

“IN THIS WAY THE LOVE OF  
GOD WAS REVEALED” (1  
JN 4:9): ATONEMENT AS A  
“PATROGENETIC” PROCESS  
(PART II)

MARGARET M. TUREK

“[T]he Son’s bearing away the sin of the world is in the  
first place the work of God in his Paternity.”



1. A RECAP OF THE PROCESS OF ATONEMENT  
IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

In “Part I”<sup>1</sup> of the present article, we set out to sketch a theology of atonement that would make understandable St. John’s claim that we have come to know God’s love *precisely in view of* God’s sending his Son as atonement. “*In this way* the love of God was revealed to us. . . . In this is God’s love . . . that he sent his Son as expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9–10, emphasis added). Our

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1. See Margaret M. Turek, “‘*In This Way* the Love of God Was Revealed’ (1 Jn 4:9): Atonement as a ‘Patrogenetic’ Process (Part I),” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 47, no. 1 (Spring 2020): 7–47.

aim was—and remains—to make the mystery of atonement sufficiently transparent to the mystery of the triune God and, in the first place, to the mystery of God the Father.

With our attention focused on the Old Testament, and guided by the insights of our cadre of theologians (Norbert Hoffmann, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, and Pope St. John Paul II), we traced the gradually emerging pattern of a process whereby atonement involves “conversion,” not simply in the sense of turning away *from* sin, but also as the “conversion” *of* sin itself. The sinner turns back to God with filial love (regenerated by God; in this respect, God is *near*), such that now he endures the effects of sin (principally *distance* from God) as a condition that pains him, and by lovingly bearing this sin-wrought distance he turns sin around: from a refusal of filiation to an occasion of it. Sin is effaced in being converted into its opposite: *nearness* to God in the filial love-suffering of God’s *distance*.<sup>2</sup>

As we advanced through the Old Testament toward the New, we noted the shift that takes place in the subject who carries out this work of atonement: from the nation to representative individuals. The latter are indicated by the figure of the Suffering Servant of YHWH (Is 53), who has his successor in the mysterious death of “the pierced one” (Zech 12:10–11, 13:1), as well as in the voluntary “oblations” of the martyrs (Dan 3:29–42, 11:31–35, 12:1–10; 2 Macc 7:37–38).

## 2. CROSSING THE THRESHOLD TO THE NEW TESTAMENT

At the threshold to the New Testament we can discern a mounting sense of powerlessness in the face of sin. “Israel is living once more in the darkness of divine absence; God is silent. . . . God

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2. The Old Testament notion of sin with which we are working can be summarized in this way: sin is a complex reality consisting of three dimensions: (1) the evil deed, (2) the inner disposition of the doer, and (3) the effects or consequent punishments (chiefly, distance from God). See Norbert Hoffmann, “Atonement and the Spirituality of the Sacred Heart,” in *Faith in Christ and the Worship of Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 149; Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 265; Walther Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1967), 426.

seems to have abandoned his people. For that very reason, the land is full of unrest."<sup>3</sup> Israel's atmosphere of disappointment and unrest is surely related to its understanding that sin is not forgiven by God in unilateral fashion. There must be an interplay—evinced *reciprocal* love—between God's forgiving love, on whose side lies the initiative in reconciliation, and man's love, which cooperates by making atonement (cf. Ex 29:35–37; Lv 1:3–4; Heb 9:22).<sup>4</sup> "These two aspects . . . show that the declining Old Covenant was quite seriously two-sided."<sup>5</sup> What is especially noteworthy is the interpersonal quality of this process that unfolds according to a "patrogenetic" structure: the work of atonement originates from and is engendered by God's own power to love.

When, therefore, the New Testament claims to be the fulfillment of the Old Testament promise of forgiveness (Mt 1:21; Lk 1:77; Acts 2:38, 5:31), this claim springs from "the conviction that in the Cross event, atonement has now been achieved, finally and absolutely."<sup>6</sup> Since that which brings fulfillment must be understood together with what it fulfills, the task before us is to show how the three factors we identified as integral to the Old Testament process of atonement remain operative in the Cross

3. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1 (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 12. Balthasar adds, "Judaism never shakes off the suspicion that God did not truly re-establish the covenant after the return of the people from exile" (*Theology: The New Covenant*, vol. 7 of *The Glory of the Lord* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], 204 [hereafter cited as *GL7*]). N. T. Wright concurs: "For the bulk of first-century Judaism, the exile was simply not yet over. The promises of Isaiah and the rest had not been fulfilled" (*Jesus and the Victory of God* [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1996], 576).

4. Norbert Hoffmann puts it bluntly: "Forgiveness must take place in the form of atonement" ("Atonement," 157). In biblical revelation, forgiveness is carried out "not as 'mere forgiveness' but as atonement" (Romano Guardini, *Der Herr* [Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1937], 358, cited in Hoffmann, "Atonement," 158). See also Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2, 443–448, 453.

5. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: The Person of Christ*, vol. 3 of *Theo-drama: Theological Dramatic Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 118 (hereafter cited as *TD3*). See also *GL7*, 36.

6. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 157. This claim is reinforced by the astonishing fact that in view of the Cross event, straightaway Christians believe the Temple sacrifices to be definitively surpassed. See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 230.

event: God's sovereign initiative, God's passionate involvement, and man's willing collaboration.<sup>7</sup> Yet even so, we must appreciate "the staggering newness" of the Cross.<sup>8</sup> Now, atonement is made, not by a mere man whose work is engendered by God's grace, but as the human work of the "only Son" whom the Father sends as expiation (1 Jn 4:9–10). The interpersonal quality of this process—in a manner undreamt of—is "raised to the height of a 'Trinitarian event.'"<sup>9</sup> At work here is the reciprocal love of God the Father and God the Son incarnate affirming itself (for our sake) against sin.

Hence we begin to see that the interpersonal matrix within which God counters sin is of a truly theological kind. The personal polarity of Lord-servant, Lover-beloved, Father-son<sup>10</sup> is both affirmed and transcended in being transposed into the trinitarian relations in God when the beloved Son of the Father *is* atonement for the sins of the whole world (1 Jn 2:2). The two-sidedness of the covenant proves to be underwritten by God's intra-trinitarian communion of love. With this insight, however, more questions beg to be answered. Why is atonement for the *sins of men* the passion and death of the *incarnate Son of God*? "Where is the sense of proportion here?"<sup>11</sup>

To answer these questions, we will point to the constellation of mysteries that are fully revealed only in view of the Cross event: the creation and deification of human persons as "sons in *the Son*," the "inner nature" of sin, and indeed the inner life of the one Godhead as a tri-personal communion of *caritas*.<sup>12</sup>

7. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 147–148, 156; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Action*, vol. 4 of *Theo-drama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 229 (hereafter cited as *TD4*).

8. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 160. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 33, 104, 203–04.

9. International Theological Commission [= ITC], "Select Questions on Christology [1979]," in *International Theological Commission: Texts and Documents, 1969–1985* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009), 200. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 158–59.

10. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 73.

11. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 160.

12. Norbert Hoffmann, "The Crucified Christ and the World's Evil," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 53. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 36.

### 3. THE NEW TESTAMENT NOTION OF CREATION AND DEIFICATION "IN CHRIST"

Only in the New Testament does the ultimate origin and end of human persons come fully to light. God creates us "in Christ" (Col 1:16; 2 Cor 5:17), that is, in the "place" of the only begotten Son, who is closest to the Father's heart (Jn 1:18). For "being totally dependent on divine freedom, creatures can receive the gift of existence nowhere else but in the eternal Son," who eternally receives his divine being from the generating Father.<sup>13</sup> And we are created for one ultimate end: to become sons/children of God by deifying grace, which amounts to our participating in the Son's relationship with the Father within the Godhead (Gal 4:4–6; Eph 1:3–6; Col 1:16; Rom 8:14–17, 8:29; 1 Jn 3:1–2). God creates us for the purpose of drawing us into the mystery of generation—to be "born of God."<sup>14</sup> For this reason, filiation by grace entails "a participation in the natural Sonship of the Son, a participation in his personal relation to the Father."<sup>15</sup> And hence what grace brings about is "an assimilation to the Son's mode of existence"; it conforms us to the Son (Rom 8:29).<sup>16</sup>

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13. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, vol. 2 of *Theo-drama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 261 (hereafter cited as *TD2*). "God the Father has not created the world by 'turning outward,' but by turning to the Son within the divine life" (Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Last Act*, vol. 5 of *Theo-drama* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 247 (hereafter cited as *TD5*)).

14. See *Redemptoris Mater*, 7; Joseph Ratzinger, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of Christian Meditation" (15 October, 1989), 4.14–15. See also the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* [= CCC] §27, §§50–52; and Balthasar, *TD5*, 427–28; *TD2*, 266–68, 330; *GL7*, 310–11, 393–94, 405, 409, 422.

15. Gilles Emery, OP, *The Trinity* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2011), 127. Emery adds, through the gift of his Spirit, the Son "enables [believers] to participate by grace in his filial relation to the Father" (127). And Balthasar explains, it is "the 'Spirit of Sonship,' who makes us cry out: 'Abba, beloved Father!' (Rom 8:15). And when Paul continues: 'This Spirit confirms to our spirit that we are children of God' (8:16), then this . . . dialogue is not between our spirit and the *Pneuma*, but between our spirit, borne by the *Pneuma*, and the Father, a dialogue in which the *Pneuma* cannot be other than the *Pneuma* of the Son, in whom we have come to share in sonship: 'because we now are sons, God sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, who cries out: "Abba, beloved Father!"' (Gal 4:6)" (*GL7*, 405).

16. Emery, *The Trinity*, 127. For Emery, "the Son is the ontological model of the new *being* of believers. . . . The Christian vocation is thus *filial* by essence" (127) See CCC §398 and §1999; see also Balthasar *GL7*, 407.

If we ask what it means for God that human persons are created to become “sons in *the Son*,” our answer must convey a mystery of trinitarian proportions. God the Father wishes to be Father to his Son in all men. God the Son wishes to be Son to the Father in all men. God the Holy Spirit wishes to be the Spirit of sonship in all men.<sup>17</sup>

#### 4. THE NEW TESTAMENT NOTION OF SIN

Like our deification as “sons in *the Son*,” sin too is a mystery of trinitarian proportions. In order to see the real nature of sin, we must be enlightened by divine revelation. John Paul II states it plainly: “Faced with the mystery of sin, . . . it is not enough to search the human conscience, . . . but we have to penetrate the inner mystery of God, those Trinitarian ‘depths of God.’”<sup>18</sup>

If human beings are created to be “born of God,” we can say with Hoffmann that sin “is an interpersonal event between ‘Father’ and ‘son.’” Sin—to the extent that it is qualified by the revelation of the New Testament—“is the son’s rejection of Sonship.”<sup>19</sup> Sin in “its objective intentionality” implies opposition against God, not merely inasmuch as God faces us as Creator, but also inasmuch as God faces us as Father-begetter.<sup>20</sup> Instead of letting our “space” of human freedom be the “place” in which God begets us by grace (our only true and final salvation), we sinners let sin usurp this “place.” Sin usurps the place in which the divine Father-Son relationship wishes to extend itself to and in human persons.<sup>21</sup> Sin, in other words, rejects God the Father, who wishes to be Father to his Son in all men. It denies God the Son, who wishes to be Son to the Father in all men. And

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17. See Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 198–99.

18. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 2, 32. See CCC §§387–88.

19. Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 165.

20. See Hoffmann, “The Crucified Christ and the World’s Evil,” 58–59. Balthasar adds, sin “reveals that abyss in the creature whereby it contradicts its own character as analogy and image, a character that arises necessarily from its position within the trinitarian relations” (*TD4*, 328–29).

