

Thomistic-Balthasarian Comments on Thomas Joseph White's *The Incarnate Lord*

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READING THOMAS JOSEPH WHITE'S *The Incarnate Lord* is a very great pleasure. His carefully argued and measured theology draws on the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas in original and fruitful ways. As a lover of the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, however, I must confess that my enjoyment was occasionally tempered with suffering—but, shall we say, only in the lower parts of my soul.

Among the many things I appreciate in this book is Fr. White's love of patristic and medieval sources. Following his guide, St. Thomas Aquinas, he combines precision with breadth of knowledge and depth of thought. Further, like St. Thomas's generous reading of manifold sources, Fr. White makes frequent irenic gestures. I am thinking in particular of the emphasis on the filial mode of Christ's obedience throughout, plus the gentle reading of Karl Barth's treatment of obedience and the end of chapter 8 on the death of Christ.

He and I share many points of agreement, almost too many to mention: the enduring importance of Chalcedonian Christological metaphysics; a suspicion of liberal historicism; and an opposition to theological anachronisms, in which the Person of Christ is interpreted according to contemporary mores rather than through revelation. I will expand on two areas of particular agreement (on analogy and on the Son's obedience), before raising a question concerning the beatific vision, and then recording some criticisms regarding soteriology (specifically, regarding Christ's abandonment and descent).

Praise for White's Treatment of Analogy and Obedience

Analogy

The chapters pertaining to analogy, natural theology, and human nature continue the Catholic theological dialogue with Barth begun by thinkers such as Erich Przywara, Gottlieb Söhngen, and Balthasar. White reiterates many of the points that they made in the mid-twentieth century, in particular the necessity of some sort of similarity between human nature and God (200–201), and therefore between human language and revelation (228–32) for the Incarnation and revelation to occur at all.¹ Given that these proposals have been rehearsed before, although too often lacking the careful argumentation that White brings to the question, I will merely indicate my appreciation for these pages and move to developing White's overriding concern for the defense of metaphysics in general for the very possibility of Christology.

As White points out in his chapters most dedicated to Barth, one's rejection of analogy does not mean that one ceases to speak of God. On the contrary, the rejection of analogy only means that one speaks either equivocally or univocally—or, even more likely, oscillating between the two. A pure equivocity, also manifested as an extreme apophaticism, is well-nigh impossible to maintain, because the pole that is remote (the divine) usually becomes forgotten, practically speaking.

And why would it not be? That of which we never speak, even if because we believe we cannot speak of it, becomes that which we forget. The pole that is close at hand fills our language and hence our thoughts. It becomes the only terrain we explore conceptually. This practical univocity manifests itself theologically as a reduction of God to our world when our world is all of which we can speak.

Thus, it is no accident that White sniffs out some Spinozism in Barth's metaphysics. Spinozistic univocity is the great alternative to analogical thinking. As Catherine Pickstock puts it, regarding the greatest recent exponent of such univocity, Gilles Deleuze, "the two philosophical options in consequence would appear to be Deleuzian [univocity] or Platonic [analogy], respectively."²

One might argue that it is mere human reflection that has created these

¹ Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2017); cited parenthetically in main text.

² Catherine Pickstock, *Repetition and Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 87.

alternatives of equivocity, univocity, and analogy. The Christian approach, it is argued, involves rejecting the commencement of thought on the human level and instead beginning with the divine, such that these alternatives are surpassed with the super-abundance of God as revealed in Christ. Indeed, one might see Barth's project as precisely this attempt to bypass human constructions in pursuit of the divine excess.

One might reply that such a method does not escape the messenger fallacy, in that it presumes that Barth alone has escaped to tell us that theology has been human, all too human. That seems tendentious, however. More to the point, I would respond that the problem of the One and the Many—to which analogy is (I contend) the most insightful response—is a perennial question that reality must pose to the mind. This is the case for sound metaphysical reasons. But given the doubt that a post-Kantian might harbor about metaphysics, let us reframe the question in theological terms: the One and the Many is a perennial question because of the reality of God himself as triune.

In other words, in addition to the enduring questions of unity and multiplicity that the world cannot but force upon any thoughtful person, the truth of the triune God demands reflection upon the One and the Many. I would argue still further: it is precisely *because* God is triune that the otherness of the world from God can be conceived in positive terms and not merely as a fall from a primordial unity into a regrettable multiplicity (as in many varieties of Platonism, both pagan and Christian). *Because* God is triune, the world's being-as-other is real, not counterfeit, and good, not a fall. As Balthasar puts it, the Trinity shows that "the fact that 'the Other' exists is *absolutely good*."³ Only in Christianity can creaturely multiplicity be given divine warrant.⁴

This metaphysical and Trinitarian introduction leads nicely to the concerns of the next topic for which I will praise White's book, his treatment of the Son's obedience.

The Son's Obedience

In chapter 6 (277–307), Fr. White critiques Barth on the Son's obedience and provides his own positive contribution (280: "The Son's divine

³ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 5, *The Last Act* [hereafter, *TD5*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 81 (emphasis original).

⁴ There are aspects of this in Thomas as well, in that he recognizes a transcendental "multiplicity," in addition to a transcendental "one," because of the Trinity; see the texts in Gilles Emery, O.P., *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 137–41.

receptivity is the transcendent ontological foundation for his temporal mission among human beings").⁵ I am in substantive agreement with his approach on these points.

I disagree with White on the extent to which his own interpretation explicitly rules out the possibility of "attribut[ing] obedience to God the Son in his eternal procession as God" (305)—or, rather, I agree with what seems to be an unacknowledged implication of his thought. It seems to me that White does indeed provide a way to attribute obedience to the eternal Son's procession—but only analogically. In making this case, I will be following Balthasar's explication of the Son's obedience. This way of proceeding will also prepare the ground for my more substantive disagreements with White in the last part of the essay.

Balthasar depended upon analogy throughout his trilogy dedicated to the transcendentals: of Beauty in *The Glory of the Lord*, Goodness in *Theo-Drama*, and Truth in *Theo-Logic*.⁶ The purpose of his trilogy is to explicate the similarity and greater dissimilarity between creaturely Beauty, Goodness and Truth, on the one hand, and the divine Beauty, Goodness, and Truth that is identical with God himself, on the other. Balthasar knew the necessity of analogy for his project: "'Glory' [as God's beauty revealed in the world] stands and falls with the unsurpassability of the *analogia entis*, the ever greater dissimilarity to God no matter how great the similarity to Him (Denz.-Schonm. 806)."⁷

This project of connecting and distinguishing the world and God is based on a key insight, that all good things have some analogous similarity (within an ever-greater dissimilarity) to the triune God. Balthasar's

⁵ I am not so sure, however, that Barth intends the hard claim that White attributes to him: "Obedience is *entirely constitutive of [the Son's] person*. . . . God the Son proceeds from the Father *in and through* his act of obedience to the divine will of the Father" (296–97; emphasis original). This would mean obedience functions as filiation, using Thomas's language (the relation and personal property that constitutes the Son; see the texts and the priority of relation as distinguishing the Persons in Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 120–27). If this is indeed true for Barth, it is certainly insupportable. Obedience cannot take the place of filiation; it is rather an analogical expression of the Son's filial "stance" or relation vis-à-vis the Father. Barth's rejection of analogy makes, of course, this way of proceeding methodologically difficult for him.

⁶ I explicate Balthasar's use of analogy and its importance to his Trinitarian theology and metaphysics in "Trinitarian *Analogia Entis* in Hans Urs von Balthasar," *The Thomist* 62 (1998): 533–59, and in "The Epiphany of Being: Trinitarian *Analogia Entis* and the Transcendentals in Hans Urs von Balthasar" (PhD diss., Boston College, 2006).

⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, vol. 5, *In the Realm of Metaphysics in Modernity*, trans. Andrew Louth, John Saward, Rowan Williams, and Oliver Davies, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 548.

approach depends upon a Thomistic metaphysics, reflected in a quote from the *Summa theologiae* given by White (*ST* I, q. 4, a. 2): “Since therefore God is the first effective cause of things, the perfections of all things must pre-exist in God in a more eminent way. . . . Consequently, He must contain in Himself the whole perfection of being” (196n54). This is the context in which Balthasar explicates the analogous attribution of human virtues and evangelical counsels, such as poverty and obedience, to the triune Persons. This method means that however close he and Barth are theologically—and they are often very close—they cannot agree on this basic starting point.

Balthasar was especially clear about the *analogical* attribution of obedience to the Son:

The application of the concept of obedience to the divine person is, of course, a figure of speech—an anthropomorphism. But, in the final analysis, all human speech about God is anthropomorphic, and this figure has been made definitive and proper by the Incarnation of the Son (Phil 2:7). In applying it, everything is to be excluded from the concept of obedience that derives from the relationship between God and the creature insofar as the creature is regarded *qua* creature, that is, as having its origin in nothingness. Everything is to be retained, on the other hand, and translated into the infinite (in the sense of the *via eminentiae*) that pertains to the analogy between God and the creature as the positive image of God, or more properly, of the Trinity.⁸

This commitment, unfortunately lacking in Barth, means that Balthasar can agree with and even quote from the section on obedience in *Church Dogmatics* that Fr. White treats, but the ideas will be reinterpreted within Balthasar’s analogical framework.⁹

⁸ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Christian State of Life*, trans. Sister Mary Frances McCarthy (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 78. I have quoted this text at some length because it presents clearly Balthasar’s foundational presupposition that he repeats across his entire works. But this means that the reader needs to keep in mind the metaphysical context of analogy while reading Balthasar’s Christology and Trinitarian theology. Balthasar repeats his commitment to analogy frequently—in fact, in every book of the trilogy, as I work through them in *Epiphany of Being*. But the reader can still cherry-pick passages out of this larger context and misinterpret them.

⁹ See, e.g., *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 1, *Seeing the Form* [hereafter, *GL1*], trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. Joseph Fessio, S.J., and John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 276. For a similar account of the importance of analogy in Balthasar’s

What Balthasar “excludes from the concept of obedience” is any inequality between the Persons (any distinction of nature, including a distinction of will)¹⁰ and any temporal sense (a succession of moments in God). What is retained is the hypostatic distinction and orientation of the Son to the Father, which is constituted by the processions in God. The Son is a receptive hypostatic “stance” vis-à-vis the generating Father, a receptivity captured in the Scholastic language of “passive generation.”¹¹ In receiving all things from his Father, he also receives the Father’s will. As Thomas puts it:

I answer that the Father and the Son do have the same will, but the Father does not have his will from another, whereas the Son does have his will from another, that is, from the Father. Thus, the Son accomplishes his own will as that of another, that is, as having it from another; but the Father accomplishes his will as his own, that is, not having it from another. This is why he says: I do not seek my own will, that is, such as would be mine if it originated from myself but my will, as being from another, that is from the Father.¹²

This personal structure of receptivity of the Father’s divine will constitutes the eternal form of the Son’s filial obedience.¹³

Trinitarian theology, see John R. Betz, “The Humility of God: On a Disputed Question in Trinitarian Theology,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 17, no. 3 (2019): 769–810.

¹⁰ See *TD5*, 88: “The Father has given the Son everything, including his will.” See the treatment by Michele M. Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 333–36. White discusses Thomas’s treatment of the same idea, i.e., the Son’s reception of the divine nature and hence the divine will from the Father (302–3).

¹¹ See Matthew Levering, *The Achievement of Hans Urs von Balthasar: An Introduction to His Trilogy* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2019), 73: “Von Balthasar remarks that [Christ’s obedience to the Father] means that there must be some analogous intra-Trinitarian obedience of the Son as Son. Insofar as obedience characterizes the form of Christ vis-à-vis the Father, that form must analogously express an intra-Trinitarian form. For von Balthasar, Christ’s filial obedience is an expression of receptive, self-surrendering love.”

¹² Thomas, *Super Ioan* 5, lec. 5, no. 798. I am grateful to Michael Waldstein for pointing out this text, which places obedience not in the relation between the human and divine wills of Christ but personally between the Father and Son.

¹³ This form of obedience as a state or “stance,” prior to its expression through obeying certain commands, is crucial for Balthasar’s concept of obedience. As Joshua R. Brown states, “Obedience is not merely consent to this or that; it is an attitude of openness,

White comes very close to just this idea: “Because this receptivity (as proceeding from the Father) characterizes his very person, he can be obedient *in and through his human actions* in a characteristically filial way, that is to say, as the *Son* made man. His human obedience thus reveals his eternal, personal relativity to the Father” (281; emphasis original). Put in Balthasarian terms, the analogous source of human obedience is the eternal hypostatic receptivity of the Son to the Father.¹⁴ Balthasar would add that this is expressed in Jesus’s human actions, to be sure, but also in his eternal filial “stance” vis-à-vis the Father.¹⁵

Fr. White grounds these reflections, as he must, in the truth that the mission of the Son is a temporal extension of his eternal procession from the Father. “[W]e understand the Son’s ‘pre-temporal obedience’ as pertaining to his *mission* to become incarnate, received from the Father” (280; see also the formulation on 306).

I would merely clarify that this mission refers to his very Person, in that there is only a logical distinction between his procession from the Father and his Person.¹⁶ The Son could not proceed from the Father to the world in an *additional* and new procession, because that would in effect constitute an additional Person in God. It is better to say that the procession

of allowing oneself to be moved and directed by God” (*Balthasar in Light of Early Confucianism* [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020], 108). Jesus’s “a priori obedience” means “his *existence itself* is already obedience” (Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Christology and Ecclesial Obedience,” trans. Edward T. Oakes, in Balthasar, *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 139–69, at 142; emphasis original).

¹⁴ As White points out, this is expressed in Christ’s prayer, which is not directed toward a generic God but rather “to the Father: it is primarily, therefore, a human mode of expression of his intra-Trinitarian filial identity, . . . a human expression and enactment of his eternal relation to the Father” (*Incarnate Lord*, 268).

¹⁵ Schumacher cites Balthasar’s *A Theology of History*, Communio Books (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 31: the incarnate Son’s “mode of being here on earth will simply be the manifestation in the created sphere, the translation into creatureliness, of this heavenly form of existence: existence as receiving, as openness to the will of the Father, as subsistent fulfillment of that will in a continuous mission” (*Trinitarian Anthropology*, 326). As Brown notes, Christ’s obedience was “how God revealed himself as triune” as well as “the fundamental language of the Incarnation, both God’s word to man and the possibility of man’s answer to God” (*Balthasar*, 111, 119; see also 132–39).

¹⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [*ST*] I, q. 41, a. 1, ad 2; see my “The Mission and Person of Christ and the Christian in Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *The Center Is Jesus Christ Himself: Essays on Revelation, Salvation, and Evangelization in Honor of Robert P. Imbelli*, ed. Andrew Meszaros (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 272–99.

that he eternally is from the Father is his mission when it is related to the creature as its temporal term.¹⁷

This precision means that his mission is *personal*, that is, coinciding with his personal procession from the Father but in the conditions of the Incarnation in time. This further underscores the fact that the Son's obedience is not that of a nature to another nature but of a person to another person—the Son to the generating Father who “gave everything [including his commandments] by begetting.”¹⁸

In any case, a development of such a Thomistic mission-Christology as White's here is sorely needed both for clarity and for deepening contemporary Christological reflection.¹⁹

A Question (or Three) on the Beatific Vision

In addition to this praise, I would like to pose a question to White concerning his treatment of the beatific vision of Christ. Or, rather, I will pose three distinct questions that all center around what still needs to be clarified in order for White's account of the beatific vision to be persuasive. I say “White's account” and not “the Thomist account” because, as White himself acknowledges, there is a development in his proposal that extends beyond Thomas's argument for Christ's beatific vision. I am not convinced that this development, as stated, does the work he wants it to do.

