

# CARTHAGINENSIA

Revista de Estudios e Investigación  
Instituto Teológico de Murcia O.F.M.  
ISSN: 0213-4381 e-ISSN: 2605-3012

Volumen XXXIX  
Enero-Junio 2023  
Número 75

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CARTHAGINENSIA fue fundada en 1985 como órgano de expresión cultural y científica del Instituto Teológico de Murcia O.F.M., Centro Agregado a la Facultad de Teología de la Universidad Pontificia Antonianum (Roma). El contenido de la Revista abarca las diversas áreas de conocimiento que se imparten en este Centro: Teología, Filosofía, Historia eclesiástica y franciscana de España y América, Franciscanismo, humanismo y pensamiento cristiano, y cuestiones actuales en el campo del ecumenismo, ética, moral, derecho, antropología, etc.

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Bernardo Pérez Andreo (Instituto Teológico de Murcia, España)  
Correo-e: [carthaginensia@itmfranciscano.org](mailto:carthaginensia@itmfranciscano.org)

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Any manuscripts and papers intended for publication in the magazine should be addressed to the Editor at the following address: Cl. Dr. Fleming, 1. E-30003 MURCIA. Single or back issues: 20 € or \$ 30. Single article in PDF 3 € or \$ 5.

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Fr. Francisco Víctor Sánchez Gil (+2019) 1985-1989. Fr. Francisco Martínez Fresneda, 1990-2016.

D.L.: MU-17/1986

Impresión: Compobell, S.L.

## FROM THEORY TO PRACTICE: UNDERSTANDING THE INCARNATION AS A MODE OF UNION

DE LA TEORÍA A LA PRÁCTICA: LA COMPRESIÓN DE LA ENCARNACIÓN  
COMO MODO DE UNIÓN

THOMAS HERBST OFM †  
University of Kent, Canterbury  
tjherbst@gmail.com

Recibido 11 de julio de 2022 / Aceptado 6 de septiembre de 2022

*Abstract:* The Church, particularly within the Gospels, and also the Pauline corpus, has understood the evolving doctrine of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity to be intimately connected in a way that *praxis*- a lived spirituality with tangible aspects- is constructed on the foundation of *theoria*, the underlying doctrinal rationale motivating choices taken by believers. This is amply attested to by scriptural as well as patristic authors and forms a core of the Church's experience to modern times.

The Franciscan movement, beginning with the experience of the founder, Francis of Assisi, forms an important, even essential, part of this intricate story that extends from the thirteenth century to the present.

*Keywords:* Church; Francis of Assisi; Franciscan movement; Incarnation; Trinity.

*Resumen:* La Iglesia, especialmente en los Evangelios y también en el corpus paulino, ha entendido la doctrina de la Encarnación de la Segunda Persona de la Trinidad como algo íntimamente relacionado, de tal modo que la *praxis* —una espiritualidad vivida con aspectos tangibles— se construye sobre el fundamento de la teoría, la base racional y doctrinal que subyace y motiva las decisiones tomadas por los creyentes. Esto está ampliamente atestiguado por los autores bíblicos y patristicos y constituye un núcleo de la experiencia de la Iglesia hasta los tiempos modernos.

El movimiento franciscano, a partir de la experiencia de su fundador, Francisco de Asís, constituye una parte importante, incluso esencial, de esta intrincada historia que se extiende desde el siglo XIII hasta el presente.

*Palabras clave:* Encarnación; Francisco de Asís; Iglesia; Movimiento Franciscano; Trinidad.

## I. Introduction

The Church, particularly within the New Testament scriptures, has understood the developing doctrine of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity to be intimately connected in a way that *praxis*- a lived spirituality with tangible aspects encompassing the various details of a believer's life- is constructed on the foundation of *theoria*, the underlying doctrinal rationale motivating choices taken by believers in terms of the living out of their Christian lives. The evolved doctrine known as the 'hypostatic union', though not always without controversy, is amply attested to by scriptural as well as patristic, medieval, and modern authors and forms a core of the Church's experience to the present time.

The Franciscan movement, beginning with the experience of the founder, Francis of Assisi and continuing in the spirituality of his various followers, forms an important, even essential, part of this intricate story in terms of these fundamental, if evolving, characteristics. This essay will endeavour to trace that dynamic, both in a general way but also with specific reference to the Franciscan charism, particularly within the thought of the founder of the Order, Francis of Assisi, and that of one of his earliest disciples, Clare of Assisi, as well as certain modern applications.

## II: Patristic and Medieval Antecedents

A fundamental aspect of Christian assertion, each serving as an aspect complementary to the other, is implied by the very name coined at Antioch in the decades of Christianity's infancy<sup>1</sup>. It is reiterated in complex theological terms by the Fourth Gospel's postulation of the pre-existent Logos and, famously, the advocacy to union with the Father with and through the Son<sup>2</sup>, is that Jesus of Nazareth is the one 'Sent from God' and, indeed, is God. The arduous journey from acknowledgement that the Christ was, at last, 'sent' to an expectant world<sup>3</sup> to an intuition and, finally, dogmatic assertion that the man Jesus is the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity and divine

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 11:26

<sup>2</sup> John 1: 1-2ff; cf. John 1:14; John 17 ff.

<sup>3</sup> In the Fourth Gospel, Jesus often describes himself as the 'one who is sent', see: John 7:29ff.

mediator forms the living heart of all of the various forms of Christian theology and spirituality that are deemed ‘orthodox’.

Perhaps, this insight goes far in explaining the ‘corner stone’ imagery used by Christ in the Gospels? But this is not encountered without controversy.

