

MEDIATION:
THE DISTINGUISHING MARK
OF CHRISTIANITY

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“In [Christ’s] mediation, the medium truly is the message: God reveals himself as love, and he does so precisely by giving himself in love, and thus enabling those he loves to love him and each other in turn.”



One of the things that most decisively defines modern consciousness is the presupposition of what is called the self-evident fact of “religious pluralism.” We take for granted, naturally and spontaneously, that there exists a potentially infinite multitude of “belief systems,” each of which makes a claim to truth and possesses a certain validity for those who accept the claim. Such an assumption can at least ostensibly coincide with the existence of a private faith, even a sincere and passionate one: I believe that my religion is “true for me” and may indeed regard that religion as the most important thing in my life. In a curious way, a private faith of this sort is not only able to coincide with the assumption of religious pluralism; it can even reinforce this assumption and find itself reinforced by it, precisely to the extent that this faith recognizes itself as a purely personal reality. Saying my religion

is true for me is, from this perspective, not a concession, but just what makes it meaningful and elicits my enthusiasm. This quality leaves in place the possibility that other “belief systems” may be just as true for others.

We do not intend here to engage the thorny problem of religious pluralism in general, but instead to think through at least one dimension of what it means that the traditional Christian cannot accept this assumption. Catholic Christianity cannot understand itself to be one of the many “belief systems”; it is not “a religion,” if religion is taken as a generic category designating a set of ideas and practices by which man relates himself to God. But to say this immediately raises the question: What makes Christianity unique? What distinguishes Christianity from all other religions, to such an extent that we would be correct to describe it as *sui generis* in the strict sense? To be sure, the ultimate response to this question is a reference to the utter uniqueness of the Incarnation, the assumption of human nature, without separation or confusion, by God himself, and the other mysteries of the faith that are either revealed by or entailed in this decisive one—for example, the Trinity or the *Theotokos*—which constitute the content of the central Christian dogma. But to the extent that we affirm the uniqueness of the Incarnation *only* as a positive fact, we ironically risk falling back into the horizon of modern religious pluralism such as we just described it. It may be that the absolute uniqueness of Jesus Christ is what distinguishes Christianity from other religions—but of course we could just as well say the uniqueness of Muhammad distinguishes Islam in a similar way, or the uniqueness of Shiva distinguishes Hinduism. It is not enough to give a different answer to the question, what sets this particular religion apart from those? We need to affirm a different *kind* of answer, and indeed one that is so different it also transforms the nature of the very question.

We intend in the following set of reflections to make two proposals in this regard, recognizing that these proposals would require much more room to be worked out in full. The hope here is simply to establish a fundamental point of orientation for future work along these lines. The first proposal is that, for the uniqueness of the central dogma of Christianity to distinguish it in a genuine way from other religious claims, that dogma cannot simply concern a positive fact in the sense of an utterly unique

event in history, which comes and goes with the passing of a discrete stretch of time, but, in addition to this, it has to *mean* something—which is to say, it must in a certain sense exceed its particularity and bear on the *meaning* of reality as a whole. Here we see at least in part what was at stake in the debate between Karl Barth and Erich Przywara over the *analogia entis*.¹ If Barth was right to worry about subordinating the truth of Christianity, which is finally the truth of a divine person, the Incarnate Son of God, to a universal philosophical principle, the danger of his position, which was notoriously to reject the *analogia entis* as “the invention of the Antichrist,”² is that it threatens to undermine the meaningfulness of Christianity (we will come back to this matter at the end of our essay).³ For Christianity to be meaningful, it has to give expression to some principle, generally recognized as true, good, and beautiful, and indeed it must do so not only in a basically impressive or even compelling way, but as the perfect paradigm. As we will explain, this does not mean that Christianity

1. See the masterful account of this debate by John Betz, “Translator’s Introduction,” in *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics; Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 1–115, esp. 83–115; and “After Barth: A New Introduction to Erich Przywara’s *Analogia Entis*,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 35–87.

2. Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, vol. I/1: *The Doctrine of the Word of God*, 2nd ed. (London: T&T Clark, 1973), xiii.

3. This danger is mitigated to a certain extent by Barth’s affirmation of analogy in principle, even if he rejects specifically the analogy of *being*. The *analogia fidei* that he posits in its place at least implies a recognition that the fact of Christ must “exceed” itself and bear meaningfully on reality in general. We cannot pursue the issue here, but we would want to argue that there cannot be analogy at all, even an analogy of faith, without an analogy of being, even as this analogy itself requires a theological foundation: the *analogia fidei* and the *analogia entis* are not rivals, but ultimately *require* each other (asymmetrically) in their irreducible difference. It ought also to be noted that to defend the analogy of being is not necessarily to defend Przywara’s particular interpretation of it, which arguably remains too “essentialistic.” For an alternative account of analogy on Thomistic grounds, from the perspective of the *act* of being, see Gustav Siewerth, *Analogie des Seienden* (1965; Freiburg: Johannes Verlag Einsiedeln, 2003). For an account in sympathy with Siewerth, but which emphasizes more the dimension of love, see Ferdinand Ulrich’s thought as presented by Martin Bieler in “*Analogia Entis* as an Expression of Love According to Ferdinand Ulrich,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?*, 314–37.

justifies itself by being the highest instance of a universal idea or by fulfilling a pre-given function better than anything else. It is just that Christianity cannot simply impose its novelty “from above,” in a manner that can for that very reason never really penetrate to the heart of anything but merely rearrange matters on the surface; it must *also* in some way respond to a need presupposed “from below,” and this means in some sense provide a reasonable answer to a philosophical question.⁴