¹⁷ See *ST I*, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3. See also Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 364–68, esp. 364: “A divine person's mission will have two constitutive features: (1) this person's eternal procession; and (2) the divine person's relation to the creature to whom this person is made present in a new way.”

¹⁸ See Thomas, *Catena aurea in Ioan*, ch. 10, lec. 4. The complete text is: “The Word did not receive the command by a word, but in the only-begotten Word of the Father there is every word. When the Son is said to receive what he has substantially, the power is not lessened, but his generation is shown. For to the Son, whom he generates as a perfect Son, the Father gave everything by begetting.” I am grateful to Michael Waldstein for pointing out this passage (trans. Waldstein; personal communication).

¹⁹ The lack of understanding of the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit has been put into relief by the efforts of some erstwhile Thomistic critics of Balthasar (who would need to criticize White as well on this point). See, for example, Alyssa Lyra Pitstick's strange suspicion of Balthasar's language of mission (*Light in Darkness: Hans Urs von Balthasar and the Catholic Doctrine of Christ's Descent into Hell* [Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2007], 215). A similar misunderstanding of the hypostatic center in Thomas's category of mission leads R. Jared Staudt to confuse divine missions with appropriations in his critique of Balthasar's Trinitarian Christology in “For the Holy Trinity: The Mission of Christ and the Order of His Human Soul,” *Angelicum* 91, no. 3 (2014): 569–606.

First, I believe that the nub of the problem concerning Christ's beatific vision could be more precisely stated. This is because there have been too many strawmen scattered about in theological reflection on this issue. So allow me to first dispense with three of them.

With Fr. White, I am not persuaded by Jean Galot's argument that Christ's beatific vision would be incompatible with human suffering (242). There is no suffering in heaven, certainly, but given that the Son of God is incarnate in human history, an account of his beatific vision could accommodate both the vision and the ordinary human experiences, including that of suffering and death. In fact, I believe that Balthasar's (late) understanding of the *visio immediata* of Christ mediated through his mission consciousness does just this; but more on this later.

I am also not convinced by Galot's concern of monophysitism, such that the possession of the beatific vision through a calculation of maximal human perfection in Christ would somehow negate that humanity (242). Human perfection is just that, the perfection (and not the negation) of humanity.

Lastly, I find Fr. Thomas Weinandy's wish to avoid positing both a human "I" and a divine "I" in Christ understandable, but I do not think arguing for Christ's having, "as man, only one 'I' and that human" is promising.²⁰ Weinandy is clear elsewhere that he holds that there is only one, divine Person in Christ, so his is an attempt to make sense of Christ's theandric consciousness, not a proposal of ontological Arianism. But it is insufficiently protected from the latter, I believe.²¹

If these concerns do not get at the crux of the problem of the beatific vision, what does? There are three points for which the theologies of the beatific vision of Christ do not yet sufficiently account (to my knowledge): first, the necessity of a hypostatic subject for the beatific vision; second, its reality as the vision of the triune God by *human* subjects, and not an inner-Trinitarian vision; and, third, the possible distinction between a beatific and an immediate vision of God by Christ.

First, the requirement of a hypostatic subject who sees God—in other words, a person who is seeing. This is Fr. Weinandy's most important (and still insufficiently answered) point, namely, that the beatific vision is a

²⁰ Thomas Weinandy, "Jesus' Filial Vision of the Father," *Pro Ecclesia* 13 (2004): 189–201, at 196 (quoted in White, *Incarnate Lord*, 245n16).

²¹ See the response to Weinandy's proposals concerning Christ's consciousness by Anselm Ramelow, O.P., "Persons, Pronouns, and Perfections: A Response to Thomas Weinandy's 'The Hypostatic Union: Personhood, Consciousness, and Knowledge,'" *Nova et Vetera* (English ed.) 17, no. 2 (2019): 425–50.

reality that only makes full sense for persons, for it is only persons (not natures) who see. Natures provide the power to see, but only persons are the agents of the action.²² Fr. White is clear on the *communicatio idiomatum*: “There is only one subject to whom all is attributed. . . . Christ was crucified in his human body and suffered physically and spiritually *by virtue of his human nature*. But it is the Word himself, Jesus Christ, who is the true subject of the suffering” (20–21). Yet this truth still needs to be applied more rigorously to the question of the beatific vision of Christ.²³

This leads to my second concern, namely, that the beatific vision is not, properly speaking, meant to describe an inner-Trinitarian reality (e.g., the Son’s union with the Father), but rather a state of the eschatological union *of human (and angelic) persons* with the whole triune God.²⁴ It is a matter of something White discussed previously, namely, the distinction between union via secondary actuality, or operation, and union via primary actuality, or substantial being (61–69). “By contrast [with the mode of substantial union of divine and human in the Incarnation], *our union with*

²² Fr. White responded to this concern with an article referenced but not included in *Incarnate Lord*: “Dyothelitism and the Instrumental Human consciousness of Jesus,” *Pro Ecclesia* 17, no. 4 (2008): 396–422. The article is an able defense of White’s use of language that Weinandy felt tended toward Nestorianism: that is, the implication that it is Jesus’s *human nature* and not *the Son* who sees the Father, a move that would substantialize or personalize the nature as a rival to the divine Person of the Son. White utilizes patristic sources to show the ancestry of his expressions. The defense of White’s *language* does not yet, however, meet the substantive point of Weinandy: how can the *divine Son* contemplate and be united to the triune God (which is, of course, the object of the beatific vision for human persons) from the outside, so to speak, when he is himself one of the Trinity?

²³ As Weinandy puts it, “since it is the Son who must be the subject of any such vision of the Father, his vision of the Father cannot be a vision of the divine essence as an object ontologically distinct from and over against himself” (“Jesus’ Filial Vision of the Father,” 192, quoted in White, *Incarnate Lord*, 244n14). Weinandy restated this concern recently: “The beatific vision, as first conceived and traditionally employed, is defined as the immediate vision of God possessed by the blessed souls in heaven, and so as a knowledge of God enjoyed by those who are not God. Jesus is not in this ontological situation” (“The Hypostatic Union: Personhood, Consciousness, and Knowledge,” *Nova et Vetera* [English] 17, no. 2 [2019]: 401–23, at 414).

²⁴ As White, of course, knows: “This grace of the vision of Christ, then, while analogous to that grace received in a human person or angel who sees God, is different insofar as it does not give the soul of Christ an awareness of the Trinity as a subject ontologically distinct from himself, but rather permits the Son to know *himself* ‘objectively’ and to understand his own filial personhood in a certain and evidential way” (*Incarnate Lord*, 262). Or more simply later: Christ “does not adore the Trinity” (268). But is this still the beatific vision at all, or some other kind of vision? I propose the latter below.

God takes place primarily in the second mode, through human operations” (63). But the *divine* Persons are not united to each other merely operatively. The Son is certainly united to the Father, but essentially (in the one divine nature) and personally (through the Holy Spirit as the fruit of their love and through perichoresis). These are entirely divine modes of union in comparison to the beatific vision, although the latter is analogous to them—more on this next.

