

“YOUR REASONABLE WORSHIP”:
CATHOLIC COMMUNION
AS THE TRUE LIFE
ACCORDING TO REASON¹

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“Catholic communion is the true life according to reason, in the sense that it makes present, in the most comprehensive way in which an earthly life can, the (enfleshed) Reason ‘through’ whom ‘all things were created.’”



1. WHOSE REALISM? WHICH RATIONALITY?²

What is the proof that it is *reasonable* to believe the Church’s teaching concerning Christ, along with everything else bound up with it? The main proof—the quintessence of ev-

1. For my parents. I would like to thank Ricardo Aldana and Conor Cunningham for helpful remarks on an earlier version of this paper, presented at the international *Communio* meeting in Zagreb, Croatia (15–19 May 2012).

2. This title is a playful recasting of that of Alasdair MacIntyre’s book, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

ery individual proof—is the Church itself. Hence the thesis suggested by the title of my article: *Catholic communion is itself the true life according to reason.*³

What does it mean to be reasonable? How we answer this question depends on how we answer a prior one: What does it mean to be realistic? This is not just an anthropological question, but a metaphysical one as well: What is *to ontós on*, what is the “really real”?

Modernity claims, implicitly or explicitly, that the good doesn’t constitute the really real as such.⁴ Rather, the really real is

3. Of course, we also need convincing discursive arguments to show that the content of the faith—the *fides quae*—is true. If, in fact, the *fides quae* is false, then no reasonable man can perform the act of faith—the *fides qua*—except, perhaps, accidentally. That said, I would like to suggest that the *fides qua* itself has a certain relative independence as a “verification” of the truth of the *fides quae*. This claim follows, I think, from a correct theological account of the *fides qua* that sees it, not as an act of so-called “private judgment,” of which the individual would be the sole proprietor (and ultimately the sole arbiter), but rather as the Church’s own indefectible adherence to Christ—an adherence that, in its core, is itself part of the *fides quae*. As Hans Urs von Balthasar teaches, the heart of the *Catholica* is Mary, whose Yes, the superabundant fulfillment of Abraham’s *fides qua*, is the immediate human condition of possibility of the Incarnation of the Word of God. The *fides qua*, then, is not “merely subjective”; it includes subjectivity, to be sure, but it does so by taking it up into the encompassing form of ecclesial life. This suggests the possibility of an apologetics that argues for the truth of the *fides quae* by appealing to the radiant intelligibility of the *fides qua* as the Catholic form of existence. The main claim that such an apologetics would seek to show is not simply that the *fides qua* is reasonable, but that the *fides qua*—understood as the Catholic *Lebensform*—is *itself* reasonableness, is *itself* the highest flourishing of reason. John Paul II says something strikingly familiar about “religiosity” in a footnote to his 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio*. Citing earlier remarks of his own, the pontiff says “[i]n fact, religiosity is the highest expression of the human person, because it is the apex of his rational nature” (*Fides et ratio*, 28; the reference is to General Audience, 19 October 1983, 1–2; *Insegnamenti* VI, 2 [1983], 814–5). The translation is mine, as are all the translations that follow.

4. Mark Shiffman has helped me see this point more clearly. By “modernity” I mean a certain “European project of emancipation” (Robert Spaemann, “Einleitung,” in *Philosophische Essays. Erweiterte Ausgabe* [Stuttgart: Reclam, 1994], 6). Although modernity is not an absolute, totally self-contained *singulare tantum*, as modernity itself would have us believe, it does have a certain unity. Nevertheless, this unity is inherently unstable; it is essentially parasitic upon, and dialectically enmeshed with, the very thing from which it seeks emancipation: human nature as teleologically ordered to a pre-defined good. One implication of this account of modernity—which I am largely borrowing from Spaemann—is that no good brought to light in the modern *era* can be credited (except *per accidens*) to the modern *project* insofar as it would be *purely*

initially indifferent to the good, which is added to the really real at a later date, some time after its initial constitution—in the form of man’s own self-given purposes.⁵ In this sense, George Grant (following Heidegger) is right to call technology the “ontology of the age,”⁶ the (tendentially) encompassing “package deal” in which we understand and live our lives.⁷

