

# THE DIVINE DRAMA, FROM THE FATHER'S PERSPECTIVE: HOW THE FATHER LIVES LOVE IN THE TRINITY

• **Antoine Birot** •

“The Cross’s tragedy of love is the echo,  
in our history, of the drama of divine love lived out  
in eternity, in which, by giving us his Son,  
the Father gives us *everything*.”

---

And Jesus began to tell the people this parable: “A man planted a vineyard, and let it out to tenants, and went into another country for a long while. When the time came, he sent a servant to the tenants, that they should give him some of the fruit of the vineyard; but the tenants beat him, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent another servant; him also they beat and treated shamefully, and sent him away empty-handed. And he sent yet a third; this one they wounded and cast out. Then the owner of the vineyard said, ‘What shall I do? I will send my beloved son; it may be they will respect him.’ But when the tenants saw him, they said to themselves, ‘This is the heir; let us kill him, that the inheritance may be ours.’ And they cast him out of the vineyard and killed him.” (Lk 20:9–15)

## *1. The owner of the vineyard*

What is most mysterious in this parable is not the tenants' shameful attitude: such an attitude is, unfortunately, quite familiar to us; it is typical of man the sinner who constantly gives offense to love. But it is also not the attitude of the servants, for they behave just as one would expect servants to behave who have received a mission and who make an effort to carry it out (such as the prophets of the Old Covenant, for example). No, what stands out as singular, surprising, and quite simply inconceivable is the *attitude of the owner of the vineyard*: "What shall I do?" he asks himself; and, for some mysterious reason, knowing the fate his servants received at the hands of the wicked tenants, he nevertheless decides: "I will send my beloved son."

This is an unfathomable mystery: what is it that fills the owner's heart, what is it that must fill the heart of God, the Father, when, contrary to all human wisdom and prudence, he decides to send his beloved Son alone into a realm fraught with every imaginable danger? As for what fills the Son's heart, when he allows himself to be sent by the Father to those who hate, who reject, who attack and deliver insult, Scripture is silent. This silence, in fact, which covers the Son's heart like a veil as he marches toward the decisive hour, is not surprising: Jesus, who conceived and related this parable, never dwells on himself; he always refers to the Father, he calls attention to the Father. The Spirit of God, for his part, does not appear here except in the purely objective form of the perfect accord between Father and Son, an accord implicitly affirmed the moment the mission begins to unfold.

## *2. Divine drama and tragedy*

Looking at things from a theological perspective, against the christological and trinitarian horizon of this parable,<sup>1</sup> we see what may be called *two poles*, which are clearly distinguished according to the

---

<sup>1</sup>Obviously, this horizon could not be grasped in its fullness by Jesus' listeners (before Easter). What Jesus wants to condemn, in addressing them here, is above all Israel's behavior in salvation history, with its ever harsher rejection of those sent to it (and finally of the One Sent) by God. With Easter and the Church, the trinitarian dimension of the parable becomes immediately evident.

level of reality with which they are concerned, either the eternal or the historical:

1. On the one hand, there is that which takes place in heaven within the Trinity, and in particular within the heart of the Father who makes the decision to send his Son into the world affected by sin. Such a decision, which is divine, concerns the *order of eternity* (it “exceeds” created time). Moreover, this decision, as God’s, is necessarily a *trinitarian* decision (by virtue of the con-substantiality and therefore the equality of the Persons; a decision made by God necessarily integrates the proper perspective of the three Persons). And, finally—as Jesus affirms here and everywhere else—it is the Father in particular who takes responsibility for the decision (“*I will send my beloved Son . . .*”).

2. On the other hand, we have what is properly speaking the historical realization of the divine mission, which includes, in the end, the sinners’ rejection and finally the tragic death of the *Son* in his mission. All things considered, we should not be surprised by the fact that, though Scripture attests to the *fact* of the first pole, it does so from a great variety of perspectives,<sup>2</sup> and thus resists any attempt to synthesize them into a systematic whole. Wouldn’t it have been more surprising if the opposite were the case, because of the nature of absolute love, which, when it offers access to its mystery, does not impose itself, but yet allows the creature the *freedom* to perceive it? The various perspectives, in any event, remain distinct from one another. In the Fathers, we find a more or less identical situation: by virtue of their sense of mystery, the catholicity of their thought, the multiplicity of perspectives that they are able to adopt in order not to constrict the revealed truth, the Fathers safeguard the transmission of dogma in all of its dimensions<sup>3</sup> even if they had no single, summary explanation

---

<sup>2</sup>Cf. the various indications of the universal saving will (1 Tim 2:4) of the God of love (1 Jn 5:8, 16); the eternal election in Christ (Eph 1:4; cf. 3:11), according to God’s “good will” (Eph 1:5); creative mediation (Jn 1; Col 1; Heb 1); the prefiguration of the Cross (1 Pt 1:20; Rv 13:8); the gift (Jn 3:16), the handing over (Rom 8:32) of the Son by the Father (Jn 5:43), into a state of humiliation, of kenosis (Phil 2:7); the Son who freely offers himself (Jn 10:17–18) as a sacrifice (Heb 10:12), through the eternal Spirit (Heb 9:14), and as a ransom (Mk 10:45) for the redemption of the many (Mt 26:28), which is an eternal redemption (Heb 9:12), and so forth.

<sup>3</sup>For this reason, it would obviously be wrong to draw the inference too quickly, on the basis of the literal absence in an author’s terminology of a

regarding the mysterious “divine council” (Maximus<sup>4</sup>) that led to the sending of the Son. With the rise of scholasticism in the thirteenth century and the new context for the study of the sacred science it entailed, the atmosphere changes. We see the most decisive evidence of this shift in Thomas Aquinas, and above all in the *Summa theologica*: here, after the initial treatment of God as the first being, the philosopher-theologian allows a consideration of the “divine attributes” that does not take account of the biblical data concerning the Trinity (I, q. 2–26). He thus elaborates a doctrine on God that will not be able (among other things and in spite of the later complementary considerations of the Persons, q. 27–43) to account for the mystery of the form and of the trinitarian exercise of divine freedom. Whether it concerns God’s love (I, 20), goodness (I, 6), the will (I, 19), knowledge (I, 14), life (I, 18), power (I, 26), or beatitude (I, 26), one finds

---

category such as “divine council,” that there was no *thought* of a council as such. Doesn’t the idea of a divine council lie behind all of the great theological visions? For example, to deny it would betray a fundamental dimension of Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. From this perspective, we must take seriously the New Testament affirmation of *mission*. We will see, below, how, in Jesus, the fact of his “unanticipating” awareness of being-sent and the inseparable and also unanticipating assent to this mission implies at its source (even if this remains implicit in the way theologians express it) a common trinitarian decision. Indeed, how would it be possible for there to appear, as distinct within the economic order, a mission, on the one hand, as the Father’s will (hence, the Father’s commandment), and on the other hand, the Son’s own will (to do precisely what the Father wills and nothing else, and without anticipating it in advance, but simply remaining in the mission given by him), if there were not, from the beginning, at the point at which the mission emerged in God (in the exchange of trinitarian love), a mysterious and *sovereignly free* “encounter” of Persons, which lies at the basis of everything that appears in the economic order?

