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Incarnate Wisdom and the Immediacy of Christ's Salvific Knowledge

Recollect that our Blessed Lord
was in this respect different from us,
that, though He was perfect man, yet there was a power
in Him greater than His soul,
which ruled His soul, for He was God.

Cardinal Newman, *Discourse XVI*,
"Mental Sufferings of Our Lord in His Passion"

1.1 Some Theological Principles

When we speak about the immediacy of Christ's salvific knowledge, we consider that knowledge which he possesses as an individual human knower. As a human knowing subject, Christ enjoys our intellectual capacities—an integral part of his human nature. He can also actualize those capacities. But the incarnate Wisdom of God speaks truths, and therefore requires knowledge, which surpass the ordinary abilities of human reason to lay hold of. Moreover, in order for Christ to act upon these divine truths and this knowledge of salvation, he must receive them in a properly human way, that is, these truths must be cognitively humanized. Of course, the exchange of predicates (*communicatio idiomatum*) allows the theologian to affirm that incarnate Wisdom, insofar as Christ shares in the divine nature, possesses the plenitude of God's knowledge. In itself, however, this ancient christological principle falls short of accounting for that specifically salvific knowledge which enables Christ to fulfill his mission as one who reveals the Father (cf. Jn 5:43).

Christ's human knowledge raises different difficulties for today's theologian than it did for our medieval forbearers. Like the Letter to the Hebrews, the scholastics clearly understood and

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readily presented Christ as one charged with a salvific mission (cf. Heb 2:10). Since they accepted Christ as the unique Teacher about God for all men and women, the medievals rather found it difficult to accept Christ's need for instruction and acquired knowledge.¹ Contemporary theology, on the other hand, takes Christ's human experiences for granted, and wonders whether any human knower, including the "one full of grace and truth," could really be said to possess beatific knowledge. Good theology will take note of these theological prejudices and even inquire about their anthropological and cultural suppositions.

Christ's created knowledge depends upon his holiness. By the created grace of Christ, we signify his substantial holiness as a man "like us in all things but sin." Holiness, of course, remains a godly attribute; it belongs to man only by a certain participation in the divine nature. On the contrary, to know designates a properly human capacity. Each person must develop or perfect this capacity through the acquisition of knowledge. It is true, there does exist a properly supernatural mode of knowing which terminates in vision (*visio*), but this sort of knowledge integrates human knowledge even as it collapses all knowledge gained through experience.

As part of its general view of Christ's natural knowledge during his earthly life, Thomism maintains four basic assumptions concerning Christ's salvific mission and what Christ knew. First, since human knowledge forms the basis or principle for all other human activity, it is impossible to deny that Christ possessed proper human knowledge. If Christ did not humanly know, he could perform no other human activity. For example, he would not have been able to pray, to satisfy for our sins, to merit, or to offer himself as a sacrifice. But these human actions of Christ remain indispensable for our salvation; indeed they illustrate Christ's salvific knowledge in action.

¹ cf. *Summa theologiae* III q. 12, a. 3.

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Secondly, human knowing unfolds according to its own dynamics. According to the Thomist view, the acquisition of knowledge requires a movement from a state of potentiality to a state of actualization. In other terms, ratiocination involves a reduction from potency to act. As a result, we can understand that in his early writings,² Aquinas hesitated in conceding such knowledge in Christ. Why? Because one acquires experimental knowledge gradually. For Christ to acquire such knowledge appears to contravene the Chalcedonian principle of perfection, i.e., everything which Christ possesses he possesses in the most eminent or perfect way—"perfectus in humanitate."

Thirdly, the importance which experimental knowledge holds in Aquinas's developed thought, for example in the *Summa theologiae*, remains difficult to evaluate.³ Aquinas it is true affirms that Christ did possess acquired knowledge. But it seems that the christological principle of integrity or perfection compels him to accept this conclusion. Even so, how can the theologian measure the cash value of such knowledge in light of Christ's other, higher forms of cognitive activity, especially his beatific knowledge.

Fourthly, perfection in knowledge is not a mark of human flourishing. Since we can never exhaust our capacity to learn, knowledge in the human person implies an indefinite progression. Even very bright people require instruction in those matters which they cannot learn by themselves. Bad instruction or the lack of instruction to be sure remains something undesirable for the human person. But ignorance is not sin, unless it is ignorance about God. And ignorance does not always entail positive error; in the same way, nescience does not amount to falsity.

² For example, see *In Sent.* III d. 14.

³ See *Summa theologiae* III q. 9, a. 4; q. 12, a. 2.