The fundamental opposition of Judaism, both within the time of Jesus and the present, to assertions of divinity (however intuitive they may have been in the ‘primitive’, pre-conciliar era) is well known. One of the famous ‘I am’ statements in the Fourth Gospel crystallizes, in literary form, the nature of this opposition as Jesus, in a stunning misuse of proper Greek grammar (!) states that, ‘...before Abraham was, I am.’<sup>4</sup> His appropriation of the name of God given to Moses in Exodus 3:14 is interpreted as blasphemy as is Jesus’ working on the Sabbath; not understood as merely breaking one of the Mosaic Laws, but as a claim to divinity based on contemporary Midrashic literature as Genesis 2:3 was interpreted metaphorically. God could not have literally ‘rested’ on the seventh, or any other, ‘day’ since, if he had, the created universe would have ceased from lack of a sustainer.<sup>5</sup> The same objection can be seen in the fiercely upheld monotheism, formulated at least in part to the perceived Christian ‘polytheism’ of post-conciliar Trinitarian doctrine, and related anti-iconographic attitudes present in Islam, the third of the great Western religious traditions.

There are also shadows of doubt cast within aspects of modern speculative Christology that would seem, at least, to mitigate the traditional dogmatic assertion of the hypostatic union and its concurrent *effect* of union. An example is found in the American Jesuit, Roger Haight. Proceeding from a tradition that extends to the pioneering exegetical methodology of Bultmann and Albert Schweitzer’s *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*, Haight’s work<sup>6</sup> engages (in his own words) issues of post-modernity and multi-culturalism. When applied to the ontological/existential ‘problem’ of the Incarnation, these seem to postulate a kind of radical apophaticism in that the mutability and subjectivity of human culture- correctly viewed through the lens of Jesus’ lived human experience- would necessarily subjectify that which, in itself, is an Absolute. God is, necessarily, objective- the source of being- and therefore cannot be known *as such* within the subjective milieu of Christ’s humanity or the culture within which he finds his historical frame of reference. What is definitely called into

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<sup>4</sup> John 8:58

<sup>5</sup> Cf. John 5:17

<sup>6</sup> See: Haight, R., *Jesus Symbol of God* (Orbis: 2000); *The Future of Christology* (Continuum: 2007).

question and, in doing so, provides a context for much fruitful discussion is the *capacity* of the Incarnation and, more specifically the humanity of Christ, to reveal that which is fundamentally objective; God, who is named I AM and in doing such to facilitate union with the Father.<sup>7</sup>

A concurrent and highly interesting point raised in conjunction with Haight's hypothesis would propose the same question from a different perspective: To what extent is human culture, or a given moment in history, able to 'enculturate' a Gospel that has as its centre, according to the traditional understanding that depends on the Nicaean/Chalcedonian definitions, an Incarnation of a God who is ineffable, immutable, and transcendent? Or, put in another way, how can union with the Father be effected within that context? One inevitably recalls the perhaps naïve remark of Philip and Jesus' reply in the Last Supper Discourse in the Fourth Gospel, "Lord, show us the Father and it is enough for us." Jesus' reply, "Have I been so long with you and yet you have not come to know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father; how do you say, 'Show us the Father'?"<sup>8</sup> The question is, presumably, a serious one- offered as such by Philip and accepted in the same spirit by Jesus. The enemies and doubters have been, for a time, banished yet, for all of that, the air of anxiety is palpable. Jesus will soon die, and that stark fact drags all of the ambiguity of human fallibility and contingency into the equation. Though clearly not trained theologians, the disciples nevertheless intuit that Almighty God should somehow be above (and, perhaps, beyond?) the terrifying reality almost literally knocking at the door. Jesus, for his part, is anxious to impart an astounding truth, at least in so far as the reflective faith of the Fourth Gospel is concerned. It is precisely in the context of drastic human limitation- physically, morally, spiritually- that the face of God is revealed; thus, his Passion is referred to as the 'hour of Glory' and surely, in so far as the paucity of human language is able to describe it, 'glory' is an attribute of the Living God and so, as is often the case in the Gospels, Philip is left with a question for his answer: What, within this context that is both historical and trans-historical (in the sense that it is universally common to the human condition) is he able to see? The answer must remain both simple and complex. This is what Philip is invited

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<sup>7</sup> This interpretation of the divinity of Jesus is contrary to the faith of the Church that believes in Jesus Christ, eternal Son of God, who became man, as has been proclaimed repeatedly in various ecumenical councils and in the constant preaching of the Church." Ratzinger, J., 'Notification' in *L'Osservatore Romano* (8 February 2005).

<sup>8</sup> John 14: 8-9.

to see. Can he also discern the nature of the Incarnation at its inception to represent scandal- who among us would direct a pregnant woman in labor to a cold barn behind the house?- and this continues to its consummation on the Cross. Throughout, the orthodox assumption has been that it is precisely in these historicized events that the full implications of the hypostatic union are understood and they have always been linked to soteriological consequences. As Gregory Nazianzus, defending the Nicæan definition of Christ's divinity against the Arians stated, 'What is not assumed is not healed. What is united with God is saved.'<sup>9</sup>

Francis of Assisi and subsequent followers seem to have discerned this truth very well. First, in the flowering of new interpretations and applications in the thirteenth century and then, among his disciples, in subsequent years, even centuries,

That the realization of an Incarnation understood as hypostatic union making union for the believer with the Father through the Son, enshrined in the dogmas of the ancient councils, was arduous is testified to in a variety of ways. The intuition, recorded in the New Testament scriptures, offers seemingly ambiguous testimony and the theme of doubt, as even believers grapple with the implications of the divine revelation, is fully articulated, though in retrospective fashion- usually in terms of the confused or false testimony of Jesus' adversaries- as the disciples themselves wrestle with confusion. There are many instances where both the ambiguous assertions of Christ's divinity and the open struggle with doubt or confusion are recounted in the New Testament and a few examples given here will serve to highlight the gathering complexity. In terms of theological, one might also say 'ontological', ambiguity there is the often-noted appearance of discrepancy in Christ's will in relation to the will of the Father. Throughout the Gospels Jesus explicitly defers his own will to that of the Father and yet, from both theological and corollary philosophical points of view, God is not 'caused' or contingent in any way. Perhaps the above-mentioned example of the agony in Gethsemane is the most well known, where Jesus not only seems to be in conflict with and ultimately subordinate to the Father's will, but to also experience a broad range of human limitations summed up in his very real fear of death. In traditional terms, the congruity of the hypostatic union is called into question as Christ's human and divine na-