<sup>4</sup>See his oft-cited declaration from the *Questions to Thalassius*, 60 (PG 90, 621 B–C): “This is the mystery [the Incarnation as the union of the divine and human natures] that circumscribes the ages and reveals the great and superinfinite will of God, which exists before all ages in infinite measure and in an infinite manner. He who is in essence the Word of God became the messenger of this will, when he became human; he made visible even the remotest depths, if one may put it this way, of his Father’s goodness, and showed in himself the end for which created things clearly received the beginning of their existence,” which remains isolated and in which the mystery of the eternal council, which is literally affirmed (on the basis of its manifestation by the incarnate Word), is brought back to “the remotest depths of the Father’s goodness,” but without being examined for himself any more in his intra-trinitarian dimension.

nothing in Thomas' treatment of these questions "that could not be equally said by the philosopher, or any other monotheist, be he of course Jew or Moslem, concerning the first cause or creator";<sup>5</sup> and the trinitarian dimension of the mystery of God's freedom is not recovered anywhere in the work. This is, in fact, rendered practically impossible because of what is taken (wrongly) to be already established in the context of the study of what concerns the divine "essence," on the basis of the initial consideration of God's "simplicity" (I, 3).

Thomas will evade this question so well,<sup>6</sup> in fact,

---

<sup>5</sup>A. Patfoort, *La Somme de Saint Thomas et la logique du dessein de Dieu* (Paris: Parole et Silence, 1998), 51.

<sup>6</sup>To limit ourselves, here, to the *Summa*, the restriction of meaning entailed in Thomas' theology in relation to the notion of divine freedom becomes evident in the determination of the processions as acts of thought (Son-Word) and will (Spirit-Love) (I, 27). It is in fact impossible for Thomas, on the basis of what he has affirmed in question 3, henceforward to think of the processions in any other way than by the psychological analogy, which thus becomes radicalized (in Augustine, it appeared as an attempt to interpret something that remained largely counter-balanced by other factors in Scripture and the tradition): the Son, he says, proceeds *ad intra* "by means of an intellectual emanation [*secundum emanationem intelligibilem*], just as the intelligible word [*verbi intelligibilis*] proceeds from the one who speaks and remains within him [*quod manet in ipso*]" (I, 27, 1). In God, who is "supreme simplicity [*summa simplicitas*]," excluding "all diversity [*aliqua diversitas*]," the Word cannot be "diverse from its principle [*diversum ab eo a quo procedit*]" ; he is "perfectly one [*perfecte unum*] with his principle, without the slightest diversity [*absque omni diversitate*]" (I, 27, 1, obj. 2 and ad 2). In this way, as J. H. Nicolas has observed (Thomas Aquinas, *Somme théologique*, vol. 1 [Paris: Cerf, 1984], 354, n. 2), we have a procession "that excludes any exteriorization of the proceeding term in relation to the principle from which it proceeds, the intellect. No exteriorization: this means *no differentiation*, for what corresponds to exteriorization—which is proper only to corporeal beings situated in spatial relationships to one another—at the level of non-corporeal being is difference." In order to think of the second procession, Thomas will recall that "in God there is no procession except as an action that remains within the agent himself [*quae manet in ipso agente*], rather than passing to an external term [*quae non tendit in aliquid extrinsecum*]. And in an intellectual nature, this immanent action occurs in the act of knowing and the act of willing (hence the procession of love in God" (I, 27, 3). That is why, in order to return to the first procession, there can be no question of "proceeding from a principle as to a different and external term [*ut extraneum et diversum*]," but only of "proceeding as an internal term, without diversity, in the mode of understanding [*ut intimum et absque diversitate, per modum intelligibilem*]" (I, 27, 1, ad 3). The outward movement of the Son emanating from the Father "entails only a relative distinction, without the slightest essential distance [*secundum solam distinctionem relationum, non secundum*

that during the long centuries that come after him, it is almost only among “spiritual” writers that the theme comes explicitly to the surface here and there, while “official” theology appears to remain indifferent to it.<sup>7</sup> It is German Idealism, and Hegel in particular, that fires a

---

*aliquam essentialem distantiam*]” (I, 42, 5, ad 2). At every point here we observe that the concern to preserve the unity of essence categorically excludes (by the logic established in question 3) any idea of distance or difference at the heart of divine unity. (See also the astonishing demonstration in *SCG IV*, chapter 11, that begins from the principle that “the more noble a nature is, the more that which emanates from it remains internal to it”). In this way, even while admitting a “communication of the divine nature [*communicationem divinae naturae*]” in the processions (I, 27, 3, obj. 2), according to which, to be sure, nature is not transmitted only in part but rather as a whole [*totam naturam*] (I, 41, 3), it is absolutely impossible to think of this communication as a *true gift of self*, i.e., as a *personal handing over* of divinity to the Son, in which the Father would be giving *himself*, and doing so *totally*, in which he would abandon himself by giving *everything* to the Son, *including the freedom* that is proper to God (indeed what would the divine nature be if it were not free?), and by respecting in advance the way in which the Son (has he truly received everything from the Father or hasn't he?) will want to exercise freedom. Now, this is precisely what we have to understand: namely, that in the generation, in the liberation of the Son by the Father, *a distance is established*, which is always necessary in love in order to preserve the autonomy and the originality that is proper to the being and acting of each Person. And this must be understood if we are to account for the revelation of God as love, without falling into some form of tritheism, or into the notion that the essence of God is somehow divided. On the contrary, it is precisely *this loving, free, absolute, and reciprocal self-gift of the Hypostases to one another* that constitutes the unique essence of God (and is also the basis of the circumincession, which is more a mystery of personal love than of intellectual emanation). Hence it follows that one must affirm (against Thomas) that *the Father does not generate in himself but in some respect outside of himself*: in the sense in which, in true love, lovers do not become fused to one another; and thus in the sense in which the Father, in generating the Son, *liberates* him: he does not fix him in place, but he sets him free in the infinite space of the divine freedom that he gives to him, just as he does the Holy Spirit.

