greatly furthered the end of the Incarnation. . . . And although these infirmities concealed His Godhead, they made known His Manhood, which is the way of coming to the Godhead, according to Romans 5:1–2: “By Jesus Christ we have access to God.”⁶⁹

It is worth adding that there is also an opposite danger of such focus on Christ's humanity, the danger that his divinity would be forgotten, since the flesh of the incarnated Word was manifest but his Godhead was hidden.⁷⁰ And this is the reason it was becoming for the Son of God to lead a needy and private life in this world: this propelled people to consider the mystery of his divinity instead of focusing them on his humanity.⁷¹ It was also wisely ordained that the incarnated God should not stay among the people unto the end of the world, which would make it possible for men to esteem him nothing beyond themselves: men began to revere Christ more when he withdrew his presence from them, since the ongoing visibility of the human nature could cause the people to erroneously overlook the divinity of Christ.⁷²

Trinitarian Sources of Concealment

The incarnated Son of God is *Deus absconditus*, for he is also hidden in the inner life of the Trinity. Thus, his concealment in the Incarnation

⁶⁸ See *Super Hebraeos* 10, lec. 2 (no. 502). It is worth noting that this passage contains a reference to the Eucharistic theology: “. . . per velamen, id est, per carnem suam datam nobis sub velamento speciei panis in sacramento. Non enim proponitur nobis sub specie propria propter horrorem, et propter meritum fidei [. . . through the veil, i.e., through his flesh given to us under the veil of the appearance of bread in the sacrament. He is not offered to us under his own form because of dread and to obtain the merit of faith].”

⁶⁹ *ST* III, q. 14, a. 1, ad 4.

⁷⁰ See *ST* III, q. 36, a. 5, ad 1: “Illud manifestatione indiget, quod de se est occultum; non autem illud, quod de se est manifestum: caro autem eius, qui nascebatur, erat manifestum, sed divinitas erat occulta [That which of itself is hidden needs to be manifested, but not that which in itself is manifest. Now, the flesh of Him who was born was manifest, whereas the Godhead was hidden].”

⁷¹ See *SCG* IV, ch. 55 (no. 3945b).

⁷² See *SCG* IV, ch. 55 (no. 3943).

is a continuation of his concealment within the Trinity. There are three New Testament passages that are of crucial significance for this motive.

The first is 1 Timothy 3:16, with special emphasis on the following part: “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of our religion [*pietatis sacramentum*]: He was manifested in the flesh [*manifestum est in carne*].” *Sacramentum* means “the sacred secret” or “the sacred mystery.”⁷³ And nothing is more secret/mysterious than what we keep in our hearts. In the case of God, it is likewise, but of course to an incomparably higher degree (1 Cor 2:11; Isa 24:16; 45:15), and what he keeps in his heart is secret/mysterious and sacred.⁷⁴ And what God the Father keeps in his heart is the Word of God, his Son, who is a secret/mystery of the Father comprehended only by the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 2:11). Thus, the Son is a *Deus absconditus* also in the inner life of the Trinity.⁷⁵ This inner-Trinitarian characteristic of the Son has not been made invalid by the Incarnation. The Son appeared visibly, but only *secundum carnem*; as for *secundum deitatem*, he is invisible, just as the Father is.⁷⁶

The second biblical passage is John 1:18: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father [*in sinu Patris*], he has made him known.” What does the word “bosom” (*sinus*) mean in this context? It indicates the secret things of the Father, for what we carry in the bosom remains hidden. And secret things of the Father refer to His infinity, surpassing all power and knowledge.⁷⁷ In that bosom, or in the most secret things of the Father’s nature and essence, is the Only Begotten Son, consubstantial with the Father.⁷⁸ From this bosom of the Father, his *uterus* (Ps 110:3), or “the inmost secret things of [God’s] essence,” is the Son begotten, who—as consubstantial with the Father—is of the same nature, power, virtue, and knowledge.⁷⁹ So, the incarnated Son of God remains in the hidden things of the Father:

We should note that the phrase, “who is in the bosom of the Father,” rejects the error of those who say that the Father is

⁷³ *Super I Timotheum* 3, lec. 3 (no. 130).

⁷⁴ See *Super I Timotheum* 3, lec. 3 (no. 130).

⁷⁵ See *Super I Timotheum* 3, lec. 3 (no. 130).

⁷⁶ See SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3429c).

⁷⁷ See *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 11 (no. 218).

⁷⁸ See *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 11 (no. 218).