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1.2 Christ's Unique Condition

In order to theorize about Christ's knowledge or lack of it, one should first distinguish the *prima facie* impression given by certain New Testament texts from that which the Scriptures in fact teach concerning Christ's salvific knowledge. Only the latter constitutes a starting-point for theological development. The theological tradition, moreover, remains heavily weighted against affirming ignorance in Christ as man. The pedagogical goals of the Fathers can help us appreciate what sometimes seems like unsatisfactory explanations of those biblical texts which affirm outright that Jesus did not know something. Speaking of Mark 14: 32, where Jesus announces that he knows not "of that day or that hour," St Ambrose writes: "He knew the hour, but he knew the hour for himself, not for me."⁴ In any event, the patristic arguments, even when strained, do demonstrate a prolonged reflection on this topic.⁵

Omniscience, as I have said, does not equal a human perfection. Even Aquinas makes a point of saying that the human soul of Christ does not grasp ("comprehendit") perfectly the divine essence.⁶ As a result, Christ did not know about our future or past sins. For this knowledge appertains only to God. However, since his redemptive act requires that Christ know about personal sins, we must conclude that this knowledge became cognitively humanized in Christ. Gregory the

⁴ *In Lucam VIII, 36 PL 15, col. 1866 C.*

⁵ See Christoph von Schönborn, O.P., "La conscience du Christ. Approches historico-théologiques," *Esprit et Vie* 9 Février 1989, pp. 81-87.

⁶ See *Summa theologiae* IIIa q. 10, a. 1, ad 2. Accordingly, the phrase "simul comprehensor et viator" does not mean that Christ's human mind encompassed God.

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Great aptly summarizes the unique circumstances which describe Christ's knowledge: "Quod ergo *in ipsa (natura humana) novit, non ex ipsa novit.*"⁷

Faith remains an imperfect way of acquiring divine truth. For theological faith arises from the assent of the will, based on motives extrinsic to the growth of human knowledge. If Jesus only knows by faith, then we must affirm that Christ's human knowledge shares in the obscurity and darkness which characterizes our own grasp of divine truth. Moreover, the sacred scriptures remain particularly subdued concerning Christ's faith. Vision, on the other hand, designates a perfect and unmediated grasp of the truth.⁸ Even though a freely-bestowed grace, the human subject still circumscribes beatific knowledge. In other terms, the sacred humanity of Christ limits beatific knowledge.⁹ Arguing that Christ's actual vision only embraced knowledge related to our salvation, both Aquinas and Bonaventure distinguished Christ's *cognitio actualis* or *scientia visionis* from the beatific vision simply speaking.¹⁰

1.3 The Supernatural Knowledge of Jesus on Earth

⁷ See his *Epistola* 39 (PL 77, col. 1097 BC).

⁸ See *Quaestiones disputate de veritate* q. 20, a. 4, ad 7; see also q. 8, aa. 1,3,4; q. 10, a. 11; *Compendium theologiae* I c. 105; *Quaestiones de quodlibet* 10, a. 17.

⁹ Edouard-Henri Weber, *Le Christ selon saint Thomas d'Aquin* (Paris, 1988), pp. 165-169 speaks about an eschatological knowledge of God and his essence in Christ. See his chapter on "L'activité intellectuelle chez le Christ," pp. 199-227 for an interesting and different analysis of texts from Aquinas on this topic.

¹⁰ Bonaventure distinguishes Christ's larger *cognitio habitualis* from his *cognitio actualis* (cf. *In Sent* III d. 14, q. 1, sol. 5) and Aquinas limits the *scientia visionis* to all that which pertains to the history of salvation (cf. *Summa theologiae* III q. 10, a. 2).

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The texts of Aquinas frequently speak about Christ as God's incarnate Wisdom. Consider the prologue to the *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum* where Aquinas explains the importance of incarnate Wisdom for both theology and salvation.¹¹ Christ's redemptive mission clearly includes a revelatory objective. Since that which God reveals remains beyond human imaginings, experimental knowledge cannot adequately accomplish the mediation of divine truth. Although one can imagine other mediations of divine truth, such as prophetic knowledge, the incarnation of divine Wisdom points to a more ultimate source: the beatific vision.

We should not confuse Aquinas's discussion about Christ's human knowledge with the modern issue of the quest for the historical Jesus. Why? Christ's knowledge reveals the grace of Christ. The theologian should not inquire: "What did the man Christ know?" Aquinas analyzes what that particular created intellect which always remains personally united to the divine Word knows. A proper theology of Christ's beatific vision will observe the proposal's modest dimensions. At the same time, theological reflection must protect Christ's humanity as a knowing subject from monophysitic intrusions. The *gratia unionis*, the fact that Jesus remains personally united to the Godhead, controls theological reflection on the human knowledge of Christ.

If we affirm that Christ possessed the beatific vision during his earthly life, we do not therefore maintain that the beatific vision directly influenced his daily life. The beatific vision remains paralyzing, and no creature can act as a result of it. Still, beatific knowledge can harmonize with human life in a way that infused knowledge, which requires capacities alien to the human mind, does not. At the same time, since it does not involve images, beatific knowledge transcends the operations of human knowing. It does not rely on *species* or created images. Aquinas seizes this

¹¹ For further information, see D.J. O'Connor, "The Concept of 'Mystery' in Aquinas' Exegesis," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 36 (1969), pp. 183-210.