Our second proposal, the elaboration of which will comprise the larger part of this essay, is that *mediation* is an especially illuminating notion in this context. One of the things that suggests this principle above others that might equally have been chosen to express the meaningfulness of Christianity—for example, the analogy of being or the phenomenon of gift—is its remarkable capacity to bring together the universal and the concrete, the theoretical and the practical: on the one hand, the notion of mediation is more obviously concrete than, for example, the *analogia entis*, which most immediately, not to say exclusively, presents itself as a concept in metaphysics (and, from another perspective, in logic). Mediation, by contrast, is the name, in the first place, of an activity: to mediate is to communicate, to convey, to pass on or hand over. On the other hand, mediation is not *only* an activity but also designates a philosophical notion, which has a logical function, but also and more fundamentally articulates a particular mode of being. In this way, mediation distinguishes itself from the more immediately, not to say exclusively, concrete and personal-social phenomenon of gift. One might say that the notion of mediation ultimately expresses the same reality as the analogy of being and the phenomenon of gift, but does so in a particular register, in its own unique way. Moreover, once we recognize this, we see that the analogy of being and the phenomenon of gift are best understood in light of each other: the analogy of being is an event of generosity, and a gift is at bottom an analogous communication of being. Mediation, so to speak, mediates between these. However that might be, in what follows we will first make a case for mediation by pointing out how the

4. This is a point that Maurice Blondel never tired of insisting on. See, for example, his important essay “The Third ‘Testis’ Article,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1999): 846–74.

most central dogma and distinguishing features of the Church give expression to this reality in a fundamental way. Second, we will attempt to offer a *reason* why mediation is central to Christianity, and indeed what mediation most basically *is*. And, finally, we will suggest why identifying mediation as the distinguishing mark of Christianity does not subordinate it to a purely formal concept, which is universal because it abstracts from all possible content and thus every actual reality.

I.

If one were to picture traditional Christianity to oneself, no doubt the first image that would come to mind is the priest, along perhaps with implements of prayer, such as the rosary, or items used in confecting the sacraments, such as the altar or chalice.⁵ While of course all religions have their religious figures, their rabbis or elders, perhaps their own monks or priests, what is distinctive about the Catholic priest is his indispensable necessity. To be sure, a Catholic is meant to have a personal relationship with Christ and a communion with God deep within his spirit, his “interior castle,” his innermost “heart of hearts”: as Augustine famously put it, God is “more interior to me than I am to myself.”⁶ There is in this sense absolutely nothing that can “come between” me and my Creator. But the Catholic understands that, however immediate this relation to God may in truth be, unlike the mystical unions or the affirmations of personal faith in other religions, for it to be proper and complete,⁷ this relation cannot

5. It has been pointed out to me that, if Hollywood desires to depict *religion* cinematically, it is quite frequently some figure of Catholicism that is chosen: apparently, the Catholic Church represents religion to the popular imagination, and indeed offers more to that imagination by way of the tangible and visible than, say, the basically private faith of Protestantism.

6. *Confessions* 3.6.11. Citations of this line in Augustine tend to end the quotation here, and leave out the part that follows, but this second part is necessary to grasp the whole paradox he is attempting to articulate. Augustine goes on to say that God is at the same time “higher than my highest height” (*ibid.*). He is not merely interior in a radical sense but, also and inseparably from this, God is radically *exterior* to me.

7. Of course, there is a natural presence of God in the world by virtue of the relation implied by creation. But this presence is not *independent* of Christ.

simply bypass the mediation of the priest and everything this mediation implies. The priest is not principally a guide, teacher, aide, or facilitator of one's personal relation to God, but, if he is all these things, he is nevertheless in the very first place the ordained means by which God communicates himself to his people—or, more specifically, the means by which Christ disseminates the grace won through his work of redemption, which is in some basic way inseparable from his person. If God, in creating the world, has in a sense naturally communicated his presence in the universal gift of being, which is not (simply) other than what he is in himself (*ipsum esse subsistens*), this first gift has always and from the beginning been meant as an invitation to the second, infinitely greater gift, namely, participation in the inner life of God, which comes through our adoption as sons and daughters in Christ. It is especially this second gift, this grace, that requires the mediation of the priest because the deed of redemption cannot be separated from the person of Christ.⁸ This relationship is not just a new description of what has always actually been the case, or merely the forensic institution of a new legal status. It is instead an ontological *reality*, which cannot be communicated simply by a message, through the words of Scripture, but must be conveyed in a manner that is just as real—just as actual, historical, and indeed “physical”—as the original deed. This grace is given through the material reality of the sacraments, with uncompromising fidelity to the precise nature of the elements, discretely enacted through the words and deeds, involving the body and soul, of the priest. And the priest is a man elevated to this role by the actual sacrament of the “laying on of hands,” which means he is a man who was physically touched by a man who

The Church instead recognizes it as a *genuinely* analogous extension of God's presence in Christ. See the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith's declaration “*Dominus Iesus: On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church*” (2000), which speaks of the “universal salvific mediation of the Church” (4; cf. 13–15).