21. See Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 165; Balthasar, *TD4*, 329, 333–34; and CCC §398.

sin opposes God the Holy Spirit (Acts 7:51), who wishes to be the Spirit of sonship in all men.<sup>22</sup>

Since our ultimate end is to be a recipient of the love God *is* as trinitarian communion, then sin as opposition to this love "has superhuman rank."<sup>23</sup> Sin possesses an infinite quality inasmuch as it is the rejection of a gift of infinite magnitude: the passionate love with which the Father wants to beget (deify) us as adopted sons in his only-begotten.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, sin, as the rejection of this infinite love, has a "repercussive effect" on God that "exceeds the bounds of what is human and creaturely."<sup>25</sup> For the love offered and the love rejected are one and the same—love without measure. Since the Father's love is infinite, his passion of love in the face of rejection takes the form of infinite love-suffering.<sup>26</sup>

If these remarks show that *sin* has a meaning for the triune God, they also indicate to what extent *atonement*—God's countermovement against sin—matters to God. As we shall see below, the Cross event as vicarious atonement demonstrates the

22. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 198–99; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theology: The Old Covenant*, vol. 6 of *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 64 (hereafter cited as *GL6*).

23. Hoffmann, "The Crucified Christ and the World's Evil," 59.

24. John O'Donnell, SJ, explains in *The Mystery of the Triune God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 25: "The one addressed by God . . . [is] loved with that very love which the Father has for the Son from all eternity. The measure of God's love for the world is not the world but the eternal Son. Thus in God's relating himself to the world, the world is not the terminus by which God's love is measured. The measure is the eternal love of Father and Son. Hence the constitutive term of God's love for the world is the inner-divine terminus of the divine Son into which the world is drawn." As for sin, inasmuch as it means the refusal of man's eternal vocation to be beloved sons in the Son (Eph 1:3–5), it bespeaks the rejection of the divine Father-Son relationship in its gracious extension to human beings.

25. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 165. Indeed, "the 'consequences' of sin extend into the Heart of God" (*ibid.*).

26. For our previous discussion of God's impassible suffering, see Turek, "In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed" (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 16–24. Pertinent too is the stance of Jean Galot in *Jesus, Our Liberator* (Rome: Gregorian University Press, 1982), 262: "It is possible to grasp the immensity of sin only in the agony of Calvary. . . . In the anguished oblation of the Cross which possesses infinite value, we discern to what degree the offense wounded God in his infinite love."

Trinity's determination to stick to the ultimate aim of creation: the extension of the divine Father-Son relationship to human persons in the order of grace (Gal 4:4-6; Eph 1:3-6; Col 1:16; Rom 8:14-17, 8:29; 1 Jn 3:1-2). For us and for our salvation, the Father makes the Son "to be sin" (2 Cor 5:21) because those who became sinners are to become sons.

##### 5. ATONEMENT IS THE BEARING OF SIN BY GOD THE SON INCARNATE

If sin is committed by one who is "more than" a mere creature, nonetheless sin is the work of human freedom alone, and thus it should be dealt with by human freedom. Indeed, as we observed in our reading of the Old Testament, sin cannot be merely walked away from; it must be "borne away," effaced, eliminated. Sin is "borne away" in being transformed or converted into its opposite.<sup>27</sup> If sin is to be transformed into its opposite, then that which is the opposite of sin—*filial love* for God—must take up and bear sin away. But filial love can bear sin only insofar as filial love is willing to bear the effects of sin, primarily separation from the Father. And given the enormity of sin, its complete and definitive transformation calls for a filial love infinite in efficacy,<sup>28</sup> capable of plumbing the trinitarian proportions of sin. And there is the rub: although the work of atonement must involve human freedom, human freedom alone cannot turn round the repercussions of rejecting the extension of the divine Father-Son relationship to and in human persons. Alone it cannot convert sin's effects into material for the expression of a filial love infinite in quality that fully images (and thus perfectly glorifies) the Father's passion of love in the face of sin. This can be accomplished only by the divine Son who, taking up human freedom in his Incarnation, makes it the "place" in which a return of love—precisely in the

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27. See Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 30-32.

28. Thomas Aquinas argues for the "infinite efficiency" of the act of Christ's atonement in *Summa Theologiae* III, q. 1, a. 2 ad 2 (hereafter cited as *ST*); and for its "infinite worth" in *ST* III, q. 48, a. 2 ad 3. Moreover, he sees charity as the principle that renders the suffering of sin's effects efficacious as atonement (*ST* III, q. 14, a. 1 ad 1).



form of an infinite filial love-suffering—can be made to God the Father.<sup>29</sup> Atonement for all the sin of the world, simply put, is the assertion of incarnate sonship against sin. Sonship takes sin upon itself—without ceasing to be itself—in order to *transform* sin into the suffering form of filial love, thereby *effacing* it.

In Hoffmann's words,

The crucified Son . . . occupies the "place of sinners" and allows God to be "Father" there, . . . as he stands *in* their sinful estrangement from the Father and endures it. . . . And this signifies the *conversion of sin*. . . . As the incarnate Son experiences the nature of sin, sin is converted in its very nature: the proud self-assertion against God, the sinful desire to be free from God, is changed into pain, a pain that is as great as this Son's love. . . .

The incarnate Son takes our sinful estrangement into his own relationship with the Father. Here sin is fashioned as in a furnace until all that is left is the Son's [love-suffering], that is, that form of love that is the exact opposite of sinful rebellion, that *converts and nullifies* it.<sup>30</sup>

In its innermost reality, therefore, vicarious atonement "once for all" (*ephapax* in Heb 7:27, 9:12, 9:26, 10:10) is the Son's business *qua* son (1 Jn 2:2, 4:10).<sup>31</sup> This claim is in accordance with the biblical texts that regard the Cross event as the definitive disclosure of Jesus' divine sonship (Mk 15:39; Jn 8:28; Phil 2:6–11; Gal 2:20; Col 1:18–20). To neglect to see this is to miss what is specifically Christian—trinitarian—in the mystery of atonement.

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29. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 165: "If sin is to be 'wiped out,' 'borne,' something far beyond human powers must take place. True, God is a match for sin, but only he is so." See Balthasar, *TD4*, 319: "For how could the man Jesus have borne away the world's sin, except as God?" Indeed only the Son of God made man, "through his distinction-in-relation vis-à-vis the Father, can expiate and banish that alienation from God that characterizes the world's sin" (Balthasar, *TD5*, 260). See also *GL7*, 211 and 304.

30. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 167–68, 170 (emphasis added). Hoffmann explains, "It is on the Cross that the real transforming miracle takes place: sin is transformed into its opposite; now it has become the negative image of filial love, suffering sonship" (168). Hoffmann describes the relation of atonement to sin as a "*negatio negationis*" (*Kreuz und Trinität: Zur Theologie der Sühne* [Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1982], 45). Balthasar uses the same formula, "the negation of a negation," to describe Christ's work of atonement (*GL7*, 409). See also Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomius* 3.10.

31. See Hoffmann, "Atonement," 169.

Balthasar enriches this trinitarian soteriology as he tackles a central theme in the New Testament understanding of the Cross event: the “handing over” of Jesus to his enemies. For Balthasar, the primary sense of the “handing over” of Jesus applies to the Father, which Balthasar interprets in view of the Old Testament: God, in an act of judgment, withdraws from his sinful people and thereby delivers them over to their enemies. In like manner, the Father hands Jesus over to his enemies (Rom 8:32: *paredoken*; Jn 3:16: *edoken*; Acts 2:23; Mt 7:22, 20:18) by withdrawing from the one he has “made to be sin” (2 Cor 5:21).<sup>32</sup> Hence, on God’s part, the Son’s passion and death is an event of divine *judgment upon* sin, which nonetheless has *redemption from* sin as its goal (cf. Is 1:27; Rom 8:3).<sup>33</sup> To be sure, “in no way may one say that the Father willed that men should crucify his Son.”<sup>34</sup> The Father permits this evil to occur as a result of the free action of sinners. Nonetheless, God’s permissive will is not limited to mere nonactivity in the face of this sinful action; rather, God actively brings a greater good out of it. The Father permits sin only to deal actively with it by judging the sin that the Son, the Lamb of God, bears in our place. As we shall see presently, the Cross event is an act of divine *judgment against* God’s enemies and, simultaneously, the consummate act of divine *love of* enemies.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, there is a second sense of *paradidonai* that applies to Jesus himself. Jesus willingly hands himself over to the power of his enemies in full accord with the will of the Father (Jn 10:18; Gal 2:20).<sup>36</sup> This self-handing-over reveals the Son’s

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32. Balthasar, *GL7*, 224: “[Jesus] is abandoned ‘into the hands of men,’ or ‘of sinners,’ or ‘of the Gentiles.’ From the Old Covenant, the real one who abandons is God, and his abandoning (above all, of Israel) is ‘in each case an act of judgment, or an act of the divine wrath’ (Popkes). The one who is handed over in this way is ‘abandoned by God’ . . . (cf. 1 Sam 24:5).” In *Mysterium Paschale*, Balthasar notes, “Jesus, the ‘servant of God’ (Acts 3:13, 26; 4:27), the ‘just one’ (Acts 3:14), was delivered by God, like the just in the Old Testament, into the hands of sinners” ([San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990], 110–111). See also *ibid.*, 108; *TD4*, 241; and CCC §599, §604.

33. See Balthasar, *TD5*, 266; *GL7*, 47, 227, and 337.

34. Balthasar, *TD5*, 251. See also *TD4*, 334.

35. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 36, and *TD5*, 261.

36. Balthasar, *TD4*, 241: “The words of institution show that Jesus’ eucharistic self-surrender is prior to any action on men’s part to send him to

free collaboration with the Father's act of judgment upon sin.<sup>37</sup> It, too, can be traced back to the Old Testament, where certain individuals voluntarily gave themselves to suffering at the hands of their enemies in order to expiate the sins of the people.<sup>38</sup>

Thus both the Father's handing over of the Son and the Son's willingness to be handed over by the Father are in reality two manners of willing (paternal and filial) that operate in the closest unity of action. As Balthasar says, "the entire act of judgment remains contained within the love of the Father who gives the Son up (Jn 3:16) and the love of the Son who places himself at his [Father's] disposal."<sup>39</sup>

Yet there is more to it. Balthasar interprets this twofold "handing over" of Jesus in connection with one of the most difficult texts in the New Testament, namely St. Paul's assertion that "for us, God [the Father] made him [the Son] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5:21).<sup>40</sup> Balthasar's key move is to understand this text in light of Mark 14:34 and Matthew 27:46: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Insofar as the Son is made "to be sin," he bears the chief consequence of sin—separation from God. The Son incarnate, says Balthasar, endures "that darkness of alienation from God into which the sinner

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his death and that God's final and definitive covenant with men is sealed in the self-surrender of Jesus (Mt 26:28 par.; 1 Cor 11:25)."

37. André Feuillet calls for "un dialogue profond entre exégètes et théologiens," particularly with regard to the Passion of Jesus (*L'Agonie de Gethsémani, enquêtes exégétiques et théologiques* [Paris: Gabalda, 1977], 225). The "hour" is the hour of the definitive judgment (84–86), and the "Day of the Lord" (227–28, cited in Balthasar, *TD4*, 315). See also *TD3*, 119–20; *TD4*, 237, and the chapter entitled "Momentum of the Cross" in *GL7*, 202–35.