Lastly, perhaps the goals that are sought through a theology of the beatific vision can be achieved through distinguishing it with an immediate vision.²⁵ For example, the text by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith cited by White (238n1) in order to demonstrate the magisterial acceptance of Christ’s beatific vision speaks of Jesus’s filial consciousness and “an intimate and *immediate knowledge of his Father*. . . . The hypostatic union and Jesus’ mission of revelation and redemption require *the vision of the Father* and the knowledge of his plan of salvation.”²⁶ This immediate knowledge would be properly Trinitarian knowledge, experienced by the theandric Christ—a knowledge of the *Father* in the Spirit, not of the triune God “as a subject ontologically distinct from himself” (262). Thus, this language protects what the theology of the beatific vision of Christ wishes to safeguard but underscores the Trinitarian relationship that is at its core.

Is the distinction between a beatific vision and a *visio immediata* a distinction without a difference? I would argue not.²⁷ Both are immediate

²⁵ Indeed, as Bernard Blankenhorn, O.P., notes, drawing on Jean-Pierre Torrell, one cannot speak in any simple way of “a settled teaching of ‘the tradition’” concerning Christ’s beatific vision: “It was a scholastic consensus that followed a real diversity of patristic positions”; see review of *Light in Darkness* by Alyssa Lyra Pitstick, *Nova et Vetera* (English) 6, no. 4 (2008): 951–55, at 954, citing Torrell, *Le Christ en ses mystères: La vie et l’œuvre de Jésus selon saint Thomas d’Aquin*, vol. 1 (Paris: Desclée, 1999), 135–42, and “Saint Thomas d’Aquin et la science du Christ: Une relecture des questions 9–12 de la ‘Tertia Pars’ de la ‘Somme Théologie,’” in *Recherches thomasiennes* (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 198–213. For Torrell’s hesitations concerning this Scholastic consensus, see the summary in Joshua R. Brotherton, *One of the Trinity Has Suffered: Balthasar’s Theology of Divine Suffering in Dialogue* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2019), 91–94.

²⁶ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Notification on the Works of Fr. Jon Sobrino, S.J., Jesus the Liberator* (1991) and *Christ the Liberator* (1999), 2006, §8 (emphasis mine; cited in White, *Incarnate Lord*, 238n1).

²⁷ Pitstick, in her eager prosecution of Balthasar, does not think so either. She makes the distinction between the two and Balthasar’s use of the language of immediate vision another example of Balthasar’s divergence from orthodoxy (*Light in Darkness*, 164–90).

visions, but, by definition, the beatific vision refers to the heavenly state of created persons, while a *visio immediata* is not so specified in advance, such that it could be descriptive of the state of a divine Person operating by means of a human nature.

Fr. White himself approaches close to this by his presentation of the beatific vision of Christ, which, to my mind, more resembles a *visio immediata* by the Incarnate Son of the Father than a beatific vision of a human person. He insightfully takes up Maximus the Confessor's distinction between nature and mode, such that the vision is experienced by Christ's human operations of intellect and will, while its subject is in the Son. This latter point means that the vision is "filial in mode" (246): "Not only the human nature but also the *graces* of the humanity of Christ *subsist* in the Word, and thus have a filial *mode* as well" (262).

This emphasis on Christ's filial mode is one of the strengths of the chapters on soteriology. He and I are in complete agreement on the filial mode of this vision and, indeed, all of Christ's subsistence and operations. But would this filial mode, which is due to the personal existence of the Son, mean Christ's vision is only analogously a beatific vision of the triune God, but properly an immediate filial vision of the Father in the Holy Spirit?

I would add to this that the mission-Christology discussed above has an important implication for this question. If Jesus's mission is not merely an understanding of the Father's plan but also co-extensive with his Person as proceeding from the Father, then Jesus's knowledge of his mission is one with his knowledge of his identity as the Son sent by the Father.²⁸ This means that, when Balthasar proposes Christ's mission as the criterion for what happens in his earthly life, this is based on a hypostatic reality. Balthasar believes that the unchangeable identity of the Son provides the possibility for Jesus's conscious experience of the *visio* to be veiled for the sake of his mission, leaving the underlying reality of his mission-Person untouched.²⁹ Even in this experiential veiling, however, the Father is present precisely as the one who is missed.

²⁸ My "Mission and Person" essay explicates Balthasar's mission-Christology. Joseph Ratzinger's Christology is similar; see *Introduction to Christianity*, 2nd ed., trans. J. R. Foster and Michael J. Miller (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 184–228, and *Behold the Pierced One: An Approach to a Spiritual Christology*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 13–46, and "On the Essence of the Priesthood," in *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 105–31. I would like to see a stronger presentation in White of this hypostatic reality of mission.

²⁹ Balthasar's own treatment of Christ's *visio beata* is inconsistent. See Randall S. Rosenberg, "Christ's Human Knowledge: A Conversation with Lonergan and

To sum up: a *visio immediata* of the Father by the incarnate Son would avoid the three problems with a beatific vision while safeguarding the consciousness of the incarnate Son of his divine identity and mission. It is “analogous” to the beatific union but differs in being proper to a divine Person.³⁰

A problem arises, however: this approach does not in an obvious way meet the soteriological concern of St. Thomas, namely, that “Christ must have the vision so that he can communicate it to others” (239n2).

This should indeed be given more thought, but I will make a proposal by way of starting the conversation: the beatific vision as the creaturely and eschatological mode of union with the triune God occurs through a grace that perfects the human being. This perfection was conveyed to Christ’s human nature at the moment of his conception through the grace of union (84–91). Thus, Christ’s human nature possesses the *perfection* of the saint in heaven, even if he is not thereby engaged in the *action* of the saint in heaven (contemplating the triune God), which is proper to a human and not a divine Person. Thus, his human nature is still the instrumental cause of the perfection of the saints in heaven.

Further, let us grant that the mode of beatific union of creatures is an analogous participation in the divine mode of Trinitarian union, in particular the personal union of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. In this way, the *visio immediata* of the incarnate Son united to the Father in the Holy Spirit would be the efficient, exemplary, and final cause of the beatific union of the saints with the Trinity. This intimate connection between Christ’s incarnate experience of the Father and the beatific vision of the saints meets the Thomistic concern for the soteriological causality of Christ.

Balthasar,” *Theological Studies* 71 (2010): 817–45, at 828–29 (Balthasar’s use of the category is “fluid”); see also Brotherton’s chronological treatment in ch. 3 of *One of the Trinity*, esp. 109–21. Brotherton grasps that the key to the question is Christ’s mission-person: for Balthasar, “comprehension of [Christ’s] mission implies complete understanding of the divine essence since His *missio* and *processio* are identical” (120). He considers Balthasar’s late understanding of the beatific vision of Christ to contain features similar to Jacques Maritain’s distinction between supraconsciousness and infra-consciousness (113–18).

³⁰ Balthasar’s later work in *Theo-Logic*, vol. 2, *Truth of God*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), comes close to this more nuanced position, citing Adrienne von Seyr’s commentary on 1 Corinthians: “On earth the Son has an immediate and absolute knowledge of the Father, which as such cannot grow and to which corresponds an absolute mission” (290n17). See also Nicholas J. Healy, “*Simul viator et comprehensor*: The Filial Mode of Christ’s Knowledge,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 11, no. 2 (2013): 341–55.