Grant’s account of technology as an ontological “package

modern, for the simple reason that it is ontologically impossible for anyone or anything actually to *be* purely modern in the first place. By the same token, we can appreciate the modern *era* as an expression of God’s providential design—while acknowledging just how deeply the modern *project* has distorted this expression. It seems to me that an important task of the Church today is to make this acknowledgment in a posture of vicarious representation (*Stellvertretung*, as Balthasar calls it) on behalf of the “modern world.” The Church must in a sense *be* the true modern world, true because it confesses the illusion of the modern project and so receives *as if for the first time* the providential blessings that this illusion has distorted. Of course, to the extent that the Church’s members are *themselves* moderns, they will be really confessing, and not just going through the motions. There is no room in this confession for any sort of moralistic resentment or indignation, but only for impartial (also philosophical) self-examination in the light of divine goodness.

5. Francis Slade makes a helpful distinction between purposes—human intentions—and ends—which have to do with the fulfillment of natures. See his essay “Ends and Purposes,” in Richard F. Hassing, ed., *Final Causality in Human Affairs* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1997), 83–85.

6. George Grant, “Thinking about Technology,” in *Technology and Justice* (Notre Dame: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1986), 32. Technology, then, is not a repertory of neutral instruments. There are two interrelated reasons why it isn’t. First, the instruments we describe as “technology” (as in “new technologies”) are not neutral, because (whether the makers fully realize this or not) they (tend to) embody a certain understanding of causal agency as neutral power to which the good is added later in the form of extrinsic human purpose. Second, this very fact implies that the essence of technology lies in the conception of causality that technological instruments (tend to) embody: What really is is what really works, and what really works is some form of neutral mechanics, whose effectiveness simply is what it is, indifferently to the purposes—all that is left of the good—that we choose to add to it from the outside. Note that this understanding of causality is nothing other than the modern ontology I have outlined above—now translated into the terms of cause (the problem being, not causality, efficient or otherwise, but its reduction to neutral power, whose constitution has nothing essential to do with any original goodness).

7. *Ibid.* At the same time, it is good to remember the possibility of “the very simple discovery that a net woven by thought is always just that: a net that exists because it is *thought*”: Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays*, 8 (emphasis added).

deal” helps us understand why we—committed Catholic intellectuals—have such difficulty actually convincing any modern non-believers that Catholicism is true. For, Grant suggests, we may (think we) think as Christians *explicitly*, but *implicitly* we largely think as technologists. The problem with what we say has its root in a problem with the *logos* of the *Lebensform* in which we say it.

Put another way, general reflections about the relationship between faith and reason, or academic engagements with this or that modern thinker, will lack any real power to convince (even ourselves) if they do not emanate from, and bear witness to, and become part of, the radiant integrity of a form of life that turns what we do with and in our bodies, in our immediate neighborhood, into a living proof that, in Christ, “all things stand together in being” (Col 1:17).

This *Lebensform* does not replace philosophy, but gives it a chance to be reborn,⁸ “saturated with a certain experience” (as I once was lucky enough to hear Robert Spaemann say⁹): of what reason really *looks* and *feels* like. The fullness of this awareness, implicitly present at every moment, can then guide our attempt to “[u]nderstand” philosophically “the *nomos* of contemporary existence, of the consciousness of the times, from a horizon that is not defined by this consciousness.”¹⁰ To the extent that we succeed in this task, we will have a usable “theory

8. Catholic communion opens up a place for a renewal of the *vita philosophica* (for a resurrection of Socrates, as it were) within the *sequela Christi*. Philosophy serves, and even enters into, discipleship, all the while remaining, and rediscovering itself as, philosophy. Philosophy, like Mary, may be a “handmaiden,” but the Lord needs his *ancilla*, without whom he cannot reveal his glory from the midst of, and, in a sense, in dependence on, the “form of a servant” that he freely assumes. It is also important to see, from the other side, that the philosophical life is itself a testimony to the primacy of the good through saying and embodying. This formulation captures, I think, one of the main theses of D.C. Schindler’s interpretation of Plato’s *Republic*, which, Schindler argues, presents Socrates as an “image of the Good.” See D.C. Schindler, *Plato’s Critique of Impure Reason: On Truth and Goodness in the Republic* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 2008).