8. Because the “second gift” (grace) is not simply “tacked on” to the “first gift” (created nature), but represents its proper unfolding and reveals its most essential truth, one can say that the Church's sacramental and theological mediation is also required—again, in an extended, analogous sense—for the proper living of the meaning of creation. It is ultimately required for a proper interpretation of nature, though it is also true that nature thus becomes itself a mediator of grace.

was touched by a man who was touched by a man . . . who was touched by Jesus Christ.⁹ The personal relation to God requires at some fundamental level actual physical contact, real presence.¹⁰

The moment we begin to reflect on the indispensable role of the objective, sacramental presence of the priest, his mediation in the manner just described, we see that it is not incidental or anomalous but expresses the very “logic” of Christianity. To go right to the heart of the matter, the “logic” of Christianity in person, ὁ Λόγος, is the unique Mediator between God and man—though we must add straightaway that this uniqueness does not come simply out of the blue as an unrelated and indeed “irrelational” absolute, but is itself mediated through the Old Covenant and the history of the previous mediators sent by God, the prophets (Heb 1:1–2).¹¹ God does not remain set apart, so to speak, in his inaccessible transcendence, as the wholly other, but also enters *into the midst* of his chosen people (“Emmanuel”) through his Incarnate Son. Note that God does not communicate his presence thus in a (merely) immediate way as pure God, but only through the mediation of the flesh of human nature, though of course this mediation does not compromise the presence of God. In fact, as we will elaborate below, the doctrine of the hypostatic union reveals that this mediation conveys God immediately: he is true God even as true man. Nevertheless, this mediation of the presence of God henceforth becomes *definitive* and *normative*: “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6). “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who does not enter the sheepfold by the door but climbs in by another way, that man is a thief and a robber” (Jn 10:1). God, the Father of all, the author of creation, is mediated to all exclusively through Christ.

9. Here we see the importance of what is called “apostolic succession” for the validity of the priesthood.

10. This does not *restrict* the presence of God to what we have just called the physical contact. Here we see the role of analogy and its relation to gift: this “point of contact” radiates *generously* beyond itself, which means that there is an analogous extension, which has no limits in principle. Thus, God can be present everywhere, but *through* the Church.

11. One might interpret the condemnation of the heresy of Marcionism, among other things, as a gesture of “protection” of the principle of mediation.

But Jesus does not exercise this exclusive mediating role in an exclusive way. We already mentioned mediation through the Old Covenant established in and through Abraham (which is itself mediated, on both sides, so to speak, through the Noahic, Mosaic, and Davidic covenants).¹² But this mediation is more directly mediated to Jesus through Joseph, who stands in the line of David, and in an even more comprehensive way, which includes not only the spiritual formation of the tradition but the natural formation of humanity, down to the very physical elements of matter, through Mary. Though the Son of God has perfectly free disposal over his human nature—“No one takes [my life] from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (Jn 10:18)—he does not originally give himself his human nature, but *receives it from his mother*. If Mary, not without some controversy to be sure,¹³ has traditionally been given the title “Mediatrice of all graces,” it is not because she displaces Christ as the exclusive mediator between God and man, but because she most immediately mediates his immediate mediation, so to speak. She does this in a way that analogously repeats, participates in, and in a certain way imitates, Christ’s act of mediating the Father, who through this mediation nevertheless communicates his perfect presence as God. Mary mediates Jesus in a manner that intensifies his exclusiveness. As the Church has traditionally recognized, there is no access to Jesus except in and through Mary, and yet this exclusiveness does not in any way diminish the immediacy of relation to Christ. Mary is not the mere instrument or vessel of the otherwise wholly transcendent divinity, or the source of the human nature, otherwise indifferent to the divine nature, but is the Mother, the Mediatrice, of God. Seeing the logic of mediation,

12. For a thorough account of the various types of covenant and instances of covenant in the Old Testament, see Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God’s Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

13. Gloria Falcão Dodd offers an overview of the controversy in *The Virgin Mary, Mediatrice of All Graces: History and Theology of the Movement for a Dogmatic Definition from 1896 to 1964* (New Bedford, MA: Academy of the Immaculate, 2012). *Lumen gentium* affirms this description of Mary, but in a very cautious way to avoid misconstrual, emphasizing that Mary’s mediation does not compromise the exclusivity of Christ (62).

as we are attempting to elaborate it here, helps us to navigate beyond whatever difficulty may present itself in this extraordinary mystery. Again, this affirmation re-presents the very “logic” of Christianity, in which the Logos is mediation itself.

If there is no access to God except through Christ, and no access to Christ except through Mary, it ultimately means that our relation to God is necessarily mediated in and through the Church.¹⁴ As the tradition has affirmed,¹⁵ there is a special connection between Mary, who gave Christ his body, and the Church, who *is* the body of Christ, extended through space and time—note that we traditionally speak of the Church as “she,” no matter how unusual it may sound today.¹⁶ It is not just the priests as individuals who mediate the grace won by Christ, but the priests solely as ordained members of the Church. In this respect, all the members of the Church share in some analogous way in the priesthood, and so all members become mediators of the grace received by the Church in an analogous way to each other (“Whenever two or three are gathered in my name” [Mt 18:20]) and to the world. But they do so by virtue of the original sacramental presence of God that lies in the Church and in some sense *is* the Church *herself*: as the Body of Christ, she is the primal sacrament, from which the other sacraments flow.¹⁷ Perhaps the central way that the life of the Church is mediated to believers is through the liturgy, at the heart of which is of course the “unbloody sacrifice of the Mass,” the celebration, which is the re-presentation, of the redemptive deed. But the confection of

14. Recognizing the significance of what is called the “invisible Church,” we have here a way to interpret the famous phrase, “Extra Ecclesiam nullus omnino salvatur” (Outside of the Church there is no salvation). See *Dominus Iesus*, 20.

15. See the account presented by Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger in *Mary: The Church at the Source* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

16. Cf. Stephan Ackermann, “The Church as Person in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 29, no. 2 (Summer 2002): 238–49.

17. Of course, the body of Christ that is the Eucharist is in some sense the source of the Church. We cannot work out a full ecclesiology here, but see the classic text by Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

the Eucharist is not an isolated event; instead, it is itself mediated through the myriad forms of the Mass, the symbols, the music, the implements of the liturgy, in their natural reality, which is transformed through human art,¹⁸ the actions and words of priests, ministers, and the faithful—not to mention the seasons in the Church’s calendar, and in the analogous extension of all these practices in the daily lives and homes of believers: the domestic Church. Two distinctively Catholic extensions of the life of the Church, which highlight in a particular way the importance of mediation, are the various “sacramentals” and the practice of ritual piety regarding the saints, those particular individuals with special charisms, special “offices” of concern, who intercede on behalf of the believers who entreat their help. All of this gives vivid—and *tangible*—expression to what we have called the “logic” of Christianity.

