

Three Rival Versions of Modern Trinitarian Theology: On Thomistic Trinitarian Theology and the Analogy of Natures in Christ*

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How do the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth reveal to us the inner mystery of God as the Holy Trinity? How does the Paschal Mystery render God present to our world in a unique sense? What does it mean to say that the Son made man reveals to us the Father, and the Holy Spirit, as well as the common life that they possess as the one God? There are many answers to this central theological question, answers that are of patristic, medieval, or modern provenance. Here I will seek to explore this question by focusing on the two natures of Christ, the mystery of Jesus as true God and true man. How do the distinctively human teachings, actions, and sufferings of the Son of God reveal his divine identity as Lord, and his transcendent relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit in their common nature?

To make clear why this question matters, I will first consider two distinct contemporary ways of answering it, those inspired by Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, respectively, before proposing a counter-alternative which is Thomistic in inspiration. What I would like to argue is that Rahner and von Balthasar, each in his own way, operate notable transitions away from certain classical forms of Trinitarian theology built up around the consideration of the common attributes of the divine

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nature and analogical terms of the inner life of Trinitarian processions. As a consequence, they both reconfigure Trinitarian theology around the consideration of the unfolding freedom of God manifest in the divine economy, either as an expression of the divine nature, as in Rahner, or as exemplified in the humanity of God the Son, as in von Balthasar. Both of these theologies invite us to reconsider ways that the divinity and humanity of Christ are distinct but analogous, and so also ways that the human operations and sufferings of Christ are indicative of but not constitutive of inner-Trinitarian relations. It is this latter idea that I would like to explore in this article. How do the human life and actions of Christ reveal his transcendent divine life as Lord?

Rahner on the Economic Trinity

Let us begin by making several observations about Rahner's famous presentation of the theology of the economic Trinity, from his now-classic work of 1967, *The Trinity*, which is itself a recapitulative expression of his contribution to the *Mysterium Salutis* dogmatics project.¹ In this book, which contains the famous *Grundaxiom* that the economic Trinity is the immanent Trinity and the inverse, Rahner is concerned from the start to advance two apophatic propositions.² Firstly, he claims that the neo-Scholastic appeal in modern Catholic theology to a treatise on the nature of the one God and the divine attributes has in effect overshadowed any substantive consideration of the mystery of the Trinity as such and has made the latter mystery a mere non-experiential and arid speculation absent

¹ See the English translation: Karl Rahner, *The Trinity*, trans. J. Donceel (1970, repr. London: Continuum, 2001). The work consists of three previously existing articles, the most substantive of which was published as "Der dreifaltige Gott als transzendenter Urgrund der Heilsgeschichte" in *Mysterium Salutis: Grundriss Heilsgeschichtlicher Dogmatik*, vol. 2, ed. J. Feiner and M. Löhrer (Einsiedeln: Benziger, 1967), to which were added two articles written in 1969, originally entitled "Trinität" and "Trinitätstheologie," for the theological encyclopedia *Sacramentum Mundi*, in vol. 4 of the German edition.

² Rahner, *Trinity*, 21–22: "The isolation of the treatise of the Trinity *has* to be wrong. There *must* be a connection between Trinity and man. The Trinity is a mystery of *salvation*, otherwise it would never have been revealed. . . . We must point out in *every* dogmatic treatise that what it says about salvation does not make sense without referring to this primordial mystery of Christianity. . . . The *basic thesis* which establishes this connection between the treatises and presents the Trinity *as* a mystery of salvation (in its reality and not merely as a doctrine) might be formulated as follows: *The 'economic' Trinity is the 'immanent' Trinity and the 'immanent' Trinity is the 'economic' Trinity.*"

from the spiritual and practical considerations of modern Christians.³ It is important to observe that this seemingly pastoral concern on the part of Rahner is connected logically to a logical and speculative claim: that Trinitarian theology may not rightly begin from a consideration of the divine nature common to the three persons, but should instead begin from a consideration of the economic activities of the Trinity in concrete human history.⁴ What is apophatic about this claim? Notably the fact that the *de deo ut uno* treatise in theology—the treatment on the divine names that pertain to God in his transcendent unity of nature—is circumvented or placed to the side as a starting point or even as a key reference in modern Catholic Trinitarian theology.⁵ Secondly, Rahner undertakes a similarly radical revisioning of the classic theological treatment of the eternal processions in God. Medieval Augustinian theologians of all stripes, from Anselm and Richard of St. Victor to Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, speculated on the eternal processions by appealing to an analogy from immaterial acts of the human soul, operations of immaterial knowledge and love, of *verbum* and spirated *affectus*. They understood the generation of the Word and the spiration of the Holy Spirit by similitudes to the human production of immaterial concept and the human act of volitional love. This so-called “psychological analogy,” however, is placed to the side by Rahner as something pertaining to a bygone era.⁶ Presumably

³ Rahner, *Trinity*, 10–21.

⁴ Rahner, *Trinity*, 21–24.

⁵ See Rahner, *Trinity* 15–21, 45–46. It should be noted that Rahner has methodological reasons to eschew consideration of the essence or nature of God as a starting point for Trinitarian theology. He is concerned that such an essentialism is artificially abstract, in that it considers God apart from, or by logically prescinding from, the Trinitarian identity and revelation of God in history. His aim, by contrast, is to begin with the Word in human nature (Jesus Christ) as the revelation of the paternity of God, and thus to think about the oneness of God as that of the Father, revealed in his Son, and his Holy Spirit. While he does acknowledge that there are transcendent pre-conditions for this revelation (in God’s own inner unity and eternity), he does not consider what these are in themselves, and his use of the *Grundaxiom* functions in such a way as to make the primary aim of Trinitarian theology the consideration of the Trinity in the economy, while the consideration of the transcendent essence of God is something of a limit-concept of our speculative reason, as it reflects on the conditions of possibility of Trinitarian revelation. Meanwhile it can simply be noted that the Council of Nicaea and the Council of Chalcedon assert that the Son is one in essence and nature with the Father. Rahner consents to the teachings of the Councils, of course, but his theology invites us to reinterpret their sense in primarily anthropological, historical-economic, and soteriological terms.

⁶ See especially Rahner, *Trinity*, 115–20, in the final section of the last essay. Rahner first

this traditional theological motif also is one that lacks sufficient economic intelligibility and direct soteriological importance.

Instead, Rahner operates a translation of Trinitarian theology into economic and historical terms by appealing to the notion of divine self-communication, which entails both divine revelation, or self-manifestation, and the transmission of grace, a participation in divine life.⁷ The idea that the Trinity is understood by us primarily in terms of the divine act of self-communication is a notion that has its proximate origins in the thought of Karl Barth, in volume IV/1 of his *Church Dogmatics* (*The Doctrine of Reconciliation, Part 1*), a text that Rahner refers to repeatedly in his work on the Trinity.⁸ In Barth's work, the Trinity is known most

employs Scholastic reasoning to explain how such a notion of the twofold procession by similitude to knowledge and love has reasonably arisen (115–16). He then problematizes the notion, considering it as a theologoumenon and mere hypothesis of past historical theology. His main criticism is significant: the theory fails to understand the procession Word as extrinsic expression, which he thinks is the key signification of "Logos," rather than as merely immanent procession. Rahner is in effect redefining the principal sense of Logos as something indicating what Aquinas would call a "relation to creatures" (see *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 34, a. 3). Aquinas thinks that the notion of Logos or Word in John 1:1–3 denotes first and foremost an eternal procession within the life of God, and that the eternal life of God must be understood therefore in terms of contemplation and love. In a secondary sense, then, "Logos" or "Word" denotes a relation to creatures, insofar as the Father creates all things in his Word, and from his subsistent contemplation and love, as the Father who eternally begets the Word and spirates the Spirit of Love. For Rahner, the interpretation is inverted. The Father speaking the Word outwardly by communicating himself to creation is the primary sense of "Logos" and "Word," and we must pass subsequently from this economic discovery of the Father speaking to us in his Logos to a consideration of what the immanent Trinity must or might be, as a precondition for this self-communication. What is purposefully surrendered by this decision is any overt conceptual form of consideration by theological analogy of what God is in himself, in his eternal life that is ontologically antecedent to creation.

⁷ Rahner, *Trinity*, 88–89: "First, we are speaking of self-communication. Hence the concept of the 'addressee' can never be excluded. The mystery of God's self-communication consists precisely in the fact that God really arrives at man, really enters into man's situation, assumes it himself, and *thus* is what he is. . . . In the second place, . . . creation as it is must or may, without detracting from the unity of the creative 'outward' activity of the one God, be considered as a moment of God's self-communication. It is the condition of the possibility of constituting an addressee. This is true even if, 'in itself,' creation might have occurred without such a self-communication. Now Christ's 'human nature' is not something which happens to be there, among many other things, which might equally well have been hypostatically assumed, but it is precisely that which comes into being when God's Logos 'utters' himself outwards."