9. “*Philosophie*,” Spaemann said, “*muß mit einer gewissen Erfahrung gesättigt sein*.” I believe that Spaemann meant “*gewiss*,” not just in a quantitative sense, but, above all, in a qualitative one. His point, then, was that philosophical reflection is nourished by saturated awareness of the world, including the world of which we are most immediately a part.

10. Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays*, 6.

of modernity”¹¹—rather than, say, an uncritical assumption of technological ontology as the “obvious” framework in which to prove faith’s rational bonafides.¹²

Fortunately, we do not have to invent the form of life that we need; it is given with, indeed, it *is* Catholic communion. Being a member of Christ’s body (with all the physical realism this entails) is itself a comprehensive *Lebensform* that displays, literally, what reason itself looks like—indeed, what Reason himself, the Eternal Logos made flesh, looks like. Which brings me back to my main thesis: Catholic communion is the true life according to reason, in the sense that it makes present, in the most comprehensive way in which an earthly life can, the (enfleshed) Reason “through” whom “all things were created” (Jn 1:2).¹³

11. Ibid.

12. We need a critique of modernity, not in order to destroy it, but in order to save it from its own internal self-contradiction(s): “For what modernity is actually depends on what we want to understand it as. The one possibility is to understand it strictly on its own terms, in the sense of a project of radical emancipation. In this case, we understand it to death, and the dialectic of the Enlightenment leads inevitably to its own self-destruction. . . . If we don’t want this kind of self-destruction, then we mustn’t understand modernity on its own terms, but must protect Enlightenment, emancipation, human rights, science, and the mastery of nature against themselves. . . . This alternative seems to me to be unavoidable. It is the background and the golden thread of my otherwise rather disparate theoretical, as well as political-practical, writings, which are almost always critical in nature: Defense of the Enlightenment against its own self-interpretation” (ibid., 13). Spaemann’s words suggest a further point: Truth—whether philosophical or Catholic—doesn’t need an adversary, much less an adversary’s defeat, to be itself. To think so would be to embrace the logic of modernity, which makes evil somehow necessary for the good to be good. Thomas Prufer puts it like this: “Just as for Aristotle the destruction of the opponent’s *logos* manifests the self-manifestation (*doxa*) of the necessity of the true *logos* (the self-manifestation of this necessity is not wrested from the self-destruction of the opponent’s *logos*), so the self-destruction of Hegel’s *logos*, the culmination of ‘the logic of modernity,’ manifests the self-manifestation of the plenitude of the *logos* of Christian theology (the self-manifestation of this plenitude is not wrested from the self-destruction of Hegel’s *logos*). Although the corruption of the best is worst, the false can always become the occasion for manifesting the self-manifesting of the true, which in its necessity and plenitude shows up the false as false, indeed as self-destructive. But the false and indeed self-destructive *logos* is not that obscurity out of which the true *logos* is manifest and in which it rests” (Thomas Prufer, “The Logic of Modernity,” in *Recapitulations: Essays in Philosophy* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1993], 70).

13. Catholic communion is just the Church being most truly itself: “his

2. CATHOLIC COMMUNION: THE BODY OF INCARNATE REASON

The foregoing repeats central points made by Maximus the Confessor in chapter 7 of his *Ambigua ad Johannem*,¹⁴ whose immediate purpose is to provide an orthodox interpretation of a passage in which Gregory Nazianzen appears to teach the pre-existence of souls:

What is this wisdom regarding [or: encompassing] me, and what is this great mystery? Or is it that God wants us to struggle with the body, so that we might always look to him? Is his intention that the weakness conjoined to us should be a pedagogy leading to dignity—lest, since we are parts of God who slipped down from above, our high honor become an occasion for exalting ourselves in our own eyes, while despising our Creator?¹⁵