<sup>7</sup>See for example, Mechtild of Magdeburg (*Das fließende Licht der Gottheit*, III, 9), Bridget of Sweden (*Revelations*, I, 24), John of the Cross (“In the beginning it would remain,” *Nine Romances*), but also all of those authors who, without necessarily explicitly talking about a council in the strict sense or a deliberation among the three divine Persons (but perhaps expressing it in poetic terms, for example), nevertheless possess a very vivid sense of the *liberty of each of the persons*, just as we see it in Scripture and in so many of the Fathers: the Father *freely* gave his Son; the Son *freely* offered himself; the Spirit himself is *perfectly free*. In *Andrei Rublev's The Icon of the Trinity* (Editions du Lion de Juda, 1986), 37ff and 85ff, Nicolai Greschny shows how, in this famous icon, the theme of Abraham's

warning shot and, as it were, backs Christian reflection on God up against the wall, summoning it to explain itself: *quid*, what is the nature of God's freedom and his relationship to the world? What is the nature of the Trinity and the Cross? What is the nature of the freedom of the Persons in God? Among the various efforts at renewal<sup>8</sup> in theology in light of this questioning stands the unique endeavor of Hans Urs von Balthasar, who attempts to recover the dramatic. Balthasar's endeavor takes the mystery of God's freedom in a real sense to be the center, not only of dogma, but also of dogmatic and biblical reflection, and it does so precisely as the infinite freedom of the *Trinity*.<sup>9</sup> Every divine decision as such, Balthasar will say, implicates the free engagement of

---

hospitality opens explicitly to the eternal colloquy among the Three Persons with respect to the sending of the Son and his Passion, which takes material form in the cup on the altar that reflects the Son's face.

<sup>8</sup>Regarding the direction taken by Thomas, and the ambiguity that characterizes all of the *De Deo uno* treatises constructed apart from the light of the Trinity, there are quite a few contemporary authors who have pointed out the problems therein: from Barth (*Church Dogmatics*, II/1, vol. 2), Rahner (*Schriften IV*, 1960, 103ff), Mühlén (*Spirit in the Church*), to Moltmann (*Trinity and the Kingdom of God*) and Greshake (*Der dreieine Gott* [Freiburg: Herder, 1997]). It is now generally accepted that any attempt to consider the divine attributes on the basis of the one essence of God in abstraction from the personal process of the Trinity cannot succeed. Regarding the metaphysical need to think of difference at the very heart of being (and thus to think of the positivity of the other), on the basis of the trinitarian archetype, the most profound insights were already offered in the 40s and 50s by Gustav Siewerth. Siewerth, though he admits Aquinas' inadequacy on this point, observed at the same time that the metaphysical hypothesis of the positivity of difference was latent in his work, and that the system as a whole would be deepened in its internal coherence and brought to life by such an integration, which could occur without having to reject Aquinas' principles (cf. M. Cabada Castro, *L'être et Dieu chez Gustav Siewerth* [Louvain: Peeters, 1997], 256; 248–274). Regarding the renewed attention given to the mystery of God's freedom today, J. Wolinski observes that it is going on "in the midst of a diversity of approaches that recalls the pre-Nicene period"; cf. "Trinité," in *Dictionnaire critique de théologie* (Paris: PUF, 1998), 1171.

<sup>9</sup>Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II/1 (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1976), 231–235 (English translation, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 2, *Man in God* [=TD 2] [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990]). On the necessity of treating the divine attributes in light of the Trinity, cf. *Theodramatik* IV (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1983), 57–58 (English translation, *Theo-Drama* vol. 5, *The Last Act* [=TD 5] [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998]) and especially *Theologik* II (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1985), 117–138.

each of the three Persons.<sup>10</sup> If this is true, then the question that we are addressing—namely, the decision of the God of Love for the world which leads to the sending of the Son to the rebellious and murderous tenants—is in itself a genuine divine *drama*.<sup>11</sup> What access do we have to this mystery? Only one: Scripture's massive testimony to Jesus' awareness of his absolutely unique mission. On the basis of this firm central point, which is attested to everywhere, it is not difficult to understand how to integrate the various diverse perspectives in the New Testament concerning the eternal origin of this trinitarian mission.<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>10</sup>*Theodramatik* II/1, 233 [TD 2]; *Theodramatik* IV, 71–74 [TD 5] (“Positivity of the Other,” the infinite difference of the Persons within the unique essence); 74–78 (“Positivity of letting-happen,” especially pg. 77: the processions in God and the original figure of freedom, in which the scholastic dilemma of the generation of the Son in the mode of nature and not of will [cf. *ST* I, 41, 2] is surpassed with the help of Adrienne von Speyr through the indication of a “recapitulation” in God of the ‘natural’ processions within the absolute divine freedom, which goes all the way to the bottom”; on this point, see also *Theologik III*, 51, 150, 218ff); 82 (“The space of freedom, which is necessary to keep the relationship alive”); 83–86 (“The absoluteness of prayer”); 445 (“The one freedom of the divine essence, which is possessed by the Hypostases always according to the manner proper to each one, such that the unity of the divine will is always *also* the result of the integration of the intentions of the Hypostases”). These things cannot be understood unless the mystery of God is seen to be, from the beginning, a mystery of love, and thus in a metaphysical sense as *both being and event simultaneously*.

<sup>11</sup>*Theodramatik* III (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1980), 297–309 (English translation, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action* [= TD 4] [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994]); *Theodramatik* IV, 221–243 [TD 5].

<sup>12</sup>As Thomas saw, following Augustine, in relation to a divine Person, mission cannot be anything but the Person's procession of origin, extended into time (*ST* I, 43). But the priority of essence returns in Thomas' understanding of the freedom of the Persons. Inquiring into Christ's obedience to the Father, he writes: “let us say simply that the Father communicates his knowledge to the Son just as he communicates his essence” (I, 42, 6, ad 2). The “communication” here eclipses the personal mystery of the gift of self, in which the giver knows how to give but also to efface himself in order to allow the other to receive and live the gift in true freedom. The priority of God's immutability makes the Incarnation an event that *does not affect the divine Person as such* (*ST* III, 16, 6, ad 2). Having excluded any distance and difference in God, Thomas has no room to understand that the divine will integrates the perspective belonging to each of the three Persons. In the Trinity, the Father “from all eternity *gives him [the Son] the will* to do that which he will have to do” (I, 42, 6). Thomas does not affirm

It goes without saying that the second pole mentioned above cannot be understood in all of its dimensions except in the light of the first. (Isn't it the case, after all, that a genuine Christian doctrine of Christology, at the burning heart of which lies the *theologia crucis*, however it is understood, cannot but be immediately and in every respect trinitarian?)