38. See Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 45; and CCC §§606–09.

39. Balthasar, *GL7*, 225. See *ibid.*, 207; *TD4*, 243, 334; and Thomas Kryst, *Interpreting the Death of Jesus: A Comparison of the Theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Raymond Schwager* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2009), 221–23.

40. See John Saward, *The Mysteries of March: Hans Urs von Balthasar on the Incarnation and Easter* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1990), 39.

falls.”<sup>41</sup> (This is scarcely a rare stance, however, as we will show in due course.)

To be sure, the Son does not identify with (in the sense of echoing) the actual “No” of sin. Jesus is always “pure loving Yes to the Father,” and so in his vicarious experience of sin he cannot be the simple equivalent of rebellious sinners.<sup>42</sup> This in no way lessens his inner suffering, however. Up until this “hour” Jesus has experienced the Father as ever present, intimately near, the one who always hears him (Jn 11:42). But now, the Father begins to hide himself. And Jesus, on his side, “renounces all perceptible contact with the Father.”<sup>43</sup> Hence, when the sinless Son is “made to be sin,” made to bear the experience of distance from the Father (“My God, . . . why have you forsaken me?”), this takes place insofar as the Son has willingly made his human heart a place in which the Father is allowed to work (Jn 14:10–11), albeit as one who conceals himself from his Son for the atonement of sin.

As Balthasar puts it,

The crucified Jesus suffers, in our place, our experience of estrangement from God. . . . For him, there is nothing familiar about it; it is all that is alien and horrible to him. He suffers something deeper than any ordinary man can, because only the Son incarnate knows in truth who the Father is and what it means to be deprived of him, to have (seemingly) lost him. . . . It makes no sense to call this suffering Hell,<sup>44</sup> for in Jesus there is no hatred

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41. Balthasar, *TD4*, 334.

42. Even less can Jesus’ cry of abandonment bespeak the suffering of the damned, since the damned cannot say “my God.” To the damned, God is a stranger, whereas Christ’s profound expression of God-forsakenness remains pure filial prayer to the Father. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 335–36; Jacques Guillet, *Jésus devant sa vie et sa mort* (Paris: Aubier, 1971), 240n30; and Seward, *The Mysteries of March*, 43.

43. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Unser Auftrag: Bericht und Entwurf* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1984), 54.

44. Balthasar says much the same in *TD4*, 336: “Jesus does experience the darkness of the sinful state, *not* in the same way as the (God-hating) sinner experiences it, but nonetheless in a deeper and darker experience. This is because it takes place in the profound depths of the relations between the divine Persons. . . . Thus it is . . . possible to maintain that Jesus’ being forsaken by God was the opposite of hell.” Still again, this time in *TD5*, Balthasar

of God, only a pain [of love] that is deeper than what an ordinary man could endure. . . . Nor can we say that the Father "punishes" his suffering Son in our place. It is not a question of punishment, since the work accomplished here between Father and Son with the cooperation of the Holy Spirit is utter love.<sup>45</sup>

Concerning the use of "punishment" language in regard to Jesus' sufferings on the Cross, Balthasar clarifies his own stance. It is plain to him that there are notions of "punishment" that must *not* be attributed to the Crucified. "If we say that an innocent man as such cannot be 'punished,' even if he is atoning for the guilty"—if "punishment" in the strict sense can fall only on the guilty—"then we shall avoid the term." (This Balthasar does in the text quoted above.) Nonetheless, it is permissible to follow St. Hilary of Poitiers in distinguishing "between the *sensus poenae*, which Christ experienced, and the *vis poenae*, for *pietatis est susceptio peccatorum ista, non criminis*."<sup>46</sup> Jesus can assume and experience

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criticizes Karl Barth's doctrine of predestination for being "too close to the view that the sufferings of the Cross were punishment, a view [I, Balthasar] rejected in *Theo-Drama* IV, 284–316; the Crucified Son does not simply suffer the hell deserved by sinners; he suffers something below and beyond this, namely, being forsaken by God in the pure obedience of love. Only he, as Son, is capable of this, and it is qualitatively deeper than any possible hell" (277).

45. Balthasar, "The Scapegoat and the Trinity," in *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 85. See also *TD5*, 266–267; and *To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 34. Consider too that if hell "is the pain of no longer being able to love" (Fyodor Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamazov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002], 322), then obviously Christ's love-suffering cannot be equated with hell.

46. Balthasar, *TD4*, 337. In *TD3*, he insists, "We must never forget that the Christological atonement must in no way be interpreted as a penance imposed on the Son by the divine Father" (242). This view is shared by Galot: "Adam's sin entailed punishments for mankind. . . . Reparation presupposes that someone assumes the consequences of sin in order to put an end to them. . . . When Christ took suffering and death upon himself, . . . he could not assume them personally as punishment, since he was innocent. . . . It would therefore be incorrect to say that Christ's was a punitive expiation, for in him expiation was accomplished only for the sins of others" (*Jesus, Our Liberator*, 267–68). "Le principe de la substitution pénale, inacceptable en droit strict (car il est de l'essence du châtement de tomber sur le coupable) prend une toute autre valeur à l'égard de la Rédemption" (Adhémar d'Alès, *Le Dogme catholique de la Rédemption* [Paris: Bureaux des Etudes, 1913], 180).

consequences of sin *pro nobis* while being wholly innocent himself.<sup>47</sup>

For Balthasar, moreover, the effects of sin penetrate to the depths of Jesus' rational soul. This inner penetration is indicated, Balthasar says, by Jesus' reference to "the cup" during his agony in the garden of Gethsemane. The cup is none other than the cup of God's wrath, often referred to in the Old Testament,<sup>48</sup> which "enters into the one who drinks it."<sup>49</sup> What does it mean for Jesus to willingly drink from this cup? For love of the Father, the Son consents to experience the Father's love in its mode as wrath:<sup>50</sup> paternal love in the form of self-concealment. If sin is the creature's "No" to God, divine wrath is God's "No" to sin.<sup>51</sup> Thus when the Father wills that his Son drink from this cup, the Son on his side willingly becomes the bearer of the world's "No" to God. To that "No," borne by the Lamb, the Father responds by "hiding his face," and thus his beloved Son endures subjectively the estrangement wrought by sin.

The relationship of the Outflow [the sent Son] with its Source [the sending Father] appears to be interrupted; [this "hour" in which the Lamb bears the sin of the world] is experienced by him as his abandonment by the Father. . . . [As the sin-bearing Lamb], he has identified himself with

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47. It is noteworthy that Thomas Aquinas, when discussing the Passion of Christ, occasionally speaks of *poena* (punishment, penalty) and even of *maledictios* (curse). See *ST* III, q. 14, a. 1 ad 1; a. 4 ad 2; q. 47, a. 3 ad 1; and q. 50, a. 1; *Compendium of Theology* 226: "Vere maledictus a Deo quia Deus ordinavit quod hanc *poenam* sustineret [he means death], ut nos liberaret." Death, for Aquinas, is the epitome of *poena*.

48. See Ez 23:32–34; Ps 79:9; Is 51:17, 51:22; Jer 13:13, 25:15–17, 27ff., 48:26, 49:12, 51:7; Lam 4:21; Obad 16; Hab 2:15–16; Zech 12:2. The cup Jesus must drink is the eschatological "chalice of the wrath of Yahweh" (Feuillet, *L'Agonie de Gethsémani*, 87–92). The chalice is offered to Jesus, yet he must accept it voluntarily (99, 212–13, 254).

49. Balthasar, *TD4*, 338.

50. "The Son experienc[es] on the Cross the Father's love in the form of his anger" (Balthasar, *TD5*, 267).

51. In *GL7*, Balthasar insists, "This wrath is no 'pretence,' but fully real: the categorical 'No' of God to the attitude that the world takes up over against him. God owes it to his loving covenantal righteousness to utter this 'No' and to maintain it as long as his will is not done on earth as in Heaven" (206). See Balthasar, *TD4*, 338–51.

what God must eternally reject from himself. And yet he is the Son incarnate, who can only proceed and live from the Source that is the Father, and this is the reason for his unfathomable thirst for the inaccessible [hidden] Father.<sup>52</sup>

Yet all the while, Jesus bears this with an attitude of unwavering obedience to the Father. He remains the pure "Yes" of filial love, even when he is plunged into the painfully experienced interior void of the Father's seeming absence. This experience does not contradict the last words of the dying Jesus in Luke's gospel, "Into your [unfelt] hands I commit my spirit" (23:46). For Jesus' self-entrustment to the Father is always and resolutely the fundamental attitude of his filial existence.<sup>53</sup>

Ratzinger, for his part, envisions Jesus' atoning passion and death in a similar light. This vision gains clarity when viewed against the horizon of the Old Testament and its (developing) understanding of death. In its early period, Israel's "phenomenology of death" was increasingly coupled with "an elucidation of death's spiritual content."<sup>54</sup> For the Israelite, death involved not merely the cessation of bodily life but also the loss of contact with God. "Death," explains Ratzinger, "was synonymous with non-communication between the Israelite and Israel's God."<sup>55</sup> The

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52. Balthasar, *The Threefold Garland* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 100. See also *GL7*, 216, 223; *TD4*, 334–35, 349–50.

53. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Man Is Created*, vol. 5 of *Explorations in Theology*, 58 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014) (hereafter cited as *MIC*). We cannot explore, within the limits of this article, Balthasar's proposals regarding the incarnate Son's "immediate vision" of the Father. One path to investigate would consider whether the Son's experience of absence is a kind of vision-in-negative of the (felt-as-absent) Father. This path would entail a paradoxical deepening of the idea of the God-forsaken Son having the beatific vision on the Cross. For now, a helpful introduction to Balthasar's view is found in Aidan Nichols, OP, *Balthasar for Thomists* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2020), 140–43; and Juan M. Sara, "Descensus ad inferos, Dawn of Hope," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 32, no. 3 (Fall 2005): 541–72. Among Balthasar's texts, see *Seeing the Form*, vol. 1 of *The Glory of the Lord* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 329 (hereafter cited as *GL1*); *GL7*, 216; *TD3*, 166–82, 195–96, 200; *TD5*, 256–64, 408–10.

54. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 81.

55. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 83. See *ibid.*, 80. Balthasar concurs: "The classic theology of the Old Testament characterizes death as the loss of the living relationship to God" (*GL7*, 229). If Jesus is to bear the sin of the world, "this

dead man descended into Sheol, into the silence of the pit, into “the God-forsaken land of darkness, a realm of distance from God.”<sup>56</sup> Indeed, the full extent of what made death dreadful was “seen from the fact that YHWH was not there.”<sup>57</sup> Suffering and sickness, accordingly, were viewed as extensions of the sphere of death insofar as they too destroyed relationships and communication. Significantly, Ratzinger identifies the life of prayer as the primary means whereby Israel advanced in uncovering the “deepest spiritual ground and content” of the phenomena of suffering and death.<sup>58</sup> Communion with YHWH through prayer provided the principal perspective from which Israel deepened its discernment of “the connection between death and sin.” The cause of this deadly rupture of relationship was traced back to sin, that is, to “a turning away from YHWH.”<sup>59</sup>

Ratzinger’s next move is to accentuate the breakthrough evident in the servant songs of Isaiah. This breakthrough to a new level of spiritual insight brought forth an interpretation of suffering and death now seen as material for *vicarious atonement*.<sup>60</sup> Death comes to be understood as “not simply the duly apportioned punishment for sins. It can be the proper path for someone who belongs to God and, treading that path in suffering, the Servant of God can open for others the door to life. . . . Suffering for God’s sake and that of other people can be the highest form of allowing God to

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act of bearing can be accomplished only in solidarity with the death that is the lot of all” (ibid.).

56. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 93.