⁷⁹ See *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 11 (no. 218).

invisible, but the Son is visible, though he was not seen in the Old Testament. For from the fact that he is among the hidden things of the Father [*in abscondito Patri*], it is plain that he is naturally invisible, as is the Father. So it is said of him: "Truly, you are a hidden God" (Isa 45:15). And so Scripture mentions the incomprehensibility [*incomprehensibilitas*] of the Son: "No one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son" (Matt 11:27), "What is the name of his son, if you know?" as we read in Proverbs (30:4).⁸⁰

Thus, the Son of God is *absconditus* by his very nature because he is consubstantial with the Father, who is invisible, infinite, and incomprehensible. The Son's concealment is by no means diminished by his Incarnation, for his assumption of human nature does not make any changes in his divine nature. The fact that the Son became visible in flesh does not mean that he ceased to be *Deus absconditus* in the bosom of the Father.

The third passage is John 17:1: "Father, the hour has come; glorify thy Son that the Son may glorify thee." Neither the Father nor the Son needs to "be glorified" (*clarificatio*) in the sense of giving each other some new glory. For, both the Father and the Son remain eternally in perfect and immutable *claritas*.⁸¹ How then can the Son speak of being glorified by the Father and of glorifying the Father?⁸² The Son wants it because it is necessary for his glory, "hidden under the weakness of the flesh" (*sub infirmitate carnis occultata*), to be manifested "in the faith of peoples believing" by the glorification of the flesh and the working of miracles.⁸³ Thus, "to glorify" is to reveal the glory and to manifest it to the people. Similarly, the Son "glorifies" the Father by manifesting him to the world. The Father is not hidden *sub infirmitate carnis*, but by the invisibility of his nature, being—just like the Son—the eternal *Deus absconditus*, *Sanctus Israel*, *Salvator*.⁸⁴ So, the Son "glorifies" the Father by manifesting his name to the world (John 17:6). The Son reveals the Father, in a way taking the Father

⁸⁰ *Super Ioanmem* 1, lec. 11 (no. 220).

⁸¹ SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434a): "Non enim Filius clarificatione indiget quasi de novo claritatem accipiens, cum eam profiteatur se *ante mundum habuisse* [For, the Son needs no glory as one who receives new glory, since He professes that He had it 'before the world was' (Jn 17:5)]."

⁸² See *Super Ioanmem* 17, lec. 1 (no. 2181).

⁸³ See SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434a).

⁸⁴ See SCG IV, ch. 8 (no. 3434f).

out of hiding. Therefore, the concealment concerns not only the Son who exists *in sinu Patris*, but also God the Father. However, the Son's concealment is a double one, for not only is he invisible, like the Father, but he has also hidden himself in the weakness of the human nature assumed in the Incarnation.

The Concealment and Kenōsis

John is the only evangelist to leave a description of the scene in which Jesus laid aside his garments, girded himself with a towel, and washed the feet of his disciples. Christ, the incarnated God, performed a surprising and mysterious act of *humiliatio*. These three actions of Christ (rising from supper, laying aside his garments, and girding himself with the towel) may be regarded as a mystic reference to his Incarnation and Passion. Christ “rose from supper”: he rushed to help mankind, for to a troubled man, it seems that “God is sitting down,” but when a man is rescued from his troubles, it seems to him that “God rises.” Thus, in the Incarnation, God ceases to “sit down” and comes to man's rescue.⁸⁵

In the context of God's emptying himself (*exinanitio*), done in the Incarnation, Christ's action of “laying aside his garments” is equally symbolic:

It indicates that he emptied himself: not that he abandoned his great dignity, but he hid it [*occult*] by taking on our smallness [*parvitas*]: “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Isa 45:15: “Vere tu es Deus absconditus”). This is shown by the fact that he “laid aside his garments”: “He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7).⁸⁶

The Son of God is immutable in his divine nature, so by no means can he abandon “his great dignity.” His emptying himself in the Incarnation consists in hiding his great dignity by taking on the smallness.⁸⁷ This

⁸⁵ See *Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 2 (no. 1746).

⁸⁶ *Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 2 (no. 1746).