The task of providing an orthodox account of this passage gives Maximus the occasion to refute Origenist readers who claimed its authority for their narrative of fall—creation of matter—restoration, a narrative that goes like this: There was once a stable unity of all spirits in God; fed up with the monotony of this life, the spirits broke away from God and from one another; as a result, God punished them with bodies; finally, the miseries of bodily existence will eventually bring them back to their senses, prompting them to return their original unity in God.¹⁶

body, the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:23)—the living proof, as it were, that “in [Christ] all things stand together in being” (Col 1:17). And all things stand together in being because the work of the Redeemer both presupposes, restores, and grounds (all in different respects, of course) the original goodness of his own work as Creator.

14. For a brief introduction to the historical background, dating (around 628–30), genre, purpose, and content of the *Ambigua ad Johannem*, and to chapter seven of that work, see pp. 21–26 of the introduction to Paul M. Blowers and Robert Louis Wilken, *On the Cosmic Mystery of Jesus Christ: Selected Writings from Saint Maximus the Confessor* (Crestwood, NY: Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2003).

15. Cited from Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua ad Johannem*, 7: PG 91, 1068D–1069A; the passage in question is found in Gregory Nazianzen, *Oratio* 14, 7: PG 35, 865C. All other texts of Maximus cited here are from *Ambigua*, 7, except for one, which is duly flagged in the appropriate place.

16. I am summing up Maximus’ own account of the Origenist doctrine,

According to the Origenists, then, the eschatological good is one that the spirits have already tried and found wanting. But what, the Confessor asks, will prevent them from finding it wanting once they finally return to it? Indeed, how can there *be* a final return, rather than an endless cycle of relapse, return, and relapse?¹⁷ The Origenist will of course reply that the blessed spirits can relapse *in principle*, but that they won’t relapse *in fact* “on account of their past experience of [evil].”¹⁸ But in that case, Maximus responds, the eschatological good gets its attractiveness, not from itself, but from its contrast with evil;¹⁹ the experi-

which he presents immediately after having cited the disputed passage from Gregory’s 14th Oration; see PG 91, 1069A–B. Maximus does not explicitly mention the Origenist teaching about the fallen spirits’ return to their lost unity in God, but he implicitly mentions it in the critical analysis of the fall—creation—restoration narrative that follows.

17. “For, if it has been possible, even once, to despise a thing after having tried it experientially, there can be no reason why it shouldn’t keep being possible to despise it *ad infinitum*” (ibid., 1069C). Maximus continues: “what could be more miserable than for the rational spirits to be thus borne along, without either having, or hoping to have, any immutable steadfastness in the good [*tô kalô*]?” (ibid.) Notice the word “hope,” which provides the key to the Confessor’s diagnosis of the problem with Origenism: It makes a mockery of Christian hope by destroying the eschatological character of the *eschaton*. Indeed, if the Origenists “read [Gregory’s words] without expecting, as it would seem, any reward for the effort to seek truth, and so take refuge in a facile interpretation that already has many suggestive antecedents in Hellenic teachings” (ibid., 1069A), they do so because their minds are unenlightened by hope, that is, by the newness of Christ.

18. Ibid., 1069C.

19. “[I]n this way, too, the good [*tô kalô*] will necessarily be the object of [the spirits’] affection, not on its own account, insofar as it is good [*kalon*], but on account of the opposite. This is like saying that the good is not lovable [*eraston*] by its intrinsic nature or because of anything proper to it. For nothing that isn’t good [*agathon*], and lovable, and capable of drawing all movement to itself—nothing that is not all these things on its own account—is good [*kalon*] in the proper sense, either. Nor, for the same reason, is there any intrinsic reason why [the good] should be able to hold fast the desire of those enjoying it. On top of this, the adherents of this way of thinking [*phronêma*] should actually give thanks to evil, inasmuch as it will have been the means by which [the rational beings] are taught their duty and finally come around to an understanding of how to have stability in the good [*tô kalô*]. Indeed, if [these adherents] have enough self-awareness to be consistent with themselves, they would have to say that [evil] is an origin, and one more useful than nature itself, insofar as, on their view, it is capable of teaching what is beneficial and of generating the most precious acquisition of all: charity, I mean, whose

ence of evil is necessary for a truly free embrace of the good.²⁰ For all its piety, then, Origenism implies a position not far from a re-interpretation of the “Fall” that we could call “modern”: For modernity, the Fall could only be the predicament of self-consciousness confronting a nature (including the nature of the human body) not constituted by the good—a predicament that, while in some sense a curse, is potentially a blessing, if only man would “dare to know” the possibility of radical (self)creation that it opens up for him.²¹