57. Death was regarded as “a non-communication zone where life is destroyed precisely because relationship is impossible. . . . YHWH is not there. In relation to him there is a complete lack of communication in Sheol” (Ibid., 81).

58. “Above all in her life of prayer, Israel developed a phenomenology of sickness and death wherein these things were interpreted as spiritual phenomena. In this way Israel discovered their deepest spiritual ground and content” (Ibid., 81).

59. “Death, being linked with [sin, that is,] a turning away from YHWH, throws light on what such separation entails” (Ibid., 84).

60. “We have the interpretation of the painful experience of the Exile in the Servant Songs of Second Isaiah. . . . There, sickness, death, abandonment are understood as vicarious suffering, and in this way the realm of death is filled with a novel, positive content” (Ibid., 86).



be present."<sup>61</sup> Precisely here Ratzinger brings out the paradoxical pattern of forgiveness–atonement. The servant of God willingly takes on suffering and death for others and—without suppressing the experience of God–forsakenness that these evince—endures all as a modality of filial prayer. Thus death as God–estrangement can be transformed into a mode of communion with God. Death as “punishment for sins” can become a vehicle of God’s forgiving power. Through the suffering and death of the righteous, the effecting of God’s “justice can become so profound that it turns into the mercy of vicarious service.”<sup>62</sup>

When we turn to the New Testament, “the first thing to note,” says Ratzinger, “is that [it] quite clearly preserves the basic thrust of the Old.” Its newness does not consist in the formulation of different ideas concerning suffering, death, and vicarious atonement but “in the new *fact* which gathers acceptingly to itself all that went before and gives it its wholeness. This new fact is the martyrdom of Jesus . . . and his resurrection.”<sup>63</sup> Jesus, in dying our sin–conditioned death, takes upon himself the full depth dimension of death as the wages of sin (Rom 6:23). Hence he “dies in tears. On his lips is the bitter taste of abandonment and isolation in all its horror.”<sup>64</sup> All the same, Jesus’ death cry (Mk 14:34; Mt 27:46) is in essence a prayer, signaling that in him the experience of God–forsakenness for sinners’ sake becomes truly and definitively “the highest form of allowing God to be present.” As Ratzinger contends,

We must not forget that these words of Israel’s crucified Christ are the opening line of one of Israel’s prayers (Ps

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61. *Ibid.*, 86.

62. *Ibid.*, 86; see also 93. In “Part I” of the present article we showed that “a perspective is discernible in the Old Testament that regards the sinner’s God–forsakenness not merely as a state *from* which the beloved would be delivered, but also paradoxically as a means *by* which that deliverance would be accomplished” (“*In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed*” (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I),” 32). See also Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 577, 581, 591; and Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 152–53.

63. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 92 (emphasis original). See Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 157; and Balthasar, *GL7*, 402.

64. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 93. Jesus enters “the sphere of death [, which] is dereliction, isolation, loneliness, and thus abandonment” (*ibid.*, 81).

22:1 [21:2]). . . This prayer that rises from the sheer misery of God's seeming eclipse ends in praises of God's greatness. This element, too, is present in Jesus' death cry, which has been recently described by Ernst Käsemann as a prayer sent up from Sheol, as the raising of a standard, the first commandment, in the wilderness of God's apparent absence.<sup>65</sup>

More recently, in *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict maintains that Jesus' cry on the Cross

is no ordinary cry of abandonment. Jesus is praying the great psalm of suffering Israel, and so he is taking upon himself all the tribulations, not just of Israel, but of all those in this world who *suffer from God's concealment*. He brings the world's *anguished cry at God's absence* before the heart of God himself. He identifies himself with all who *suffer "under God's darkness"*; He takes their cry, their anguish, all their helplessness upon himself—and *in so doing transforms it*.<sup>66</sup>

Pope Benedict does not leave room for a stance that would see Jesus' atoning death as a merely exterior substitution for sinners. For him, plainly, Jesus' work of atonement is a process of *transformation* that entails an *interior* assumption of sin's estrangement from God. This is evident, not only in the texts quoted above, but in numerous additional passages from *Jesus of Nazareth*. Commenting on Jesus' baptism as anticipating his atoning death on the Cross, Benedict explains that "because of his equality with God, [the Son] can take upon himself all the sin of the world and then *suffer it through* to the end—omitting nothing in [his identification] with the fallen."<sup>67</sup> "He must *suffer through* the whole of it, in order *to transform it*."<sup>68</sup> Further on, when interpreting Jesus' agony in the garden of Gethsemane, Benedict

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65. Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 226.

66. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, 214 (emphasis added). "Psalm 22 is Israel's great cry of anguish, in the midst of its sufferings, addressed to the apparently silent God. . . . We can hear the great anguish of the one suffering on account of God's seeming absence" (ibid., 204).

67. Ibid., 20 (emphasis added).

68. Ibid., 26 (emphasis added).

avers that the process of transforming sin begins when "the abyss of sin and evil *penetrates deep within Jesus' soul.*"<sup>69</sup> Indeed, "the abyss of . . . evil and enmity with God he now takes directly upon himself, or rather *into* himself, to the point that he is 'made to be sin' (cf. 2 Cor 5:21)." <sup>70</sup> Yet this process of transformation cannot be efficacious without "the filial will" of Jesus surrendering itself totally to the Father's will.<sup>71</sup> Hence we have Benedict's brief summary of the process as the Son "taking men's 'No' upon himself and drawing it into his 'Yes' (2 Cor 1:19)." <sup>72</sup> Thereby sin "is truly absorbed, wiped out, and *transformed in the pain of infinite love.*" <sup>73</sup> Or as he phrases it elsewhere, the Son "*transforms evil in suffering, in the fire of his suffering love.*" <sup>74</sup> This manner of envisioning Jesus' work of atonement bears a strong resemblance to, and is clearly compatible with, Hoffmann's and Balthasar's view that sonship takes sin upon itself—indeed into itself, without ceasing to be itself—in order to transform sin into its opposite, thereby effacing it or wiping it out. Only the Son incarnate who is closest to the Father's heart (Jn 1:18) can, as the sin-bearing servant (Jn 1:29), suffer God's concealment such that the abyss of enmity with God is "converted" into material for a new and unparalleled covenantal intimacy with the Father.<sup>75</sup>

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69. *Ibid.*, 149 (emphasis added).

70. *Ibid.*, 155.

71. *Ibid.*, 156. Significantly, Benedict pauses to insist that "it is quite mistaken on the part of some theologians to suggest that the man Jesus was addressing the Trinitarian God in the prayer on the Mount of Olives. No, it is the Son speaking here [to the Father in the Spirit], having subsumed the fullness of man's will into himself and transformed it into the will of the Son" (*ibid.*). Benedict's stance reinforces the interpersonal quality (Father-Son, Lover-Beloved) of the theology of atonement under development here. See *ibid.*, 162.

72. *Ibid.*, 123. See also *ibid.*, 225.

73. *Ibid.*, 231.

74. Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, Homily for the Mass "*Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*" (Vatican City, 18 April, 2005), [http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html). Compare this with Balthasar's statement: the Cross event is the hour "when the eternal triune plan is executed to clear out all the refuse of the world's sin by burning it in the fire of suffering love" (*The Threefold Garland*, 99).

75. See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 20–21.

John Paul II agrees that what the Son incarnate suffered entails a profound subjective experience of separation from his Father. While the pope follows Thomas Aquinas in affirming that Christ “at the summit of his human spirit had a clear vision of God,” he differs from Thomas in holding that “the most acute pain for the soul of Jesus” involved an experience of the Father’s absence proportionate to the sin he bore.

At the summit of his human spirit Jesus had a clear vision of God and the certainty of his union with the Father. But in areas bordering on sensitivity, . . . the human soul of Jesus was reduced to a wasteland, and he no longer felt the presence of the Father, but he underwent the tragic experience of the most complete desolation. . . . The Father was silent now. That silence of God weighed on the dying Jesus as the heaviest pain [or penalty (*la pena*)] of all. . . . In the sphere of feelings and affection, this sense of the absence and abandonment by God was the most acute pain for the soul of Jesus, who drew his strength and joy from union with the Father. This pain rendered more intense all the other sufferings. That lack of interior consolation was his greatest agony. But Jesus knew that by this ultimate phase of his sacrifice, reaching the intimate core of his being, he completed the work of reparation which was the purpose of his sacrifice for the expiation of sins. If sin is separation from God, Jesus had to experience in the crisis of his union with the Father a suffering proportionate to that separation.<sup>76</sup>

In this way, John Paul II revises Thomas’s interpretation of Jesus’ abandonment by God. In his *Summa theologiae*, Thomas mentions it only once in order to say that the Father did not shield his Son from the power of his enemies.<sup>77</sup> John Paul II, for his part, takes pains to assert that this abandonment does not consist only in the “external” nonintervention of God when Jesus is tortured and killed by his enemies. There is more to it. The Father concealed himself from Jesus internally, which results in

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76. John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis (Vatican City, 30 November, 1988), 4–6. See also his apostolic letter *Salvifici doloris*, 14–16.

77. In Thomas’s view, Jesus is abandoned “externally” by his Father but does not suffer the internal experience of the Father’s self-concealment. See *ST III*, q. 47, a. 3; q. 46, a. 8; q. 50, a. 2 ad 1. For Balthasar’s remarks on Thomas’s treatment of this question, see *TD4*, 264.

an acute feeling of the absence of the Father in his soul. Jesus' soul thus enters into a "night," a darkening of his psyche in its relation to the Father. He no longer feels the paternal presence.

Likewise, John Paul II's theology of atonement agrees with that of Hoffmann, Balthasar, and Benedict in interpreting Matthew 27:46 ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?") in light of 2 Corinthians 5:21 ("For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin"). These two passages interpret each other, explains the pontiff. The "entire evil" of sin is unveiled when the incarnate Son is "made to be sin," that is, when the Son is made to endure separation from the Father, estrangement from God. John Paul II's words merit quoting in full:

The words uttered on Golgotha bear witness to this depth—unique in the history of the world—of the evil of the suffering experienced. When Christ says: "My God, My God, why have you abandoned me?" . . . these words on abandonment are born at the level of that inseparable union of the Son with the Father, and are born because the Father "laid on him the iniquity of us all" (Is 53:6). They also foreshadow the words of Saint Paul: "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin" (2 Cor 5:21). Together with this horrible weight, *encompassing the "entire" evil of the turning away from God* which is contained in sin, Christ, through the divine depth of his filial union with the Father, perceives in a humanly inexpressible way *this suffering which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God*. But precisely through this suffering he accomplishes the Redemption, and can say as he breathes his last: "It is finished" (Jn 19:30).<sup>78</sup>

What, then, is God's answer to sin? Sin is "annihilated," says John Paul II, in virtue of the filial love of Christ who vicariously accepts to suffer separation from the Father proportionate to "all human sin in its breadth and depth."<sup>79</sup>

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78. *Salvifici doloris*, 18 (emphasis original). Note the words, "*the rejection by the Father*," which allude to the Father's wrath, the Father's "No" to sin.

79. *Ibid.*, 17. "Sins are cancelled out precisely because he alone as the only-begotten Son could take them upon himself, accept them with *that love for the Father which overcomes* the evil of every sin; in a certain sense he *annihilates* this evil" (*ibid.*, emphasis original).