At a more general level, it is impossible to understand the Church without a recognition of the fundamental mediating role of tradition and Scripture. The word of God preserved in the Bible has always played a normative role in Christian life, similar but not identical to the role it has played for the Jews. In a certain respect, the Church has recognized Scripture, the received word of God, as a sort of absolute, a *ne plus ultra*, which contains the deposit of revelation in a perfect way so that nothing can be added or taken away.¹⁹ No further writing, no special revelation, can measure up to the definitive revelation given in the canonical books of the Bible. On the other hand, as Rémi Brague has shown so well, Christianity is not a “religion of the book” in the way that Judaism and even more so Islam

18. In her wisdom, the Church insists, for example, that the candles used in the celebration of Mass be at least 51 percent beeswax. We see expressed here the sacraments’ rootedness in the natural world; once again, grace is mediated by nature. Purely synthetic materials are not permitted in the confection of the sacraments, nor—if one could imagine the horror—the artificial lights of imitation candles.

19. *Dei verbum*, 11. In affirming the status of Scripture, the document also says, “It is clear, therefore, that sacred tradition, Sacred Scripture and the teaching authority of the Church, in accord with God’s most wise design, are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others, and that all together and each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (10).

are.²⁰ For Christians, the “word of God” is in the first place Jesus Christ. The words of Scripture mediate the one Word of God. In contrast to Islam, for example, according to which the Koran was immediately dictated to the prophet Muhammad, and so can never be properly translated into any other language without compromising its theological legitimacy, the Christian Scriptures were mediated through the “instrument” of inspired human authors, with their natural capacities and interests, along with their own histories and cultural backgrounds. And the further mediation of translation into other languages is permitted thus in principle.²¹ It is crucial to note—and indeed this is one of the basic points of our reflection—that this mediation does not compromise the absolute and definitive character of Scripture: just as the essential mediation of the finite human nature of Jesus Christ does not compromise his divinity but allows it to communicate itself immediately, so too the human authorship of Scripture, with all its cultural particularity, does not compromise the perfection of God’s revelation. *God reveals himself* through the mediation of human authors.

Moreover, the canonicity of Scripture cannot be isolated from the tradition of the Church: not only was it the tradition of the Church that determined which writings were authentic in the sense we have been discussing, but the tradition of the Church has been essential to the proper interpretation of Scripture. This tradition has come to give more weight to some passages than to others, and more authority to certain readings than to others, which is necessary in order for Scripture to be read as a well-balanced whole in relation to the reality of the one Word of God—in contrast to the “fundamentalist” fragmentation that would make every jot and tittle equally absolute in itself and

20. Rémi Brague, *The Legend of the Middle Ages: Philosophical Explorations of Medieval Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 2–3; *On the God of the Christians (and on One or Two Others)* (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine’s Press, 2013).

21. It is interesting to observe that at least in some cases, for example in the gospel of Matthew, the “original” Greek is thought to be itself already a translation (from Hebrew). Greek is the language of the New Testament, not because it is a divine language given directly—*immediately*—by God (as Arabic in Islam), but because at the time it was the universal language, most commonly accessible to others, thus the one that served as the best mediator.

in isolation from the rest. The tradition, which the Church has always recognized as guided by, or in other words mediated in and through, the Holy Spirit, thus provides a certain normative standard itself, not just for the interpretation of Scripture, but for liturgical practices, for “faith and morals,” and in a special way for the dogmatic content of the Church’s faith by means of definitive conciliar formulations (and, as an analogous extension that is less definitive but still an essential guide, by means of the theological interpretation of that content). Tradition—which is in a certain sense the historical expression of the principle of mediation²²—lies at the heart of Christianity.

The centrality of mediation also explains another fact about the Catholic tradition that seems to be unique among the “religions,” namely, the “official” authority the Church has granted to philosophy.²³ At the root of this recognition is the affirmation of reason as playing an indispensable role in mediating the faith. In a certain respect, one might compare this recognition to the affirmation of the integrity of the human authorship, with its full breadth of natural capacities, in the inspiration of Scripture. Reason not only prepares for the reception of faith, but also deepens the appropriation of faith through its abiding work, and finally bears in itself the special fruit afforded by the new life, and the new light, of revelation. Though the Church has not adopted as her own any particular “philosophical system,” she has cultivated the “legitimately autonomous” development of a philosophical tradition, according a particular authority to the classical roots of that tradition and of course granting a special status, above all in the realm of metaphysics,

22. Tradition is also essentially connected to gift: see my “Taking Truth for Granted: A Reflection on the Significance of Tradition in Josef Pieper,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 44, no. 4 (Winter 2017): 690–717. There are grounds for rooting the importance of tradition in Christianity ultimately in what might initially seem wholly unrelated, namely, Christ’s *traditio*, his handing himself over to be sacrificed. This could be interpreted as a reflection in the soteriological context of his having handed himself over in the Incarnation, and that as an image of the *supra-traditio* in the Father’s begetting of the Son in the Trinity.