By way of closing out this section, I would like to observe that I am not convinced by Fr. White's strong language of the necessity of Christ's beatific vision as the basis for the operative unity of Christ: "*Only* this vision safeguards the unity of the personal actions of Christ in and through his two distinct natures and operations. . . . [The vision] is *essential* for *there to be personal unity in the voluntary acts* of the man Jesus." (246, emphasis mine).³¹ This is a daring proposal that, as he freely acknowledges, goes beyond those of Thomas (while not, for all that, being necessarily incompatible with them).³²

My hesitation is entirely Fr. White's own fault. His earlier chapters convinced me that an accidental operation cannot be the foundation for Christ's ontological unity (e.g., 41–43). But would the beatific vision not be precisely such an accidental operation? I recognize that White's proposal regards the *operative* unity (the unity of action) and not the ontological unity of Christ, but it is by no means clear to me why the primary causality of the grace of union (that is, the hypostatic union itself) is insufficient as a basis for operative unity. Is it really the case that *only* the beatific vision of Christ, as White puts it, would provide the operative unity that the hypostatic union of Christ should already provide?³³

Assuming, however, that we could dispense with the "only," I grant Fr. White's important point, that Christ's human knowledge must be constant in its awareness of his identity lest his human nature be left thinking, willing, and operating in psychological isolation from the Logos. My thesis is that securing this truth requires anchoring Christ's human knowledge of his identity as the One Sent in his filial relation to the Father, which

³¹ Christopher M. Hadley, S.J., addresses White's critique of Balthasar's understanding of "faith," arguing that the latter is not incompatible with a certain reading of Christ's *visio* ("The Archetypal Faith of Christ," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 [2020]: 671–92, at 683–86). He does not, however, address White's concern about operative unity.

³² Brotherton cites Guy Mansini to argue that Christ's beatific vision, for Thomas, is fitting but not strictly necessary (Guy Mansini, "Understanding St. Thomas on Christ's Knowledge of God," *The Thomist* 59, no. 1 [1995]: 91–124, at 94–96, cited in *One of the Trinity*, 89n32). If not necessary to the Incarnation, it is hard to see how it could be necessary for Christ's operative unity.

³³ See White himself: "The cooperation of the two wills [of Christ] stems from the hypostatic identity of Christ and is indicative of the unity of his person" (255). See also from some of the loveliest pages of the book: "Because Christ's human nature is united hypostatically to this divine will in its filial mode, the latter must exact upon this nature the expression of its own hypostatic identity: that of God the Son" (265). Is not the cooperation of the two natures and wills one example of operative unity stemming from the hypostatic union?

is unchanging. It may be, in fact, that Thomas's language of the vision operating in the apex of Christ's soul would be the best for capturing this awareness of his filial identity.³⁴

Some Disagreements on Soteriology

As the preceding indicates, I agree entirely with Fr. White's "central claim" that "Chalcedonian Christology has a permanent importance for Christian theology" (236). I disagree with the structural implication of the book: that Chalcedonian Christology (expounded in the first half) naturally leads to one (and only one?) soteriology (the essays in the second half).

Certainly, some forms of soteriology are ruled out by Chalcedon, such as an Arian or Pelagian proposal that would make our salvation solely a matter of exemplarism. Nevertheless, the Church did not follow up the early Christological counsels with similar conciliar activity on the matter of soteriology, allowing a *de facto* orthodox soteriological multiplicity that is reflected in Aquinas himself.³⁵ In that spirit, I offer alternatives to some aspects of Fr. White's soteriology.

Abandonment

Fr. White's chapter on the cry of abandonment from the Cross (Mark 15:34) is an insightful and moving treatment of the Son's sufferings. His explication of the "I thirst" cry (John 19:28) was especially profound (323–28).³⁶

This chapter showed the coherence of Jesus's sufferings in his divine Person and nature, the eschatological nature of Jesus's desire, and the possibility of the coexistence of suffering with hope and with an immediate vision of God. The chapter did not, however, sufficiently answer the question of why Jesus chose to speak of being *abandoned* by God. If Jesus wished only to express that he suffered and experienced eschatological desire for us and for his resurrection, surely other psalms would have been

³⁴ I am grateful to Adrian J. Walker for his help in articulating this paragraph.

³⁵ For example, Thomas accepts but contextualizes Anselm's soteriology of satisfaction by presenting three other ways in which Christ saves us (*ST* III, q. 48; see Christoph Cardinal Schönborn, *God Sent His Son: A Contemporary Christology*, trans. Henry Taylor [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010], 289–300).

³⁶ I treat the water theme in the Gospels from anthropological, Christological, and Trinitarian perspectives in "Fluidity: Man, the Triune God, and the Eucharistic Christ," *Communio* 46 (2019): 585–619. Fr. White's treatment of John 19:28 pointed out a lacuna in that essay, in that I do not treat the "I thirst" cry.

more appropriate (e.g., “Oh, God, come to my assistance! Oh, Lord, make haste to help me!” [Ps 69:2]). Why cry out instead of *abandonment*?

Further, it should be noted that, while many Scripture passage might be cited in order to celebrate God’s future victory, Psalm 22 describes the entire arc of the Paschal mystery. Yes, there is victory, but it is a victory that is preceded by specific forms of redemptive suffering. “All who see me mock me” (v. 7); “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint” (v. 14); “they have pierced my hands and my feet” (v. 16); “They divide my clothes among them, and cast lots for my garment” (v. 18)—all these verses, including the very first (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”), present the precise contours of what Christ would do for our salvation as the Father hands him over to death.³⁷

A further concern is White’s argument that, because the pains of damnation are due to the free rejection of God, these pains are “essentially dissimilar” from Christ’s pains on the Cross and *therefore* the two pains “cannot be compared analogically” (316). He explains further that “strictly analogical predication requires something that is essentially common to the two terms that are compared” (317). The example that he gives involves two kinds of goodness, the analogues goodness-1 and goodness-2, each analogously applicable to two different aspects (the analogates) of a human being “because they [I believe White means the analogues, although grammatically it would be the analogates] have existence in common, and all existence is good” (317). But, he argues, there is not such a possible analogy between “both the love for God and the refusal to love God, because one is the privation of the other” (317). Thus, Christ cannot experience “something analogous to damnation and despair,” because this would be equivocity (316). His conclusion: “The *essence* of Christ’s agony, therefore, stems from something entirely different from such aversion to God [analogue-1] ([namely,] divine love [analogue-2]) and therefore, strictly speaking, is not analogous to the state of the damned. In fact, at heart it is entirely dis-analogous” (318; emphasis original).³⁸

³⁷ The divine prerogative captured in biblical *traditio* language is addressed in Brian K. Peterson, “What Happened on ‘The Night’? Judas, God, and the Importance of Liturgical Ambiguity,” *Pro Ecclesia* 20, no. 4 (2011): 363–83, and discussed in Franks, “Fluidity,” 599–601 and 614–15.

³⁸ Brotherton makes a similar argument against comparing the otherness between the sinner and God with the otherness of the distinctions of the Trinitarian Persons. To compare the two kinds of otherness is, Brotherton argues, “actually an equivocation” (*One of the Trinity*, 218; cf. 244–46). I will treat Trinitarian difference shortly, but here it is appropriate to note that Balthasar is not arguing that the difference between moral evil and God is simply analogous to the difference between the divine Persons. Rather,

This closely reasoned passage nevertheless pushes too far. Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger (more on the latter shortly) are not arguing that Christ's experiences are analogous to the pains of abandonment, but rather the real experience of them. As Joshua Brotherton puts it, "the 'separation' between God and Christ crucified is only phenomenal—it is a profound subjective experience, a psychological separation, not a metaphysical one (i.e., not the objective separation that exists where *caritas* does not)."³⁹ Nevertheless, White's conclusion—that Christ's agony is "entirely dis-analogous" to the state of the damned—would disallow their and any position that holds that Christ is *experiencing* that state, so let us examine his argument more carefully.