6. ATONEMENT IS A WORK ENGENDERED  
BY GOD THE FATHER

If our cadre of theologians is united in affirming that the Son, in vicariously bearing sin, suffers an acute feeling of the absence of the Father in his human soul, they are equally united in affirming the inseparable union of the incarnate Son with the Father throughout his work of atonement. Doubtless it would be a serious mistake to regard the Father's forsaking of Jesus on the Cross as signaling a real rupture of the Father-Son relationship. After all, to be the Son means to be always dependent on the Father (Jn 5:19–20, 5:31, 15:9).<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the Son's historical mission unto the paschal event may be seen as the graciously free expression of his eternal generation by the Father.<sup>81</sup>

This consideration already implies another point. According to John 14:9–12, Jesus maintains, "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. The Father who dwells in me is doing *his* works. Believe . . . because of the works themselves . . . the works that *I* do." Here Jesus avers that *the Father* is at work in the works that *the Son* performs. Paternal work engenders filial work, such that the Father's work is accomplished in the work of the Son. Now, inasmuch as the Son's work is to atone for the sin of the world (Jn 1:29; 1 Jn 2:2, 4:10), this work is not performed of himself (Jn 5:19, 5:30, 8:28), as if the Father, in sending the Son, kept himself back at an uninvolved distance, leaving the Son to act alone. Rather, in his act of sending, the Father remains *immanent* in the filial action of the One sent. Put differently, the Father's *sending* of the Son is always at the same time his *accompanying* of the Son; his is a sending-forth that remains

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80. "The Son does everything in the Father's will, whether he prays or acts, speaks or keeps silence, turns his attention to God alone or concerns himself with the Father's lost creatures. Whatever he does, he is always feeding on the food of the Father: 'My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work' (Jn 4:34)" (Balthasar, *MIC*, 57). See Balthasar, *GL7*, 250; and *Salvifici doloris*, 16.

81. "Thomas Aquinas . . . teaches that the Son's being sent, his mission (*missio*), into finite, passing time, is only the extension, the economic form, of his eternal procession (*processio*) from the Father" (Balthasar, *MIC*, 56). See *ST I-I*, q. 43, a. 2 ad 3; Balthasar, *TD4*, 356; and *GL7*, 213. The ITC affirms as much in its document "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," I.C.3.

always a being-with (Jn 8:16, 8:29, 16:32).<sup>82</sup> Hence for someone (truly) to hear and see Jesus in the performance of his mission would mean, at the same time, "to understand Jesus' deeds as the work of the Father, for they are 'performed with the power of my Father' (Jn 10:32), indeed they are 'the works of my Father' (10:37)."<sup>83</sup> Nothing in the mission of Jesus is separate from the Father's involvement. Nothing in his mission is beyond the reach of the Father's action, for in this respect he *is* the Father's action, inasmuch as he acts always by and with and for the Father.<sup>84</sup>

Thus there are solid biblical grounds for asserting, with Hoffmann, that "in Christ's atoning work, God the Father is acting with his *generative* power."<sup>85</sup> And again, "Christ's atoning work on the Cross . . . is effected by the Father's *generative* power and carried out by the incarnate Son in free, obedient love."<sup>86</sup> If Jesus, with all his love, experiences the distance that exists between sinners and God as an excruciating absence, it is because the Father, with all *his* love, remains always united to Jesus and unceasingly moves and sustains him in his task of taking upon himself the desolation

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82. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Does Jesus Know Us—Do We Know Him?* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 77: "Jesus, who was sent out by the Father, was yet accompanied on his 'journey' by the One who sent him." See Turek, "'As the Father Has Loved Me' (Jn 15:9): Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach to a Theology of God the Father," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 295–318.

83. Balthasar, *GL1*, 668. The Father "is seen to be present in the One who is sent (Jn 12:45), witnessing to himself in him (5:37; 8:18); he dwells with him (8:16,29; 16:32). . . . It is important for the One who sends to be 'known' (15:21), 'believed' (5:24; 12:44) and 'honored' (5:23) in the One who is sent" (*TD3*, 153).

84. Regarding Jesus' acting by virtue of the Father's "perpetually operative love," see Balthasar, *TD3*, 110; *TD2*, 87; *GL1*, 147, 614, 616; and *GL7*, 262, 283. Balthasar's remarks on the incarnate Son being accompanied by the Father recognize the *generative* nature of this paternal accompaniment: "The accompaniment has a hardly imaginable intimacy which is expressed in the Son's prayer-life and, moving from this, in his whole existence. . . . The Father's [accompanying] love . . . becomes [in the Son] its answering coactuation or realization," thereby showing its *generative* power (*The von Balthasar Reader*, eds. Medard Kehl and Werner Löser [New York: Seabury Press, 1985], 176).

85. Hoffmann, "Atonement," 172 (emphasis added).

86. *Ibid.*, 173 (emphasis added).

of sinners to the point of dying as their vicarious representative.<sup>87</sup> And therefore what Jesus experiences as God-forsakenness is the opposite of what in reality is taking place. On the Cross, sin is countered by the mutual love of the Father and the Son incarnate, which willingly endures the separation brought about by sin, in order that this “unholy distance” between God and sinners be transformed from within by the “holy intimacy” between the Father and Jesus. Hence Jesus’ cry of God-forsakenness bespeaks paradoxically his unparalleled union with the Father.

Balthasar unequivocally affirms this view: if “the Father allows the Son to endure dereliction among sinners,” nonetheless all the while the incarnate Son is “‘not only *moved* by the Father’s love but also *borne and enveloped* by it.’ In this, . . . *their common work of love* for the world, Father and Son are closer together than ever.”<sup>88</sup> Balthasar suggests that this state of God-forsakenness, when the Father conceals himself, “is rather like a photographic negative in its relation to the positive reality of a presence and a union that can never be disturbed.”<sup>89</sup> Consequently, when the Son says of the Father, “he has not left me alone” (Jn 8:29), he is thinking also of his atoning passion, when even in the most profound forsakenness the Father will remain always with him. This will be true even when Jesus no longer experiences it. He knows that, in this dereliction, when

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87. To be sure, God’s work *ad extra* is the common work of the three divine Persons, who operate by one and the same nature. Nonetheless “each divine person performs the common work according to his unique personal property” (CCC, 258). Hence those who (with our cadre of theologians) hold that the Father’s act of generation *ad intra* is an act of love are critical of the tendency to let the Father’s distinct mode of love *ad extra* dissolve into an undifferentiated, monadic divinity.

88. Balthasar, *TD4*, 348–49. Inner citation is from Paul Althaus, *Die christliche Wahrheit: Lehrbuch der Dogmatik* (Gütersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1949), 471–472. See also *TD4*, 262, 336.

89. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Engagement with God: The Drama of Christian Discipleship* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 44. “The depths of the saying [the cry of dereliction] are too deep to be plumbed, but the least inadequate interpretations are those that find in it a sense of desolation in which Jesus felt the horror of sin so deeply that for a time the closeness of his communion with the Father was obscured. Glover writes: ‘I have sometimes thought there never was an utterance that reveals more amazingly the distance between feeling and fact’” (*TD4*, 336; inner citation from Vincent Taylor, *The Gospel According to St. Mark*, 2nd ed. [London: St. Martin’s Press, 1966], 594).



the Father himself is manifest as the forsaken God, he will be in absolute unity with him.<sup>90</sup> For this love originates in the Father who moves Jesus to willingly act as the Father's definitive image and collaborator in suffering through the estrangement wrought by sin. Indeed, "through it all, the Son's relationship with the Father who generates him remains intact; in fact, everything serves to reveal this eternal relationship."<sup>91</sup> In short, the Son's bearing away the sin of the world is in the first place the work of God in his Paternity.

Thus the Father and the Son incarnate are jointly involved in this redemptive work: sin as opposition to the extension of their paternal-filial relationship in the economy of grace is countered by their shared willingness to endure mutual forsakenness as an expression of their unswerving love for us—"while we were enemies" (Rom 5:10).

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90. See Balthasar, *TD5*, 263; and *GL7*, 234, 249–50.

91. Balthasar, *TD5*, 264. If we ask after the possibility of the Father's self-distancing from Jesus during the Passion while he nonetheless remains at work in his Son, Balthasar answers that the condition for this paradoxical unity "must lie within the Trinity, in the absolute distance/distinction between the Hypostasis who surrenders the Godhead and the Hypostasis who receives it" (*TD4*, 333). The Father, in giving the Son autonomy (*Selbstständigkeit*), gives the Son the distance (*Abständigkeit*) that is necessary in order to maintain the personal distinction of the Other in the exchange of self-giving love between them. See *TD5*, 94; *TD2*, 257; and Balthasar, *Unless You Become like This Child* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 44 (hereafter cited as *UYB*). "In God," says Balthasar, "begetting is the definitive, irrevocable leaving-free [*Freilassung*] the Begotten" (*TD5*, 83). And the Begetter's modality of leaving-free entails both his *withdrawing from* and *remaining in* the Begotten. It is a kind of *withdrawal* inasmuch as the generating Father "detaches himself [*Sich-lösen*] from the One on whom he bestows this gift" (*TD5*, 93). Indeed, the Father's power to let the other be (*Sein-lassen-Können*) is expressed precisely as the power to separate himself from his own (*Sich-vom-Eigenen-abscheiden-Können*) (see *TD5*, 83, 85). At the same time, the Father's leaving-free the Son is a *remaining in* the Son insofar as the One Begotten, while receiving himself in such a way that he subsists in himself, is yet the hypostatic locus in whom the Begetter ceaselessly expresses his Paternity. This means that the Son's "receiving himself (in which he receives the divine substance)"—and hence infinite freedom—"can never be cut off from the paternal act of generative love" (*TD5*, 92). Hence Balthasar understands Jesus' affirmation that "the Father is greater" as expressive of the experience of the eternal Child who "knows himself to be sheer Gift that is given to itself, and which would not exist without the Giver, who although distinct from the Gift, nonetheless gives himself within it" (*UYB*, 44). See also Ferdinand Ulrich, *Leben in der Einheit von Leben und Tod* (Freiburg: Knecht, 1973).

To be sure, the role of the Holy Spirit is indispensable here too, since the Holy Spirit maintains the unity between the Father and the incarnate Son in their common work of reconciling the world to God.<sup>92</sup>

#### 7. THE GOD-FORSAKEN SON REVEALS THE FORSAKEN GOD, THE FATHER

Thus far we have focused primarily on atonement as a work of eliminating sin by transforming it from within through the power of filial love. Going forward we will extend the scope of our discussion of the Son's mission of atonement to include its twin dimension: its *revelatory* nature and purpose.<sup>93</sup>

Our first move is to acknowledge that Jesus Christ defines his mission as doing the will of him who sent him (Jn 4:34, 6:38, 10:18), performing his Father's works (4:34, 9:4, 14:10), speaking his Father's words (3:34, 7:16, 12:49–50, 14:10, 14:24)—professing, moreover, that he can only do what he sees the Father doing (5:19). Plainly, “according to Jesus Christ's own portrayal of himself . . . [he presents] himself consistently as the definitive ‘interpretation’ (cf. Jn 1:18) of God the Father.”<sup>94</sup>

Our next step is to discern a twofoldness in the person of the Son incarnate as he performs his mission. He is simultaneously the Father's self-expression (*receptive* to paternal action) and his own filial manner of expressing himself (*actively* corresponding to, and thereby interpreting, the action of the Father). This is indicated by the words of the Johannine Jesus: “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. The Father who dwells in me is doing *his*

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92. We cannot, within the limits of this essay, elaborate on the role of the Holy Spirit in the Cross event. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 404; *TD3*, 151, 186–201, 520–23, 533; *TD4*, 257; and *TD5*, 262. See also Hoffmann, “Atonement,” 177–78.

93. We have already discussed how the process of atonement as pictured in the Bible is profoundly revelatory of the living and loving God in Turek, “*In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed*” (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I),” 34–45.