23. Of course, philosophy does not have the same authority as theology, and no particular philosophy has been canonized. On this, see John Paul II’s *Fides et ratio*.

to Thomas Aquinas.²⁴ Along with the mediating role of reason, the Church has begun increasingly to recognize the importance of the mediating role played by social and political forms. This recognition comes to expression in the ongoing development of what has come to be called the tradition of “Catholic Social Thought,” inaugurated by Leo XIII’s *Rerum novarum* (1891). Typically, this tradition is interpreted as providing general moral principles for the essentially “secular” activities and institutions in politics, economics, medicine, and other dimensions of social life. But there is much to be gained by learning to see these forms as mediating the Christian mysteries, and so extending the life of the Church into the world, all the way into its darkest recesses, so to speak.²⁵

If mediation is essential to the Church, and if it represents the distinguishing mark of Christianity—which is impossible to deny when one looks at the whole unfolding of the various dimensions of Christian life—it is not only because of the absolute centrality of the Mediator, Jesus Christ, but ultimately because something like mediation constitutes the inner life of God himself. The being of God, the divine nature, is not a monolithic quantity, a “frozen Essence block,” as Ferdinand Ulrich puts it,²⁶ but is “mediated” as it were in and through the divine persons. The Son is perfectly God in himself, but he is so only by receiving the whole Godhead from the Father; the Holy Spirit is perfectly God in himself, but only by being spirated by the Father (and the Son).²⁷ The persons are each perfectly God, and altogether they are perfectly one God—a mystery conceivable, to the extent that it can be conceived, only as perfect mediation,

24. See *Fides et ratio*, 43–44; cf. *Aeterni patris* (1879) and *Lumen ecclesiae* (1974), 8.

25. On the importance of political form in mediating man’s relation to God, see Pierre Manent, *Metamorphoses of the City: On the Western Dynamic* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013), 304–27. I am grateful to Mark Shiffman for this reference.

26. Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D.C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), 17, 30, 35, 44, and 57.

27. If we read the *filioque* as analogous to mediation in the way we are presenting it, it allows us to affirm the Catholic position without threat to the truth the Orthodox seek to protect, namely, the “monarchy” of the Father.

which is to say as the perfect sharing of divinity with each other in a single absolute Gift. To reflect on what all this means will be our next step.

II.

We have described mediation as expressing the “logic” of Christianity, but, at least until one begins to unfold more concretely what is meant by this, as we are attempting to do, the proposal that this notion expresses the heart of Christianity is bound to seem strange, and perhaps a bit abstract. One would perhaps sooner have expected to hear that “love” is the heart of Christianity: after all, it is not the word “mediation” but the word “love” that has a special place in Scripture, above all in the New Testament. Indeed, what is distinctive about Christianity is a recognition that God is not only one who loves, perhaps most perfectly as the one who has brought the world and everything in it into being and now exercises a special providential care for it. Such care is arguably part of every traditional religion in some way, even if the notion chafes against the philosophical insight that the absolutely transcendent First Cause of the universe cannot be affected by anything other within that cosmos, by all the vagaries of time and history—so that it ultimately makes no sense to pray to God and request his assistance or generosity.²⁸ According to Christian revelation, God not only *loves*, but God *is* love (ὁ θεὸς ἀγάπη ἐστίν; *Deus caritas est*²⁹); love is, so to speak, the very essence of God.

Given our exposition thus far, this raises the question whether there is a connection between love and mediation. When we reflect on the matter, it becomes evident that they are ultimately the same, or at least that mediation is love expressed as it were in more technical, philosophical terms. To see the connection first of all requires that we spell out more clearly precisely

28. This was especially a danger in the “classical philosophical spirit” of the Hellenistic period in late antiquity. One sees it, for example, in the objections raised against Christianity by Celsus, to which Origen responded in his classic work *Contra Celsum* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

29. See Benedict XVI’s 2005 encyclical of this name for a more complete elaboration of the novelty of this revelation.

what “mediation” means. We indicated above that “to mediate” is “to convey” or “to communicate.” In this respect, at least one aspect of the connection between love and mediation becomes evident: love is generous, and it is the nature of generosity to give—above all, to give oneself, which is another way of saying to communicate oneself. As the classical axiom formulates it, *bonum est diffusivum sui* (the good is self-diffusive). But the word “mediation” contains more than simply “communication”; the notion is more comprehensive. It refers not just to the transition from one location to another—in communication, some intelligible content is moved from point A to point B—but while so doing it sets into relief at the same time the medium through which the passage occurs, granting that medium an abiding significance for what is communicated beyond the mere instrumental significance of providing an indifferent means. To speak of mediation in a positive sense is not just to say that something moves from A to B, but to say that it does so *through* C in such a way that it is in some respect transformed by C, or in any event that C remains abidingly meaningful for what is thus communicated. C mediates the communication from A to B such that this communication is not intelligible without it, or at least not intelligible in the same way.

This puts the matter quite abstractly, of course, but it is not difficult to illustrate it concretely by considering one of the examples we just presented. We said that the grace of redemption is mediated through the sacraments. The point in this case would be that this mediation by the sacraments is not incidental to the grace communicated; it is not something wholly dispensable and altogether irrelevant to the meaning of grace. It is not possible in the present context to elaborate a full sacramental theology, but we can at least make an observation about how this mediation affects the meaning of grace: sacramental mediation reveals that grace, and the redemption it conveys, is not just a subjective conviction or feeling; it is not just a spiritual or mystical state, nor is it just a legal status. Instead, the new relation to God given in grace is an objective and substantial reality, which includes the body in its physical nature just as much as the interior depths of the soul. What mediation means in this particular example will be analogously different from what it means in other cases—indeed, it will be unique in some respect in every instance, which