Characteristically, Maximus does not just refute Origenism, but also retrieves its original intention within an orthodox affirmation of the coherence of creation and redemption as a single, yet differentiated self-manifestation of the Logos (and so of the Trinity).²² Yes, the *culpa* has *in fact* turned out to be *felix*, but

nature is to fulfill the natural movement of all creatures into God, in whom it gathers them in a steadfast abiding without any more turning aside” (ibid., 1069C–1072A).

20. If the good gets its attractiveness, its motive power, from contrast with evil, then it follows that the good, taken by itself, is insipid. But if it is insipid, then only someone who doesn’t know any better can enjoy it simply as it is, without additional seasoning. To enjoy the good simply is to enjoy it as a simpleton, who has no genuine freedom. Hence the conclusion: Knowledge of evil, or of what it would mean to do evil, is necessary for real freedom—which, by the same token, is essentially a choice of which the chooser himself, not the good, is the sole source (since otherwise there would be unexamined submission to some prior claim). It is worth pointing out that, while it was the serpent that first insinuated that man needs the possibility of evil (or of what tradition calls “evil”) for true freedom, it was modern liberalism that first institutionalized it in a whole regime.

21. One hears many echoes of this re-interpretation in modern German philosophy: “The shared project of the German philosophers, including Nietzsche (and Heidegger, as I will argue) could be summed up in this way: Burdened with homesickness in modernity, or a sense of loss, they diagnose the ground of that loss and thereby transform the loss, so that it (the illness, wound, or ugliness) is preserved somehow, or justified, in the transformation. And yet, as justified, it is not simply overcome” (Richard Velkley, *Heidegger, Strauss, and the Premises of Philosophy: On Original Forgetting* [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2011], 29).

22. Just as the New Adam both presupposes and creates the Old (“the mystery that took place in Christ for the final fulfillment [*epi telei*] of the world-age,” Maximus tells us, “is the manifestation and the accomplishment of the mystery hidden in the first father [Adam] at the beginning of the world-age” [PG 91, 1097D]), so, too, Christ’s redemptive enfleshment both presupposes and guarantees the distinction between man’s Fall and his original genesis as a

only because the Incarnate Logos has freely used the *culpa*—in spite of itself—as an occasion to accomplish in a new—“stranger and more divine”²³—manner the eternal purpose for which he originally created us²⁴: to be his likeness, indeed, his physical presence within the world.²⁵ The “Logos of God . . . always and in all things wills to operate the mystery of his embodiment.”²⁶ Nevertheless, foreseeing the Fall, the Logos has chosen to achieve this pre-cosmic purpose by himself becoming man, in order to unite the rest of us to himself through his own humanity, transforming us into the “members of his body” that “we were pre-destined” to be already “before the ages.”²⁷

soul-body unity whose goodness crowns that of the material world. Maximus pithily expresses this distinction when he concludes his account of Gregory’s true intention by saying: “I do not think that he wants to explain here the cause of man’s coming into being, but, rather, of the misery that supervened upon his genesis afterwards” (ibid., 1089D–1092A).

23. Ibid., 1097D.

24. “He showed both that we have come into being for this purpose and that the all-good, pre-cosmic purpose of God in our regard receives absolutely no innovation according to its own *logos*, even as it of course comes to fulfillment through another, more new *tropos*, introduced later” (ibid., 1097B).