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<sup>9</sup> Gregory Nazianzus, *Epist.* 101.7. Gregory hearkened back to the older axiom: 'What is not assumed is not saved', used against the docetic tendencies of the Gnostics. See: Studer, B., A. Louth, ed., M. Westerhoff, trans., *Trinity and Incarnation: The Faith of the Early Church*, (Edinburgh, MN: 1973), p. 195.

tures would appear to be antithetical to one another. Patristic scholars, notably John Chrysostom, examine Christ's hesitation to lay down his life by recourse to a kind of duality which would seem to beg the question; Christ's divine will operates in union with the Father, but his human will, when it displays weakness, 'belongs to the dispensation, not the Godhead.'<sup>10</sup> Bonaventure disputes this interpretation but avoids a Monophysite understanding by describing a *perfected* human will that is in no way compromised by a healthy fear of death- better understood as the desire to preserve one's life- but nevertheless remains in union with that of the Godhead.<sup>11</sup> Bonaventure precedes this argument in his *Commentary on the Gospel of John*<sup>12</sup> with recourse to two other problematic passages found in that Gospel which would seem to subordinate Christ's will to that of the Father. The first is his practice of prayer and the second that of his baptism in which it seems incongruous that the greater should go to the lesser, and it is pointed out that Christ had no sin (filth) to wash away. In both cases Bonaventure makes it clear that these actions are undertaken in terms of *condescension* and for *instruction* and in *commendation of humility*, but are not, in themselves, necessary attributes of Christ's humanity. The point is anticipated in *III Sentences* where Bonaventure invokes John of Damascus: 'In Christ the human nature does not hold the nature of a handmaid',<sup>13</sup> and this must be true, in terms of the difficult consideration at hand, in relation to the Godhead and the congruity of the hypostatic union, but what of the Godhead itself? Put in another way, is Christ's condescension- in all of its variegated aspects, not only in terms of the relationship of his will to the Father's but also in terms of poverty, infirmity and all of the other inevitable contingencies of human existence all the way to death- entirely antithetical to the divine *esse* and, if perhaps not, is it correct to describe these things solely in terms of condescension? A brief examination of two incidents, one described by both the Synoptic and Fourth Gospels and the other exclusive to the Fourth Gospel may serve to highlight subsequent Franciscan-orientated reflections on the congruity of the hypostatic union and its many soteriological implications.

<sup>10</sup> Chrysostom, *In Ioan. Homil.*, 67.1, (PG 59), cols. 369-71.

<sup>11</sup> See: Herbst, T., *The Road to Union: Johannine Dimensions of Bonaventure's Christology*, Pensiero Franceseano 4 (Grottaferrata [Roma]: 2005), p. 201.

<sup>12</sup> Bonaventure, *Comm. In Ioann.*, 1.64, q. 1, resp. (VI), p. 260.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, III Sent., d. 9, a. 1, q. 1 resp. 6 (III), p. 201; cf. John of Damascus, *Fide orthod.*, 65/3.21 (*Burgundio/Cerbanus*), pp. 261-3 (PG 94), col. 1083.



The incident of Christ's baptism, described in the Synoptic Gospels and implied in John,<sup>14</sup> has already been described as problematic in that Christ seems not to have required it, having no sin. First, it should be said the state of sinlessness, in itself, does not impugn the integrity of Jesus' human nature; on the contrary, it is augmented as the pre-lapsarian state of humanity is described as sinless. Put in another way, our sin diminishes our humanity and should not be understood to be intrinsic to the human condition. But why would Jesus, being sinless, then submit to a ritual centred on the reality of sin and its ritualized ablution? The answer, perhaps, can be understood by recourse to a metaphor; did he descend into the chilly waters of the Jordan, not to be cleansed of sin- impossible, as there was no need- but, rather, to *pick it up*? It should be recalled that in each account of the baptism, the event is understood to represent the inception of his public, that is to say salvific, ministry. In the Synoptic Gospels the theme is strengthened by the interlude represented by Christ's temptation in the wilderness. It seems to be no coincidence that once having embraced the human condition, *in all of its aspects*, Jesus then faces the very real psychological consequences in his experience of temptation. Even in the Fourth Gospel, where the story is not explicitly recounted, the theme is nevertheless implied by John the Baptist's careful choice of appellation; 'Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.' The Baptist could have used any number of titles to describe and- as this is the first- to sum up who Jesus was and what he came to do. He chooses the theme of sacrifice and identifies a messiah destined for the ignominy of the cross. Thus, once again the seamless theme of apparent scandal and contingency negativized by sin is upheld as that which began in cold and lonely poverty on Christmas Day leads inexorably toward Calvary. Thus, the human nature of Jesus can, perhaps, be understood in a way congruent with the existential reality of humanity operating within perceivable bounds of a very tragic history; and the question of the hypostatic union becomes yet more urgent- how is it that God is expressed, not only within the confines of what we might call 'nature' or 'creation', but one shattered and alienated from its source as well?

In the Fourth Gospel the events and discourses directly preceding the arrest, trial, and death of Jesus at the Last Supper offer an extensive pedagogy of advanced theological reflection, both in terms of the author's intent and, if one situates the teaching in a historical context, of Jesus' sense of urgency to both explain who he is and what he came to do in the past context of his nearly completed ministry and also in preparation for the looming

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<sup>14</sup> Matthew 3:13-17; Mark 1:9-11; Luke 3: 21-22; cf. John 1: 31-34.

event of his Passion. It is here that the seminal question of Philip regarding the revelation of God is uttered and Jesus' seemingly cryptic reply given in return and, as has been noted, both question and response are utterly appropriate as both address a single soteriological concern understood in terms of union. What has been described as a probable reason for Christ's baptism now rushes toward its conclusion on the cross and Philip, intuiting the awesome problem of congruity, is left in confusion as the fulfillment of the promise of Emanuel is called into question and, if apparent, seems bereft of the expected salvific consequences. Put in another way; the 'one sent' came to reveal God and that revelation, as Jesus is careful to explain throughout the Gospel and in highly explicit terms in the Last Supper Discourses, is meant to re-forge shared links of life<sup>15</sup> abandoned in the Fall as humanity is restored to a relationship with the Father, its source. This is the soteriological consequence of the fulfilled promise of Emanuel and Philip wants to see its consummation. And so, we may ask, what exactly has Philip seen? He has seen many things, often purportedly miraculous, but, in the spirit of Jesus' own admonition to look beyond the miracles, there was an event, more immediate and far more prosaic, that should have sufficed to answer his question as, shortly before, Jesus washed the disciples' feet.