is what the principle of analogy implies—but the example makes manifest something that will be true in every case, namely, that mediation implies a transformation in some respect of what is mediated. We might say that mediation, at some level and in some respect, which will be analogously different in every case, entails an *enrichment*. This brings to the fore a new dimension in the connection between mediation and love. Generosity already implies a positive relation to what is other: in generosity, one shares one's wealth, and thereby enriches the other. But mediation deepens this enrichment, and so we might say it deepens the generosity. Mediation implies not just the enrichment of the other as recipient of the gift, but an enrichment of the gift itself, and therefore of the giver himself, to the extent that he is involved in the gift, to the extent that, in giving the gift, he is also giving himself: *bonum est diffusivum sui*. In other words, in mediation, one not only enriches the other, but one allows oneself to be enriched *by* the other. This is an affirmation of the other of a whole new order: it is an affirmation of the significance, the “meaningfulness,” of the other, a recognition that the other is good, not just because of my gift to him (which would be an oppressive sort of generosity, allowing only a unilateral relation), but because he is also a gift in some sense to me. I not only affirm my goodness to and for him, but recognize his own goodness, which is intrinsic to him and not a mere function of my generosity. It is also a goodness *for me*. This deepened generosity is thus a genuinely reciprocal relation. Mediation allows the other to make a contribution, so to speak, to “add something” to the relation.

The mysterious sixth-century writer, presumably a Syrian monk, who wrote under the name Dionysius the Areopagite, is especially interesting in relation to this point insofar as his work represents an appropriation of the classical Greek tradition, which recognized the centrality of the good (i.e., God), as pure generosity—the axiom *bonum est diffusivum sui* is in fact a Latin translation of a passage from Dionysius, cited, for example, by Aquinas³⁰—specifically within the transformative context of Christian revelation.³¹ At what is arguably the climax of his

30. For example, Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra Gentiles* 1.37.5.

31. There has been controversy for centuries over whether Dionysius appropriates pagan thought into Christianity or instead appropriates Christianity

principal work, *The Divine Names*, in which Dionysius presents the highest name of God, namely, “the Good,”³² he introduces the name “love,” eros, as an elaboration of the meaning of goodness. This is to say that love is not simply a new name, added in juxtaposition to previous ones, but unfolds the inner meaning of goodness, deepening that meaning by showing forth what might not be so immediately obvious on the surface. It is a bold move, not only because the philosophical tradition rejected the possibility of attributing eros to God,³³ but because eros is not evidently part of the Christian tradition, presumably because it seemed to be inseparable from a kind of sensuality unbecoming to God.³⁴ But Dionysius justifies it, first by appealing in fact to Scripture and to the earliest Church Fathers,³⁵ but then also by offering a reason for it: if we understand eros more basically in a spiritual rather than in a sensual sense, he says, we discover that in a certain respect at least it is “more divine” (θειότερον) than even agape as a name for God, because eros brings out the ecstatic, the self-transcending, and so the “other-affirming” character of love more directly than agape.³⁶ In light of the point we made

into pagan thought, thus compromising its novelty and divine origin. We cannot enter into a discussion of this controversy, or attempt finally to resolve it, of course, but the argument we are presenting is meant to show one clear way in which Dionysius *transforms* pagan thought.

32. He justifies this with a reference to the “Sacred Writers,” i.e., to Scripture (*The Divine Names* [= DN] 4.1), having insisted that one cannot approach God except *through* his self-revelation in the Bible.

33. Plato, *Symposium* 201e–202e. Interestingly, Plato presents love precisely as a *mediator* (μεταξύ). Aristotle presented God as supremely *loved* (*eraston*), not as a lover (*Metaphysics* 12.7.1072a25–27). In a text that stands out as extraordinary when read in the context of the classical tradition, Plotinus anticipates Dionysius, writing that there is *something like love* in God (and *as God*) interpreted as “the Good” (*Ennead* 6.8.15).

34. Note that this is different from the more common objection to eros (which we find, for example, in C. S. Lewis’s *The Four Loves*), which criticizes eros as essentially *selfish* rather than *other-centered*, as agape is. This is arguably a modern reinterpretation of the problem, which appears to have its ultimate roots in the disappearance of a participatory metaphysics.

35. See Dionysius, *DN* 4.11, 4.12.

36. We do not mean to deny that agape signifies love in an “other-affirming” sense, but only that, if it is set in opposition to eros, that aspect tends to undermine itself.

above, we might say that agape, especially if it is interpreted in opposition to eros,³⁷ would tend to be understood reductively in the first sense of generosity described above, namely, the unilateral relation in which the other is affirmed solely as the recipient of goodness. With eros, as Dionysius interprets it (not in opposition to agape, but as another word for love that brings out a unique dimension of that inexhaustible mystery),³⁸ the affirmation of the other is radicalized, so that the lover moves himself in giving, not arbitrarily as it were, for no reason at all, but *because he is moved by the beloved*. Eros thus implies a reciprocity. To identify goodness and eros, as Dionysius does, means that what is highest is not just an object of love, “the good,” but is himself a lover, and indeed that what is loved is to be a lover too in response. There is thus in this a more complete communication of goodness.

This development of goodness as eros, incidentally, already marks the Christian difference: God does not simply draw creation to himself as transcendent First Cause, the origin and end of all things, but enters *also into the middle*, so to speak, and comes in pursuit of his creatures.³⁹ The divine name “eros” thus brings to light the mediation at the very heart of God. Rather than calling God simply “the Good,” in what we might view as a static and lifeless way, Dionysius proclaims that “the Divine Eros is nothing else than a Good

37. The classic, and extremely influential, text in which the two are set in stark opposition is Anders Nygren, *Agape and Eros* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953). For a critique of Nygren, see Josef Pieper, *Faith, Hope, Love* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997); and D.C. Schindler, “The Redemption of Eros: Philosophical Reflections on Benedict XVI’s First Encyclical,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 33, no. 3 (Fall 2006): 375–99.