⁸ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* [CD], trans. and ed. G. W. Bromiley and T. F.

ultimately by economic functions: the Revealer, the Revealed, and the internal agent of Revelation—the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as three respective modes of God’s being manifest in God’s own decision to freely reveal himself to humanity.⁹ In Rahner this idea takes on its own hue. He makes a very original claim in this regard, affirming that God is not obliged to create humanity, but that if God does create, he creates in view of the plenary self-communication of God to what is not God by way of personal incarnation, and this can occur only for the Son of God as God’s Word or property of self-communication.¹⁰ Furthermore, the human being, man,

Torrance, 4 vols. in 12 (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1936–1975), I/1:306–32. On the background and historical development of Barth’s approach to Trinitarian theology leading up to and including the first volume of the *Church Dogmatics*, see Bruce L. McCormack, “The Trinity,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Karl Barth*, ed. P. D. Jones and P. T. Nimmo (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 227–45. Rahner refers approvingly to Barth’s ideas in *Trinity* on 74 and 110. These passages have to do specifically with Barth’s idea of the persons in God as modes of being, but this idea is presented in Barth’s thought within the context of his designation of the persons as three distinct modes of divine revelation and self-communication. The theoretical parallels between the two thinkers seem significant, at any rate.

⁹ Barth, *CD*, I/1:306: “According to Scripture God’s revelation is God’s own direct speech which is not to be distinguished from the act of speaking and therefore is not to be distinguished from God Himself. . . . In God’s revelation God’s Word [in which God actively reveals himself] is identical with God Himself.” Barth follows up on this idea of God in his act of revelation by articulating an idea that prefigures (and no doubt influenced) Rahner’s *Grundaxiom*: “Our concepts of unimpaired unity and unimpaired distinction, modes of being to be distinguished in this essence, and finally the polemical assertion . . . that God’s triunity is to be found not merely in His revelation but, because in His revelation, in God Himself, and in Himself too, so that the Trinity is to be understood as ‘immanent’ and not just ‘economic’; . . . none of this is . . . explicitly stated in the Bible. . . . [But] the doctrine of the Trinity is concerned with a problem that is really and very centrally posed by the biblical witness to revelation” (133).

¹⁰ Rahner, *Trinity*, 28–30. Rahner considers the idea (found in Aquinas and others) that *in principle* another person of the Trinity *could* have become incarnate, even if it is most fitting that the Son and Word became incarnate, rather than the Father or the Spirit. Aquinas argues in fact that the Father fittingly sent the Son into the world, but that the Father and the Spirit are one in wisdom, will, and power with the Son, so that the Incarnation is a work of the whole Trinity, revealing the Trinity as the one God. By that same measure, however, it follows logically that any of the persons could have been incarnate, since they are each the one omnipotent God (*ST* III, q. 3, aa. 5 and 8). The point is not to pursue a possible counter-factual possibility of the divine economy, but to make clear that the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are truly one God ontologically and act as the one God soteriologically in the economy, in free but also fitting ways. Rahner argues that this Thomistic idea is without foundation in the pre-Augustinian patristic tradition, and that it is false due precisely to the fact that: (1) it fails to consider the Logos from all eternity as self-communication (29: “A revelation of the Father without

just is what God creates if God wishes to create outside of God's own self.¹¹ So the human being is a certain necessary moment in any possible creation outside of God and is also a precursor and adumbration of the Incarnation, of the Word made human, the plenary self-communication of God in a created idiom.

There are many interesting aspects to Rahner's theory. He posits the exclusive possibility of the Incarnation of the Son, not of the Father or the Spirit.¹² He advances the Scotistic notion of the creation as being for the Incarnation. His notion of creation is decidedly anthropocentric. He eschews the medieval idea that the Incarnation of the Son rather than the Father or the Spirit takes place due to a divine fittingness, as opposed to a strict necessity. Indeed, if all three persons are the one God, and if God is truly able by omnipotence as Creator to become human, then it seems logically entailed that we affirm that the Father or the Spirit might in principle

the Logos and his incarnation would be like speaking without words."); (2) it fails to consider that any revelation of the Trinity must reveal the modes of derivation of the Son and Spirit from the Father. The last of these points is true, but it is not a point of controversy, since Aquinas also affirms it, as do most Scholastic authors. The criticism presents us with a straw-man argument. Rahner's genealogical argument regarding pre-Nicene theology is fallacious, since it presupposes that all ideas in theology must be explicitly present in the earliest strata of theology. By that same criteria, almost all his own theological notions should be abandoned. Furthermore, the idea of God's unity of essence is found in early Christian theology, including in the Council of Nicaea, so it would seem evident that one must affirm that the Father and the Holy Spirit possess the same omnipotence as the Son, by nature, and if this is the case, they have the infinite power to become incarnate, in principle, even if not most fittingly. The idea that the Logos from all eternity is self-communicational, oriented toward creatures, is an equivocal notion. If one means by this that the Logos is ontologically intelligible only as being eternally related to creatures, the notion is problematic; but if one refuses this notion of "Logos" (which I think is the one Rahner tends to hold), then his argument is not valid. The Logos can be eternally related to the Father and the Spirit without being uttered in human incarnation, and thus the Trinity could be revealed to humanity in an alternative mode, without the incarnation of the Son, even if this latter mode is most propitious and fitting.

¹¹ Rahner, *Trinity*, 32–33: "Human nature in general is a possible object of the creative knowledge and power of God, because and insofar as the Logos is by nature the one who is 'utterable' (even into that which is not God); because he is the Father's Word, in which the Father can express himself, and, freely, empty himself into the non-divine; because, when this happens, that precisely is born which we call human nature. . . . Man is possible because the exteriorization of the Logos is possible."

¹² See Rahner, *Trinity*, 28–30, contrasted with Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 3, aa. 5 and 8. See also the important speculative and historical consideration of this question by Dominic Legge, *The Trinitarian Christology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

have become human. For our purposes, however, what is significant is that Rahner posits a real distinction of the Son from the Father and the Spirit from all eternity in view of the Son's being potentially as the Word incarnate, meaning in this context of an economic Trinitarianism that the Son alone is self-communicable. In short, it truly is the Son's role in the economy, as the one who can communicate what the Father is precisely by being subject to hominization, by which he is distinguished from the Father and the Spirit eternally. Having sidestepped the possibility of distinguishing the Son from the Father and the Spirit by appeal to the eternal processions by analogy to human immaterial operations of knowledge and love, Rahner has re-articulated the distinct personal modes of God's being based on their economic activities. Nor does he hide from this conclusion, but rather explores it in other ways that are logically consistent with one another. He posits, for example that the distinct personal modes of God's being in the economy undertake distinct divine activities proper to each person and undergo distinct passive forms of inter-relation with human subjects in history proper to each person.¹³ If we experience God as really distinct in three modes—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—in history, the reasoning goes, so too then in some way the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit must relate back to us by way of real relations of subjective passivity that are genuinely proper to each person.¹⁴

¹³ See Rahner, *Trinity* 34–38, where he makes some very strong statements in this regard, such as on 36: "Here is the absolute mystery revealed to us only by Christ: God's self-communication is truly a *self*-communication. . . . In a *quasi-formal* causality he really and in the strictest sense of the word bestows *himself*. . . . It follows as a formal axiom that if the distinction present in communicated by God exists *only* on the creature's side, then there is no *self*-communication with a real distinction that is communicated as such, hence with a real distinction 'for us,' then God must 'in himself' carry this distinction." The tenor of the argument in these pages seems to suggest, cautiously, the assertion of a Scholastic real relation (ontological relativity) on the side of God, for each person, in his engagement with creatures in the economy.

¹⁴ Rahner, *Trinity*, 38: "The 'threefoldness' of God's relation to us in Christ's order of grace is already the reality of God as it is in itself: a three-personal one. This statement would constitute Sabellianism or modalism only if the following conditions were fulfilled: if it totally ignored the fact that this modality is one of radical *self*-manifestation in uncreated grace and in the hypostatic union; if it claimed that God himself is so little affected by this relation that this 'diversity' would, as in creation and in God's natural relation to the world, bring about no difference in God, only a difference in creatures" (final emphasis added). Rahner is clearly saying here that any denial of new relatedness and alteration of God in each person of the Trinity as a result of the economy would constitute a species of Sabellianism. This suggests that, if one argues that the Trinity of persons in God is not at least in some way constituted through the economy, then one denies a

Rahner does not say so overtly, but it would seem to follow from his position that the divine nature of the Trinity takes on distinct modes of operation and passion in distinct persons. After all, the Son in his divine nature is disposed actively from eternity toward incarnation in ways that the Father and Spirit cannot be, just as the three persons also undertake or undergo distinct natural activities individually as God that each of the two others do not. In this case, it is possible to imagine that the nature of God is at least in part constituted relationally by reference to the economy. Who each person is naturally as God is determined in part by the economy of his acts and passions. Even more importantly, the persons are not wholly and perfectly identical in nature, insofar as they are each a participant in natural properties of activity or reception that are not found in one another. In this case, one way to maintain divine unity is to posit the notion of a modally differentiated divine nature such that the distinct developments of the divine nature always correlate to distinct persons, unfolding within the economy.¹⁵ Rahner's conceptually austere designation of the persons as mere modes of subsistence reinforces this interpretative strategy.¹⁶ The Father is God in his mode of communicating, the Son is the spoken communication in human nature, and the Spirit is the eschatological mode of God's life communicated subjectively to humanity in the Church.¹⁷

The challenge then becomes to understand how the natural modes of economic communication of the three persons are truly indicative of something always already eternal in God that is distinct precisely as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Rahner posits such an equivalency as a premise of

real distinction of persons in God, which is neither a historically well-founded notion of Sabellianism nor a genuinely theologically defensible statement. I think Rahner permitted his theological zeal to get the better of him on this point.