25. “God made man of soul and body out of goodness for a twofold purpose. First, that the rational and noetic soul that had been given him, inasmuch as it exists after the image of its maker, might also receive deification after his likeness through clinging gnostically to God by desire and by loving him totally with all its power. Second, that the same soul, prudently laying hold of the body by skillful providence with respect to what is under it and in accord with the command to love one’s neighbor as oneself, might logify [*logisai*] the body through the virtues and make it serve God as a fellow slave through itself as mediator of the indwelling presence of the maker, the one who bound [body and soul] together thereby becoming for the body the indissoluble bond of the immortality given to it. The aim of all this in turn was that, what God is for the soul, the soul should become for the body; and that there should be shown to be one Creator of all things who extends his presence to all beings, analogously to them, through (the) human nature; and that the many, distant from one another by nature, converging around the one nature of man, should come into unity; and that God might become all in all, comprehending all things and enhyostatizing them in himself, through the fact that none of them any longer has a detached movement or is without a share in his presence, whereby we are and are called gods and children and body and members and parts of God and by reference to the *telos* of the divine purpose” (ibid., 1092B–C).

26. Ibid., 1084C–D.

27. Ibid., 1097B. Here is the full text: “I don’t think that a man who knows

Maximus' entire argument in *Ambigua*, 7, then, hinges on the *caro cardo salutis* as the guarantee of the conformity of all things to the Logos, hence, of the ontological primacy of the good.²⁸ But what is true of Christ's "historical" *caro* is also true, analogously, of the Church that unfolds it in space and time as Catholic communion. Insofar as this communion renews the unique physical presence of the truly reasonable life, the *zôê* and *phôs* who exegetes the Father and his love (cf. Jn 1:2; 18), it *is* that life—as received by, and shared among, men (with and through *their* innate [embodied] reason).²⁹ Catholic communion, in this sense, is the true life according to reason.³⁰

how to think piously needs any further testimony for the manifestation of the truth that Christians believe truly, having clearly learnt through that same truth that we are the members and the body and the fullness of God's Christ, who fills all in all, we who, through his Son, our Lord and God Jesus Christ, are recapitulated to God the Father, according to the purpose hidden in him before the ages. For the mystery that was hidden from the ages and the generations has now been revealed through the true and perfect enhumanization of God the Son, who united our nature to himself hypostatically, without separation and confusion, and fitted us to himself through the kind of first-fruits that was the intellectually and rationally ensouled flesh that he took from us and that was ours, and who deigned to make us one and the same thing with himself according to his humanity, as we were predestined before the ages to be the members of his body" (ibid., 1097A–B).

28. Indeed, the enfleshment of the Logos makes *physically* present the "inmost ground" of the *rational coherence* of the entire divine economy, from creation to consummation: the original "paternal goodness." This is why, in the sixtieth chapter of the *Quaestiones ad Thalassium*, Maximus can write that "the substantial Logos of God himself, having become man, both made luminously manifest (if it is licit to say this) the inmost ground of the paternal goodness and showed in himself the end for whose sake creatures, in accord with divine wisdom, took their origin towards being": PG 90, 621B ; I have modified Migne's *saphôs* to *sophôs*.

29. There would be much to say here about the Trinitarian dimensions of the *totus Christus*, especially about the distinction and unity between the Son and the Spirit, but I will have to leave that for another occasion.

30. The Church's members, Maximus tells us, are so intimately interconnected that they converge to form a single "perfect man [*teleion andra*]" (1069D). They constitute this one perfect man because they jointly receive, while communicating to one another, the Trinitarian identity of the Incarnate Logos (the Church is an *anêr*, a masculine person, only insofar as it is the feminine Bride who becomes one flesh with the Bridegroom who represents her [one reason why the priesthood cannot be extended to women]). To call the Church's members a single "perfect man" is thus to say that by their mu-