38. Dionysius suggests that the two words indicate the same thing under a different aspect, like the words “Fatherland” and “Motherland” (see *DN* 4.11). Augustine makes a similar case for *amor* in *The City of God* 14.7. Aquinas explains that “charity denotes . . . a certain perfection of love [*amor*], insofar as that which is loved is held to be of great price [*carus*], as the word itself implies” (*Summa theologiae* I-II, q. 26, a. 3). He also defends Dionysius’s statement that *amor* is in a certain sense more “Godlike” than *dilectio*, though he puts the matter in different terms than Dionysius does (see *ibid.*, I-II, q. 26, a. 3 ad 4).

39. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, “Movement toward God,” in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 3: *Creator Spirit* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1993), 15–55. This is also the deepest implication of Augustine’s transformation of Neoplatonism. See Augustine, *Confessions* 7.9.

Eros towards the Good for the mere sake of the Good.”⁴⁰ This “dynamic movement” is of course not a temporal change, but nor is it a temporal stasis. Instead, it is a supratemporal fullness of life, an eternal “ever more.”⁴¹ This mediation—from the good *through* the good *to* the good—brings out the depths of the meaning of love, or we could say that this love brings out the depths of the meaning of mediation. It presents the most radical sense of goodness possible: God, precisely *as* perfect goodness, does not wish to be good only in himself, so to speak, but wishes to have his (own) perfect goodness only *in* and *with* his other.

This is the heart of the matter. It is of course ultimately only in the doctrine of the Trinity that we can carry the full truth of the matter to its (inexhaustible) end. The Trinity is a doctrine to which Dionysius himself only points as the overgreat mystery that sets the horizon for his reflections,⁴² but it is reflected in the “economic” mysteries of creation and redemption. After highlighting the ecstatic character of love whereby the lover exceeds himself, moves out beyond himself, in the vision of the beautiful goodness of the beloved, Dionysius describes God’s relation to creation thus:

And we must dare to affirm (for it is the truth) that the Creator of the Universe Himself, in His Beautiful and Good Eros towards the Universe, is through the excessive Eros of his Goodness, transported outside of Himself in His providential activities towards all things that have been, and is touched by the sweet spell of Goodness, Agape and Eros, and so is drawn from His transcendent throne above all things, to dwell within the heart of all things, through a Super-Essential and ecstatic power whereby He yet stays within Himself.⁴³

40. Dionysius, *The Divine Names and the Mystical Theology*, trans. C. E. Rolt (London: The Macmillan Company, 1920), 4.10 (102), translation slightly modified. Hereafter, citations referring to this translation will include pagination in parentheses.

41. See Hanspeter Heinz, *Der Gott des Je-Mehr: Der christologische Ansatz Hans Urs von Balthasars* (Bern: Herbert Lang, 1975).

42. Dionysius, *DN* 1.1 (51), 1.4 (56), 2.4 (69), and 2.5 (71).

43. Dionysius, *DN* 4.13 (100; translation slightly modified).

God is, as it were, brought outside of himself by goodness, which is ultimately his own but is mysteriously at the same time the goodness of the world he created, a goodness so radiantly good it moves even God. This goodness, again, is indeed *his* goodness, but we can say that he (freely) wishes to have his goodness, to be perfectly good, *only in and through* the mediation of his other, the world that is his creation. This is why he can be said to remain perfectly in himself even in relating generously to what is other than himself, or, as Robert Sokolowski formulates what he calls “the Christian distinction,” the world is truly other than God, but God plus the world is not greater than God alone.⁴⁴ This paradox makes sense only in the light of love interpreted as mediation in the way we described: God wishes *to be* goodness itself only in and through his other.

This mystery receives its most dramatic expression in the (rare) reference Dionysius makes in *The Divine Names* to the order of redemption, specifically to the event of the Incarnation, which is of course God’s most radical gift of himself to the world. The most extraordinary moment of this event takes place in the hidden depths of Mary’s womb. Dionysius describes this moment as follows:

And since that Supra-Divine Being has in loving kindness [ὑπὲρ φιλανθρωπίας] come down from thence unto the Natural Estate, and truly took substance and assumed the name of Man (we must speak with reverence of those things which we utter beyond human thought and language), even in this act He possesses His Supernatural and Super-Essential Existence—not only in that He has without change or confusion of Attributes shared in our human lot while remaining unaffected by that unutterable Self-Emptying as regards the fullness of His Godhead, but also because (most wonderful of all wonders!) he passed in His Supernatural and Super-Essential state through conditions of Nature and Being, and *receiving from us all things that are ours*, exalted them far above us.⁴⁵

44. Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason: Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 32–34.

45. Dionysius, *DN* 2.10 (78; translation slightly modified; emphasis added). Note that he receives precisely what he most originally gave, and that this reception is the most glorious gift of our nature to us.

Out of love of man (“philanthropy”), God decides to possess his absolute transcendence of nature and being, not over against the world, but only *in* and *through* the conditions of nature, and far from compromising his transcendence, this glorifies that transcendence immeasurably, just as it does the natural condition he assumes. The meaning of God’s love, we might say, is inconceivably enriched through this mediation, not because it is conditioned by that mediation as something imposed on him in the form of a constraint, but because he himself gives the gift of mediation. But what Dionysius calls the “most wonderful of all wonders,” or more literally the “novelty of all novelties” (τὸ πάντων καινῶν καινότητων), is that he reveals his inexhaustible wealth here by placing himself in poverty, in a position of *receptivity*, with respect to the world. He is the creator of human nature. But instead of *giving himself* the nature of which he is the author—which we might say would ultimately contradict the ethos of the Incarnation and so the “logic” of Christianity—he *receives it from his creature*. Indeed, he receives not only the matter of flesh, and not only human nature, but in a certain respect he receives the whole world from his creatures. Indeed, more than that—wonder of all wonders!—*he receives his very Godhead from his mother, who is for that reason called, not just the “Christotokos,” but the Theotokos*. The Son of God does not deem his Godhead something to be grasped at, but empties himself, taking the form of a slave; he gives himself most radically to the world by freely choosing to be God only in and through the mediation of his creation.⁴⁶

III.