¹⁵ See Rahner, *Trinity*, 36n34. Rahner affirms a unity of essence but seems to allow for distinct properties or accidents in the divine persons, arising from the economy. In addition he posits three manners or modes of subsisting of the one God within the economy (see 73–76 and 109–12). As he notes, there are also ideas like those present in Barth, albeit with less Scholastic overtones. See, in this regard, Barth, *CD*, I/1:316, 332–33, 355–62, and 371.

¹⁶ Rahner, *Trinity*, 109: “The one self-communication of the one God occurs in three different manners of given-ness, in which the one God is given concretely for us in himself, and not vicariously by other realities through their transcendental relation to God. God is the concrete God in each one of these manners of given-ness—which, of course, refer to each other relatively, without modalistically coinciding.”

¹⁷ See the explorations in Rahner, *Trinity*, 58–68. See the systematic restatement of this point of view in Rahner's *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. W. V. Dych (New York: Seabury, 1978), 133–38.

orthodox Trinitarian theology, so its affirmation by him is not in question.¹⁸ But a mere affirmation of equivalence does not answer the question how this is the case. It seems that there are two ways that one can in fact resolve the conundrum. One way goes down the path of radical apophaticism. On the basis of the plenary self-communication of the Trinitarian life in history, we posit that there must be present eternally in the pre-existent life of God some feature of the three persons (we know not what) that makes the isomorphic communication of economic Trinitarian life in history possible. Karen Kilby defends this way of reading Rahner for its constructive epistemological modesty: The economic Trinity is what we have, and not any gnostic access to something from before its givenness. God in his transcendence makes us know God in himself, but only under economic configurations, while the eternal mystery of God in himself remains veiled as a subject pertaining to eschatological hope.¹⁹

The other way runs down the path of radical identification of the inner life of God with his economic development in time. This is the path of Jürgen Moltmann, who is certainly no doctrinaire Rahnerian, but who arguably interprets the *Grundaxiom* in more logically consistent ways than does Rahner.²⁰ Aquinas posits that all real relations pertain either to actions and passions or to quantitative relations.²¹ If in fact the relations of the persons in the Trinity are intelligibly derived only by reference to economic activities and passivities, such as the Son's Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection, as it impacts the relations of the persons in God, then these activities and sufferings of the Son made man are in some way constitutive of the evolution of the inner nature and life of the immanent Trinity.²² Moltmann could even be justified in claiming that the spatial and temporal features of history transpire in a sense in and between the persons in God, if the relations of the persons are determined in part by economic relations derived from historical circumstances of time and place.²³

¹⁸ This is evident from the many references to conciliar statements and notions about the Trinity that are present in Rahner's work.

¹⁹ See Karen Kilby, *God, Evil and the Limits of Theology* (London: T&T Clark and Bloomsbury, 2021).

²⁰ See the very critical analysis of Rahner's Trinitarian theology and his use of the *Grundaxiom* by Jürgen Moltmann in *The Trinity and the Kingdom: The Doctrine of God*, trans. M. Kohl (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981), 144–48.

²¹ See Aquinas, *In V metaphys.*, lec. 17, nos. 1001–2, and *ST III*, q. 7, a. 9.

²² See Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 83, 94–96.

²³ See *The Trinity and the Kingdom*, 95–96, on the ontologically unresolved and ongoing economic development of the Trinity, based on a shared spatio-temporal history of God and human beings.

At any rate, we are in a position to consider some potential challenges that arise from the Rahnerian idea of a purely economic interpretation of inner-Trinitarian processions. Either the eternal Trinitarian processions in themselves are marked by a certain unintelligibility or they become intelligible as historical constitutions of the nature of the Trinity within history and with necessary reference to the economy. Perhaps such challenges can be surmounted, but they need to be faced squarely by those who would wish to follow in Rahner's footsteps on the pathway of his famous *Grundaxiom*.

The Balthasarian Alternative: The Humanity of God as Cypher of the Divine Transcendence

In many respects the Trinitarian project of Hans Urs von Balthasar follows that of Rahner and takes its lead from his. Like Rahner, von Balthasar is deeply influenced by Barth on this matter, and he follows both in seeking to bypass the traditional treatment of the *de deo ut uno* treatise, interpreting the Old Testament as a charter for radical apophaticism.²⁴ From the revelation of the God of Exodus we unlearn our attachment to the idols of our minds and imaginations and enter into the darkness of the unknown holiness of God. His glory and splendor are revealed principally, then, in the mystery of the Incarnation, the human life, Cross, and dereliction of Jesus.²⁵ The humanity of Christ becomes the cypher and real presence of the uncreated divine life of God the Word. In addition, von Balthasar

²⁴ See, for example, the thematic reflections in Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic: Theological Logical Theory*, vol. 2, *The Truth of God* [*Theo-Logic II*], trans. A. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 87–122, which function as a kind of *de deo uno* treatise on the unknown God as a prelude to 125–86 on the Christological epiphany of the Trinity.

²⁵ The Barthian path of von Balthasar's Christology can be shown in many instances, but see *Theo-Logic II*, 138–48, for the heart of his systematic treatment of the Christological revelation of the Trinitarian persons. "Karl Barth has emphasized two insights with the uttermost resoluteness. First, the economic Trinity, and it alone, reveals to us the immanent Trinity: 'In the inner core of the truth in which he stands before us, God stands *before himself*. . . and prior to that in the inner core of the truth in which we know God, God knows himself. . . It is not self-evident that our knowledge of God attains truth as the outside of that interior truth.' (CD 2.2, 52–53) Second, a description of the essential properties of a *nuda essentia* [naked essence] of God that leaves the hypostases out of account is, in the extreme case, 'strict nominalism' and in the case of many Christian thinkers, 'semi-nominalism.' 'The fundamental mistake of the ancient Church's entire doctrine of God is reflected in the following arrangement: first the essence of God in general, then his Trinity- with all the ambiguities and pitfalls to

wishes to forgo any rigorous conceptual dependence upon the classical Augustinian notion of immaterial processional life in the Trinity, by way of analogies from knowledge and love, for the Word and the Spirit respectively, preferring to treat the latter as aspirational models of a foregone era that are of limited contemporary value.²⁶ Seemingly influenced by Barth, von Balthasar treats this facet of the tradition as a non-essential theologoumenon, one that fails to acknowledge the inaccessibility of the divine nature outside of or apart from the Incarnation, a position that rejoins in part the reflections of Martin Luther in the 1518 Heidelberg Disputation, which were to influence Barth's positions.²⁷

Rahner has the problem of suggesting how his economic Trinitarian persons or modes of subsistence correspond to an inner distinction that exists in God eternally, in a way that is truly intelligible, without simply identifying the divine nature with a historical process of divine self-differentiation in the economy. Von Balthasar offers his own original answer to this problem by appeal to an idea one also finds in Barth's *Church Dogmatics* IV/1, on the obedience and dereliction of Christ.²⁸ Effectively,

which this sequence perforce gives rise' (CD 2.2, 392)" (138). From context, it seems clear that von Balthasar is sympathetic to the programmatic aspects of Barth's proposal.

²⁶ Von Balthasar's analysis of the psychological analogy in *Theo-Logic II*, 128–34, is revelatory. Essentially he details elements of the account from Anselm and Aquinas, sequentially, and problematizes each. The main difficulty he faces is that he cannot conceive clearly of a coherent form of conceptual "reduplication" in which one understands God analogically *both* essentially, as subsistent wisdom and love, *and* as a Trinitarian life of processions in which the Father, eternally knowing himself, begets the eternal Word, and in loving himself spirates the Spirit of Love. He characterizes this view as one that is *de facto* problematic, since it entails the mistaken idea that the essence of God produces acts as if it were a fourth person. By contrast, for Aquinas, only persons act as agents, not the essence, but they do act in virtue of the essence, as persons act in and through natures. So there is no opposition of the notion of essential or natural knowledge and love in God and personal processional knowledge and love. The two notions go together, in fact, within one coherent Trinitarian understanding of the inner life of God. By contrast, von Balthasar seems to see the Victorine notion of reciprocal personal love and the monological vision of Augustinians (processions by similitude of knowledge and love) as two complementary models, each of which is incomplete and somehow problematic, such that they must each be surpassed by a Christological and cruciform reconfiguration of Trinitarian theology. This is achieved primarily by Barth (in CD I/1 and IV/1), whose pathway von Balthasar follows, with qualifications.