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axiom as a way to explain the compatibility of beatific knowledge and experimental knowledge. The "mind had also to be fulfilled through its dealings with the imagination," he says.¹² To say that beatific knowledge remains compatible with human knowing, however, does not immediately resolve Christ's status as both wayfarer and beholder—"simul viator et comprehensor."

The beatific vision is incompatible with ignorance (i.e., nescience). For God lacks nothing. As Aquinas indicates, the traditional patristic solution invoked Christ's will in order to explain how Christ stepped outside of the effects of the beatific vision.¹³ In brief, Christ simply choose those times when he no longer required his beatific knowledge. Some critics observe the artificial character of this explanation. However, we need not construe this as portraying an unreal Christ exercising his divine will at this time or that. Rather we should consider this explanation as part of the logic of the incarnation. Within that logic, God himself choose that non-communication occur at particular moments in Christ's life.

Still, the non-communication could not result in a total blackout. Christ's human knowledge and his whole life remains marked by the fact that he himself is the incarnate Wisdom of God. The Johannine Gospel, for instance, repeatedly insists that Jesus comes to reveal the truth about God. But Christ reveals divine truths in a human way; and this establishes the horizon for his earthly ministry. According to the divine plan, everything depends on Christ's teaching; he incarnates the *sacra doctrina*. The charism of inspiration, theological reasoning, ecclesiastical teaching continually depend on Christ who remains the unique source of a universal outpouring of doctrine.

¹² See *Summa theologiae* IIIa q. 9, a. 4, ad 2.

¹³ For example, see *Summa theologiae* III q. 14, a. 1 ad 2.

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In commenting upon the first article of the *Summa theologiae*, Cardinal Cajetan faithfully describes the universal scope of the *sacra doctrina* of which Aquinas speaks by terming it "omnis cognitio a deo revelata."¹⁴ It is interesting, however, to note that this important perspective of Aquinas's thought rarely becomes a direct theme of his theological reflection.¹⁵ The explanatory framework of this horizon remains the doctrine of participation (formal continuity, even in diverse modalities) combined with the causality of *doctrina* as a sort of *motio*.

The best illustration of this participative share in a single reality remains that "doctrina" which stands at the summit of the human vocation, namely, the beatific vision. Here the formal influence of the divine Essence itself combines with what the tradition calls the *lumen gloriae* so that the higher "doctrina" can redound to the lower. One might argue that this central theme of Aquinas's theological anthropology establishes the guiding rule for his understanding of how *doctrina* works. From God and the blessed to the angels to the prophets to Christ and his apostles to the *prelati* and teachers and preachers of the Church, Aquinas claims a formal community in those who are taught, the *docta*, and one universal causal *ordo* of principal to instrumental/ministerial teachers. Of course, Christ himself stands at the center of this entire process; it is he who teaches the angels.

When he discusses Christ's knowledge, Aquinas offers some suggestions about the anthropology which undergirds this.¹⁶ Since no human capacity can draw directly upon the beatific vision for information, Aquinas rules out that Christ's beatific knowledge simply augments his human knowledge. The beatific vision does not provide a sort of objective amplification. In order

¹⁴ Cajetan's commentary may be found in the Leonine edition of the *Summa*, *In Iam* q. 1, a. 1.

¹⁵ Still, it does form the theme of Aquinas's *principium* or inaugural address (in *Opuscula Theologica* I, pp. 441ff.); cf. also *ST* II-II q. 2, a. 6; q. 2, a. 3; *In Ioann.* VI, 5; *In Matt.* XXIII, 1.

¹⁶ See *Summa theologiae* III q. 9, a. 3, ad 2.

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to take account of this fact, Jacques Maritain and others introduced the notion of a "supraconsciousness." The beatific vision forms a sort of umbrella or shell over the human knowing powers. Christ benefits from the beatific vision as from a hidden source of light which "illumines" rather than informs. In the Dionysian account of angelic knowledge, the higher angels illumine the lower angels by the sheer power of their intelligences. In this construal, Christ had no need of theological faith. He knew the mysteries of God by the light coming from the beatific vision itself. This amounted to a true, subjective communication, even if it does not entail an objective one, i.e., the grasp of discreet truths.

This same enlightenment obviously suggests parallels with the experiences of the mystics which we call infused contemplation. The illumination of his created intellect by the beatific vision would result in an elevated knowledge, but one which remained a "natural" mode of knowing. As a corollary, we can hold that Christ truly learned in a human manner what he himself taught as God. Accordingly, Mary and Joseph really taught Jesus; they were true instruments of his human learning. In brief, Christ's beatific knowledge does not force us to repudiate the Gospel narratives.

This view supposes the unity of Christ's personhood. On the assumption that theological schizophrenia is inappropriate, we can conclude there does exist some kind of communication between Christ's beatific knowledge and his human knowing. And the communication must occur in the single subject who is the Logos/Son. This brings us to appreciate Charles Péguy's exclamation: "Quand on pense, mon Dieu, quand on pense que cela n'est arrivé qu'une fois."

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