It is thus fitting that in *Ambigua*, 7 Maximus argues as much *in light of* Catholic communion as he does *for* Catholic communion.³¹ Indeed, we could go so far as to say that the text itself reflects how membership in the Church, with all its physical realism, fashioned its author into an icon of Catholic reason, whose unity of saying and embodying renews the *vita philosophica* in the *sequela Christi*. *Ambigua*, 7, then, reflects and enacts the ecclesial inseparability of “theology and sanctity” in Maximus’ own person, whose entire mission—words and deeds—makes tangibly present the very thing he thinks *about* and *in light of*: Catholic communion as “truing in charity.”³²

tual charity they participate as far as creatures can in the numerical unity proper to the three divine persons—and so also in the numerical unity of the divine intelligence as articulated in the consubstantial Word. The members’ communion of love thus includes the definitive (co-)realization of human intelligence, which reconciles once and for all objectivity and subjectivity, impartiality and personal engagement, absolute truth and viewpoint, substance and disclosure, possession and inquiry, uniting them without confusion or separation in the logic (literally: Logos) of the Trinity. Obviously, this communion of mind flourishes principally in the heavenly Church. Nevertheless, just as the earthly Church is the unique sacramental foretaste and school of the heavenly Church, it is also the unique sacramental foretaste and school of the truly reasonable life that the latter’s heavenly communion entails. Here on earth, there is no foretaste of perfect communion without “schooling” in it, hence, without the toil of mutual patience. Yet, if this toil is a joy, it is because even now our bodily presence to one another is a sacrament of the charity that, in the next life, will make us luminously transparent to one another without violating our mysteriousness for one another—the living stones of the heavenly city are, after all, risen bodies living with the life of the Risen Body par excellence who is Christ, and these bodies are intrinsic to the heavenly communion of love, and so of intelligence. Finally, it is worth emphasizing once more that our ecclesial “schooling” in communion does not replace the philosophical life, but furnishes it a womb in which to experience an earthly rebirth from the seed of its heavenly fulfillment. For even “Plato understood universality as de-individualization,” but “[w]hat he had in mind was the universalized experience of an ascetical, mathematical-mystically formed elite that does not have to leave its individuality aside, because it has de-privatized this individuality and elaborated it into something universal” (Spaemann, *Philosophische Essays*, 4).

31. It would be interesting to document the Confessor’s understanding of membership in the Church as the matrix of thinking, indeed, of his own thinking in *Ambigua*, 7. There is ample material. See, for example, 1089B–1097A.

32. *Ibid.*, 1097A.

3. "YOUR REASONABLE WORSHIP"

Let me conclude with some remarks that, while going beyond the letter of *Ambigua*, 7, seek to draw out some of its implications for the task of showing the reasonableness of faith today.

The Risen Lord reveals himself to his disciples as the solution to the problem of evil, as the guarantor of the ontological primacy of the good, by "presenting [*parestêsen*] *himself* alive after his passion" (Acts 1:3). He accomplishes his one self-presentation "*in multis argumentis*" (ibid.). Some of these arguments are discursive. But the discursive ones, no less than the others, confirm the true presence of Christ's risen body, and vice versa; they are a verbal sacrament through which he shows us his "hands and feet" (Lk 24:39) and so fills us with joy (and joy, of course, also has something to do with truth).³³

The Risen Christ, then, is his own Apologetic, in a mutual saturation of word and deed. He draws us into this Apologetic in the Church's Eucharist, gathering us into communion as co-offerers of his now eternalized sacrifice (cf. Heb 9:11–14). Our eucharistic existence is thus itself *apologia*, as Paul underscores when he enjoins us to "present [*parastêsai*] your bodies as a living sacrifice . . . your reasonable worship [*logikên latreian*]" (Rom 12:1).

The eucharistic existence that the Apostle calls "reasonable worship" turns the whole of us, body and soul, into an argument for Christ. In part, it does this by making us flourish as "rational animals" whose entire way of life unites passionate commitment to the truth with the intellectual humility, even humor, born of awareness of the abiding (good) difference between our "earthen vessels" and the surpassing "treasure" (2 Cor 4:7) they contain. It is here, in this renewal of the philosophical

33. The Risen One still bears his wounds. This reminds us that the suffering he endured as a result of having assumed the weight of the world's sin reveals the full depth and the character of the Father's love. This revelation through suffering accounts for, and saves, what is partially true in Origenism and, in another way, in modernity (as descriptions of, and solutions to, the problem of evil). Nevertheless, it does so precisely because, unlike Origenism and modernity, it both presupposes and creates the absolute distinction between finitude and Fall. Christ can use our sins to reveal the inmost ground of the paternal goodness only to the extent that he separates them from us completely and casts them into hell.

way of life, that we then find the source and standard of good *discursive* arguments for the faith. The very technical excellence of these arguments (which may include a good dose of the right kind of aporetic) is itself a verbal sacrament of the Risen One.