We therefore have two poles: on the one hand, there is the *drama of love* which is played out in the sphere of eternity wherein the Trinity resolves upon the salvation of the world, when the *Father*, more specifically, makes the trinitarian decision and undertakes all of the responsibility for sending the Son; on the other hand, there is the *tragedy*, i.e., the Cross and the death of the Son.<sup>13</sup>

### I. *The Divine Drama*

#### a. *We know the Father's love through the Son whom he sent to us*

By sending his beloved and only-begotten Son on an infinitely dangerous earthly mission (in which all of those sent before him failed and suffered humiliation), God reveals to us his inmost feelings in our

---

any spontaneity in the Son's self-offering. Hence, there is an ineluctable heteronomy (*ST III*, 47, 2 and 3). But from this perspective, how are we to understand the Cross, in which "my will" and "your will" are distinguished (Mt 26:39)? Thomas nevertheless had established in another place that "the cause that led Christ to pour out his blood was the Holy Spirit, for it was under his inspiration and with his prompting, that he did so" (*Lectura in Hebraeos* c. 9, lect. 3, §444). It is in this direction that we must seek a solution.

<sup>13</sup>Following the parable, there is the chastisement of the guilty ("He will have the tenants killed," 16a); God's fidelity to his plan of salvation ("He will give the vineyard to others," 16b), then Jesus' infinitely weighty words concerning "the stone that was rejected has become the cornerstone" (verse 17: a veiled announcement of the resurrection), and, on this basis, within an eschatological perspective that includes "every man who will stumble on this stone," there is the judgment (18: "he will be broken," "shattered to pieces")—all of this serves merely to show, to those to whom the words are addressed, the implications of what was just affirmed. The created and historical realities that occur in the economic order (the rejection of the servants, the death of the Son, the merciless judgment), in all of their tragic power, are brought to, encompassed, and surpassed by affirmations of an infinite theological nature: the absolute plan for universal salvation.

regard: "God *so loved* the world that he sent his only Son . . . so that the world might be saved through him" (Jn 3:16). The cost of this gift, the infinite intensity of the renunciation it required the Father to make, provides us with a measure of the intensity of his love for us. Does there exist a creature, one wonders, that would be able someday to take the full measure of the love God has for us, when we consider the unheard-of (infinite) sacrifice that the gift of the Son must represent for the Father?

*b. From Jesus' unimaginable mission  
to the eternal trinitarian decision*

Once Jesus is in the world, he has an acute awareness of the fact that he did not come into the world on his own (Jn 7:28); instead, the Father sent him (7:29; 8:42; etc.) on the basis of a plan of love (Jn 3:16). Jesus' existence on earth therefore consists in mission, and if he spends himself and all of his energies to bring his mission to a good conclusion (Jn 5:36; 17:4), it is of course ultimately because of his love for the Father (Jn 14:31), because of his desire to serve and glorify the Father (Jn 17:4), who himself sent him out of love for the Son and for the world (Jn 17:23).

Now, Jesus is God, as much as the Father and the Spirit are God; in the Trinity, he is in no way inferior to them. How can it be, then, that on earth, Jesus exists personally in a state of mission, to such an extent that he never allows his "I" to detach itself for a single moment from his mission? How can it be that he who is God—the infinite and absolute God—thus exists in the condition of one who is *sent*, which implies in itself and by definition the obedience to a commandment (Jn 12:50) given by an Other?

Shall we say that he obeys as man but does not obey as God? We can simply dismiss this suggestion, since the mystery is precisely the fact that he is *personally* sent by the Father. At every moment of his mission he therefore exists personally as *the Son* (who obeys), the Person of the Son, who cannot be dissected into two parts, one of which would obey while the other would not.<sup>14</sup>

How then can we explain the mystery of the obedience of Jesus' love, at the heart of a mission that is clearly so central and so profound, so unique, that, in Jesus' consciousness, as we said above,

---

<sup>14</sup>Cf. *Theologik* II, 117–118.

we see no gap at all between his “I” and his mission? How can his “I” coincide in fact with his mission, and not only that but coincide from all eternity, as clearly it must? In Jesus’ consciousness, Balthasar will say, “the identity between his awareness of himself and his awareness of his mission, or, which comes to the same thing, Jesus’ ‘un-fore-thinkable’ ‘being-in-agreement’ with the Father’s will to mission, the coincidence of his free fundamental will and the fundamental will of the Father, goes back to a mysteriously supra-temporal event which can be no other than the *unanimous trinitarian* decision for salvation, a decision that included the sending of the Son. . . .”<sup>15</sup>

*c. God’s decision for the salvation of the world, which leads  
to the sending of the Son, is indeed a drama  
of love of infinite dimensions*

Jesus, to be sure, is God, true God, and even in his mission he is always one with the Father (Jn 10:30). If he gives his life, he says, it is of his own accord (Jn 10:18). It is “through the eternal Spirit,” according to Paul, “that he offered himself to God” (Heb 9:14; cf. 10:5–10). But how do we reconcile this with his being sent on a mission? How do we understand the fact that there is *at one and the same time* both freedom, i.e., absolute spontaneity, and mission? What is the principle [*origine*] that would explain how Jesus could have an “unfore-thinkable” awareness of both his mission and his consent to it?

Whatever else may be said, this principle can only be absolute love and life, God’s perfect beatitude in heaven. But included somehow within this eternally living fullness is that which happens in the Trinity once the Father projects the world (in his Son and for him: Eph 1:4; Col 1:16) and once the shadow of the world’s sin is cast over the trinitarian light.<sup>16</sup> Now, we must acknowledge straightaway that what takes place within absolute love will always remain a mystery to us as creatures; it will never be “explainable” except by absolute love and we ultimately will never be able to produce anything but

---

<sup>15</sup>*Theodramatik* II/2, 171–172 (for an English translation, see *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *Persons in Christ* [=TD 3] [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992]).

<sup>16</sup>See Adrienne von Speyr, *Das Allerheiligenbuch*, II (NB I, 2) (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1977), 104–108; *Das Wort und die Mystik*, I (NB V) (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1970), 258–260; Hans Urs von Balthasar and Adrienne von Speyr, *Au cœur du mystère rédempteur* (CLD, 1980), 37–40, 45–46.

fragmentary human formulations for it, within the framework traced out by the biblical pronouncements. One of Adrienne von Speyr's insights can open up a direction for us in this context: The Son, she says, who is completely turned toward the Father (Jn 1:18) in trinitarian love, experienced the offense of sin *in the Father*; in other words, he did not first consider the effects of sin on himself, the Son (even though he too is God), but insofar as they affect *the Father*.<sup>17</sup> And thus, in a movement of pure love, even before any precise "consideration" (and here we are always of course speaking in human terms) of "what could be envisioned in detail" for the "reparation" or expiation (Heb 2:17) of the world's sin, the Son offered himself to the Father.