Both Balthasar and Ratzinger agree with White, of course, that Christ himself is not a sinner.⁴⁰ The difference is that they apply a logic of redemptive causality rather than one of similarity between two analogues. This logic looks like this: the sinner's rejection of God causes the experience of abandonment by him. With Christ, this effect is detached from its cause; instead, it is Christ's love that is the cause of his experience of abandonment. If analogy is relevant to this, it would apply to the "essential similarity" of the human natures of the sinner and of Christ, which provide the possibility for either to experience abandonment by God.

his point is that the *possibility* for sin is derived from the Trinitarian difference, for two reasons: first, there is creaturely otherness that is not a fall because of Trinitarian otherness; and, second, the otherness of sin is a *perversion* of this creaturely otherness and parasitic upon it—the creature can choose, dramatically, what is not God because it is, metaphysically, not divine. Balthasar is motivated in part by a desire to avoid a Gnostic dualism in which evil is attributed causally to a malicious principle other than God. For the perversion of sin and its "not-God" aspect, in contrast to God's reality, see Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, 2:316–26, esp. 323: "Diabolical contra-diction cannot be assimilated into God's logic." Brotherton views arguments utilizing "conditions for the possibility of X" as suspiciously Kantian and epistemological, not ontological (see *One of the Trinity*, 248), but he has perhaps not considered how deeply Balthasar engaged the (neo-)Platonic metaphysical logic, which inexorably refused any ground for otherness beyond its being a fall. In this sense, Balthasar's (metaphysical!) concern is decidedly pre-Kantian. See his reservations concerning the Platonism of the Fathers on precisely this point in his early article "The Fathers, the Scholastics and Ourselves," trans. Edward T. Oakes, *Communio* 24 (1997): 347–96; see also "A Résumé of My Thought," trans. Kelly Hamilton, *Communio* 15 (1988): 468–73.

³⁹ Brotherton, *One of the Trinity*, 47–48. In general, Brotherton's treatment of the descent on 15–77 must be commended as a careful and charitable treatment of a topic that arouses strong but not always clearly thought-out reactions.

⁴⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4, *The Action* [hereafter, *TD4*], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 336: there is no "identification of the Crucified with the actual No of sin itself."

Fr. White might object to such a severing of cause and effect, in that the cause (sin) is not found in Christ, while the effect (the experience of abandonment) is. Yet in fact Christ's mission frequently entails the interruption of the normal order of cause and effect. Thomas, in quotations provided by White, gives some examples: the disruption of the natural connection between the beatific vision and its effects in the body (Christ's body before the resurrection is passible and mortal; see 329n51), and the normal experiences of the consolation of virtue not given to Christ on the Cross (331n56). White himself rightly presents this interrupted causality: "[Christ's] role [as redeemer] entails an acceptance upon himself of some of the *consequences* of sin in our fallen humanity . . . without an experience of that sin itself" (331, emphasis original; cf. 405).

Further, it seems quite radical to argue, as White does, that the essence of Christ's agony is "entirely dis-analogous" with the experience of the sinner. Thomas himself does not shrink from noting that Christ takes on our punishment, which is an effect of sin, even if this theme is not emphasized by him.⁴¹

Balthasar takes up the same question in the following way: "The crucified Jesus suffers, in our place, our experience of estrangement from God." But he immediately adds: "For him, there is nothing familiar about it; it is all that is alien and horrible to him. He suffers something deeper than any ordinary man can, because only the Son incarnate knows in truth who the Father is and what it means to be deprived of him, to have (seemingly) lost him." This is nevertheless "not a question of punishment, since the work accomplished here between Father and Son with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit is utter love."⁴²

Following Balthasar, I would argue that Christ's cry of abandonment entails many of the points defended by White (an eschatological desire for

⁴¹ Thomas writes: "There are four reasons why Christ descended in his [human] soul to hell. The first was to take on the entire punishment of sin and thereby to atone wholly for its guilt" (*In Symbolum Apostolorum expositio*, in *Opuscula theologica*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, "Descensus and Development: A Response to Recent Rejoinders," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 13, no. 1 [2011]: 3–24, at 11).

⁴² Hans Urs von Balthasar, "The Scapegoat and the Trinity," in *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 85, cited in Margaret M. Turek, "In This Way the Love of God was Revealed (1 Jn 4:9): Atonement as a 'Patrogenetic' Process (Part II)," *Communio* 47 (2020): 399–440, at 410. The "seemingly" here points to the error in Brown's assessment of abandonment in light of filial obedience, because Brown assumes that the Father "really" (and not experientially) withdraws from the Son; see Brown, *Balthasar*, 182; cf. Turek concerning God's forsaking as a mode of redemptive love, discussed in the body of the text shortly.

his own resurrection and for our salvation, etc.) but is at its heart exactly what it states: a cry to the Father expressing the Son's experience of abandonment by the One with whom he is eternally united. This is possible because of the redemptive activity of the Passion, which shifts the burden of our sin onto Christ while he remains the sinless one.⁴³

Allow me a few words on why this stance makes good sense of revelation. As Margaret M. Turek's important work on atonement is demonstrating, Scripture presents sin as the abandonment of God: "They have forsaken YHWH, spurned the Holy One of Israel" (Isa 1:2, 4).⁴⁴ God's response is to forsake Israel: "I have forsaken my house; I have abandoned my heritage. I have given the beloved of my soul into the hands of enemies" (Jer 12:7). This forsaking, however, is only for the purpose of bringing Israel to repentance.

As Turek shows, Balthasar, Ratzinger, and John Paul II all describe how Jesus experiences this forsakenness in the place of sinners, to make possible their reunion with the Father. Ratzinger maintains that Jesus's experience of death, to "the God-forsaken land of darkness, a realm of distance from God," thereby "brings the world's anguished cry at God's absence before the heart of God himself. He identifies himself with all who suffer 'under God's darkness'; He takes their cry, their anguish, all their helplessness upon himself—and in so doing transforms it."⁴⁵

⁴³ Balthasar argues that, during the Son's Hour, in particular during his descent into hell, the Son's *visio immediata* is veiled. Is this the same as the view I dismissed above, namely, the argument that the beatific vision is incommensurate with the suffering of the Passion? As is the case for Balthasar regarding all things Christological and soteriological, Christ's experience of this reality is dependent upon one thing only, namely, his mission to save us. In other words, it is not the suffering that determines the vision but rather the mission that determines both the suffering and the vision. In order for Christ to *experience* fully the dark night of the sinner in his abandonment by God, the vision is veiled in his experience. Yet, objectively, this is the time of the incarnate Son's most profound union with the Father.

⁴⁴ Margaret M. Turek, "In This Way the Love of God was Revealed (1 Jn 4:9): Atonement as a 'Patrogenetic' Process (Part I)," *Communio* 47 (2020): 7–47. She follows this with a treatment of the New Testament in "Atonement as a 'Patrogenetic' Process (Part II)," and develops it in a book-length meditation, *Atonement: Soundings in Biblical, Trinitarian, and Spiritual Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2022).

⁴⁵ Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 93, and Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, *Holy Week: From the Entrance into Jerusalem to the Resurrection*, trans. Vatican Secretariat of State (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 214, as exegeted by Turek in "Atonement as a 'Patrogenetic' Process (Part II)," 414–17.