²⁷ For Barth's treatment of Luther's early work on the contrast of *theologia gloria* (which relies too greatly on speculation) and *theologia crucis*, which finds God present in the humanity of God crucified, see CD, I/1:14, 167–68, 178–79.

²⁸ The *locus classicus* text is found in Barth, CD, IV/1:157–357. At 177–92 Barth works out his own account of the communication of idioms, in contrast to that which is

both Barth and von Balthasar posit that the human nature of Christ and his actions and sufferings as man are not identical with his divine nature and divine action as Lord, but they correspond by close analogy, so that what Christ does as man and undergoes humanly by way of obedience, suffering, surrender, and even abandonment on Good Friday correspond to something always already present in God eternally as the ground of Love, in the eternal relations of the Father and Son.²⁹ These relations are characterized, for von Balthasar, by mutual surrender and reciprocal free-self-giving, such that what happens in the economy of the Incarnation and the Cross is a kind of emanation and external human expression of what is always already present in the divine life.³⁰ This approach has as its

found in Gottlieb Thomasius and other Lutheran kenoticists, influenced in part by Hegel. Rather than posit a self-limiting deity, Barth posits that the kenotic life of the humanity of Christ (in his obedience, suffering-unto-death, and Godforsakenness) is indicative of attributes found in a transcendent way in the eternal obedience and sonship of God. These human traits are thus characteristic, by a kind of similitude found only in Christ's humanity, of the eternal relations in the Trinity of the Son to the Father. Christ's human nature, in his crucifixion and dereliction, thus reveals the inner life of the Trinity to us. This point of view is also thematic in *CD II/2* and *IV/2*.

²⁹ Von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama: Theological Dramatic Theory*, vol. 4, *The Action [Theo-Drama IV]*, trans. G. Harrison, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 333: "If Jesus can be forsaken by the Father [in the crucifixion], 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. And while the distance/distinction between these two is eternally confirmed and maintained ('kept open') by the Hypostasis who proceeds from them [the Holy Spirit], it is transcended in the Godhead that is the absolute gift they have in common."

³⁰ In *Theo-Drama IV*, von Balthasar posits that the intra-Trinitarian kenosis of God is the foundation of all other subsequent moments in creation and redemption, and develops this line of thought systematically, influenced especially by Barth and Sergius Bulgakov. "We spoke of a first 'kenosis' of the Father, expropriating himself, by 'generating' the consubstantial Son. Almost automatically, this first kenosis expands to a kenosis involving the whole Trinity. For the Son could not be consubstantial with the Father except by self-expropriation; and their 'We,' that is, the Spirit, must also be God if he is to be the 'personal' seal of that self-expropriation that is identical in Father and Son. For the Spirit does not want anything 'for himself' but, as his revelation in the world shows, wants simply to be the pure manifestation and communication of the love between Father and Son. . . . This primal kenosis makes possible all other kenotic movements of God into the world; they are simply its consequences. The first 'self-limitation' of the triune God arises through endowing his creatures with freedom. The second, deeper 'limitation' of the same triune God occurs as a result of the covenant, which, on God's side, is indissoluble, whatever may become of Israel. The third kenosis, which is not only Christological but involves the whole Trinity, arises through the Incarnation of the Son alone: henceforth he manifests his eucharistic attitude (which was always his)

advantage, in comparison with the one previously discussed, that it makes the inner-Trinitarian life of God radiantly transparent to us. With von Balthasar's theology of Holy Saturday, we are given to know the inner life of God. The potential disadvantage is that it risks identifying the inner divine life of God and the relations of the persons by way of excess reliance on the human natural actions and passions of the human life of Christ. If Rahner runs the risk of an excessive apophatic theology of equivocity where we cannot truly speak of the inner-processional life of God, von Balthasar's Christological Trinitarian theology poses the risk of systematic dependency upon an excessively univocal notion of God's inner life, one based upon an excessive reliance on the ontological configurations of the humanity of God.³¹ On this reading, divine persons appear clearly in their real distinction from one another, but their relationality is inevitably invested in or even constituted by the dramatic coinherence of the persons in a shared mutual history of redemption. Such a history may be a pre-history from before the foundations of the world prior to being a history within the world, but it is a history toward or unto the narrative resolution of the Cross, the descent into hell, and the universal redemption of the created order, recapitulated into the Trinitarian life of God.³² One

in the *pro nobis* of the Cross and Resurrection for the sake of the world" (331). Despite his distance from Rahner in all this, it is interesting that von Balthasar follows Rahner (and Barth) by characterizing the eternal identity of the persons in God almost exclusively in terms of their relations to the world in the economy.

³¹ I have written about this topic in further detail in *The Trinity: On the Nature and Mystery of the One God* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022), chaps. 31–34, esp. chap. 33.

³² One can consider here a host of passages where von Balthasar seems to denote the possibility of a developmental life in God that results from or that reaches its perfect actuation because of the economy of redemption. See *Theo-Drama III* (*The Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. G. Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993]), 250–58; *Theo-Drama IV*, 323–28; *Theo-Drama V* (*The Last Act*, trans. G. Harrison [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998]), 506–21. See *Theo-Drama IV*, 327–28: "We cannot say that the Father is involved in 'risk' by allowing his Son to go to the Cross. . . . However, if we ask whether there is suffering in God, the answer is this: there is something in God that can develop into suffering. This suffering occurs when the recklessness with which the Father gives away himself (and *all* that is his) encounters a freedom that, instead of responding in kind to this magnanimity, changes it into a calculating, cautious, self-preservation. This contrasts with the essentially divine recklessness of the Son, who allows himself to be squandered, and of the Spirit who accompanies him." Von Balthasar seems to be affirming in a qualified fashion that all three persons are defined inwardly, essentially by their kenotic mission of love toward humanity, and that in some sense they develop ontically in relation to this mission and through it. In *Theo-Drama III*, 183–91 and 521–23, he posits the notion of an

must of course maintain the reserve, with von Balthasar, that all that God undertakes in the economy he undertakes freely and that it did not ever have to be thus.³³ Grace is given gratuitously, as is creation itself, from the free inner love of the Trinitarian persons. But it is difficult to see or say what the Trinitarian life might be if we did not have the quasi-univocal constituents of the drama of redemption (Incarnation, obedience, Cross, and recapitulative resurrection) by which to draw forth accurate concepts for the inner life of God in himself. Von Balthasar does not have to face Moltmann's problem of a Trinitarian God derived from the economy or of an economically constituted Trinity, but he does face the challenge of what Erich Przywara called "Theopanism," the idea that the Trinity alone is less than the Trinity in the economy, and so the Trinity plus the world is the final expression of the inner-Trinitarian life, and in a sense the economy of redemption is the condition of possibility for God's own plenary realization of his inner-processional life.³⁴ What God could be before the foundations of the world becomes, here again, opaque to us unless it is depicted anthropomorphically, as a life of mutual surrender based essentially on the portrait of Jesus Crucified.

Dyothelitism and the Analogy of Trinitarian Life in Christ: A Thomistic Alternative

In the final part of this article, I would like to offer the rudiments of a Thomistic alternative to the economic Trinitarianism that has been referred to above. I will do so by referring to four concepts or propositions that are of traditional inspiration, that is to say, derived from Aquinas's theology but also reflective of other authors, both patristic and Scholastic.

economic "Trinitarian inversion." The processions of the Son and the Spirit are supposedly inverted in the economy as a result of this kenosis of the Son, so that during the time of his Incarnation and prior to the resurrection, the Son proceeds from the Spirit in his very person as Son. This Trinitarian inversion, and the Trinitarian enrichment that seemingly goes with it, suggests that the eternal kenosis of the Trinity is indicative and anticipatory of a great divine self-expression, and a self-becoming that occurs throughout the symphony of history.

³³ This is beyond doubt. Von Balthasar's eternal Trinitarian kenosis is virtually "built" upon the foundation of eternal freedom and even constituted by it, and thus it follows from everything that comes forth from the Trinity.

³⁴ On the notion of Theopanism, see Erich Przywara, "The Scope of Analogy as a Fundamental Catholic Form," in *Analogia Entis Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. J. Betz and D. B. Hart (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 388–89.