Now, if trinitarian love is eternal, we have to add immediately that the Son's self-offering (which to be sure arises *spontaneously* in the Trinity) in reality encounters in the Father what we could call something like an "expectation," in the sense of a modality of the Creator's living love which, quite clearly, cannot resign itself purely and simply to the fact of his creature's sin. For the Father desired his creature in the Son and for the Son, out of love, not for death but for life. He did so to such an extent that we must acknowledge, at the origin of the decisions to create and save the world within the intra-trinitarian dialogue that constitutes God's eternal life, something like a (divine and absolute) "Prayer,"<sup>18</sup> the expression of the Father's expectation—with all the necessary qualifications this acknowledgment would entail. The Father's "Prayer," however, is also ultimately "anticipated" by the Prayer of the Son's self-offering, to the extent that the Son "enters into the Father's desire" before the Father has even formulated it. *He anticipates the will of the Father* in the exchange of love. To put it another way, when the Son offers himself to the Father for the world, it is possible for there to be on his part the giving of an "assent" (2 Cor 1:19) that in fact "anticipates" the demand that the

---

<sup>17</sup>"Before the Incarnation, each of the divine Persons experiences the offense of sin primarily in the others; and the Son becomes man above all in order to expiate the offense given to the Father and to the Spirit." Later, "as man he will prove to the Father that a man can be good, that evil therefore does not come from the Creator, and he will deflect the arrows of sin from the Father and turn them toward himself on the Cross" (Adrienne von Speyr, *Objektive Mystik* [NB VI] [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1970], 110).

<sup>18</sup>[The word "prayer," here, is meant in the older sense of request, a usage still current in French, though archaic in English ("I pray you to do something . . ."). —Trans.]

Father addresses to him, in the sense that this Yes is pronounced by the Son who “first,” freely, entered into the desire of his Father, anticipating what that desire will be. Thus, this Yes, when it emerges from within the heart of Love, can very much be in all truth a Yes uttered *in obedience*, even if the one who utters it is God as much as the Father and the Spirit is God. This manner of spontaneously *anticipating* the expectation of the Other is without any doubt one of the most characteristic features of trinitarian love, which is always and in each of the Persons, a perfectly self-forgetful love. This occurs in such a way that we must acknowledge in God both prayer and self-offering, willing and letting-happen, gift and reception, expectation and fulfillment (a fulfillment, to be sure, which is always divine, super-abundant, and exceeding all expectation). Thus, though there is a hierarchy of Processions, these exist in a trinitarian *unity*, so that none is any more eternal or original than the others.<sup>19</sup>

With these reflections, we join up with another aspect of Balthasar’s thought. As he explains, from a biblical perspective, the “unforethinkability” (*Unvordenklichkeit*), in Jesus’ consciousness, of his mission and his consent to it (i.e., his spontaneous self-offering for its sake), leads back to a unanimous (eternal) *trinitarian* decision concerning the salvation of the world. This is thus a decision that involves the free and spontaneous involvement of each of the three Persons. Here, therefore, in relation to the immanent Trinity, we can never stress enough that,

any position of priority is ruled out: as if, for example, the Father, “offended” by sin, would have originally pushed the Son to re-establish order in creation through the cross. *The Son’s self-offering is just as original* in relation to this work, and so is the Spirit’s self-offering for the sake of mediation, an offer the acceptance of which—still speaking in human terms—could not have cost the Father any less than the Son’s carrying out of the sacrifice with the help of the Spirit.”<sup>20</sup>

*d. The prefiguration of the cross and the Father’s sacrifice*

---

<sup>19</sup>Adrienne von Speyr has shown how the trinitarian dialogue ought to be conceived as the original Prayer, which always already contains within itself all the created modes of prayer. Cf. Adrienne von Speyr, *The World of Prayer*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 28–78; Balthasar, *Theodramatik* IV, 83–86 [TD 5].

<sup>20</sup>*Theodramatik* II/2, 172 [TD 3].

“ . . . [A] sacrifice *the acceptance of which could not have cost the Father any less . . .*” Here we touch on the decisive point. When the Son offers himself for the world, the absolute character of this self-offering becomes immediately evident to the Father. Scripture affirms it: for the Father, there is a *pre-figuration of the Cross* in the sense that the Son is “fore-known” by the Father (*proegnōsmenou*: 1 Pt 1:20) as the *Lamb* even before the actual creation of the world. In other words, the Son, in the eternal Trinity, thus presents an availability that is so total and unconditional that he appears in the Father’s eyes as the Lamb who is so totally pure, totally handed over, totally given, and totally abandoned that he is ready for *absolutely everything* (an “everything” that implicitly includes the Cross in advance<sup>21</sup>). The Son’s movement of offering to his Father, we repeat, is a spontaneous movement of love. It is a movement that is purely gratuitous and free, the pure positivity of love, the pure offering of self, which, originally, knows as yet nothing painful, but which, to the contrary, is the expression of an eternal and effective divine joy: that of being able to offer everything to the Father.

Everything that the Father “undergoes” must therefore necessarily contain a divine depth and seriousness that is, properly speaking, ineffable. “What shall I do?” (Lk 20:13). Receiving his Son’s offer of love, the Father, in his eternal perspective as Father, is able to measure from this moment on the infinite risk and the entire weight of suffering in store for the Son, if he were to be sent into the world. He is able to discern in the present, in the features of his divine Son who is full of the joy of giving himself and absolutely self-forgetful, everything that he will have to endure as the “Lamb” of God, if the Father were to respond positively to his offer and allow the world’s alienation to be inflicted on him.

In whatever may fill the Father’s heart, there is a mystery of Love that is in itself absolutely inexpressible for us. Perhaps we could say (without forgetting for a single moment here or in relation to everything said above that these are mere human words that seek to do

---

<sup>21</sup>By this, we are referring both to the Passion, which is undergone unto death in dereliction, and to the a-temporal outpouring of this mystery into hell: Holy Saturday. The Son, who experiences the hatred, rejection, and fatal assault by the tenants, does not only experience the *act* of dying, but also the *state of death*. He “tasted” death (Heb 2:9).

the least damage possible to the mystery of God): it is as if, on the one hand, the Father sees in advance all of the suffering that the Son will have to undergo if he is sent into the sinful world; and how could the Father's heart not be broken in advance at the sight of this unimaginable ocean of suffering that will flow over the Son? But, on the other hand, and this in fact comes first, he sees that through this self-offering the Son manifests his love to the Father; the Son, in freedom, offers to him *an (extreme) expression of his love*. In this case, can he in fact say No to his Son? "What shall I do?" Can he reject the Son's offer, i.e., his love, the Son's spontaneous expression of love?