94. Balthasar, *TD3*, 506. “Jesus himself consciously . . . claimed to be the revealer of the Father (Jn 14:9)” (*GL1*, 189). Additionally, see Balthasar, *GL1*, 135, 154, 189, 195, 611–13; *TD2*, 91; *TD3*, 172; *UYB*, 10; and “God Is His Own Exegete,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 280–87.

works. Believe . . . because of the works themselves . . . the works that *I* do" (Jn 14:9–11, emphasis added). If earlier we gleaned from this text that the Son's work is *generated*, now we perceive that it is also *imitative*. Filial work *mirrors* or *images* paternal work. Jesus constantly points back to the Father as the original model on whom he patterns his life. The gospels bear this out in numerous texts, perhaps most notably in John 5:19–20: "I solemnly assure you, the Son cannot do anything by himself—he can only do what he sees the Father doing. Whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise. For the Father loves the Son and shows him everything that he himself does." Jesus, in seeing the Father's love, is moved to dispose of himself in imitation of his paternal Origin. Hence Balthasar maintains that even "the Son's suffering love becomes the inverted mirror-image of the Father's love."<sup>95</sup>

On this matter, too, Ratzinger's stance is congruent with Balthasar's. He affirms that Jesus' whole human existence, including his suffering love as the sin-bearing Son, is in the service of his "interpretation" (Jn 1:18) of the Father.<sup>96</sup> In his own words,

He who sees Christ truly sees the Father. . . . "The surrender to death makes the love of the Father visible. . . . The Crucified One is 'the image of the invisible God' (Col. 1:15)." . . . Therefore he who sees Christ, the Crucified One, sees the Father, and the entire Trinitarian mystery. For we must add, when one sees the Father in Christ, *then* in him the veil of the temple is truly rent, and the interior of God is laid bare.<sup>97</sup>

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95. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 86. See *The von Balthasar Reader*, 127; *TD3*, 157, 224, 511; *GL7*, 376–77; and Turek, "As the Father Has Loved Me" (Jn 15:9)."

96. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Benedict describes the mission of Jesus as "the concrete realization of the Father's action" (vol. 1, 208). "By the way he acts, Jesus himself becomes 'the revelation of the one he called his Father.' . . . Jesus bases his conduct on the Father's. . . . Jesus justifies his own conduct by relating it to, and identifying it with, the Father's (cf. Lk 15:2)" (*ibid.*, 207–08).

97. Joseph Ratzinger, "Jesus Christ Today," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 17, no. 1 (Spring 1990): 80–81, with inner citations from Christoph Schönborn's *Die Christus-Ikon* (Schaffhausen: Novalis-Verlag, 1984), 96–97. John Paul II also asserts, "The Paschal Mystery is Christ at the summit of the revelation of the inscrutable mystery of God. It is precisely *then* that the words pronounced in the Upper Room are completely fulfilled: 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14:9)" (*Dives in misericordia*, emphasis added).

Benedict reiterates this view in the first volume of *Jesus of Nazareth*:

“When you have lifted up the Son of man, *then* you will know that I am He” (Jn 8:28). On the Cross, his Sonship, his oneness with the Father, becomes visible. . . . On the Cross, Jesus is exalted to the very “height” of the God who is love. It is *there* that he can be “known,” that the “I am He” can be recognized. . . . What we find here is not metaphysical speculation, but the self-revelation of God’s reality in the midst of history.<sup>98</sup>

For Benedict, it is “on the Cross”—when enacting his Passion of love “to the end” (εἰς τέλος: Jn 13:1)—that Jesus reaches the “height” of his exegesis of God’s love as Father.

A further aspect, which we noted previously, emerges in volume two of *Jesus of Nazareth*, where Benedict pinpoints the inmost essence of Jesus’ suffering as the sin-bearing Son. Jesus’ cry on the Cross (Mt 27:46; Mk 15:34) indicates for Benedict that Jesus is enduring “for us” the experience of estrangement from the One who sent him. “He is taking upon himself” the state of all those “who *suffer from God’s concealment*” and who cry out “*at God’s absence*.”<sup>99</sup>

Now, if, as Benedict holds, the Son’s “surrender to death makes the love of the Father visible,”<sup>100</sup> and if “death’s spiritual content” is “distance from God,”<sup>101</sup> then we suggest what comes to visibility regarding the *Father’s* love is *his* willingness to endure sin-wrought distance from his beloved as a modality of his generative power, that is, the form that paternal love takes in producing its answering filial image unto the atonement of sin. Hence the Crucified, precisely in suffering “distance from God,” unveils the suffering love in the heart of

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98. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 349 (emphasis added). See *ibid.*, 6–7, 137.

99. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, 214 (emphasis added). “In this last prayer of Jesus, as in the scene on the Mount of Olives, what appears as the innermost heart of his passion is not any physical pain but *radical loneliness*”—suffering the Father’s apparent absence (Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, 227).

100. Ratzinger, “Jesus Christ Today,” 80.

101. Ratzinger, *Eschatology*, 81, 93.

the Father, such that "through the suffering Son, [we] recognize the true God."<sup>102</sup>

John Paul II, for his part, is equally insistent that we see the suffering *Father* in his crucified Son.<sup>103</sup>

It is not possible to grasp the evil of sin in all its sad reality without "searching the depths of God." [If the world is to be convinced concerning sin, it will] have to mean *revealing suffering. Revealing the pain . . .* on account of sin [, which Scripture, notwithstanding certain anthropomorphic formulations] seems to glimpse in the "depths of God" and in a certain sense in the very heart of the Trinity. The Church, taking her inspiration from Revelation, believes and professes that sin is an offense against God. What corresponds, in the inscrutable intimacy of the Father, the Word and the Holy Spirit, to this "offense," this rejection of the Spirit who is gift and love? . . . In the "depths of God" there is a Father's love that, faced with man's sin, in the language of the Bible reacts so deeply. . . . This inscrutable and indescribable *fatherly "pain" will bring about* above all the wonderful economy of redemptive love in Jesus Christ . . . in whose humanity the "*suffering*" of God is concretized.<sup>104</sup>

*If sin caused suffering, now the pain of God in Christ crucified acquires through the Holy Spirit its full human expression. . . . In Christ there suffers a God who has been rejected by his own creature: "They do not believe in me!"; but at the same time, from the depth of this suffering . . . in the depth of the mystery of the Cross, [divine] love is at work, that love which brings man back again to share in the life that is God himself.*<sup>105</sup>

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102. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, 224. For more on Benedict's doctrine of God's impassible manner of suffering, see Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 19–24.

103. It goes without saying that this stance is not to be mistaken for "patripassianism," which is a brand of modalism. For more analysis and commentary, see Turek, *Towards a Theology of God the Father: Hans Urs von Balthasar's Theodramatic Approach* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2001), 269–70.

104. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 39 (emphasis original). Hoffmann concurs: "The 'consequences' of sin extend to the Heart of God" ("Atonement," 165), as does Robert Barron in *And Now I See: A Theology of Transformation* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1998), 218.

105. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 41 (emphasis original).

In what does God's "fatherly 'pain'" consist? John Paul II situates this pain in the face of sin, understood as the rejection of God's love.<sup>106</sup> This suggests that the pain of God that is "concretized" in his crucified Son involves sin-wrought estrangement. This suggestion is supported by John Paul's teaching on the essence of the human suffering of Christ on the Cross. As we saw above (in section 4), the pope maintains that "the most acute pain for the soul of Jesus"—that pain that reveals God's "fatherly 'pain'"—consists in suffering separation on account of sin. "He no longer felt the presence of the Father. . . . The Father was silent now. . . . This sense of the absence and abandonment by God was the most acute pain for the soul of Jesus."<sup>107</sup>

Taken together, these texts of John Paul II uphold the notion that Jesus' expiatory suffering of separation brings to completion the historical revelation of the *passio caritatis* of the almighty Father.<sup>108</sup> Far from being incapacitating, the Father's suffering love is *effective* (is "at work") in Jesus as the divine archetype and generative source of his bearing sin in filial fashion, unto sin's atonement.

At this point we can say that if the Father directs Jesus to expiate sin by bearing the God-forsaken state of sinners, it is only because the Father, on his side, is first to allow himself to endure being forsaken (Hos 11:1–8; Is 1:2, 30:9). It is this resolutely passionate love shown by the Father that serves Jesus as the model that he imitates in allowing himself to be forsaken on the Cross (Jn 5:19–20). For such a paternal love is worthy of nothing less and engenders nothing other than a return of filial love in kind. And so it is that the crucified Son as "the God-forsaken" images and thus reveals "the forsaken-God," his Father.

Given the positions of our recent popes, we can hardly regard as idiosyncratic Balthasar's assertion that the climax of

106. Cf. Dt 32:6, 32:18; Is 1:2, 1:4, 63:16, 64:7; Jer 31:9; Hos 1:2, 1:9, 4:10, 8:3, 11:1–11; Mal 2:10. Cf. also Jon D. Levenson, *The Love of God: Divine Gift, Human Gratitude, and Mutual Faithfulness in Judaism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 101.

107. John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis (Vatican City, November 30, 1988), 4–6.

108. See John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 65–66. For more on John Paul II's doctrine of God's impassible manner of suffering, see Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 16–19, 22.

the Son's revelation of the Father is presented in the figure of the Forsaken One.

"This is what the Father is like." . . . The high point of Jesus' interpretation of God is the time . . . that the Son on the Cross is forsaken by the Father. . . . Here, certainly, Jesus is the man who takes away the sin of the world, and God can only turn his face away from the monstrous proportions of this sin [*an allusion to God's wrath*]. But is this God who has turned his face away not also a forsaken God? [*an allusion to God's paternal love-suffering*] "He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14:9)—he who has seen my forsakenness has seen also the Father's forsakenness. So far does Jesus' transparency go, allowing the Father to shine through him.<sup>109</sup>

Noteworthy here is that Balthasar brings together, albeit allusively, wrath and love-suffering as two aspects of the Father's passionate involvement in the Cross event.<sup>110</sup> If up until now we have concentrated on the latter aspect—the Father's love-suffering—next (and finally) we shift our focus to the former: the Father's wrath at work in the Cross event.

#### 8. DIVINE WRATH IN THE CROSS EVENT

Anger at sin is an ineradicable feature of the biblical God. As we noted in the first part of this article (on atonement in the

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109. Balthasar, *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, 103–104 (author's italicized notes in brackets). In *TD3*, Balthasar states that "in the cry of dereliction on the Cross, Jesus reveals how God is forsaken by sinners" (225). "The highest interpretation of the Father, takes place . . . in the last stage of the earthly existence of Jesus—in the Passion" (Balthasar, "God Is His Own Exegete," 283). See also *GL7*, 85–86; and Turek, *Towards a Theology of God the Father*, 43–45.

110. As we explained in the first part of this article, (1) God's love as *hurt* is divine love in its *exposure to* the beloved's "No." This is God's love in the mode of letting *himself* bear the absence of his beloved; (2) God's love as *wrath* is divine love in its *opposition to* the beloved's "No." This is God's love in the mode of "hiding his face," withdrawing himself: letting his beloved bear *his* absence. See Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 40.