Proposition 1:

The analogical knowledge of eternal procession in God is the condition of possibility for a theological understanding of the way the economic missions of the Trinitarian persons manifest the eternal identity of God.

I have noted above that Barth, Rahner, Moltmann and von Balthasar all purposefully distance themselves from any concerted use of the traditional notion of two processions in God understood by similitude with immaterial acts of the human mind, acts of intellect and volition as a basis for understanding the eternal generation of the Word and the spiration of the Spirit, respectively. However, the tradition of the Church insists on three key points of teaching that are relevant in this regard. First, there is one God, and the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are equally and identically divine.³⁵ Second, the divine nature common to the three is not bodily or physical.³⁶ Third, the persons are distinguished principally, if not uniquely,

³⁵ Like Rahner, I will note key pronouncements from the Church's magisterium, as preserved in the latest edition (43rd, Ignatius Press, 2012) of Denzinger [DH]. It should be noted that the use of DH in Catholic theology should stem not from a historically outmoded, more ahistorical, and non-biblical (authority centered) methodology. Nor need it imply something merely culturally conventional, since the decrees of the Church found in Denzinger are not culturally conventional and the work itself is referred to regularly in official Catholic magisterial documents. Rahner's use of magisterial pronouncements was not meant to denote only the necessity in Catholic theology of intellectual commitments (based in scriptural and dogmatic teachings) that imply the exclusion of alternative problematic options. It also was meant to signal possibilities for further development and a range of options of interpretation, a point on which I seek to follow Rahner. This all being stated, the conciliar teaching of the Council of Nicaea and of the Council of Chalcedon implies that the three persons in God are equally and identically God. See DH nos. 125–26, 147.

³⁶ One finds this affirmed by the Catholic Church, among other locales, in the First Vatican Council, *Dei Filius*: "The holy, catholic, apostolic Roman Church believes and confesses there is one God, true and living, Creator and Lord of heaven and earth, almighty, eternal, immense, incomprehensible, infinite in his intellect and will and in all perfection. As he is one, unique, and spiritual substance, entirely simple and unchangeable, we must proclaim him distinct from the world in existence and essence, all blissful in himself and from himself, ineffably exalted above all things that exist or that can be conceived besides him" (DH no. 3001). See also the Fourth Lateran Council, chap. 1: "We firmly believe and confess without reservation that there is only one true God, eternal, infinite, and unchangeable, incomprehensible, almighty, and ineffable, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit; three Persons, indeed, but one essence, substance, or nature entirely simple. The Father is from no one, the Son from the Father only, and the Holy Spirit equally from both. Without beginning, always and without end, the Father begets, the Son is born, and the Holy Spirit proceeds. They are

by relations of origin.³⁷ Therefore, to think out the real distinction of persons who subsist in an individual unity of nature, we must have some recourse to the notion of immaterial processions of origin. If, in fact, only these two notions—intellectual and volitional procession in human persons—provide us with examples of immaterial processions in the created order, then only these processes bear a properly analogical similitude to immaterial, eternal processional life in God. All other similitudes will be in some way metaphorical, and so significantly less perfect, if not to say obscure, or even potentially arbitrary.³⁸ In short, it is difficult to think about the immanent Trinity—how there obtains in God eternally a real distinction of persons based on real relations of origin, even as there is a unity of substance in God—unless we have some recourse to the analogies of processional knowledge and processional love in order to distinguish the eternal persons in God.³⁹

of the same substance and fully equal, equally almighty, and equally eternal. They are the one principle of the universe, the creator of all things visible and invisible, spiritual and corporeal” (DH no. 800).

³⁷ That the persons of the Trinity are distinguished principally in virtue of their relations of origin is taught by both the Cappadocian Fathers and Western Fathers such as Augustine. It is also subsequently affirmed in ecclesial definitions such as the Eleventh Synod of Toledo in 675 AD (DH nos. 528, 532), the Fourth Lateran Council (DH nos. 800, 805), the Council of Florence, (DH nos. 1300–1301), and the 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [CCC] §254, which refers to these precedent conciliar teachings.

³⁸ The reason for this strong assertion is simple. Intra-Trinitarian action must be immanent action, not transitive action, that is to say, action terminating in the eternal “subject” who is God, not outside of God. Now, each and every human experience, including those pertaining to human actions like human obedience unto death by crucifixion, implies external quantitative juxtaposition or configuration. But if the divine nature is immaterial, then these actions cannot be attributed to the divine nature in purely analogical ways, but only metaphorically. (We cannot say that the divine nature is subject to time, spatial distension, pain, death, etc. literally, or that God is literally a cascading font of water, fire emitting light, and so forth.) Aquinas makes this point in *ST* I, q. 27, a. 1, and in *De potentia Dei*, q. 9, a. 9.

³⁹ I realize that one can of course simply affirm that there *are* relations of origin in God that are processional, immanent, eternal, and non-physical, and then express these by a collection of metaphors and a modest use of literal or proper theological analogies (such as that of the generated *logos*, even without any recourse to the notion of the Spirit as love). The *Catechism of the Council of Trent*, trans. J. A. McHugh and C. J. Callan (New York: Joseph F. Wagner and B. Gerder, 1949), presents a primarily apophatic treatment of the topic, but still cautiously asserts that the Holy Spirit, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, is the eternal bond of charity common to both: “Let the pastor teach that the terms *nature* and *person* used to express this mystery should be most scrupulously retained; and let the faithful know that unity belongs

If this is the case, it follows that, in the absence of any appeal to this form of analogical thinking in Catholic theology, one would be obliged to affirm either that the transcendent relations of origin in God, and thus the eternal distinction of persons in God, are mostly unintelligible to us, or that they are intelligible only on the basis of something that happens in the economy. Barth seemingly chose the latter option by making God's revelatory self-communication and God's unfolding relation to creation in divine election the keys to our understanding of any Trinitarian notion of a distinction of persons.⁴⁰ I am suggesting that this is decision both consequential and erroneous, since it makes Trinitarian ontology dependent essentially upon a divine-historical interaction with creation and humanity. If instead we appeal to eternal processions of Word and Love, we acquire the basis for in turn understanding precisely how it is that the Trinitarian persons are eternally truly distinct while each is truly the one God, since

to essence and distinction to persons. But these are truths which should not be made the subject of too subtle investigation. . . . [Let each of the faithful pray that] he may be worthy to see [in the beatific vision] how great is the fecundity of the Father, who contemplating and understanding Himself, begot the Son like and equal to Himself, how a love of charity in both, entirely the same and equal, which is the Holy Ghost, proceeding from the Father and the Son, connects the begetter and the begotten by an eternal an indissoluble bond; and that thus the Essence of the Trinity is one and the distinction of the Three Persons perfect" (22–23 [article 1]).

⁴⁰ Barth eventually develops the notion of an *analogia relationis* in his work, which is manifest for example in *CD*, III/3:102–5. God is characterized by a relationality (and perhaps therefore an ontological relativity) to his creation, which is a dimension of his free decision and self-determination, from all eternity. This idea is present, I think, throughout Barth's work, taking on diverse forms of expression. See *CD*, I/1:337–47, where Barth effectively explains that theology today should not seek to have recourse to the analogy from acts of the human mind (or the psychological analogy) when speaking about the Trinity, that is to say, by the similitude of knowledge and love in the human soul. Instead it is God's act of self-revelation to humanity, in Jesus Christ, that expresses what God is eternally as Trinity. Likewise, see *CD*, II/2:115–17 and 145–58, on the doctrine of election, wherein God is eternally characterized by a relation to creation in divine election of humanity, in Jesus Christ. See likewise the Christological idea of God's self-constitution by way of his eternal decision to relate to humanity in the Incarnation, crucifixion, and resurrection found in *CD*, IV/1:177 and 202–3. In *CD*, IV/2:84, Barth writes: "We must begin with the fact that what takes place in this address is also and primarily a determination of divine essence: not an alteration, but a determination. God does not first elect and determine man but Himself. In His eternal counsel, and then in its execution in time He determines to address Himself to man, and to do so in such a way that He Himself becomes man. God elects and determines Himself to be the God of man. And this undoubtedly means . . . that He elects and determines Himself for humiliation."

the Father eternally communicates all that he is as God to the Son in the begetting of his Logos and he and the Son eternally communicate all that they are as God to the Spirit as their shared mutual Love. In addition, the two missions of the Son and the Spirit render the eternal processions in God's own life truly present to the world, especially in the Incarnation of the Word made flesh and in the sending at Pentecost of the Holy Spirit forth from the Father and from the resurrected Son of God. The missions, Aquinas tells us, just are the eternal processions with an added effect of grace.⁴¹ The grace of the sending of the Son and the Spirit into the world, then, manifests effectively to us who God is eternally, but the missions, those sendings into the world, do not constitute who the Trinity is.⁴² On the contrary, because we can think logically, clearly, and analogically of who the persons are eternally *in se*, so too we can think of who they are as they are present among us in their twin missions, in which they have in fact effectively revealed to us in history and in human existence, the inner life of God, and have rendered this life to us in intelligible, albeit mysterious terms.