Careful exegesis of this pericope<sup>16</sup> reveals a theme of divine union made accessible to humanity in retrospective acknowledgement of the hypostatic union that is not understood merely in terms of divine condescension, but rather utter compatibility. The scene is meant to shock in a constructive way as the disciples are invited into the heart of paradox where the human nature of Jesus serves as the medium of divine revelation in which the great soteriological imperative of uninhibited access, or union with the divine *esse*, is clearly stated and demonstrated in a way so prosaic as to be easily understood (at least in human terms) within the context of culture and experience. The act of stripping, getting on one's knees, and washing the disciples' feet points to a multivalent existential reality highly descriptive of the *human condition*- or at least it appears so to the disciples- possibly a valuable ethical example in the sense of Bonaventure's categories of instruction and commendation of

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<sup>15</sup> That salvation is predicated on union and shared life with God, mediated specifically by the Logos, is made explicit in John's highly Christological revision of the creation story in the Prologue: 'All things came into being by him; and apart from him nothing came into being that has come into being. In him was life; and the life was the light of men,' John 1: 3-5, *New American Standard Bible*, Reference Edition (Iowa Falls: 1975).

<sup>16</sup> John 13: 5-17.

humility, but Peter's vociferous objection points to a different concern, which indirectly reveals the real point; not ethical, in a primary sense, but ontological. Jesus' response to Peter's objection, which Bonaventure ingeniously ascribes to an *excess of reverence*<sup>17</sup> would be better described as *misdirected reverence*. Peter intuits that Jesus is (at least) from God...and God is not found on his knees, or is he? Jesus' response, pointing toward the soteriological theme of union is clear: Peter must allow Jesus to wash his feet if he is to have any 'part' with him. This choice of words, especially given the wider context of the salvific theme that forms the core of the Gospel, indicates something greater than mere observance of an ethic, however important that may be. Peter is understandably shocked as 'union' (part) is understood to be with God and God is not found stripped and on his knees, but Jesus is and, lest there be any mistake about the congruity between his, admittedly retrospectively understood, divinity and humanity, the terms he uses to describe himself and, by extrapolation, that 'part' which Peter is invited into union with point directly toward the divine- Jesus is 'teacher' and 'Lord'. Returning to Philip, both question and answer assume, in light of the pericope describing Jesus washing the disciples' feet, both immediacy and poignancy as the human medium of incarnation in various prosaic- if sometimes also horrific- vignettes nevertheless point toward a thoroughly 'enculturated' revelation of God that must be direct, not symbolic in the sense of an intermediate lens or filter, because the revelation itself facilitates union and that in turn is predicated on an explicit kind of seeing that results in knowing, better described as love. This must never be limited to a mere ethical injunction- as Jesus commands this or that- because the revelation of the divine *esse*, recognized as a very specific kind of love, is, in turn, understood to be the restoration of the pre-lapsarian ontological state of humanity, re-created in this case, after a pattern of *imago Dei* now patterned on the Incarnation. And so the question, at least, assumes greater clarity; if God is, indeed, found on his knees- not limited to a role of condescension but actually *compatible*, in a very specific sense, with the acknowledged condescension that descent to human estate implies, then what are the identifiable characteristics of both 'God' and 'image', which form the ontological basis of salvific union that Jesus invites the disciples to by washing their feet? In order to understand this, it is necessary to briefly examine the seminal text given in Genesis.

The creation accounts in Genesis are unambiguous in an important assertion; humanity is part of both the 'natural' and 'spiritual' creation. The

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<sup>17</sup> Bonaventure, *Comm. In Ioann.*, 13.5-20 (VI), pp. 425-28.

essential characteristic of humanity as ‘natural’ is stated clearly in the text: *Then the Lord formed Man of dust from the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living being.*<sup>18</sup> Though nowhere in the text is mention made of a soul or the possible ontological distinctions or relationship between soul and body, the existence of ‘soul’ is, nevertheless, strongly implied by the passage from the second creation account quoted above in the sense that the ‘life’, which caused the newly created human to become an animated being was from God who breathed into his creation *the breath of life*, which is given a Christological interpretation in the Fourth Gospel as the author anticipates the causal agency and subsequent compatibility of creation to the Second Person of the Trinity by reference to the Logos. In the first creation account the implication is stronger. Humans are created *In [God’s] own image*.<sup>19</sup> Thus, it is possible to see that in humanity, at least, there exists a unity of being inclusive of all aspects of creation; natural and supernatural, so that humanity is able to function as a microcosm of the entire cosmos<sup>20</sup>, both physical and metaphysical.

The implications of this insight are enormous and, in some degree, problematic. The assertion that humanity is able to function as a unified microcosm of the created order in every aspect must not be understood in a passive way. On the contrary, a specific role or ‘job description’ is envisioned as the *theoria* able to describe the human race in these terms is resolved in a kind of *praxis* that mandates participation in the very ‘work’ of God since, in reality, only God can be described as entirely inclusive of all aspects of Being, entirely self-sufficient and, as such, the *macrocosm* mirrored by the human *microcosm*. All aspects of being, whether natural or supernatural, are held together and given meaning in the singular, radically simple ontological reality of God who ‘is what he is’. Everything else ‘is what it is’ in contingent relation to the only aspect of Being that exists in itself and conceptualizes all else and this, essentially, is the ‘work’ described in the Six Days of Creation; God creates by conceptualization; when a thing is named or distinguished

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<sup>18</sup> Genesis 2:7.