And here is where the most astonishing mystery occurs: out of love for his Son and for the world, and taking upon himself in advance the weight of all the consequences in terms of suffering for the Son, the Father accepts his Son's self-offering: He says Yes to the Son.

Thus, aware of the infinite risk carried in this mission, and taking responsibility, precisely in advance (the "pre-Passion" of the Father), for the entire burden this will entail for the Son (in his Incarnation, all the way to his Passion), the Father, by means of something like a divine "hope" ("Perhaps they will respect my Son?": Lk 20:13), takes responsibility for sending the eternal Son into the world.

At this point, everything is set in motion, the whole of the "economy," beginning with this mystery: knowing that the Father welcomes and accepts his total self-offering, the Son places himself in an absolute manner into the Father's hands.

*e. At the beginning of the economy of salvation:  
the mystery of the deposit*

Here we pass from the pure "offering of availability" to the mystery of his actual "handing himself over." The Son's placing himself into the Father's hands is a surrender of everything that belongs to him, everything that he received from the Father: it is a total surrender of his being, of his divine glory, and of all his divine attributes, so that the Father can do with it, absolutely all of it, what he wishes, and so that he can decide what needs to be done for the salvation of the world. Adrienne von Speyr has called this mystery—which occurs at the level of the personal relations between the Son and the Father and thus in the unique Spirit—the "depositing" [*Hinterlegung*] of the Son's divine attributes into the Father's hands;

from this perspective, the Father appears, at the beginning of the economy of salvation, as the one who assumes and bears (for both) all of the responsibility for the redemptive plan for the world.<sup>22</sup> Here, we arrive at the precise point that St. Paul indicated in the letter to the Philippians, the point at which the apostle sees that the Son, who was God, divested himself, quite literally, at the beginning of his mission: he “emptied” (*ekençsen*) himself (Phil 2:7). This is a mystery that is possible only because the Father, in his infinite love, and despite the “terrible” pain (the passion of love!) it represents for him (by depositing himself, the Son has made himself vulnerable!), the Father *accepts* the Son’s self-emptying, and he receives this deposit. This act of “kenosis,” i.e., this “deposit,” on the Son’s part, this surrender, this actual handing himself over into the Father’s hands, is exactly the origin of the Son’s being sent into the world: *because* the Son has handed himself over, through the kenotic deposit of his divine attributes, *therefore* and only therefore, can he have a genuine *mission*.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup>Adrienne von Speyr, *Jean, le discours d'adieux*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1982), 134–135; *Objektive Mystik* (NB VI), 156 and 141; Balthasar, *Theodramatik* II/2, 176–209 [TD 3]; *Theodramatik* IV, 232–234 (with further references to von Speyr) [TD 5]; *Theologik* II, 262–264.

<sup>23</sup>Without a “deposit,” there is no genuine mission. Hence the difficulty, not to say impossibility, that confronts the theologians who, ignoring the concept of kenosis, attempt to elaborate a Christology in a genuinely trinitarian sense. Thus, Thomas Aquinas asks, with respect to Phil 2:7, “But because he was full at the level of divinity, does this mean that he was thus emptied at the level of divinity? No, because whatever he was, that he remains, and whatever he was not, he assumed; but this must be understood as an assumption of that which he did not have.” “Christ emptied himself, not *in depositing* [*non deponendo*] the divine nature, but *in assuming* human nature. . . . The Apostle thus says: he emptied himself, because he assumed human nature” (*Super ad Phil. 2:7*, lectio II; Marietti 57). “He emptied himself, not in *losing* his fullness, but *in taking on* our humble state” (*ST* III, 57, 2, ad 2; cf. *SCG* IV, 34). In short, the mystery of the Incarnation “was not brought about by the fact that God changed in some manner the state in which he exists from all eternity, but by the fact that he united himself to the creature, or rather, that he united himself in a new manner” (*ST* III, 1, 1, ad 1). We can see the problem: the “fullness” that Thomas is talking about was not understood in a trinitarian sense; it is therefore unable to be reconciled with the idea of a humbling, of a “kenosis” or a “deposit.” In this context, “kenosis” cannot mean a *loss*; this notion must be rejected. As for the notion of a “deposit,” it is in this context simply inconceivable, because there is no otherness that is capable of receiving and safeguarding this deposit. Moreover, the fullness of the divine Pure Act is therefore irreconcilable with an “assumption.” With the notion of *handing*

At this point, we leave the eternal sphere, the level of the divine drama, in order to enter the level of history, which leads us to the Cross, the tragedy.

## *II. The Tragedy*

### *a. While the Son carries out his mission on earth, the Trinity takes a peculiar form*

Over the course of the years that the Son spends on earth, the Trinity takes the particular form that has been called, since Ireneaus, the “economic” Trinity (i.e., proper to the *oikonomia*, to the progressive and historical unfolding of the plan of salvation which was devised in heaven): the Father now holds and preserves the Son’s deposit into his hands of his entire divine being, which the Son entrusted to him. The Son is henceforward in the world, there where the Father sent him, dwelling in the humanity (body and soul) that he received from the Father. As for the Holy Spirit, who is eternally the Spirit of the Father and the Son, he has taken the form (from the moment of the trinitarian decision and the deposit) of the Spirit of mission (coming from the Father), which is at the same time in the Son the Spirit of obedience (towards the Father). All of this occurs in conformity to the Father’s will (and the Son’s will to obey), and in order to allow, i.e., to enable, the Son to live an authentic sending, an authentic mission, which implies an authentic *going out* from the Father (Jn 16:28), even while always resting *with* the Father (Jn 16:32), and even *in him* (Jn 14:10), being *one with him* (Jn 10:30). Conjointly sent with the Son, the

---

*oneself over* (at the level of personal relations), it becomes impossible to account for the christological kenosis affirmed by Paul without weakening the literal meaning of the text; it would imply some form of “loss of substance” in God (which would be a mythological understanding of God, the sort that in fact characterizes many post-Hegelian theologies). Thomas was perfectly correct to insist that, for the eternal God, there can be *neither change nor loss* in the Incarnation. But we can understand this only if we accept an interpretation of the trinitarian mystery itself as an original drama of love, which emerges through the free generation of the Son by the Father, which is for the Father an absolute gift, including the whole of divine freedom, and thus is a “kenosis of original love” to which the Son responds eternally and freely (see *Theodramatik* III, 303 [TD 4]).

Spirit of mission persists in the service of the Father and the Son, going before the Son in his mission (Lk 1:35), or following after him (Jn 1:33), according to the needs of the mission, which are new at every moment.<sup>24</sup> Love is sovereignly free, and it is precisely here that freedom is achieved, in this “economic” form of the Trinity, which emerges from the deposit and the mission.