Old Testament),<sup>111</sup> God's wrath in the face of sin is not an independent power of destruction separate from or set in opposition to God's love. Rather, God's wrath is the form that God's love takes when it encounters whatever is opposed to and hardened against the designs of his love. It is always exercised in the service of these designs. God's wrath coincides with his zeal to carry out the work of his love against sin: producing living images of his own paternal "heart" while overcoming sin in all its consequences. This side of the eschaton, divine wrath serves his beloved's salvation.<sup>112</sup> This carries over into the New Testament, where "God's 'anger' becomes the burning and 'consuming fire' (Heb 12:29) of his unshakable love, which must annihilate, cauterize, and excise (Heb 4:12) all that is not love."<sup>113</sup>

We find support for this understanding in the gospels, which portray Jesus as displaying anger at the obstacles that impede the working of divine love (see Mk 3:5, 4:10, 9:25; Mt 11:14, 20–24, 15:7, 12:34; and Lk 14:21). This support is reinforced by the earnestness and boldness with which our cadre of theologians interprets Jesus as the definitive revealer of the Father. Undoubtedly the works and words of Jesus derive from one who loves with a fully human nature. Nevertheless, these are

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111. See Turek, "'In This Way the Love of God Was Revealed' (1 Jn 4:9) (Part I)," 35–40. See also J. Fichtner, *Der Zorn Gottes im Alten Testament*, 404, 408–10; Eichrodt, "Zorn Gottes," in RGG [= *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart*], vol. 4 (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1930); H. Brandt, "Zorn Gottes IV. Dogmatisch," in RGG, vol. 4, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1932). "The wrath of God is nothing other than an aspect of God's love" (Martin Bieler, "God and the Cross: The Doctrine of God in the Work of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 1 [Spring 2015]: 72).

112. "God's anger only 'turns' or 'stands still' (2 Macc 7:38) when sin is overcome in all its consequences, when the sinner is finally 'cleansed' and 'healed' from sin, and forgiveness is fully achieved" (Hoffmann, "Atonement," 151). See Jer 31:31–34; Ez 36:24–26, 33; J. Scharbert, "Vergebung," in *HTHG* [= *Handbuch Theologischer Grundbegriffe*], vol. 2 [Munich: Kösel-Verlag, 1963], 741–42; and Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1961), 160.

113. Balthasar, *TD3*, 119. For Balthasar, God's anger expresses a "free self-involvement that is controlled by love and righteousness" (*TD4*, 344). It contributes to implementing his loving will against man's ego-driven resistance. See *GL7*, 205, 300; *TD5*, 266; Nichols, *OP*, *Balthasar for Thomists*, 88.



truly understood only "if they are seen and expounded as expressing the nature of divine love."<sup>114</sup> Accordingly, those gospel texts that speak of Jesus' anger can be read as revelations of "the divine attitude."<sup>115</sup> This reading is endorsed by the International Theological Commission, which regards Jesus' anger (Mk 3:5) as "a manifestation of a certain way of behavior on God's part."<sup>116</sup>

Indeed, we can look back (albeit briefly) to the mission of the prophet in the Old Testament, where certain features throw light on and substantiate this reading. Discernible there is "a fellowship in *attitude* and *destiny*" between God and the prophet, which is brought about by the Spirit of God. To begin with, the Spirit communicates to the prophet God's *pathos* of love toward his people. "It is not only the knowledge of God's designs in history that is communicated to him, but also the *pathos* of God's heart: wrath, compassion, sorrow . . . (Hos 6:4; 11:8; Is 6:8; Jer 6:11)."<sup>117</sup> The prophet, for his part, is to be "sym-pathetically open, by divine design, to God's *pathos*."<sup>118</sup> In this way, the prophet is empowered both to endure (to receptively appropriate) and to reproduce (to actively manifest) the modalities of God's love in its exposure and opposition to sin. Precisely for this reason, the prophet is also drawn into a fellowship in *destiny* with God. Insofar as the prophet expresses God's disposition toward a sinful people, he himself becomes exposed to their hostility toward God (cf. 1 Sam 8:8; Ps 69:8, 69:10; Jer 15:15). Surely it is possible to recognize these features of the prophetic mission in that of Jesus Christ, even if in him we encounter something greater than a prophet (Mt 12:41). From the vantage point of the Old Testament, there are grounds for regarding the crucified Christ as both the consummate revelation of the Father's anger

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114. Balthasar, *Prayer*, 184.

115. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 340–45; *The Truth of God*, vol. 2 of *Theo-logic: Theological Logical Theory* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 139.

116. The ITC, "Theology, Christology, Anthropology," II.B.2 (emphasis added). The ITC continues, "In other places [of the New Testament] it is stated explicitly that God gets angry (Rom 1:18; 3:5; 9:22; Jn 3:36; Rev 15:1)" (ibid.).

117. Gerhard von Rad, *Old Testament Theology*, vol. 2 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1967), 63, cited in Balthasar, *GL6*, 234.

118. Balthasar, *TD4*, 344.

and, just so far, the voluntary brunt-bearer of animosity against the Father so as to reveal sin for what it is (Mt 21:37–39).

In an effort to refine our sketch of a biblical and trinitarian understanding of divine anger (as to its essence and motive as well as its definitive revelation and agency in the Cross event), we turn to the work of Martin Bieler in his book *Befreiung der Freiheit*. Here Bieler distinguishes “true anger” from sheer vengeance. Sheer vengeance is ego-driven and lacks the motivation of love for another, whereas “true anger” works to remove the hindrances to the attainment of good, even the good of one’s enemies, who are to be regarded as creatures of God and whom God wills to be converted and saved. “True anger” is motivated by love. “Indeed, anger *is* love in its whole impetus.”<sup>119</sup> “True anger,” therefore, “is not primarily an urge to inflict injury, but rather distinguished by a passion to remove the hindrances that disunite man from the good.”<sup>120</sup>

Bieler notes that for St. Thomas the characteristic manifestation of anger (the irascible power) is not a lashing out but rather *an assumption and bearing of all the difficulties on the way to accomplishing the good goal*. Notably, Thomas holds that the highest concrete expression of the power of wrath (*vis irascibilis*, the irascible power) for a human being is the readiness for *martyrdom* in the face of opposition to the gospel (good news). “Truly the principal act of the irascible is to overcome even death on account of Christ.”<sup>121</sup> If this is true, and if martyrdom is the highest form

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119. Bieler, *Befreiung der Freiheit: Zur Theologie der stellvertretenden Sühne* (Freiburg: Herder Verlag, 1996), 171. Balthasar agrees, “The wrath of God and his love, in the final analysis, are but one. Consult Saint Thérèse of Lisieux on this point, and she will confirm it for you” (*To the Heart of the Mystery of Redemption*, 33). Clement of Alexandria says the same in *Paedagogus*: “Even the passionate rising of anger—if one wishes to call [God’s] reprimands true anger—comes from his love for man.”

120. Bieler, *Befreiung der Freiheit*, 170–171. Bieler refers to Thomas’s *De veritate*: “The irascible power [anger] is in a certain way ordered to the concusible [passions that are grounded in love and aim simply for the good] as its defender” (q. 25, a. 2). Yet, in Thomas’s view, anger, properly speaking, is never attributed to God (*ST I*, q. 19, a. 11; *II-II*, q. 162, a. 3, etc.). Nonetheless, Thomas concedes that it is possible to speak of God “hating” sin and sinners, and so of being “reconciled” (*placatus est*: *III*, q. 49, a. 4) in the context of a work of atonement (*III*, q. 49, a. 4 arg 2; resp 2).

121. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis IV*, d. 49, q. 5, a. 5 qc 1 co: “Irascibilis vero actus potissimus est etiam mortem propter Christum superare.”

of *imitation of Christ*, then how are we to think of *Christ's own* exemplary act of overcoming mankind's opposition to God?<sup>122</sup> It would seem that Christ, in assuming and bearing the sin of the world, and thereby accomplishing the Father's will to save (Jn 3:17, 19:30; 1 Tim 2:4), is the pre-eminent concrete expression of the irascible power (anger) in his humanity. Moreover, if with St. Irenaeus we regard Christ as "the visible of the Father"<sup>123</sup>—for the humanity of Christ serves as the language in which he expresses what God the Father is like (Jn 1:18, 14:9–11)<sup>124</sup>—can we say then that the *crucified* Christ is the highest human expression of divine wrath, that is, of divine love in its work of eliminating sin? In this perspective, "wrath is wholly dedicated to the good of another, as Aquinas insists it must be, even as it works determinedly against the evil that the other does."<sup>125</sup>

But now if the crucified Son is the highest human expression of divine wrath engaged in the work of eliminating sin, what is the *manner* or *way* in which Christ manifests anger? Balthasar's observation may shed light on these questions. "The instruction of Jesus, which expresses the behavior of God, newly and ultimately, moves toward a refusal to hit back, toward an ultimate defenselessness."<sup>126</sup> What is provocative here is that the crucified Son manifests divine wrath in a disposition of *defenselessness* to the end of *overcoming* sin for the sake of those who are yet enemies. Indeed, whatever violence is on display during Christ's Passion is due, not to divine wrath, but to the fury of the demonic powers against God, and to those men who are in some way under its influence. As Balthasar notes,

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122. This question is raised by Thomas Kryst, "Interpreting the Death of Jesus: A Comparison of the Theologies of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Raymond Schwager" (PhD diss., The Catholic University of America, 2009), 396–397.

123. Irenaeus of Lyons, *Against Heresies* bk. 4, chap. 6.

124. See CCC §470.

125. Kryst, *Interpreting the Death of Jesus*, 398.

126. Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Crucifixus etiam pro nobis," *Internationale Katholische Zeitschrift – Communio* 9 (1980): 26–35, at 28–29, cited in Kryst, *Interpreting the Death of Jesus*, 398. See Balthasar, *GL7*, 321, 437–38.

In the suffering of the living Jesus, there is a readiness to . . . let the whole power of sin surge over him. He takes the blows and the hate they express upon himself and, as it were, amortizes it through his own suffering. The “powerlessness” of suffering (and the active readiness to undergo that powerlessness) outlasts every power of hammering sin. . . . [The] sinful impatience against God is finally exhausted in comparison to the [powerful] patience of the Son of God. His patience undergirds sin and lifts it off its hinges.<sup>127</sup>

This is the final filial iteration of divine love’s all-powerful “powerlessness.” On the side of *sonship* we find “true anger” in the form of defenseless self-surrender with the will to save enemies. On the side of *sin* we find the contrary: violent aggression against the meek and innocent Son.

This view that the Son’s defenselessness before sinners is a form of true anger against sin finds support in St. Thomas, who says that “the irascible power tends toward overcoming contraries and winning out over them.”<sup>128</sup> Now, the work of atonement achieved by Jesus Christ involves filial love overcoming its contrary: sin. In this reading, atonement is the assertion of sonship against sin. Sonship takes its contrary (sin) upon itself in order to transform sin into its contrary (sonship), thereby effacing it.

In this trinitarian perspective, divine wrath is purified of violent aims separated from love.<sup>129</sup> Instead, it is characterized

127. Hand Urs von Balthasar, “On Vicarious Representation,” in *Spirit and Institution*, vol. 4 of *Explorations in Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 421. “The quality of the loving obedience of the Son of God toward the Father” as he delivers himself into the hands of sinners “is beyond all comparison with the quality of hate spending its fury on him” (Balthasar, *The von Balthasar Reader*, 153).