The distinguishing mark of Christianity is mediation, which we have interpreted to mean that, whatever is most precious or most

46. See the profound insights on this score in the work of Paolo Prospero: “‘Fixed End of the Eternal Plan’: Rereading Cabasilas’s ‘Homily on the Annunciation,’” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 207–36; “Believing and Seeing,” *Theological Studies* 78, no. 4 (December 2017): 905–29. In this latter article, Prospero argues that, in faith, one possesses vision *only through* the mediation of the other; the immediacy of vision is nevertheless mediated.

proper to oneself, one holds precisely in the form of having received it from or through another. One's relationship to God is not something possessed and enjoyed (merely) immediately, over against others, but is rather possessed *immediately only in and through the mediation* of the sacraments, through the mediation of the priest, through the mediation of Mary and the Church, and ultimately through the mediation of Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh. Faith, which is what is most precious to the believer, is something essentially received from others and through what is other. To speak of mediation in this way is to speak of love and of gift as the ultimate meaning of reality.

The danger of identifying a "distinguishing mark of Christianity," to which we alluded at the outset, is that it threatens to subordinate God to a universal principle in the sense that God becomes little more than the best representative of an idea that transcends him and all other things.⁴⁷ Arguably this threat is realized in Hegel, who is otherwise no doubt the thinker in our tradition with the deepest insight into mediation.⁴⁸ It is illuminating to consider the difference between what we have been unfolding here and Hegel's own interpretation; a brief glance at the difference will provide a fitting conclusion to our own reflections.

As is well known, Hegel sought to integrate the self and the other in a nonreductive way by means of the concept of mediation. But, to put a rich and complex philosophy in a nutshell, for Hegel mediation is ultimately *self*-mediation: the self mediates itself through the other. Though this inclusion of the other in the meaning of the self opens up an extraordinary insight into logic, being, knowing, history, and culture, we propose that the reduction of mediation to the form of self-mediation represents a fundamental perversion, which changes the meaning of the whole.

47. Here is the essence, boiled down to its logical core, of what is called "ontotheology." For a basic presentation of the theme, see Iain Thomson, "Ontotheology? Understanding Heidegger's *Destruktion* of Metaphysics," *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 8, no. 3 (2000): 297–327.

48. Hegel's greatest achievement is perhaps his recognition that the Christian revelation of the Trinity has profound philosophical implications that bear on the meaning of *everything*, from politics, to art, to logic. His consequential error however is to think that it *only* has these implications, that its meaning is exhaustively philosophical.

It is ultimately *because* of his reduction of mediation, which makes the other always in some sense a function of the self, that Hegel needs finally to overcome the *essentially abiding* otherness of religion and its eternal mystery and suck out, so to speak, the essential philosophical content from the Christian revelation of the Trinity in the Incarnation.⁴⁹ It is also the very same reduction that notoriously leads Hegel finally to overcome philosophy as the love of wisdom in order to be left with pure wisdom, or in other words “Absolute Knowing.”⁵⁰ In contrast to this elimination of generosity, we affirm abiding otherness as part of the very point of mediation, which finally allows precisely love to be the only absolute. In Christian mediation, which conveys an immediate relation without leaving the mediation behind, there is no impatient movement beyond the love of wisdom but an embrace of wisdom only in the form of love.

In one of his aphorisms, Balthasar asks, “Which of the two has loved more deeply: Hegel, the great matchmaker, who personified the impatience for marrying off and uniting; or Kierkegaard, who embodied the zealous patience for keeping the parties apart to the end, only to make us fall to our knees the more definitively?”⁵¹ The proper response is ultimately *both*, because love includes both: a profound *intimacy*, and therefore immediacy, but which occurs only in and through the mediation of the abiding and abidingly other. The consummation of love does not eliminate mystery, but allows an ever more profound entry into it.

49. For a more sustained critique, see William Desmond, *Hegel's God: A Counterfeit Double?* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2003); cf. my *The Perfection of Freedom: Schiller, Schelling, and Hegel between the Ancients and the Moderns* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2012), 357–72. Desmond is no doubt the contemporary philosopher who has reflected most profoundly on the notion of mediation, though he interprets the notion—somewhat differently (but certainly in a complementary way) than we do here—as “the between.” See, for example, his *Being and the Between* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995). For other contemporary thinkers of mediation in philosophy, see Emmanuel Tourpe, “Autant de manifestation, autant de médiation: Pour une phénoménologie de Dieu,” *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 76, no. 2–3 (2020): 1053–72.

50. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 3.

51. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Grain of Wheat: Aphorisms* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 11–12.

Mediation, interpreted as love, reveals itself to be not simply a concept, a universal principle or philosophical idea, which Christianity then exemplifies, but the distinguishing mark of Christianity first of all because it is an actual reality, a deed carried out in history. Indeed, in Christianity, mediation is ultimately first a person: the Logos who mediates between man and God. The word “mediation” thus designates the event of communication itself, which is to say the generous gift of self, and Christian mediation is this original gift of God, who gives himself to man precisely by receiving man into himself. And, secondly, because mediation is not a mere extrinsically instrumental and disposable *means*, but enters intrinsically into the act, what is mediated in the event of communication is just that, namely, mediation itself. In this mediation, the medium truly is the message: God reveals himself as love, and he does so precisely by giving himself in love, and thus enabling those he loves to love him and each other in turn: “In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us” (1 Jn 4:10). For this reason, just as goodness is at the same time eros, God’s gift is at the same time a task: become what you have received; “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12). □

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