*b. The Father carries and accompanies the Son*

Because he so loves the Father and has handed all things over to him, the Son, in his mission, lives out the purest obedience of love and the purest surrender. In the whole way in which he remains faithful to his mission, and at every moment, he renews his initial Yes, and thus his deposit, over and over again. It is thus that he makes his eternal self-offering and surrender to the Father real at the level of history: He is not simply in the process of carrying out a decision that someone else made, but he is on the contrary always, even in the temporal order, the one who offers himself to the Father in order to carry out the work of the world's redemption. This alone, as he says, is his food: to do the Father's will (Jn 4:34). As we saw at the level of the divine drama, the Father “sends the Son, who thereby fulfills the will of the Father, and allows him to come to us, in such a way that the mission and the permission proceed from the same love.” It is also in this way that, ultimately, we see a perfect coincidence within the incarnate Son between his consciousness of himself and his consciousness of his mission, and that his entire existence manifests itself as an absolute existence of mission.<sup>25</sup> Jesus is “sheltered” by his mission because he is being carried by the Father.

---

<sup>24</sup>The Cappadocian Fathers formulated the simplest expression of the trinitarian inversion at issue here (Gregory of Nazianus, *Theological Discourses*, 31, 29 [*Sources Chrétiennes* 250 (Paris, 1978), 333]; 38, 9 [SC 358, 121]; Basil, *Treatise on the Holy Spirit* 19 [SC 17 bis, 419]): after the deposit, Jesus lives out his mission in conformity to the Father's will, in docility to the Spirit, which of course does not entail any change in the order of the processions, but merely that the mutual relation between the simultaneous missions of the Son and the Spirit change according to the needs of the economic plan (*Theologik* III, 50–51; cf. *Theodramatik* IV, 74–77 [TD 5]).

<sup>25</sup>Cf. *Theodramatik* IV, 77 [TD 5]. It is in the central position of the mission that we have the economic revelation of a common trinitarian decision.

Indeed, the Father, who in the divine drama had consented to his Son's request and assumed in advance the entire burden of the mission, lives out, from his own side, and from the moment of the deposit, a singular manner of *carrying* his Son and *accompanying* him at every step along the way into the mission into which the Father himself had sent him. It is now that we see what was implied in the initial decision: because he had taken responsibility for everything in advance in heaven, the Father experiences with the Son everything that the Son now experiences on earth.

*c. The Father administers  
the deposit*

The way in which the Father accompanies his Son contains a very precise mystery, which is necessary if the Son's progressive fulfillment of his mission is to be possible: namely, that the Father *administer* the deposit that the Son entrusted to him, according to the needs the Son encounters during his mission. Indeed, to take a few striking examples, it can be the case, at a particular moment in the mission, that the Son needs to know a particular event in advance. It can be the case that he needs to perform a miracle, to heal a sick person or forgive a sinner. When, in all of these situations, the Son knows that the Father expects this gesture, which is in accordance with his will (cf. Jn 5:19), then the Son must be able to make use of his divine power, or his divine knowledge, his eternal vision, or his capacity to pardon sinners; in short: the Son must be able to make use of his divine attributes, precisely because it is what the Father wills in this particular situation. And so, he makes use of them— always, to be sure, to the precise extent that the mission requires, i.e., according as it is necessary in order dutifully to carry out the mission given to him by the Father. If the mission demands, by contrast, that he encounter a situation without knowing it in advance, and thus that he run up against the limitations that all human beings know (and to the point of the unfathomable night of the passion, in which *everything* will be taken from him), then the Son adheres to what has been established by the Father in his obedience of perfect love.

*d. The Spirit of mission moves the Son*

The restitution of the divine attributes to the obedient Son in the state of kenosis is carried out by the Holy Spirit, who acts as a Spirit of mission, i.e., in conformity to the will of the Father. In reality, from the moment that the Son, in heaven, deposits *everything*, up to and including the capacity to take it back (and the divine power of spirating the Spirit, of course, belongs to this deposit), he undergoes a deprivation of the sort that his condition is henceforward absolutely one of “letting-happen”; if he *is moved* in his mission according to his absolute obedience of love to the Father, it is because the *Spirit* (who has also himself entered fully and eternally into the divine drama in order to make the trinitarian plan possible) now substitutes himself in a personal manner for the Son’s breathing forth (which is what he is, in fact, eternally in the trinitarian mystery of spiration, though for the hour of the Cross it is in the state of having been deposited). In order to allow the Son to actualize, at every moment, his total self-surrender, which he offers to the Father in heaven, and at the same time in order to allow the Father to unfold his plan of salvation through the Son’s trinitarian mission, and thus to permit the Son to live in the deposit and in mission, *the Spirit actively brings about in the Son the obedient response of love*. These two aspects are thus inseparable for the Spirit: 1. to allow himself, like the Son, to be sent (in terms of the divine spontaneity proper to him, which desires in love nothing more than to serve); as the Spirit of mission he brings the Father’s will to the Son, and makes possible its fulfillment by constantly bringing about the divine attributes necessary for the Son according to the situations he faces in mission, i.e., as a function of the Father’s will; 2. doing so, he too (on his own, actively, through “substitution”) breathes forth in the Son his obedient response to the Father. The Son has placed all things in the Father’s hands to such an extent that in truth his freedom of love now takes the form of an absolute letting-happen.

*e. Mission leads to the Cross*

It is in this pure “letting-happen” that the Son will undergo the “hour.” This hour, which comes at the end of the mission as its ineluctable and tragic conclusion, will represent the decisive fulfillment of the mission. According to the words of John the Baptist, Jesus’ precursor, the mission ultimately consisted in the Lamb’s “taking away the sin of the world” (Jn 1:29). Such a task implies taking upon oneself the full weight of sin—or, more precisely, to allow it to fall upon one,

to *bear* it (1 Pt 2:24), and thus to *expiate* it (Heb 2:17), i.e., to reabsorb it into love. It is thus necessary to be sent *into the midst* of sinners, i.e., precisely *in their place*, in their proper sphere, in order to be charged with the whole of their spiritual situation of *alienation* in their relation to God. This bearing, this substitutional taking-responsibility that implies one's allowing oneself to be plunged into sin, has as its necessary corollary the experience of the night, the internal experience of the darkness of the state of sin in which the sinner is imprisoned. Hence: the loss of the Father, and, with the Father, of all light—to such an extent that, for the abandoned Son, absolute non-sense is added to the experience of the complete failure of every endeavor. The dereliction that the Son comes to know at the end of his mission is thus at the same time the mark of the highest tragedy (for him) and the most indubitable proof (for us) of what precisely lies at the heart of his mission. He bears sin to such an extent that he no longer knows (he is no longer able to know, in this state) that the Father is always there, and that precisely through what is happening (but beyond his capacity at this point to ascertain), his mission is in the process of being brought to its most perfect completion.