It is true that we know of the Trinitarian processions in God only because they are revealed to us in the New Testament as the very teaching of Christ himself and of the apostolic community. And we believe of their existence only due to the enlightenment of divine faith, accompanied by the signs of Christ's miracles, his resurrection, and the testimony of the Church down through the ages. Furthermore, this knowledge we have is opaque and imperfect, oriented toward an eschatological vision of the life of the Trinitarian processions in beatitude. But all these caveats function as mere details. The more fundamental truth that undergirds them is that we have acquired true knowledge of who God is in himself (see *Summa theologiae* [ST] II-II, q. 1) through the means of the visible mission of the Son made man and of his sending of the Holy Spirit of his Father.

⁴¹ See Aquinas, ST I, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3: "Mission signifies not only procession from the principle, but also determines the temporal term of the procession. Hence mission is only temporal. Or we may say that it includes the eternal procession, with the addition of a temporal effect. For the relation of a divine person to His principle must be eternal. Hence the procession may be called a twin procession, eternal and temporal, not that there is a double relation to the principle, but a double term, temporal and eternal."

⁴² See, on this point, see Bruce D. Marshall, "The Unity of the Triune God: Reviving an Ancient Question," *Thomist* 74, no. 1 (2010): 1–32; Gilles Emery, "Theologia and *Dispensatio*: The Centrality of the Divine Missions in St. Thomas's Trinitarian Theology," *Thomist* 74, no. 4 (2010): 515–61; Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, 29–39 and 43–48; White, *Trinity*, chaps. 30 and 31.

Proposition 2:

We must ascribe to the Word incarnate both divine nature terms and human nature terms, and these terms are not to be ascribed to one another.

I noted above that both Rahner and von Balthasar purposefully distanced themselves from the use in Trinitarian theology of a *de deo ut uno* treatise, by which one seeks to identify the divine attributes or the common names given to the divine essence of the Holy Trinity, attributes like divine simplicity, perfection, goodness, infinity, immutability, knowledge, will, power, and so on. These are nature terms attributed analogically to God, according to Aquinas, and so attributed equally and identically to each of the three persons in God, albeit in three modes of subsistence, as paternally originate, filially generated, or eternally spirated.⁴³ The Father is powerful in a way distinct from the Son and the Spirit, as the origin of all Trinitarian life, while the Son is also powerful, as one who receives all things from the Father, and the Spirit is powerful as one who is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, their mutual Love and gift, who has the power to raise the dead.⁴⁴

Let us continue with this Thomistic, alternative line of thinking. If the Son is God, and if the Son of God has taken on a true human nature, then Jesus Christ, as the Son of God made human, is truly God and truly man, as the Council of Chalcedon teaches. But this also means, in light of what has just been stipulated, that Jesus Christ, as the God-man, possesses in himself the eternal life and nature of God, that he shared in as Lord and God equally with the Father and the Holy Spirit, even as he receives it from the Father and communicates it with the Father to the Holy Spirit. In this divine nature he, is also one with the Father in divine wisdom and will, even as he receives his nature, wisdom and will as Lord and God, from the Father. All of this is distinct from his human nature, wisdom and willing, so that we rightly speak not only of two natures, but also of two wills and operations in Christ, as true God and true man.⁴⁵

⁴³ See *ST I*, q. 40, a. 2; q. 42, aa. 3 and 4.

⁴⁴ *ST I*, q. 42, a. 6: "The Son is necessarily equal to the Father in power. Power of action is a consequence of perfection in nature. In creatures, for instance, we see that the more perfect the nature, the greater power is there for action. Now it was shown above (q. 42, a. 4) that the very notion of the divine paternity and filiation requires that the Son should be the Father's equal in greatness—that is, in perfection of nature. Hence it follows that the Son is equal to the Father in power; and the same applies to the Holy Ghost in relation to both."

⁴⁵ The letter of Pope Agatho that is contained in the documents of the Third Council of Constantinople thus affirms: "[The Church] confesses and preaches two natural wills and two natural operations in [Christ] for if anyone understood will as personal, since

How should this set of affirmations affect our judgments about the question central to this essay, that of the revelation of the Trinity in the economy of the incarnate Word? How do the humanity of Christ and his sending of the Spirit reveal to us the inner life of God as triune? Based on our second proposition, we can state at this juncture the following answers. First, the human nature of Christ does not provide us with any purely univocal concepts or language for the inner divine life of the Son. Jesus's human nature and his human operations of knowledge and love, of suffering and atonement, or resurrection and glorification, are not identical with his divine nature in its simplicity and transcendent unity. Second, there is a real similitude and ontological likeness of the humanity of Christ to his divinity, and thus of his human operations as man to his divine operations, which he conducts with the Father and the Holy Spirit. When Christ acts as both God and man, such as in healing miraculously, it is only in virtue of his human nature that he speaks words or stretches out his hand or wills with a human mind and heart, and it is only as God that he can actively heal by divine power, with his Father and with the Spirit. But the two operations coincide and are harmonious with one another, so that the human actions is subordinate to the divine action and reveals it, albeit imperfectly. In John 11:43 Jesus cries in a loud voice, "Laz'arus, come out," and the dead man is brought back to life. When Jesus speaks this way, by a human action, he implicitly manifests the transcendent divine identity that he as a man possesses in himself, by which he is mysteriously one with the Father, as God and Lord.⁴⁶ Third, and relatedly, the divine nature of the Son of Man remains transcendent in its alterity and limited comprehensibility, even as it is manifest in the actions and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son made man, so that we understand the divinity of Christ only partially and imperfectly from his human gestures, words,

three Persons are spoken of in the Holy Trinity, it would be necessary to say that there are three personal wills and three personal operations (which is absurd and exceedingly profane). But since the truth of the Christian faith maintains that the will is natural, where this one nature is predicated of the holy and inseparable Trinity, it follows that one natural will and one natural operation are to be understood. Where, however, in the one Person of our Lord Jesus Christ, Mediator between God and man, we confess two natures, namely, divine and human, in which after the wondrous union he exists as one and the same in two natures, so we also confess two natural wills and two natural operations" (DH no. 545). Aquinas develops this point of view systematically in *ST* III, qq. 18 and 19.

⁴⁶ Aquinas analyzes this topic at some length in *Super Ioan* 11, lec. 6 (on the raising of Lazarus).

sufferings, and even resurrection.⁴⁷ Without the events of the life of Christ in his human nature, we would understand the divine nature and life of the Trinity even less perfectly, to be sure, but in his human nature and its economic unfolding we understand the inner mystery of the Holy Trinity still only imperfectly, and this is equally certain.

Proposition 3:

Trinitarian theology must acknowledge adequately the human exemplarism of the life of Jesus, which is a sign of God's solidarity with us in our redeemed human condition, and is only indirectly a revelation of the divine life of the Trinity.

I have noted above that modern economic Trinitarianism can run the risk of introducing historical features of human existence into God so as to make the Trinity seem experientially concrete and manifest to us in time. The converse side of this is that the same theologies also run the risk of minimalizing the human facticity of Jesus of Nazareth and the human exemplarism of God's life with us. Medieval theologians like Bonaventure and Aquinas placed great emphasis on the perfection of Jesus as a human being.⁴⁸ For them, God did not become human merely or perhaps even primarily to reveal the inner life of the Trinity to us in human form. The Incarnation does reveal the mystery of the Trinity, to be sure, but arguably God became human *primarily* in order to redeem our humanity from within our human condition.⁴⁹ As the New Adam, Christ makes a new form of human life possible, and he provides both an example and

⁴⁷ The human actions of the Lord participate in his divine natural perfections as Lord, insofar as the latter are communicable. The humanity of Christ is not eternal, omnipotent, or omnipresent, but it does participate in the glory, wisdom, and charity of the uncreated Godhead, without the human nature being essentially identical with or confused with the divine nature. Participation implies reception and resemblance to an exemplar, without any affirmation of formal identity. Thus the life of Christ can reveal the glory of the Father, which the Son shares with the Father as Lord, from all eternity, even in and through the gestures, words, actions, and sufferings of Christ, as well as through his resurrection and glorification as man. Nevertheless, these features of his human life are not naturally or essentially identical as such with his uncreated divine nature. They manifest it somewhat obliquely, but truly, in such a way that we come to know the divine nature of Christ, and his mystery of personal communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit, through his human life, death, and resurrection.

⁴⁸ See Zachary Hayes, "Christology and Metaphysics in the Thought of Bonaventure," *Journal of Religion* 58 (1978): S82–S96; Brian Shanley, "Aquinas's Exemplar Ethics," *Thomist* 72 (2008): 345–69.