<sup>19</sup> Genesis 1:27 (*imago Dei*).

<sup>20</sup> Subsequent development of the idea and some implications of humanity, as body/soul, functioning as a microcosm of the created order is rich in patristic and medieval theological literature, particularly regarding the role of the Logos, the problematic compatibility and meaning of the hypostatic union, and the dynamics of redemption. For some important contributions in these areas see: Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* (creative dynamism of the Logos); Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* (re-capitulation), Maximus the Confessor (spiritual anthropology), Bonaventure, *De reductione artium ad theologiam* (egression/regression).

from another it comes into existence and, as such, shares to some degree in the divine nature since God- fundamentally the articulate, self-conscious fullness of Being- is the only one able to conceptualize another or to name himself. Created 'existence' is rooted in the 'naming' and represents a very real ontological affinity for the Creator since the 'name' exists in God and forms the substantial nature of whatever that thing is in relation to the one who conceptualized it. In an often-overlooked passage in Genesis humans are given the same task.<sup>21</sup> The responsibility is enormous. It is clear in both of the Genesis accounts of creation that the ontological unity pre-supposed by the common existence of all things as 'conceptualized by God' causes them to also be dependent on God in hierarchical relationship. In this sense, the hierarchy is simple; everything is derived from and contingent to the Creator. It is also apparent, in a closer examination of the text, that creation itself is arranged in a hierarchy of mutual dependence and, by extension, inter-dependence. Sustained in the primal sense by God as source and foundation (the unique, self-sufficient Being), the hierarchy of creation operates in the relationship of one thing to another in similar ways with humanity at the apex. Humanity, by virtue of *imago Dei* sustains nature at the apex of the created hierarchy in a similar way to God. This can be understood in terms of *domination* or *subduing*<sup>22</sup> in the sense that humanity sustains nature against the chaotic tendencies that would undermine the 'naming' and *rule*<sup>23</sup> as the action that maintains the sense of divine order that brought (and continues to sustain) creation into existence. If one were to visualize this hierarchy in terms of a pyramid with humanity at the apex, its true function could only be grasped in a paradoxical way. Inverting the pyramid, apex at the lowest point, reveals the true nature of *imitatio* implied by *imago Dei* within the context revealed by the Incarnation. To *rule* is to *serve* and glory (properly understood as the manifestation of divine *esse*) is discovered to consist of kenotic love. The importance of this perception is found in the assertion that fundamentally humanity, as *imago Dei*, participates in the creative 'work' of God; primarily as agent, unifying in itself a proper ordering, which brought creation into existence and sustains it in time. Participation in this 'divine project' or, to put it in another way, maintenance of what *imago Dei* actually

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<sup>21</sup> 'And out of the ground the Lord God formed every beast of the field and every bird of the sky, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them: and whatever the man called a living creature; that was its name,' Genesis 2:19.

<sup>22</sup> Cf., Genesis 1: 28.

<sup>23</sup> Cf., Genesis 1: 26.

implies within the context of the Genesis text, depends on humanity's ability to function as *microcosm* and this can be summed up as the articulate realization of, and participation in, radical contingency. Humanity, at the apex of the created hierarchy and partaker of the divine kenosis of service/love, sustains creation in its proper contingent orientation toward God.

The rather bold assertion that humanity, created *imago Dei*, participates in God's creative work presupposes a problem. The problem is centered on the same supposition that serves as a definition of *imago Dei* in the sense that the boundaries of contingency are blurred. This, of course is a pervasive theological problem that affects every aspect of the discipline; not least the complex Christological wrangling that resulted in the full definition and ontological implications of the hypostatic union more than four centuries after Christ's earthly ministry was completed. The problem is one of proximity and, by extension, relationship. It is immensely exacerbated by the Fall but, despite that, exists as well when considering the hypothetical prelapsarian state of humanity. This difficult problem of proximity/relationship is highlighted by the classic, quasi-dualism of the West, articulated in the world of Paul and stamped on the intellectual heritage of Christianity by Neo-Platonic philosophy. The implied problem of proximity/relationship proposed by the Platonic philosophical systems was the ironic result of the solution to a different problem; the need to identify a transcendent principle by which reality could be measured, described and (perhaps) understood. Despite the antithetical nature of certain aspects of Jewish religious thought to the Platonic identification of monistic rationalism as the total sum of what might be described as 'real', there was also an affinity as both systems of thought posited a transcendent principle, over and above the natural world, as the source and arbiter of reality. Plato's Monad and the Yahweh of later Judaism did have something in common but also seem, as we have seen, to have little in common with the Christian supposition of an Incarnation that is understood in terms of hypostatic union.

From a Christian point of view, the state of humanity as *imago Dei* presupposes a relationship with God, the divine transcendent principle, as so profound that it is based on ontological affinity. Having recognized this, the gulf that separates contingent creation from the Creator must also be acknowledged. The pantheistic solution proposed by Stoicism was not an option for Christians rooted in the Jewish tradition of radical differentiation between creature and Creator. This conundrum affected both the Jewish religious and Greek philosophical traditions. The resolution to the problem described above becomes urgent when one considers the dynamic of salvation, for the

author of the Fourth Gospel, throughout the Pauline corpus, patristic writers, and subsequent Christian theologians as *union with the Father in Christ*. The potential inherent in humanity as *imago Dei* demands it; damaged, perhaps lost, in the Fall; salvation consists in its restoration. The same soteriological imperative is found in the Gospel of John. In a three-fold process related to the salvific event of the Incarnation beginning with ‘seeing’, leading to ‘believing’ (doctrine/understanding) and ‘testifying’ (praxis) the believer is led to union with the Father in Christ. The theme is pervasive throughout the Fourth Gospel, but is most eloquently articulated by the complex ‘union’ language contained in the Last Supper discourses. The ontological problem, present already in the hypothetical pre-lapsarian state of humanity, is immeasurably compounded by the effect of sin. This is also attested to in the Fourth Gospel as the inverted soteriological equation of seeing/disbelieving/rejection leads to damnation. In this sense humanity chooses to remain ‘outside’ the relationship with God described as *union*, asserting instead an illusion of self-sufficient being, doomed to a futile ‘unity’ with a false notion of self that is really an embrace of annihilation. Humanity is left estranged from God, itself, and nature as the creative order of hierarchical interdependence is shattered and this provides the problematic context within which our questions occur; is the divine *esse* revealed by the Incarnation in a way compatible with restoration of *imago Dei*? Of course, the answer must be in the affirmative but saying and doing are two different things and, as Roger Haight and innumerable predecessors extending back to the earliest days of the Church have in various ways pointed out, the gulf which seems to separate contingent human experience from a God defined as transcendent and ineffable makes use of soteriological terminology predicated on union- both in terms of the hypostatic union pertaining to Christ and our own union with the Father through him- difficult to say the least.