It is out of love for us and for the Father that Jesus allows himself to be transported into this state of alienation and abandonment, which is absolutely unimaginable and contradictory for him who, from all eternity, has tasted the presence of, and communion with, the Father. Out of love, “The one who knew no sin was made sin for us” (2 Cor 5:21).

Let us say it again: if it was possible for the Son to undergo this (from within the divine trinitarian and eternal unity), it is because he was in an absolute state of *mission* (which in turn was made possible by the *free* deposit of his divine being into the Father's hands). Because the issue turns on mission, which is accepted at the outset by love in the most perfect freedom, the central content of his experience, which is separation, expresses in reality the most encompassing mystery of love and the most intense union. (It is because divine unity is so vast, and because love, communion, and reciprocal trust are also absolute, that the Persons are able, at the Cross, to take on the experience that is most inconceivable for them: the experience of separation. This experience, to the extent that it is lived out in a state of mission, is not incompatible with trinitarian unity, but, on the contrary, it is precisely the most profound expression of this unity.)

*f. The Father, "bound" by the Pact of Love  
formed in heaven, allows the Son to go  
all the way to the end*

To put it in other terms, if the Son was able to undergo the cross, it is because *the Father, from all eternity, carries him*, and does so most especially at this particular moment. The Father who, ever since the divine council in heaven, accepted everything and took responsibility for everything, the Father who, over the course of the entire duration of the Son's mission, showed him that he did not leave him alone but was one with him (Jn 10:30; 16:32), the Father carries his Son while the Son is on the Cross, and he necessarily experiences, in his Fatherhood, the unspeakable suffering that his Son underwent. All of the blows that the Son receives here—how would it be possible to imagine that the Father, the one who sent him, would not himself suffer them? And when the Son sinks into the night of dereliction, is it possible that the Father—the *Father*—who sent his Son, would not at every moment carry him and painfully undergo everything that is at this moment happening to his Son? And yet, even when the Son calls him, and even when the Son ultimately breathes forth to him his Spirit (the Spirit of mission), the Father, mysteriously, remains hidden and silent. *The Father has abandoned the Son!* Though he remains present, he does not show himself to the Son; he does not make his presence manifest to him, and does not give him the knowledge that he has received the Spirit that the Son breathed forth. What is the reason for all of this? It is that, if he did show himself to the Son in this moment, he would by that very act prevent the complete fulfillment of the mission for which the Son had offered himself from all eternity.<sup>26</sup> To the extent that the Father would make himself visible, the Son would be unable to have an inner experience of the sinner's situation, and thus would be unable to take it upon himself and bear it in a genuine sense. Thus, it is out of love and respect for the Son and his mission, according to the Pact of Love that they formed together in heaven (and for which the Son, by means of his deposit, gave over all the responsibility to the Father), that the Father remains veiled and invisible to the

---

<sup>26</sup>A striking description of the trinitarian experience on the Cross and after the onset of the Passion, in Adrienne von Speyr, *Jean, naissance de l'Eglise*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1985), 106–109 [English translation, *John: Birthplace of the Church* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991)].

Son. Only extreme love explains this extreme behavior, which leads to the most extreme suffering possible. In order to allow the Son to go all the way to the end, i.e., all the way to the lowest point possible, in order to bear *all* of sin, the Father leaves the Son absolutely deprived of any consolation. Suffering can, here, only take on its greatest depth, its divine dimension: all the while being carried in the hands of the Father's love, but without being aware of it anymore (since the hands have become perfectly invisible to the Son), the Son, on the Cross, undergoes the genuine experience of being abandoned by the Father. He dies in *being abandoned by God* (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34).

Thus, Holy Saturday provides the final expression, the ultimate word, of the divine mystery of love and freedom, which is, strictly speaking, unspeakable.<sup>27</sup>

The Resurrection will make manifest that the whole of this experience, which was love and freedom from the beginning, was nothing but the supreme expression of a mystery of life. Divine love reveals itself as greater and more powerful than all things, so full of life that it does not need to exclude the extreme expression that consists in substitutionally taking on the very reality of death. For, in order to say it once more: the entire incommensurable weight of suffering that the Son experienced in his mission is precisely what the Father, in advance (1 Pt 1:20), had accepted in the divine drama. And everything was an expression of love. Seen from the perspective of the Trinity and by virtue of the divine drama, the fact that the Father allows the Cross allows the Son to express his love for the Father in the fullest way possible. Freedom is expressed on both sides in love: one suffers in anticipation so that the other can speak his love to the end, and thus also in suffering.

*g. The supreme expression of trinitarian love for man,  
who was lost and then redeemed*

We will never, in any way at all, manage to measure, or even less to "explain," the love that the trinitarian God makes manifest on the Cross, by allowing all of the world's sin to fall upon the Lamb, to the point of allowing him to die in the most profound night that one

---

<sup>27</sup>The mystery of the Cross includes the experience of being dead. But what is experienced here by Jesus as hell possesses a unique depth that is without analogy: the night of Holy Saturday is not "hell," but a *surpassing* of hell.

could ever imagine. The Cross, the Son's Passion of love, which is made possible because the Father took responsibility for it in advance within the divine drama (in the "pre-Passion"), will remain forever the absolute manifestation of God's love for us, which will never be surpassed in the entire history of the world.

*h. "Whoever sees me, sees the Father":  
the tragedy is the echo of the divine drama*

Starting from the tragedy of the Cross, the tragedy of the Son's death (announced by Jesus himself in the parable of the homicidal tenants), the believer's glance looks up and ascends to the eternal origin of the trinitarian mission, in the divine drama. The drama of love, which exceeds all times, has its burning core in the heart of the Father, when, moved by love and with full knowledge of the implications, he takes on the responsibility of sending the Son into the world in order to save it. "Whoever sees me, sees the Father," Jesus says to the apostle Philip (Jn 14:9, at the threshold of the Passion); the Son is the perfect expression of the Father (cf. Heb 1:3); the Passion of the Son who was sent is the perfect expression of what the Father who sends him undergoes in advance. That is why, in truth, whoever sees the Son's love on the Cross sees the Father's love shining through it. Whoever sees the infinite suffering accepted by the Son, sees in the same glance the suffering that was taken on in advance by the Father. The Cross's tragedy of love is the echo, in our history, of the drama of divine love lived out in eternity, in which, by giving us his Son, the Father gives us *everything*.—*Translated by D.C. Schindler.*

**ANTOINE BIROT** is a priest and professor of moral theology at the seminary of Aix, France.

*This essay is a shortened version of the author's original, "Drame divin, côté Père," published in the French Communio 26, no. 4 (July-August 2001).*