128. STI, q. 81, a. 2.

129. Speech about divine wrath is fairly common in Balthasar’s theodramatic theory, yet it is relatively rare for him to describe the Father’s wrath with violent images (for instance, the Father “striking” the Son; the Father “unloading” or “outpouring” his wrath on the Son). For these instances, see *TD4*, 345–49. These images can be unduly misleading, and they undercut the main thrust of his theological efforts, since for Balthasar the Son suffers the Father’s wrath inasmuch as he suffers being “forsaken [*verlassen*] by the Father” (*TD4*, 333). Indeed by his own admission, Balthasar wants to guard against “interpreting the suffering of Christ as a punitive raging of divine anger against the innocent victim (as the Reformers tended to do)” (*GL7*, 204). Notable too is that in

by an unyielding love whose paternal way of opposing sin entails "hiding his face" (concealing or withdrawing himself) from Jesus so as to enable his beloved Son to collaborate in transforming sin into its contrary, thereby wiping sin away. Sin is countered by their mutual assertion of redemptive anger. The Father's anger (his paternal work of love against sin) takes the form of concealing his presence from his sin-bearing Son, thereby plunging the Son into the most acute experience of spiritual dereliction. The Son's anger (his filial work of love against sin) takes a dual form according to his role as mediator between the Father and human beings. As the vicarious representative of *sinners*, Jesus resolutely assumes and bears sin as separation from the Father—thereby annihilating *the* great obstacle to the final goal of our creation, namely our sharing in divine filiation. On the other side, as *the Father's* representative before sinners, Jesus engages in combat not by lashing out but by confronting and bearing the brunt of men's opposition to God; it is a form of combat that is paradoxical, since it unites humiliation and glory, surrender and conquest. Thus both the Father and the Son incarnate distinctly yet inseparably display nonviolent anger in their zeal to overcome evil by means of love.<sup>130</sup>

It merits emphasizing that in the Cross event there is no interruption or gap between "the powerlessness of being slain and the power of conquest," since God in Christ conquers by total self-surrender.<sup>131</sup> God in Christ liberates man from the forces of sin (1 Cor 15:24–26) only because Christ yields himself willingly to these forces. It is precisely by handing himself over, by letting sin do its worst, that he overcomes sin. He actively combats and conquers these forces not from outside, but by way of suffering sin's effects all the way through, since it is only thus that

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TD5, Balthasar rules out the notion that the Father "strikes" the sin-bearing Son in anger (267). For their part, Hoffmann, John Paul II, and Benedict XVI consistently avoid using violent images of divine wrath.

130. See Hoffmann, *Kreuz und Trinität*, 31; and Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, 44–45. This is why, for Balthasar, the death of Jesus is "the most radical expression of the *loving* purpose of the Father," a love that wholly subsumes anger (*ibid.*, 59).

131. Balthasar, TD2, 180. See GL7, 321.

he overcomes sin from within.<sup>132</sup> Moreover, this way in which Christ exhibits anger against sin—combining action with passion, combat with surrender—reveals how God can freely involve himself for our sake with impassible passion, namely in such a way that his intimate contact with our estranged condition is totally real but serves, not to change God in his eternal nature, but to change us.

Pope Benedict thinks along similar lines. He envisions Jesus' "*combat with the 'strong man' (cf. Lk 11:22)*" in terms of "tak[ing] upon himself all the sin of the world and then suffer[ing] it through to the end—omitting nothing in [his identification] with the fallen."<sup>133</sup> As the true human image of divine wrath engaged in the work of eliminating sin, the crucified Son manifests anger in a way that coincides with wholly selfless and unprotected love. Jesus is the revealer of the *pathos* of God, but not as one against whom the Father's rage is violently vented; rather as one who himself exhibits God's wrath directly in combating Satan by suffering through the godlessness of sin—for love of us and for our salvation.

This last phrase spurs us to extend reflection on this theme a bit further. Earlier we noted that, for Benedict, the Cross event is the height of God's self-revelation.<sup>134</sup> At the same time and inseparably, the Cross event is the highest and purest form of God's anger made manifest.<sup>135</sup> (We are assuming, again, that "true anger" is a modality of love that works to remove the hindrances to the attainment of good, even the good of one's enemies.) Indeed, the hallmark of the God who is love, according to Benedict, is love for sinners while they were still enemies. Benedict makes this point repeatedly in *Jesus of Nazareth*. Jesus, he says, shows us "the essence of God the Father through *love of enemies*."<sup>136</sup> Truly, the Father "is this love."<sup>137</sup> It then becomes clear that the figure of Jesus, who dies

132. See Balthasar, *Engagement with God*, 27–28.

133. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 20 (emphasis added).

134. See *ibid.*, 136.

135. As mentioned earlier, "anger is love in its whole impetus" (Bieler, *Befreiung der Freiheit*, 171).

136. Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, 137.

137. *Ibid.*, 136.

praying for his enemies as he bears their sin, is the mirror in which we come to see God's fatherly anger in its "for us" character.<sup>138</sup> For Benedict, "this is the vengeance of God: he himself suffers for us, in the person of his Son."<sup>139</sup>

While remaining faithful to Benedict's theology, we can apply much of his catechesis on God's exercise of omnipotence to the subject of God's anger.

[We are] to learn to recognize that . . . God's ways are different from our ways (cf. Is 55:8), and even his omnipotence [for our purposes, his anger] is different. . . . His [anger] is not expressed in violence, it is not expressed in the destruction of every adverse power as we would like, but is expressed in love, . . . in an attitude that is only *apparently* weak—God *seems* weak, if we think of Jesus Christ who lets himself be killed. An apparently weak attitude, consisting of patience, gentleness and love, shows that this is the true way of being powerful! This is the power of God! And this power will win! . . .

This is the true, authentic and perfect divine power: to respond to evil with good, to insults with forgiveness, to murderous hatred with the love that gives life. Then evil is really defeated, because washed by the love of God. . . .

To say "I believe in God the Father Almighty," in his power, in his way of being Father, is always an act of faith, of conversion, of transformation of our mind, of all our affection, of our entire way of life.<sup>140</sup>

Significantly, the recognition in Christ of the Father's way of exercising power and manifesting anger in the work of eliminating sin is, for Benedict, a vital catalyst for the "transformation of our mind, of all our affections, of our entire way of life." Of our mind and affections because the perception that God's almighty anger is a function of his love of enemies (Rom

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138. See *ibid.*, 136–37.

139. Ratzinger, Homily at the Mass "*Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*" (Vatican City, 18 April, 2005).

140. Benedict XVI, "I Believe in God: The Almighty Father," Wednesday Audience (Vatican City, 30 January, 2013), [http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_aud\\_20130130.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2013/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20130130.html) (emphasis added). Balthasar says much the same: the triune God "is above the need to dominate, let alone use violence" (*TD4*, 331). See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004), 85.

5:8, 5:10) can incite repentance and spur sinners to surrender ourselves into God's hands. Of our entire way of life because beholding God's "true way of being powerful" means seeing that it contradicts the violent aggression unleashed against God's Son and thus calls for the rectification of our conduct toward those with whom Christ identified himself.<sup>141</sup>

As for John Paul II, when he discusses the optimal conditions that conduce to our conversion from sin, his key moves are wholly aligned with those of Benedict, Balthasar, and Hoffmann. Beholding the Pierced One, we are enlightened by the Spirit to perceive not only the whole truth about the evil of sin, but at the same time the true face of the Father who is rich in mercy (Eph 2:4).<sup>142</sup> Indeed, the simultaneity of this twofold revelation indicates that every modality of divine love (for us)—including wrath—may be subsumed into the attribute of mercy. This is shown, for instance, where John Paul II explains that if "for our sake [the Father] made him to be sin" (2 Cor 5:21), this means that Jesus, for our sake, suffered "*rejection by the Father*."<sup>143</sup> And this means, further, that Jesus experienced the Father's merciful love in its mode as wrath.<sup>144</sup> When, therefore, we behold God's Son crucified, we are meant to be convicted of sin (Jn 19:37; Zech 12:10); yet this conviction takes place concurrently with the realization that "for us" has been borne the full ramifications of our guilt so that the world's sin might be expiated and forgiven (Mt 26:28; 1 Jn 2:2, 4:8–10). "Thus 'convincing of sin' becomes a manifestation . . . that sin is conquered through the sacrifice of the Lamb of God."<sup>145</sup>

To acknowledge this is not to downplay the prophetic language of decision that reverberates throughout the New Testament. Quite the opposite, as Balthasar insists,

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141. See Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 2, 199. Moreover, already in the Old Testament we can discern a progression in which portrayals of God's wrath appear more and more clearly in association with God's suffering love. See Bieler, *Befreiung der Freiheit*, 157; Balthasar, *TD4*, 55.

142. See *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 39, and *Dives in misericordia*, II.

143. *Salvifici doloris*, IV, 18 (emphasis original).

144. See John Paul II, Wednesday Catechesis (Vatican City, 30 November, 1988), 4–6.

145. *Dominum et vivificantem*, II, 4, 9.



The supreme threat—coming from God the Father, who as it were gives sinners his supreme love, God the Son—is a threat not to abuse this supreme gift, because, behind it, there is no greater love to call upon and to turn to (Heb 6:4–8; 10:26–31). And once again, the Spirit of Love cannot teach the Cross to the world in any other way than by disclosing the full depths of the guilt that the world bears, a guilt that comes to light on the Cross and is the only thing that makes the Cross intelligible.<sup>146</sup>

Thus we can take seriously the Gospel references to divine wrath and judgment without jeopardizing the revelation that God is love (1 Jn 4:8–10). Clearly the work of divine wrath/judgment in the Cross event shows that sin is scarcely trivialized when the Holy Trinity goes to such dumbfounding lengths to annihilate it. Yet rather than manifesting a disposition equally ready to condemn as to forgive, this work of divine wrath/judgment stems wholly from love, indeed ultimately from that of the Father (1 Jn 4:8–10).<sup>147</sup>

## 9. CONCLUDING REMARKS

We have suggested that the Father's forgiving love is coextensive with his generative love (*ad extra*), which has as its inherent aim to produce a reciprocal, mirroring love—filial love—in the form of atonement. Atonement, on its side, is the form that filial love takes when asserting itself against the consequences of sin. Sin is expiated "once for all" (Heb 7:27) when Jesus, who is God's Son incarnate (Jn 1:1, 1:18; 1 Jn 4:8–10; Gal 4:4), lets the Father's love exercise its full effect in him as the definitive sin-bearer. Father and Son are jointly yet distinctly involved here: sin as opposition to the extension of their paternal-filial relationship in

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146. Balthasar, *Love Alone Is Credible*, 93.

147. The Cross event "constitutes a 'superabundance' of justice. . . . Nevertheless, this justice . . . springs completely from love: from the love of the Father and the Son" for sinful humanity (*Dives in misericordia*, III, 4). Later the pope states, "Even the Old Testament teaches that . . . love is 'greater' than justice. . . . In the final analysis, justice serves love. The primacy and superiority of love vis-à-vis justice—this is a mark of the whole of revelation" (*ibid.*, V, 7). See Balthasar, *TD4*, 239, 338, 343; *Mysterium Paschale*, 58; and *You Crown the Year with Your Goodness*, 78–79.

the economy of grace is countered by their shared willingness in love to overcome and transform the estrangement wrought by sin—as an expression of their undeterred love while we were yet enemies (Rom 5:10).

Despite whatever imperfections may be found in our sketch of the mystery of atonement, we hope that it has showcased a pivotal conviction of Balthasar's: that in the Cross event, the manifestation of "God's love for the world is so dazzling that it completely outshines the old 'chief commandment' with its anthropocentric formulation, as we see in the sentence which begins, then breaks off and reverses itself: 'In this is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the expiation of our sins' (1 Jn 4:10)."<sup>148</sup> □

*MARGARET M. TUREK* is professor of dogmatics and chair of the dogmatic theology department at St. Patrick's Seminary and University in Menlo Park, California.

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148. Balthasar, *GL7*, 455. For a book-length treatment of atonement that includes discussion of how Christians are enabled by the triune God to share in Christ's atoning work, even in a "representative" capacity, see Margaret M. Turek, *Atonement: Soundings in Biblical, Trinitarian, and Spiritual Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, forthcoming).