

EUCCHARIST AND KENOSIS

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1. Discussing the eucharistic mystery from the perspective of kenosis is not a simple matter. In the twentieth century, in fact, there were many “theologies” that claimed authentication by resorting to what they called the “key” concept of kenosis, which was made to serve in a thousand different ways: “radical theology,” “theology of secularization,” “theology of hope,” “liberation theology,” “ecumenical theology,” “theology of dialogue,” “theology of trinitarian kenosis,” “theology of crisis and chaos,” “neo-cultural theologies,” “kenotic Christology,” “theology of kenotic anonymity,” “theology of biblical kenosis,” etc., etc. In all of these one notes the proper attempt to promote the kenotic principle in Philippians 2:7, so as to place truly at the center of Christian thought the

mystery of the abasement and self-giving of the Son of God (rather than the self-divinization of man, which bases itself on its own ideas about the power, knowledge, and glory of God, thereby developing a powerful concept that appropriates and imposes the truth). We should also note, however, that this “kenotic key” has allowed many writers gradually to evacuate the Christian faith of everything that properly identifies and characterizes it (whether at the level of the concept of God, the level of ecclesial mediation, or the level of theological language), leaving only an empty, indeterminate space in which everything can be reconciled with everything: all faiths, all beliefs, all confessions, all languages are invited to censor themselves, to limit themselves, to “weaken” themselves

in the conviction that they thus imitate Christ's self-emptying with a view to universal salvation. At the same time, this kenotic process supposedly liberates the Church from all religious, political, cultural, and scientific conflicts (for example, in relations between faith and science), simply because the Church would finally recognize that it can have no "strong" language, no truth that can be formulated definitively, and thus no "strong" claim or presence in the world.

On the other hand, since the Eucharist is, in fact, from all of these perspectives, the greatest point of Christ's kenosis (his ultimate abasement and self-concealment, his ultimate weakness and "distribution"), it would follow that a genuine reflection on eucharistic kenosis can become the ultimate and most radical justification for any theological enterprise.

2. Perhaps the use of the theme of kenosis suffers today from a rather widespread theological limitation, namely an ascetical-moralistic reduction, a lack of *substantiality*. It seems obvious to me that Christ's kenosis (his "abasement," his "self-emptying," his "renunciation" of glory and of certain divine prerogatives) can of

course be interpreted in terms of humility, service, offering, etc., and in this way one can make many appropriate reflections and offer Christians many appropriate recommendations, especially for those situated in some sort of "power" or "glory." In the lives of the saints, countless teachings and examples of this sort can be found, as in the life of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux. Many of the so-called kenotic theologies apply this paradigm, even if they are not as interested in the defects or virtues of individual Christians as in the sins of the institutional Church and of the historical actualizations of Christianity or of past theologies.

All of this is very useful. But is this really the main problem? Or is there a more essential aspect? It seems to me that the question of kenosis must be traced back to its trinitarian source, where the divine persons, in their interrelations, already confront us with the incredible mystery of the "poverty of God" (as Zundel called it), in which each divine person affirms himself by giving himself entirely without keeping anything back. The first "overlooked kenosis," in my opinion, consists in this: that we Christians

have kept a concept of person in which “relation” and “self-gift” are not *substantial* (as in the Trinity) but remain *accidental* (and hence do not touch the core of the person). We have thus limited ourselves to “importing” from the Trinity certain moral-ascetical attitudes (dedication, humility, gift) and imagine that these somehow correspond to the divine archetype. These attitudes, vaguely imported from the Trinity, seem to us to become concrete by the idea of “imitating the kenosis of Jesus” (still ascetically and morally), while forgetting that the Son of God Incarnate is not an *exemplum* [exemplar or model] (in Pelagian fashion), but rather a *donum* [gift]. To summarize, we should assert forcefully that Jesus did not come to offer us, to the supreme exemplary degree, those virtues of humility and abasement that we human beings could already discover by ourselves (with our own sound integrity of mind and heart), but rather came to *give us a new way of thinking about the person*: a way that for us human beings (creatures and sinners) is not only kenotic *ex parte humana* [in a human way], but kenotic *ex parte divina* [in a divine way], in other words, in a way

that is beyond all our possible imagining or our own capacity to achieve. The kenosis that Jesus reveals to us not only prescribes behaviors for us to imitate, but gives us a new vision of the very foundations of being.

3. Furthermore, the divine kenosis—starting from God’s decision to create man *ex amore*, out of love, and *with a view to a loving communion with himself* (see *Gaudium et spes*, 19)—is not a withdrawal of God’s power from the world, but rather a revelation of the extremely particular and ineffable glory and power of his love. The same must be said about the kenosis of the Incarnation, which includes the glorification and exaltation of the Son who bears his love “*to the end*,” utterly and completely (Jn 13:1). A theologian who wants to respect Christian kenosis in his theological language is not called to an indistinct, undifferentiated, ultimately relative language, but rather to a language that is glorious in its absolute originality. Think, for example, of the problem of “truth.” Christian kenosis in this regard does not consist in forbidding oneself to affirm something with certainty. Nor does it consist

in adopting modern relativism *in religious terms*; rather it consists in expressing the glorious revelation that occurs in the world when one recognizes that the truth is not an idea that is imposed by force (whatever the force in question may be), but a person who wants to be known *as* necessary love and *with* necessary love. (Think of the experience of Edith Stein in her dark night in Bergzabern, a night that she devoted to reading the autobiography of Teresa of Avila!)

4. Finally, the Eucharist: this is no doubt the humblest point in the abasement of the Son of God Incarnate, who was not afraid to *be exposed* for our love (think of the “exposition of the Blessed Sacrament”), entrusting even his personal, theandric substance to the humble eucharistic species of bread and wine. It is certainly true that a Christian ought to derive from this the teaching and the strength to become nourishment for his brothers and sisters, allowing himself to be consumed without fear of losing himself. But eucharistic kenosis is also the supreme power by which Christ has enclosed all of his divine glory within the substance of the bread, transubstantiat-

ing it into his own substance. Not only that, but the Eucharist also encloses within itself the transforming power of the love that sacrificed itself, encountering evil and death and conquering them from within. “The institution of the Eucharist demonstrates how Jesus’ death, for all its violence and absurdity, became in him a supreme act of love and mankind’s definitive deliverance from evil” (*Sacramentum caritatis*, 10). In this respect, an image Benedict XVI is fond of becomes very significant, in which he compares the Eucharist to *nuclear fission*:

The substantial conversion of bread and wine into his body and blood introduces within creation the principle of a radical change, a sort of “nuclear fission,” to use an image familiar to us today, which penetrates to the heart of all being, a change meant to set off a process which transforms reality, a process leading ultimately to the transfiguration of the entire world, to the point where God will be all in all. (*Sacramentum caritatis*, 11)

In nuclear fission, a minimum of matter releases a

maximum of energy. When we speak about kenosis, and about eucharistic kenosis in particular, this image can be illuminating and ensure that the abasement we speak about is precisely that attractive, transforming, and all-enveloping abasement of God—rather than the result of our weaknesses or our strategies, which aim at making ourselves accepted by the world (and making our truths and

our Christian presence accepted) with the excuse that we are simply disappearing into the world “*eucharistically*.”—*Translated by Michael J. Miller.* □

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