John Paul II expanded on this theme in *Salvifici Doloris*. I will quote the entire relevant passage:

After the words in Gethsemane come the words uttered on Golgotha, words which bear witness to this depth—unique in the history of the world—of the evil of the suffering experienced. When Christ says: “My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?,” his words are not only an expression of that abandonment which many times found expression in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and in particular in that Psalm 22[21] from which come the words quoted. One can say that these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father “laid on him the iniquity of us all.” They also foreshadow the words of Saint Paul: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin.” Together with this horrible weight, *encompassing the “entire” evil of the turning away from God* which is contained in sin, Christ, through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way *this suffering which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God*. But precisely through this suffering he accomplishes the Redemption, and can say as he breathes his last: “It is finished.” (§18, emphasis original)

The words of abandonment, the Pope writes, certainly pertain to Israel’s messianic hope of deliverance (as emphasized by White); yet John Paul II does not stop there when he writes, again, “these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father ‘laid on him the iniquity of us all.’” The cry depends upon the triune relation of unity and distinction between Father and Son, because of which the Father can lay upon the Son our iniquity. The words do not express an actual rupture within the Trinity, but rather the *experience* of “*the separation, the rejection by the Father,*” that is proper to *us* as sinners, not to the Son. But on the Cross, the Son takes on our experience, *for the sake of his mission to save us*.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Again, mission (and not, e.g., human perfection in the abstract, such as the ability to suffer with confidence; see White, *Incarnate Lord*, 322n38) is the criterion for Christ’s actions and Passion. Jesus’s sufferings (“unique in the history of the world,” as John Paul II says) differ from those of, e.g., the martyrs in 2 Macc 6 and 7 or Stephen in Acts 6, because Christ’s (divine and universal) mission was different from their (human) participation in his.

Christ's experience of separation is, as White notes, quoting Balthasar, only possible because of the eternal Trinitarian relations: "If Jesus can be forsaken by the Father, the conditions for this 'forsaking' must lie within the Trinity, in the absolute distance/distinction between the Hypostasis who surrenders the Godhead and the Hypostasis who receives it."⁴⁷ It is not correct, however, to say (with White) that, for Balthasar, "obedience as *separation* . . . is characteristic of the very generation of the Son from the Father" (375, emphasis mine). The inner-Trinitarian life as an eternal reality entails the "distinction" of Persons, but only analogously "distance" or "separation."⁴⁸ Instead, the distinction of the Persons of the Trinity provides the conditions of possibility for the Son to take on the sinner's separation from God. To address this question takes us to the next topic, that of the descent of Christ to hell on Holy Saturday.

First, however, one additional note: Balthasar's theological proposal on abandonment is mirrored in the experiences of many female mystics, especially in the twentieth century.⁴⁹ Adrienne von Speyr is one obvious example. But she is not the only one. I would like to call attention to the life and teaching of Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare movement.⁵⁰ Her teaching can be condensed to two key phrases: unity and Jesus abandoned.⁵¹

⁴⁷ TD4, 333 (quoted in White, *Incarnate Lord*, 375n89).

⁴⁸ Balthasar often signals this analogous reality by putting "separation" in quotation marks, but not consistently. This inconsistency is undoubtedly a weakness in Balthasar's writing.

⁴⁹ For chronologically earlier examples, especially medieval ones, see Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Might Be Saved?": With a Short Discourse on Hell*, trans. David Kipp and Lothar Kraut (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 97–113.

⁵⁰ Focolare is much better known in Europe than in North America. For a summary of its charism, see Amelia J. Uelmen, "Chiara Lubich: A Life for Unity," *Logos* 8, no. 1 (2005): 52–64, and the secondary literature given there.

⁵¹ Lubich writes: "It was the Holy Spirit, we believe, before leading us into the mystery of unity, who concentrated our faith and all of our love in Jesus who in an insuperable climax of love and suffering, cries out from the cross: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). In that moment *he experienced the most profound separation that can ever be imagined; in a sense, he experienced being separated from his Father with whom he was and remained one*. At the same time, he gives all humankind a new and fuller unity than the one lost through sin: *he reunites all with one another and with God in a new unity, which is a participation in his unity with the Father and with us. Therefore, Jesus forsaken is the key to understanding and living out unity*" (Chiara Lubich, *Essential Works: Spirituality, Dialogue, Culture* [Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2007], 206 [emphasis added], cited in Piero Coda, "The Unity of Reciprocal Love: The Charism of Chiara Lubich and the Theology of Klaus Hemmerle," *International*

Lubich does not think it is an accident that this aspect of Christ's life is so emphasized recently, perhaps as a development of doctrine:

This is why Jesus forsaken seems to be the God of our times. He is heaven's response to the terrible chasm of sufferings and trials cut deep into the hearts of men and women by the atheism permeating many aspects of our modern culture; by the extreme poverty of millions of displaced people; by the quest for meaning and ideals of the disillusioned and confused new generations.⁵²

Lubich here calls to mind the experience of St. Therese of Lisieux at the outset of the twentieth century, who sat at the table of atheists, experiencing their distance from God while herself not being a sinner. If this is an atoning act possible for God's saints, the exemplary case of it would be Jesus' cry of abandonment.

Recent popes have not rebuked Lubich for these proposals. On the contrary, as expressed by Benedict XVI in his message to Focolare when Lubich died, they have tended to support her precisely on this point: "I have been moved by news of the death of Chiara Lubich, which came at the end of a long and fruitful life marked by her tireless love for the abandoned Jesus."⁵³

Descent and the Trinity

Fr. White treats the descent in chapter 9 (380–437). Much of what I had to say about the cry of abandonment applies to the descent, so this section will be briefer.

I will not address the question that takes up much of the chapter, namely, the question of universal salvation. While worth treating, we cannot progress much further than Balthasar's own insistence on both the real possibility of finite freedom's choice of hell and the hope that grace

Journal of Philosophy and Theology 78, nos. 1–2 (2017): 155–71, at 162). It has been the lifework of Msgr. Coda, Lubich's friend and theological advisor, to unpack her Trinitarian insights. Coda has served as a member of the International Theological Commission and of the Pontifical Academy of Theology (as secretary prelate from 2003–2008). See also Coda's *From the Trinity: The Coming of God in Revelation and Theology*, ed. William Neu (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2020).

⁵² Lubich, *Essential Works*, 206, cited in Coda, "Unity of Reciprocal Love," 162.

⁵³ Catholic News Agency, "Beatification cause opened for founder of Focolare movement," January 24, 2015, catholicnewsagency.com/news/beatification-cause-opened-for-founder-of-focolare-movement-52945.

prevails in the end for all human beings. If Balthasar does indeed deny either of these poles, then he would certainly need to be corrected. Further, I would like to note my appreciation for White's treatment of limbo, in particular his words on 416–17. Lastly, I think that White's concern about Balthasar's ambiguity about the reality of an intermediate state of the soul after death (summarized on 422–23) merits further thought and hopefully will inspire a Balthasarian approach that takes this critique into account.⁵⁴

I will instead turn to a question that has been underlying all of White's engagement with Balthasar, namely, the merit of the latter's Trinitarian theology. This brings us back to the opening pages on analogy.

Fr. White questions whether Balthasar presents a primordial Trinitarian rupture that impermissibly projects our sinful separation from God into the Trinitarian relations. Balthasar, of course, denies this. What the Cross reveals is not "God's 'self-alienation,'" but rather his salvific love for the world.⁵⁵

But what, then, about Balthasar's language, such as "separation" and Trinitarian "enrichment"? Is Balthasar trying to have it both ways? (See White, 417–18 and 429–34.⁵⁶) Let us begin with "separation." I have spoken about his analogous use of this language, which admittedly can be misunderstood. But what Balthasar wishes to underline with it is the distinction within the Trinity, which must be maintained as forcefully as its unity if we are to avoid modalism. Fr. White is concerned that Balthasar's emphasis undercuts divine simplicity, but of course White also grants that there is distinction in the Trinity: namely, the otherness of the divine Persons, distinguished through opposed relations of origin (418). Only subsisting relations can distinguish the Persons in a way that does not introduce either rupture or subordination into God.

Thus, the "Son is infinitely Other, but he is also the infinitely Other of

⁵⁴ Brotherton undertakes such an attempt in *One of the Trinity*, 62–77.

⁵⁵ Balthasar, *GL*1, 462, 462. The dramatic Trinitarian relations of distinction and unity are neither "tragic" nor "comic" but transcendent (Balthasar, *TD*4, 327).