The classic Christian understanding of the hypostatic union, defined dogmatically at Chalcedon in 451, represents nearly four hundred years of reflective discourse on this difficult topic. The genius of Cyril of Alexandria’s proposition that Christ is *mia physis* (one nature) formed of two- *ek duo*- reverberates through the ages in its perceived soteriological consequences, avoiding the dead end of the *tertium quid* in which Christ is neither fully God nor fully human and thus unable to effect union in that he could not have been the bridge from a dubious humanity to spurious divinity. The marvelous preposition, *ek*, is laden with soteriological connotations that transcend the merely ethical and move to the heart of an ontological union based on affinity that then puts the ethical in proper perspective. Ramifications in terms of mediated grace

and the receptivity of humanity to it are obvious as *imago Dei* is understood in its proper perspective and seen as a concrete fruit, both in terms of human origins and potential for redemption. That God is perceived as having chosen to exist as a human being, in complete measure and without compromise, while remaining fully God lends a further layer of richness to the implications implied by the proposition *ek*; signifying as it does not only an affinity with our human nature, but also the concurrent affinity with the world that serves as a stage for human activity. The supposed post-modern critique that the Chalcedonian definition fails to speak in a credible way to the complexities of inculturation could not be further from the truth, unless one considers the fallacious pretension of a term like ‘post-modern’ when considering the question in the first place. A system of thought based on the radical subjetivization of all that can be perceived to the marginalization, if not exclusion, of any ‘other’ can hardly be expected to perceive or appreciate any kind of universal reality or truth whether it is named ‘God’ or something else.<sup>24</sup> Obviously, this mode of thought, which can only resort to a weary apophaticism if able to entertain the possibility of any belief at all, though waxing strong in the modern (not post-modern) world, is challenged by a more holistic viewpoint and has been throughout the Christian Era. That the Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union actually radicalizes the notion of Incarnation/union is well attested by Franciscan insight extending to the thirteenth century and remains relevant today. A few examples will suffice here and, at the same time, finally clarify what exactly Philip was able to see in the Upper Room.

### III. The Medieval Context

The earlier centuries of the Medieval era, commencing perhaps with the fall of the Western Roman Empire throughout the sixth century, bore a very different character from the latter period, characterized as the ‘High’ Middle Ages. This latter period commenced around the end of the eleventh century and endured until the beginning of the fourteenth century. Reasons given for this are various- from climate change, in this case global warming, that allowed for the cultivation of newly arable land, the foundation of townships, expansion of cities (with the rise of the universities), and explosive population growth, to the final cessation of the often violent

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<sup>24</sup> One is strangely reminded of Pilate’s cynical query to Jesus at his trial, ‘What is truth?’ See: John 18:38.



migration of people throughout continental Europe (with the exception of Islam in the southwest and, later, the southeast).

Whatever the case, the period of the High Middle Ages has been described as a time of greater stability and prosperity than the centuries immediately preceding it and this reverberated throughout the Western Church.

M-D Chenu puts it very well in his famous collection of essays, *Nature, Man and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*.<sup>25</sup> In various places in his collection of essays Chenu lists three aspects that characterized the age: *nature*, *history*, and *affectivity*. By 'nature' he means just that; a re-integration of the natural world to a positive (as opposed to an other-worldly, often negative, perception) into a more holistic theological perspective. The same is true of human 'history', which for those in this period would have comprised what we consider to be salvation history, extending from creation to the eschaton. Finally, 'affectivity', which comprises not only human emotion, but other psychological dimensions.

Thus, we have a sort of theatrical production of near-cosmic dimensions. The natural world can be conceived of as a vast stage. The production itself, or plot, takes place within the confines of the sacred, for better or worse, and everyone has their own role to play with Christ as a kind of 'leading man' at centre stage in every scene. Finally, the 'script' takes into account both setting and plot and tells the story in immediate, human terms.

The re-integration- of the natural world inclusive of human history (culture) and psychology into the ancient Christological/soteriological understanding of Incarnation and union depends on the delicate balance of divine/human revelation with concurrent consequences effected by the Incarnation understood as a divine hypostasis. The Second Person of the Trinity, also understood as the exemplary cause of creation based on the new Aristotelian philosophical methodology, as well as older Greek Neo-platonic emphases, and scriptural witness found in the Prologue of John, postulate Christ, as the visible manifestation of the divine image, to be not only radically situated in his own historical time and place but, as a consequence presumably of the supernatural and extra-historical nature of God, in every other time and place as well, most specifically their own. The resultant 'existential mysticism', fully attested in the writings of St. Paul, relies on a paradox and thus is found the vulnerability of the Chalcedonian solution to misrepresentation and certainly misunderstanding. That God could somehow become something other

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. Chenu, M.-D., *Nature, Man, and Society in the Twelfth Century: Essays on New Theological Perspectives in the Latin West*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997).

than he is while remaining fully God must always remain a matter of faith, but the lived experience that that faith engenders results in an enculturated Gospel that sacrifices none of its integrity to the bogus soteriology that must result from a *tertium quid* with the concurrent effect of sacrificing all possibility of real union to a misty, reified subjectivism characterized broadly in the Fourth Gospel as ‘blindness’. It is this very subjectivism that caused the Fall of humanity in the first place if the metaphor found in Genesis is to be understood in an ontological as well as psychological way. The Incarnation challenges that blindness and reintegrates humans along with their brilliant mosaic of cultures into the purview of God.