⁴⁹ See Aquinas famous arguments to this effect in *ST* III, q. 1, aa. 1–3.

teaching to us of how to live in this world as adopted sons and daughters of God by grace. On this view, the principal reason for the Incarnation is to provide a pathway for the divinization of our human nature, that is to say, a participation in Trinitarian life by way of the resurrection. God became human principally in order to remake our humanity and lead us into the life of God.

I say this because Catholic theology traditionally has placed some decided emphasis on the importance of Jesus Christ's universal moral example for all other human beings, even as it has also underscored the natural human limitations of Jesus as a human being living in a given historical time and place.⁵⁰ It follows from the fact that Jesus of Nazareth did live in a particular culture, at a given time and place, that he did possess many of the individualizing traits proper to this time and place, as would be the case for any human being. That is to say, he lived a particular way of life within the context of his cultural environment, in a mode proper to his historical circumstances, one that we are not meant to imitate materially in every respect. God became human, and so God also lived out a human life of limitation and facticity marked by culturally distinct modes of thought, speech, historical consciousness, and moral sensibility. Jesus of Nazareth in all of these respects is a historically located individual marked by a given culture, within a larger patchwork of historically varied human cultures and individuals. However, at the same time that Jesus of Nazareth is God, living out this ordinary, historically contingent human life among

⁵⁰ This is exemplified in the recent formulation of CCC §§471–74: “Apollinarius of Laodicea asserted that in Christ the divine Word had replaced the soul or spirit. Against this error the Church confessed that the eternal Son also assumed a rational, human soul. This human soul that the Son of God assumed is endowed with a true human knowledge. As such, this knowledge could not in itself be unlimited: it was exercised in the historical conditions of his existence in space and time. This is why the Son of God could, when he became man, ‘increase in wisdom and in stature, and in favor with God and man’ (Luke 2:52), and would even have to inquire for himself about what one in the human condition can learn only from experience (cf. Mark 6:38; John 11:34). This corresponded to the reality of his voluntary emptying of himself, taking ‘the form of a slave’ (Phil. 2:6). But at the same time, this truly human knowledge of God’s Son expressed the divine life of his person. ‘The human nature of God’s Son, *not by itself but by its union with the Word*, knew and showed forth in itself everything that pertains to God’ [Maximus the Confessor, *Qu. et dub.* 66]. Such is first of all the case with the intimate and immediate knowledge that the Son of God made man has of his Father. The Son in his human knowledge also showed the divine penetration he had into the secret thoughts of human hearts. By its union to the divine wisdom in the person of the Word incarnate, Christ enjoyed in his human knowledge the fullness of understanding of the eternal plans he had come to reveal.”

us, and he is also a human being marked by particularly perfect human wisdom, lifestyle, and moral freedom. By the gift of grace that Jesus of Nazareth brings into the world from his eternal Father, he provides a way to beatitude and teaches a way of perfection that is open to all. He likewise provides teaching regarding the kingdom of God and performs miracles as universal signs of his authority and of the presence of his Father.⁵¹ He is also a man who gives his life intentionally for the human race through the historic suffering and death of Roman crucifixion.⁵² And he is one in whom our human nature has been re-made and glorified eschatologically in the mystery of the resurrection.⁵³ It is very important to recognize that all of this has happened in Christ for us, out of God's divine solidarity with us in our human condition, and so the human life, teachings, moral exemplarity, atonement, and resurrection of Jesus are all revelations not only of God the Trinity, but in fact of humanity, of the humanity of God as the proleptic annunciation of our own eschatological humanity, redeemed and refashioned by God. Trinitarian theology must not evacuate Catholic reflection on Christ of its distinctively anthropological and eschatological significance. Christ is the New Adam, and his humanity is new to God. I say that it is new to God not in the sense that God acquires a novel enrichment of his being when he becomes human. Rather, the person of the Word begins to be present in our human nature, that of the Son, and extends a new offer of the Trinitarian life of grace to all human beings, especially through his death and resurrection. The humanity of God is the model of human re-creation. A dyothelitist form of Trinitarian thinking can adequately recognize this fundamental principle.

⁵¹ On the miracles of Christ as signs of the divine origin and authority of his message, see Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 43, esp. a. 4.

⁵² See Aquinas, *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2. I have argued elsewhere that the human free intentionality of Jesus in the activity of the atonement is an essential element of the redemption (*The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2015], chap. 8).

⁵³ On the human exemplarity of Christ's resurrection as a principle of universal eschatological re-creation, see Aquinas *ST* III, qq. 54 and 56. In *Foundations*, 298–301, Rahner explores the idea of Christ as the universal and “absolute saviour” of humanity based upon resurrection, as an eschatological event of the perfect union of humanity with God. Rahner leverages the use of this idea, however, somewhat against traditional notions of the atonement, in which Christ's personal obedience to the Father in his human life, suffering, and death, plays a meritorious and recapitulatory role in history with regard to the redemption of our humanity. Wolfhart Pannenberg offers a more historically and conceptually nuanced account of the exemplarism of the resurrection of Jesus Christ with regard to the *telos* of the human cosmos in *Systematic Theology*, vol. 2, trans. G. W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans, 1994), 343–63.

Proposition 4:

The subsistent being and the operational being of the humanity of Jesus reveal the Trinity to us in distinct and complementary ways.

I have argued up to this point that, to think coherently about the Trinity present in history, we have need of the classical notion of the immaterial eternal processions of the Word and Spirit as the instantiation of eternal subsistent relations or persons in God. I have also argued that we have need of a theological exploration of the divine nature and its attributes as distinct from the human nature of Jesus. Thirdly, I have emphasized the human exemplarity of Christ as the New Adam. These principles being identified, it is now possible to return to where we began, with Rahner's assertion that the human nature of the Word reveals the Trinity in history, God "outside of himself" so to speak, active and present in the divine economy. My fourth principle is concerned with this idea, and it advances a twofold proposal by which we may consider the humanity of God as revelatory of the Trinitarian life of God present in history. One pertains to the personal and relational subsistence of the Word in human nature. The other pertains to Christ's human actions and sufferings as indicative of his personal relations with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

The first idea is simple, even if it signifies the incomprehensible mystery that is at the center of Christianity. The eternal Word in his relational procession from the Father subsists in our human nature, such that the human nature of Jesus is the human nature of God the Son. If this is the case, then the simple being of the Son in the world in human nature—from conception to biological maturation, and from his public life to his crucifixion and resurrection, and now in perpetual glory—is the manifestation of the Word and Son of the Father, in his eternal relation to the Father and in his eternal relation to the Holy Spirit. Simply by being human, the Son renders these eternal processions mysteriously present to us, but without thereby constituting or altering the eternal mystery of the Holy Trinity. His Incarnation renders the eternal Trinity truly present to us in time; it does not introduce God through time into his final status as eternal Trinity. This presence is ontological of course, since God is rendered present in a new way by the Incarnation, and it is also epistemological, since we come to know God the Holy Trinity more perfectly in virtue of the Incarnation.⁵⁴

The second proposal is more complex and challenging. How do the economic *acta et passa*, the human actions and sufferings of Jesus, reveal his personal relations to and identity as Lord with the Father and to the

⁵⁴ Cf. the brief allusion to this point in Aquinas, *ST* I, q. 8, a. 3, ad 4.

Holy Spirit?⁵⁵ Take for example the human activity of truth-telling, in which Christ as an eschatological preacher and teacher is actively inspired to communicate revelation, including even the truth about his own divine identity and sonship. This activity considered formally as such is human and not identical with the Lord's divine nature or his transcendent activity as divine truth. But the human teaching of Jesus of Nazareth stems from his transcendent divine identity, and is measured by it, participates in it, and even expresses it. In learning from Jesus Christ, we effectively come into contact with the First Truth himself.⁵⁶ Likewise, the Son who is the truth, and has this truth in himself, is always in living relation and union with the Father and the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Jesus teaching as a man in a historical time

⁵⁵ Aquinas states several times in *ST* III that all of the "actions and sufferings" (*acta et passa*) of Christ are in some way conducive to our salvation. See for example q. 43, a. 2.; see also q. 48, a. 6, which states that "all Christ's actions and sufferings operate instrumentally in virtue of His Godhead for the salvation of men." The point of emphasis here clearly is soteriological. I am interested in asking what the repercussions of this notion are for Trinitarian ontology.

⁵⁶ Aquinas comments thus on John 14:6 ("I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,"): "Note that both truth and life belong properly and essentially [*per se*] to Christ. Truth belongs essentially to him because he is the Word. Now truth is the conformity of a thing to the intellect, and this results when the intellect conceives the thing as it is. Therefore, the truth of our intellect belongs to our word, which is its conception. Yet although our word is true, it is not truth itself, since it's not true of itself but because it is conformed to the thing conceived. And so the truth of the divine intellect belongs to the Word of God. But because the Word of God is true of itself (since it is not measured by things, but things are true in the measure that they are similar to the Word) the Word of God is truth itself." (*Super Ioan* 14, lec. 2; in *Commentary on the Gospel of St. John*, trans J. Weisheipl [Albany, NY: Magi; Petersham, MA: St. Bede's Publications, 1980]; further translations are from this edition). The implication of this passage, which Aquinas does not himself draw out, is that Christ's *human* words can correspond to and adequately indicate to us the truth of his uncreated identity as the eternal Word of the Father.