⁵⁶ He criticizes Balthasar for taking notions of "separation," "self-surrender," and "passivity" and applying them not "to the humanity of Christ alone, but to *his Godhead as such*. In that sense, they come to characterize the very relations of the Father and the Son from all eternity" (White, *Incarnate Lord*, 394; emphasis added). If by "his Godhead," White means to indicate the divine nature, his words are imprecise as a description of Balthasar. Balthasar's language signifies the Trinitarian *relations* and, in particular, the filial relation to the Father that the Son is. See *TD*4, 322–28; see also the texts and commentary in Schumacher, *Trinitarian Anthropology*, 343. While there is no real distinction between the divine Persons and nature, the primary referent of these kenotic terms is to the relations.

the Father.”⁵⁷ Both the unity and the otherness within the Trinity are of infinite and divine “dimensions.” The wholly good otherness of the creature vis-à-vis God is derived from this divine Otherness.

The “not” which characterizes the creature—it is “not” God and cannot exist of itself—is by no means identical with the “not” found within the Godhead. However, the latter constitutes the deepest reason why the creaturely “not” does not cause the analogy of being between creature and God to break down. The infinite distance between the world and God is grounded in the other, prototypical distance between God and God.⁵⁸

“Distance” and “not” in God, that is, are meant to express the opposed relationships of origin that constitute the Persons of the Trinity: The Father is “not” the Son in generating the eternal Son, who exists eternally in a relationship of filiation to the Father. The distinction between them Balthasar often renders analogically in spatial terms, such as “distance” and “space.”

Sin takes this naturally good, metaphysical otherness and perverts it into willful rejection of God. Sin can do this because of the “space” of freedom opened up between the creature and God. This very “space,” however, is metaphysically dependent upon the “distance” between the divine Persons.

The introduction of sin brings us back to Christ’s descent. Metaphysically, sin is not any-thing; it is only parasitic upon being, as the sinful will is parasitic upon the freedom derived from the Trinity. Sin only decays being without becoming anything positive. But sin is *experienced* historically as a terrible force.⁵⁹ This weight of historical experience the Son takes on in the redemption, all the way to hell. Because the perversion of sin occurs within the “space” of the triune God, as does creation itself, its redemption will occur in the same “space.” Sin is not capable of breaking free from the all-embracing reality of God. As Aidan Nichols puts it, “nothing in the

⁵⁷ Balthasar, *TD*4, 325.

⁵⁸ Balthasar, *GL* 1, 266. The second sentence in this passage was, according to a footnote, a rejoinder to Barth.

⁵⁹ See Richard Barry, “Retrieving the Goat for Azazel: Balthasar’s Biblical Soteriology,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 15, no. 1 (2017): 13–35, at 14, for a linguistic treatment of the same idea: “Sin has no substance of its own. It is being inclined toward nothingness, and ‘nothing’ is the truly unthinkable thought. Yet the psalmist says ‘my sin is ever before me’ (Psalm 51:3): sin is our constant companion.” Existentially, we must confront the nothingness of sin that, paradoxically, “*is* ever before us.” Barry’s treatment of Balthasar’s language of the “burden” of sin is especially helpful, at 22–27.

Economy can go further than the absolute self-surrender which characterizes the triune life from all eternity.”⁶⁰

Drawing on the scriptural witness, Turek notes the atoning reality of distance from God: “*Sin (its effects) must also be transformed into a condition for the expression of filial love.* Here we need to recall that the principal effect of sin is *distance from God*. This effect must be transformed into *a condition for the expression of filial love.*”⁶¹ Here I extrapolate from this to the descent: By traversing the whole path of our rejection of God, all the way down to Gehenna, the Son ensures that death and sin need not have the last word by transforming our distance from God into the space to express his deepest economic union with the Father in the Holy Spirit.⁶²

How does this economic experience “enrich” God? Balthasar insists that this enrichment does not add “anything that is lacking to his eternal life.”⁶³ But how can the economy “perfect” and “enrich” God “without adding anything that is lacking”?⁶⁴ In the recapitulation of all creation that the

⁶⁰ Aidan Nichols, *No Bloodless Myth: A Guide Through Balthasar's Dramatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000), 213. See also Balthasar, *TD4*, 324: “On the basis of what is manifest in God’s kenosis in the theology of the covenant—and thence in the theology of the Cross—we must feel our way back into the mystery of the absolute, employing a negative theology that excludes from God all intramundane experience and suffering, while at the same time presupposing that the *possibility* of such experience and suffering—up to and including its christological and trinitarian implications—is grounded in God” (emphasis added).

⁶¹ Turek, “Atonement as a ‘Patrogenetic’ Process (Part I),” 31 (emphasis original). Turek relies primarily upon Balthasar, John Paul II, Ratzinger, and contemporary biblical scholarship to provide a detailed exegesis of relevant Old Testament passages. She summarizes this scholarship as revealing a “gradually emerging pattern of a process whereby atonement involves ‘conversion,’ not simply in the sense of turning away *from* sin, but also as the ‘conversion’ *of* sin itself. The sinner turns back to God with filial love (regenerated by God; in this respect, God is *near*), such that now he endures the effects of sin (principally *distance* from God) as a condition that pains him, and by lovingly bearing this sin-wrought distance he turns sin around: from a refusal of filiation to an occasion of it. Sin is effaced in being converted into its opposite: *nearness* to God in the filial love-suffering of God’s *distance*” (“Atonement as a ‘Patrogenetic’ Process [Part II],” 400).

⁶² See Balthasar, *TD5*, 268: “Now we have seen dereliction as a mode of eternal communion between Father and Son in the Spirit, and in conclusion we begin to see how the ‘economic’ modes of relations between the Divine Persons are latent in the ‘immanent’ modes, without adding a foreign element to them as such. The only foreign element is sin, which is burned up within these relations—which are fire.”

⁶³ Balthasar, *TD5*, 514.

⁶⁴ Balthasar, *TD5*, 514. See also 515, quoting von Speyr: “When the risen Son returns to the Father, ‘something happens in God. . . . This new joy perfects the Trinity in the sense

Son performs in the Incarnation and which he returns to the Father, God gains the world, now sanctified and returned to him. But this does not add anything to God, because the world is sanctified through participating in God's own life.⁶⁵ As Nichols states, "what the world gives to God, as Balthasar makes clear, is what *it gives back to God of the love it has received in taking part in the Trinitarian dialogue*, through the saving economy in which God himself has enfolded it."⁶⁶

Conclusion

This brings us back to the point of departure, the goodness of creation as a participation in the Good that the triune God is. G. K. Chesterton once remarked that Thomas Aquinas's religious name should be "Thomas of the Creator." These Balthasarian reflections on the analogous goodness of creation are deeply indebted to Thomas's metaphysics of analogy, while Balthasar's theology of the Trinity depends upon the teachings of the Persons as subsisting relations and as processions extended into missions.

While Fr. White and I disagree on how to judge Balthasar's contribution to theology, we are still speaking the same theological language, although perhaps in different dialects. Fr. White's book insightfully presents Thomas's metaphysics, its Christological implications, and further soteriological proposals. His treatment is rich and thought-provoking and will serve as a guidepost for a contemporary Thomistic Christology and soteriology. I am grateful to have this opportunity to comment on it.⁶⁷ N.V

that the grace that is to be bestowed becomes ever richer, both in the world into which it pours forth and in God himself, who is willing to bestow it."

⁶⁵ Balthasar, *TD5*, 521.

⁶⁶ Aidan Nichols, *A Key to Balthasar: Hans Urs von Balthasar on Beauty, Goodness, and Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 78 (emphasis original). See the whole section of 70–78.

⁶⁷ I am grateful to Matthew Levering, Margaret M. Turek, Michael Waldstein, and Adrian J. Walker for their helpful comments on earlier drafts of this essay.