In the Franciscan experience this ‘existential mysticism’ is abundantly evident. Francis of Assisi’s encounter with the leper and subsequent recognition of the face of Christ in the marginalized of his society owes everything to this insight as does his peculiar ‘fundamentalism’ as he ‘literally’ followed Christ...but did he? Or, was he able to recognize Christ’s face and discern his example in the multitude met on the byways of thirteenth century Europe... and the question that begs an answer is: Was there a difference? In the hagiographical discrepancy of that seminal meeting with the leper, where, in one account, the leper is embraced and the shattering catharsis achieved, transcending time and space and leaving Francis irrevocably changed by an enculturated Gospel that spoke to his lived experience in a very specific ‘here and now’, it then seems somehow mitigated as the second account supernaturalises the event, causing the leper to disappear in Francis’ arms as it was actually a miraculous encounter with Christ himself. Which of the two accounts is the real one? Each speaks an identical truth, utterly inter-changeable as the ramifications of the hypostatic union and its soteriological consequences (appropriately expressed, as union based on shared love should be, with an embrace) are made manifest in one man’s specific time and place.

The experience of Francis was seminal, at least regarding the subsequent reclamation and understanding of what had been present in Christianity from the beginning in terms of the nature and soteriological effects of the Incarnation, but it is Clare of Assisi who articulates that radicalized existentialism, couched as it must be in the language of paradox, that truly makes the divine *esse* present in the Incarnation known and accessible to our experience.

The fourth *Letter* to Agnes of Prague begins with a salutation to the ‘illustrious Queen and Bride of the Lamb, the Eternal King...the Lady Agnes.’<sup>26</sup> The soteriology of union is underscored with nuptial imagery. It is also the

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<sup>26</sup> Clare of Assisi, *The Fourth Letter to Agnes of Prague*, p. 54.

last letter in the series and many years have passed since the first letter was written. Clare is near the end of her life and Agnes, who began life as a princess and could have been a queen, is well along the road of renunciation as a Poor Clare nun. The spiritual maturity of both parties is underscored as Clare writes in an almost eschatological mode describing consummation of the relationship between the believer and Christ, the lover and the beloved. She invokes, as she has in earlier correspondence, the mirror metaphor, but in a way far more explicit than that found in her third *Letter*:

Gaze upon that mirror each day, O Queen and Spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually study your face in it, that you may adorn yourself completely, within and without...as is becoming, the daughter and dearest bride of the Most High King. Indeed, in that mirror, blessed poverty, holy humility, and inexpressible charity shine forth as, with the grace of God, you will be able to contemplate them throughout the entire mirror. Look, I say, at the border of the mirror, that is, the poverty of him who was placed in a manger and wrapped in swaddling clothes. O marvelous humility! O astonishing poverty! The King of the Angels, the Lord of heaven and earth, is laid in a manger! Then reflect upon, at the surface of the mirror, the holy humility, at least the blessed poverty, the untold labors and punishments that he endured for the redemption of the human race. Finally contemplate, in the depths of the same mirror, the ineffable charity that he chose to suffer on the tree of the Cross and to die there the most shameful kind of death. Therefore, the mirror, suspended on the wood of the Cross warned those passing by that here are things to be considered...<sup>27</sup>

In the astounding juxtaposition of imagery found in this passage, Clare not only refers to and manipulates traditional crucifixion iconography, but also the fundamental purpose of the Platonic metaphor. Painted with words, the highly visual image sets before the eyes of the reader a familiar tableau; a crucifix replete with realistic corpus. In this sense Clare reveals herself as a daughter of the spirituality of her age; the *Christus Triumphans*, devoid of suffering and far removed from humanity, is replaced by the Suffering Servant, *Christus Patiens*. In this way, the 'scandalous' aspects of the Incarnation are boldly appropriated and the real humanity of Christ affirmed in all of its horrific consequences. This represents a vision of poverty very close to the experience of the whole human race as the sufferings of any individual heart find a frame of reference in the suffering of Christ. Thus, in a profound sense, as Agnes is invited to contemplate Christ reflected in a mirror, it is her own

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-6.

reflection that she sees. Clare understands this and opens the sequence with an invitation to Agnes to ‘study her face’ in the mirror. It is a simple thing for Agnes, many years on the road of Franciscan renunciation, cold, hungry, barefoot and poor, to recognize her own likeness in that mirror. As such, Clare presents us with an image of Christ as ‘archetype’ of the human race and, if this were all, the metaphor would serve as a rather sophisticated psychological trope, but would have little in common with its Platonic forebear in that the element of proximity to the transcendent, however distant the relationship between that which is reflected and that which reflects is perceived, would be missing. On the contrary, since the reflected image is one of stark suffering, the metaphor might be construed to represent the very opposite of what the Platonic mirror was designed to accomplish; an introverted gazing at self, lost in the maelstrom of passion and its damning effects, useful, perhaps, as a warning but not as an archetype of proximate relationship with the divine. This, however, is far from Clare’s mind. She is explicit in asserting that the image of the Suffering Servant is also the *Most High King, King of the Angels, and Lord of heaven and earth*, in other words, he is Almighty God. It is a very difficult balance to strike, demonstrating a deep, if instinctive, understanding of the nature of the hypostatic union. Clare’s insight, characteristic of Francis, Bonaventure and a host of other Franciscans and, in a way, of the age in which they lived, fuses the two aspects of Christ’s identity in a subtle and highly creative application of the Chalcedonian definition—Christ’s divinity and humanity are represented in the union of *persons* as the Second Person of the Trinity has truly become human. He is not *any man* or simply an ‘archetype’ of humanity, rather, he is the visible revelation of the invisible God, Incarnate for all to see in the *modus* of his humanity.