⁵⁷ Commenting on John 15:26 ("But when the Counselor comes, whom I shall send to you from the Father, even the Spirit of truth. . .") Aquinas writes in *Super Ioan* 15, lec. 5: "He mentions the eternal procession of the Holy Spirit when he shows in a similar way that the Spirit is related both to the Father and the Son. He shows the Spirit as related to the Son when he says, 'the Spirit of truth,' for the Son is the Truth: 'I am the way, and the truth, and the life' (14:6). He shows the Spirit as related to the Father when he says, 'who proceeds from the Father.' So to say that the Holy Spirit is 'the Spirit of truth,' is the same as saying the Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Son: 'God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts' (Gal 4:6). And because the word 'spirit' [*spiritus*] suggests a kind of impulse and every motion produces an effect in harmony with its source (as heating makes something hot), it follows that the Holy Spirit makes those to whom he is sent like the one whose Spirit he is. And since he is the Spirit of Truth 'He will teach you all truth' [16:13]." We should note that Aquinas is suggesting here, implicitly, that in the human words of Christ, we come to know the eternal relations of the Father, the

and place is communicating to us, then, the truth not only about himself but also about his Father and their Spirit.

We could give many other such examples, but here I would like to conclude by focusing briefly on two: the Transfiguration and the crucifixion of Christ, each considered as Trinitarian mysteries, mysteries that reveal the inner life and nature of the Trinity as the ultimate ground of reality and mystery of salvation. The Transfiguration, Aquinas notes, is the paragon of miracles.⁵⁸ It is indeed miraculous that Jesus's vulnerable human nature that is like ours in all things but sin is transfigured on Mount Tabor so as to anticipate the radical transformation of his body and soul in the mystery of the resurrection, as that of a glorified humanity. This glorification of the humanity of Christ by way of anticipation is not a glorification of his divine nature. The Transfiguration neither alters nor expresses in an immediate bodily way the communication of the divine light and life of God. But the Transfiguration of Christ is expressive of the divine, uncreated glory of God, as the humanity of Christ comes to participate more deeply by the moment in the immutable perfection and glory of the very deity of Christ, that deity in virtue of which he is one eternally with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The other two persons are always already "in" the humanity of Christ, since the humanity of Christ is the humanity of God the Son, who is one in being with the Father and the Holy Spirit. But, at Tabor, the Son's humanity is proportioned more perfectly in grace and glory to his uncreated divinity. Simultaneously, in his human speaking and hearing, he reflects and speaks overtly about his eternal relation to the Father and to the Holy Spirit. His human eschatological perfection is also an occasion for the manifestation of the Trinity. This Trinitarian epiphany is an anticipation of the glory of the resurrection of the beloved Son, in which the Son will shine in glory eternally in his human nature in such a way as to manifest as fully as possible in a created nature both his divine filiation (his hypostatic relation to the Father, as source with him of the Spirit), and his divine nature, shared with the Father and the Spirit.

Likewise, we can speak of the historical crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth as a manifestation of the Trinity. The Son's human obedience in accepting the crucifixion as a means of salvation reveals the fact that he receives the one eternal divine will that he has from the Father. The human obedience of the Son pertains to his human will, not his uncreated divine will.

Word, and Spirit, as they are truly manifest concretely in the human life and words of Jesus himself.

⁵⁸ See *ST* III, q. 45, esp. a. 2.

However, the filial mode in which he obeys as man denotes his transcendent, personal relation to the Father, as one who receives all that he has and is from the Father. Consequently it also manifests Jesus's divine will and divine capabilities, as something he is always receiving from the Father. The filial obedience of Jesus as man thus reveals his filial Lordship.⁵⁹ The Son obeys the Father by accepting the mystery of the Cross as the means of our redemption.⁶⁰ In doing so, he also thus manifests the eternal love of the Father, and the Son, for the world, as a redemptive and re-creative love, one that is active even from within the mystery of the Cross, as something freely accepted by Christ in his human volition.

Similarly, Jesus as Lord sends the Holy Spirit upon the world, with the Father and from the Father. However, Jesus as man receives the Holy Spirit in both soul and body, within his human nature, and the Spirit is the inner source of all his grace and inward spiritual illumination.⁶¹ There is a consequence of this idea with regard to the Passion: The Spirit reposes upon Christ in his human nature, moving him inwardly to accept the mystery of the Cross as a means of redemption for human sins; so too in the Passion, the Son reveals to us the will of the Holy Spirit, that the Son should suffer for the redemption of humanity. The uncreated love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is revealed to us in the obedience of Christ crucified.

We can note at the term of these remarks how the dyothelitist teaching of the two wills of Christ is operative in the account that is under consideration. The Passion, suffering, and death of Jesus reveal the perfect depths

⁵⁹ See Aquinas's analysis of the obedience of Christ in *ST* III, q. 20, aa. 1–2. I have offered a further Trinitarian reflection on this notion in chap. 6 of *Incarnate Lord* and chap. 33 of *Trinity*.

⁶⁰ See the analysis of Aquinas in *ST* III, q. 46, a. 2.

⁶¹ Aquinas posits this idea of the inhabitation of the Holy Spirit in the soul of Christ, as source of his created grace, in *ST* III, q. 7, aa. 5 and 13, the latter of which states: "The union of the human nature with the Divine Person, which . . . is the grace of union (cf. *ST* III, q. 2, a. 10), precedes the habitual grace of Christ, not in order of time, but by nature and in thought. . . . First, with reference to the order of the principles of both. For the principle of the union is the Person of the Son assuming human nature, Who is said to be sent into the world, inasmuch as He assumed human nature; but the principle of habitual grace, which is given with charity, is the Holy Spirit, Who is said to be sent inasmuch as He dwells in the mind by charity. Now the mission of the Son is prior, in the order of nature, to the mission of the Holy Spirit, even as in the order of nature the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Son, and love from wisdom. Hence the personal union, according to which the mission of the Son took place, is prior in the order of nature to habitual grace, according to which the mission of the Holy Spirit takes place." See the systematic reflection on this dimension of Christology in Legge, *Trinitarian Christology*, 131–231.

of charity that he bears within himself as man, in his human heart, but by the same measure, they also reveal the uncreated love that he bears within himself as Lord in transcendent and perfect communion with the Father and the Holy Spirit. The eternal love that they have for the world is one, common to all three persons. It mysteriously dwells within Christ crucified and gives foundation to all his works of redemption and their effects, through time and for eternity. From the seed of the Cross, planted in the earth of the tomb, the Trinity works to produce a grace-filled, created emanation of the Trinitarian life of God, which we call the resurrection and the Church: humanity alive in the eternal life of God. Consequently, the event of the Cross manifests the mutual determination of the persons of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit to communicate to the world by atonement and grace a true participation in the Trinitarian life of God. In his free human acceptance of suffering and death out of love for the human race, Jesus of Nazareth manifests obliquely but really the uncreated communion of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit that is the foundation of the world and the principle of eternal salvation.

Conclusion

To conclude, we may ask what theologians should today seek to communicate regarding the knowledge of the Trinity, considered at a speculative level, yet with a view toward the practical encounter with God and the mystery of human salvation. First, that the eternal processions of God the Holy Trinity need to be understood by recourse to true analogies for the uncreated life of God, one of truth and love. Second, that these processions are rendered present in time by the visible missions of the Son and the Spirit, but that the latter missions do not invite us to dissolve, particularly in Christ himself, any distinction of the divine and human natures. Therefore, the study of the divine attributes pertaining to the divine essence remains central to Catholic theology in the pursuit of wisdom regarding the Holy Trinity. Third, the humanity of God is a mystery of human salvation and denotes to us Jesus's uniquely perfect way of being, as an exemplar in the order of nature and grace. Fourth, that the concrete human being Jesus—his history and his life among us—do render present in our world the persons and eternal relations of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as well as the activity they share in together in virtue of their transcendent deity. His history among us, however, does not constitute, complete, or bring to fruition the inner-Trinitarian life of God. It is he who brings our life to fruition, through the mysteries of the life of the

Son of God, who reveals the Father, and sends the Holy Spirit among us, for the forgiveness of sins, for the communication of grace, and for our sanctification and divinization in Trinitarian life. This is an alternative itinerary of Trinitarian theology, one that responds to many of Rahner's core concerns but that seeks to achieve its aims by recourse to alternative and more classical principles. N.V.