What Are Theologians Saying About Christology?

Word Incarnate

By Robert P. Imbelli

Pressed to choose but one New Testament verse to recapitulate the Good News, the Gospel within the Gospel, one might opt for the climax of the Prologue of St. John (1:14):

And the Word became flesh
and made his dwelling among
us, and we saw his glory, the
glory of the Father's only Son,
full of grace and truth.

The Word, the eternal Son of the Father, who precedes and “pre-contains” all creation, became part of created reality, entered into human history, lived a complete human life, became one of us—even unto death.

So stupendous is this mystery that already in the first century some demurred. Surely it was unseemly for the divine to enter into the muck of humanity, confined in a body, subject to the indignities and torments to which flesh is heir. So began the perennial Gnostic revulsion against the flesh, and especially against the flesh-taking of the Holy, Immortal One.

The First Letter of John stands at the origin of the ecclesial tradition of discernment of spirits. It reiterates with insistence: “Beloved, do not trust every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they belong to God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. This is how you can know the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Messiah has come in the flesh belongs to God” (1 Jn 4:1-2).

The incarnation of the Word is not adventitious to God’s saving action; it is the very heart of salvation.

The Letter to the Hebrews sealed the canonical New Testament’s incarnational conviction. “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to God who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him” (Heb 5:7-9).

Almost 400 years later, the great Christological Council of Chalcedon articulates, in the language of its culture and time, this core discernment and persuasion of the New Testament. Jesus the Christ is “perfect [Greek teleion] in divinity, perfect in humanity, truly God and truly human, of a rational soul and body.” In a famous formulation the council confesses the one Lord Jesus Christ “in two natures with no confusion, no change, no division, no separation...the property of both natures is preserved and comes together into a single person and a single subsistent being.” Here the mystery of the Incarnation is neither explained nor reduced, but confessed and celebrated. Chalcedon enunciates the “deep grammar” that governs the church’s preaching, catechesis and theological reflection.

Fast-forward 1,500 years. As part of the commemoration of the anniversary of Chalcedon, Karl Rahner, S.J., wrote an essay that stands at the origin of renewed Christological reflection in the Catholic tradition. The essay, in revised form, appears in the first volume of his Theological Investigations under the title “Current Problems in Christology.” In the context of the Catholic theological world of the 1950s, these sentences rang like a manifesto:
We shall never cease to return to this formula [of Chalcedon], because whenever it is necessary to say briefly what it is that we encounter in the ineffable truth which is our salvation, we shall always have recourse to its modest, sober clarity. But we shall only really have recourse to it (and this is not at all the same thing as simply repeating it), if it is not only our end but also our beginning.

Rahner lamented that there was far too much mere repetition of creedal formulae, rather than genuine appropriation of the council’s insight. Moreover, he also judged that some of what was said in standard textbooks and in popular preaching was, often inadvertently, not consonant with Chalcedon’s measured doctrine. In particular, Rahner discerned a “crypto-monophysitism” that emphasized the divinity of Christ to the virtual exclusion of his full humanity.

In retrospect, this article (published in German in 1954 and in English in 1961) anticipated the direction of much of post-Vatican II Christological reflection by Catholic theologians. It stressed the need to do full justice to the humanity of Jesus, to return anew to the canonical range of New Testament witness rather than relying, almost exclusively, on the Gospel of John. It advocated complementing a “Christology from above” with a “Christology from below,” one that takes with utmost seriousness “the human experience of Jesus.”

Rahner already anticipated that this commitment would entail not only a focus on the human nature of the Word in some abstract, timeless fashion, but a consideration of the “flesh-taking” in its concrete historical, religious and social setting. This commitment, supported and promoted by the experience and teaching of Vatican II, led to a profusion of works in Christology: from Hans Küng to Edward Schillebeeckx, from Hans Urs von Balthasar to Walter Kasper, from Jon Sobrino to Elizabeth Johnson. Though the works of these authors certainly differ among themselves, all would echo Rahner’s claim that Chalcedon marks not only an end, but also a beginning of the church’s never-ending reflection on the mystery of its Lord.

In the present situation of Catholic theology, at least in its university setting, I think few would contend, as Rahner did 50 years ago, that there flows “an undercurrent of monophysitism.” The acknowledgement of the humanity of Jesus, of his immersion in the Jewish religious-cultural world of his time, has become an indisputable given (see Elizabeth Johnson, Consider Jesus; N. T. Wright, Jesus and the Victory of God; Gerald O’Collins, Christology: a Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus). New archeological findings continue to “flesh out” the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth (see James H. Charlesworth, ed., Jesus and Archeology, Eerdmans, 2006). The present danger may lie, rather, in an inclination to present a Jesus who is fully, but only, human: a “Christology from below” that never quite manages to get off the ground. The church’s foundational faith in the incarnation of the only Son risks being reduced to a vague avowal of the divine inspiration of one who is a provocative prophet. Indeed, some even hint that the church’s dogmatic tradition distorts the reality of the first-century Jewish figure.

I read the recent notification of the C.D.F. on some writings of Father Jon Sobrino as a call to accountability to the grammar of Chalcedon, even as theologians probe new insights and forge new language. In the spirit of 1 John, it offers guidelines for discernment. I do not think Karl Rahner would object in principle to this admonition, though he might differ, of course, with regard to the congregation’s specific findings.

The challenge before us all, not only theologians, but preachers and parents, artists and educators, is to rekindle in our day and place the Christic imagination: to appropriate and extend Vatican II’s confident confession that Jesus is “the light of the nations” (Lumen Gentium, No. 1), that he is “the mediator and fullness of all revelation” (Dei Verbum, No. 2) and that the Holy Spirit offers to everyone “the possibility of being associated with Christ’s paschal mystery” (Gaudium et Spes, No. 22).
In pursuing this inexhaustible blessing and mission, we can do no better than take as a sure guide the Letter to the Hebrews, which so forthrightly celebrates the humanity of the Lord. For it also, with equal boldness, proclaims his unsurpassable uniqueness (Heb 1:1-2):

*In times past, God spoke in partial and diverse ways to our ancestors through the prophets, but in these, the days of fulfillment, God has spoken to us through a Son, whom he has made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe.*