⁸⁷ This passage—*Super Ioanmem* 13, lec. 2 (no. 1746)—contains a phrase *parvitatē assumendo*, or “taking on the smallness” (also *parvitatē suscipere* in *Super Romanos* 9, lec. 5, [no. 805]). This may also mean taking on something “minor,” “weak,” “insignificant,” “poor,” or “low.” In another passage, Aquinas states: “Christ made himself little [Christus se parvum fecit] by taking on our littleness” (*Sermo Puer Jesus*, nos. 79–80 [Leonine ed., 44/1:104; English in *The Academic Sermons*, trans. Mark-Robin Hoodland, C.P. [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2010], 90). There are also other expressions

smallness refers, of course, to human nature, subjected to suffering and death. Therefore, the theological motive of God's hiding himself in the Incarnation may shed additional light on the issue of God's *kenōsis*. Of course, it is crucial to take into account the statement characteristic for the doctrine of the hypostatic union that the *exinanitio* of the Son of God consisted in allowing human nature into the *in persona* union. However, there is a new aspect to be considered: the assumption of human nature to some extent involves the concealment of the divine nature. Only when this is understood is a fuller insight into the theology of *kenōsis* possible. Though God remains in the undisturbed fullness of his existence, in his *exinanitio*, he becomes *Deus absconditus* somehow more fully. Thus, God's concealment in the Incarnation should be understood as a kenotic act.

It is worth it to note that although God is a hidden God in his *kenōsis*, at the same time it allows him to reveal many of his attributes in a new way. In the mysteries of *exinanitio* (Phil 2:7) and *humiliatio* (Phil 2:8), the Son of God took on human *infirmetas*, and thus was able to perform on the Cross the work of redemption. On the one hand, of course, Christ's assumption of human nature and his "crucifixion in weakness" (2 Cor 13:4: "crucifixus est ex infirmitate") were possible due to such concealment (1 Cor 2:8), but on the other hand, they also served to reveal God's nature. For, in a new way, they

referring to kenosis that are worth mentioning. These phrases are meant to clarify such terms as *incarnation* or *descensio* ("descent from heaven"). For, the notion of *exinanitio*, found in Phil 2:7, is not the same as *depono*, or "giving up," "abandoning," and "putting off." The meaning of *depono*, just like that of the verb *evacuo*, does not fit with the constancy of the subject of the Pauline hymn. Meanwhile, the expression *minoratus est*, or "made lower," derived from Heb 2:9 ("Qui modico ab Angelis minoratus est"), is consistent with the meaning of the hymn. This "lowering" of the Son is expressed also in John 14:28: "Pater maior me est" (SCG IV, ch. 8 [no. 3430]). Thus, *exinanitio* can also be understood as *minoratio*, or "a lowering" (*In De Trinitate* II, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1), since the verb *minor* means "to lower" or "to cut short," though it should also be taken into account that the noun *minoratio* may actually be used to denote "a diminution" or "an abasement." *Exinanitio* consists also in a *breviatio*: "a shortening" or "an abbreviation." The use of this latter word is based on an association between Isa 10:22–23 in the Vulgate and a Latin translation of Rom 9:28, in which the expression *verbum breviatum* ("word abridged") may be found. Therefore, this expression can be referred to the Incarnation and *exinanitio*: the Son of God became "emptied" (*exinanitum*) and "abridged" (*breviatum*) by assuming the "weakness and smallness" (*Super Romanos* 9, lec. 5 [no. 805]).

disclosed that God's love consists in love for the friends⁸⁸ and revealed God's mercy,⁸⁹ justice,⁹⁰ goodness,⁹¹ wisdom,⁹² some aspects of his power (the Incarnation itself⁹³ and forgiveness of sins⁹⁴), and many other of his attributes. Therefore, hiding himself in the weakness of human flesh, which was necessary to lay down his life "for his friend" (John 15:13), God also reveals himself in a new way.

Conclusion

I am aware of the fact that this issue deserves to be discussed in a much more comprehensive way. This article is a survey of the ideas that form the theology of Christ as *Deus absconditus* in the works by Aquinas. Certainly, this theology does not constitute the most important part of Aquinas's Christology, but that does not mean it is wholly marginal. For, as I have sought to show, it appears quite often in his analysis and is developed in full awareness of its place and significance. I believe that if we do not take it into account and give it some more consideration, we miss a truly important aspect of Aquinas's Christology that is of crucial importance for his reflection on God's kenosis. N.V

⁸⁸ See *Super Ioannem* 15, lec. 2 (no. 2009); *Quodlibet* V, q. 3, a. 2, corp.; *Super Romanos* 5, lec. 2 (no. 399); *In symbolum apostolorum*, a. 4 (no. 56).

⁸⁹ See *ST* I, q. 21, a. 3, corp.

⁹⁰ See: *ST* I, q. 21, a. 4, ad 1; *ST* III, q. 41, a. 1, ad 2.

⁹¹ See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 1, sc, corp., and ad 2.

⁹² See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 1, sc.

⁹³ See *ST* III, q. 1, a. 1, sc.

⁹⁴ See *ST* I, q. 25, a. 3, ad 3.