That this assertion, extending to the patristic era, represents a fundamental subversion of Platonism in all of its forms has often been noted. Plato would not have envisioned the possibility of the transcendent One becoming a part of the created order; it is fundamentally impossible for something to be itself and what it is not at the same time. Though the Jewish Platonist Philo postulated the existence of the *Logos* as creative agent and intermediary bridging the gap between the ineffable Godhead and creation, he never envisioned an incarnation for much the same reasons as Plato. Plotinus wrote eloquent descriptions of his own experience of union with the Neo-Platonic Transcendent Principle in language that approximates later usage in certain strands of Christian mysticism, but his experience was one of *ekstasis*—coming out of one’s self— and this is precisely the opposite dynamic as that described by Clare’s use of the mirror metaphor. What

Agnes sees, as she gazes at the form of Christ Crucified, is *herself* and the necessity of *ekstasis*, in tacit acknowledgement of the Platonic gulf separating the reflection and that which is reflected in the mirror, is no necessity at all. What makes this radical bridging of the ‘proximate gap’ implied by classical Platonism possible is the Incarnation and, according to Clare’s understanding, well attested by scripture itself, the motivation is love. Both Paul and the Johannine corpus of Gospel and Letters define this love as ‘kenotic’ and, more so, by implication as fundamentally the *esse* of the Godhead. Kenotic love will logically result in a form of poverty as ‘pouring one’s self out’ implies. In this way, what is manifested in the hypostatic union wears a specific visage; the Crucified Poor Man has found the lowest place and manifested that special kind of love, which is the undiluted revelation of divine transcendence, through utter, self-emptying poverty. As such, and highly reminiscent of Bonaventure’s conception of Christ *in medias res*, all aspects of creation and, most important, human experience are re-embraced and re-integrated into a relationship with the Godhead so profound that it is most aptly described by the nuptial imagery of union. Clare’s final use of the mirror image is found in that context recognizing in true Franciscan fashion the seamless nature of the Passion from Christ’s birth in poverty to his death on the Cross, as it is proposed to Agnes who is *Christ’s spouse*. In doing so, Clare remains true to the ancient union soteriology found in Christianity from the earliest times.

In Clare’s final, mature use of the Platonic mirror the metaphor is changed but not subverted. Hierarchical idealism, often expressed by Clare in the language of chivalric spirituality, is maintained as is the parallel theme of ascent. Clare, however, resorts to paradox, in a way reminiscent of Paul’s canticle in Philippians 2, to describe a kind of inverted hierarchism in which the apex has found the lowest place without, however, becoming less than it is or really moving from its place at all. On the contrary, ‘descent’ (poverty) is necessitated by the association of transcendence with kenotic love. In this sense, she remains true, at least, to the function and purpose of the metaphor, while radically changing its construction. In doing so she proposes a dazzling vision of a kind of ‘existential mysticism’ as Christ becomes a medieval (or modern) penitent and is easily recognized as the reflection of one’s own face in the mirror. That he is also Almighty God invites the one gazing into this very special/prosaic mirror to a journey of ascent and descent resulting in perfect union as that which reflects and is reflected are recognized, like lover and beloved, as one and it is this that, perhaps, the disciple Philip in that far away Upper Room was invited to see.

#### IV. Conclusion

Tangible forms of ‘existential’ union based on equally concrete perceptions of the realized dogma of the Incarnation extend- both within the *praxis* of individual believers and the Church as a whole- into modern times. Two outstanding individual examples from the twentieth century are found in the Franciscans Maximilian Kolbe and Leonardo Boff. Kolbe’s willing acceptance of martyrdom at Auschwitz, on behalf of others, speaks, in perhaps the most poignant way possible, of the ultimate result of the fundamental unity of Incarnation resulting in union. Boff’s ‘preferential option for the poor’ and his refusal to separate *theoria* from *praxis* (the Christ of faith from the Jesus of history) extends that insight to a life led in some respects, like Francis of Assisi before him, in solidarity with the marginalized.<sup>28</sup>

Finally, one might have recourse, on an ecclesial level, to some seminal documents from the Second Vatican Council and other sources (notably John Paul II’s *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*). Key documents, including the corner stone of the Council, *Lumen Gentium*, shed some light on the subject. In Chapter Two, ‘Exploring the Perimeters: From *Lumen Gentium* to *Dominus Iesus*’, in *Interpreting the Spirit of Assisi: Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*, T. Herbst writes:

‘Challenges’, if honestly perceived as such, and, in the documents of Vatican II and, significantly, in other documents representing the official and quasi-official teachings of the post-conciliar Church, there exists a kind of acknowledgement of dialectical kinship of shared knowledge and concepts that is augmented by the highly complex proximate relationships of the three major Western religious traditions; in areas of doctrine, spirituality and historical *praxis* to name a few. This is then extended to other religious traditions, in a kind of descending motif that, nevertheless, also acknowledges real points of shared contact. Abundant examples of this exist, notably in the seminal document of Vatican II dealing with the Church’s self-identity, *Lumen Gentium*, and the ground-breaking document dealing with interfaith dialogue, *Nostra Aetate*.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Boff, L., *Jesus Christ Liberator: A Critical Christology for our Time*, (New York: Orbis, 1989).

<sup>29</sup> Diemling, M., Herbst, T., eds., *Interpreting the Spirit of Assisi: Challenges to Interfaith Dialogue in a Pluralistic World*, Herbst, T., chapter 2: ‘Exploring the Perimeters: From *Lumen Gentium* to *Dominus Iesus*’, (Canterbury: Franciscan International Study Centre Publications, 2013), p. 15. Cf. Abbott, W., gen. ed.; Gallagher, A., trans. ed., *The Documents*

We have seen that throughout the history of the Church, in scriptural and patristic antecedents, extending through the medieval period to modern times, a close association of the developed doctrine of the Incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity with the *praxis* of union with the Father through him. This aspect of Christian doctrine and spirituality has been poignantly represented in the Franciscan experience, from its inception in the early thirteenth century to the present. It has been, perhaps, the genius of the Franciscan way of expressing this fundamental truth- in terms of practical, tangible, and, often poetic, ways- that owes so much to the original insight and experience of the founder, Francis of Assisi, and continued so profoundly by his many followers in subsequent centuries.

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