According to Hans Urs von Balthasar, we fulfill the Pauline injunction through either one of the two ecclesial states of life: marriage or consecrated virginity. Living them well (which of course requires confession and absolution) is thus our primary, most comprehensive, and most concrete context for responding to evil, including the evil of clerical sexual abuse (to take just one contemporary scandal that calls into question the Church’s credibility). It is not just that marriage and virginity reveal the beauty of the Church’s teaching about sexuality, whose splendor some priests have obscured by their sexual abuse of minors.³⁴ It is also that, in doing so, they make physically present, as it were, the ontological primacy of the good, without which there is no intrinsic reason, no reason in the very nature of things, to call sexual abuse of minors—or any other form of wickedness, for that matter—an evil. I am not justifying clericalist “damage control”; on the contrary, I am saying that, if we want to be able even to *identify* the evil of clerical sexual abuse *as the terrible evil it truly is*, then we have to think about it with the mind of

34. Clerical sexual abuse exploits the very same vulnerability of the flesh that Catholic sexual ethics seeks to protect as a place for the Word to prolong the mystery of his Incarnation in us. Of course, a robust christological reading of sexuality doesn’t exclude a—properly understood—Aristotelian reflection on its (created) nature. Quite to the contrary. If, as good Aristotelians, we think from the end revealed in the physical, then we realize that “sex” is anything but univocal neutral mechanics to which we add our self-given purposes as we see fit. Indeed, “sex” is an analogical term, whose intra-natural *analogatum princeps* is the conjugal act, since it is the only one that is *per se* apt for generation and *per se* apt for expressing the deepest union (“one flesh”) *at the same time and in the same respect*. Hence the teaching of *Humanae vitae* concerning the impossibility, finally, of successfully disjoining the procreative and the unitive meanings of the conjugal embrace (as Conor Cunningham has said to me in private conversation, “there’s no such thing as contraception”). But this very teaching, rightly understood, implies that union includes openness, not only to fertility, but also to the sacrifice bound up with its joy—a sacrifice that is not so much planned as asked for and accepted in always unforeseeable ways. In this sense, the Aristotelian analysis helps identify the precise “place” in the nature of the conjugal act where it opens to what consecrated virginity embodies *ex professo* as a way of life: the fruitfulness of the self-sacrifice of Christ on the Cross, on behalf of his Bride the Church.

the Church (which none of us has ever finished acquiring), and not, say, through the lens of a modern technological ontology for which, strictly speaking, nothing is intrinsically good or evil, or, indeed, *intrinsically anything at all*. Paradoxical as it may sound, we cannot argue appropriately for the Church in the wake of the recent abuse scandal(s) unless we grasp the starkness of the choice we *all* face: either Catholicism or nihilism, God or nothing.³⁵

“Do not be conformed to the present age,” Paul says immediately after the verse about rational worship that I cited just now (Rom 12:2). Inevitably, there will be a conformity of the one to the other; neutrality is impossible. The only question is this: Will it be technology that forms how we understand even our sexually differentiated bodies? Or will it be the truly human sexuality which is entrusted to the Church’s guardianship, and whose pattern is (for those with eyes to see) set forth in its two states of life, that causes us to recover our own bodily presence in the world—in our own immediate neighborhood—from the empire of technology? □

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35. Clerical sexual abuse, like every other form of wickedness, is parasitic on the good for its existence and efficacy; it is a “privation of the due good.” By the same token, if our condemnation of clerical sexual abuse, or of any other evil, should somehow call into question the ontological primacy of good over evil, it would just so far undermine the very condition of its own possibility. But to reject the Church is at least implicitly to reject the ontological primacy of good over evil—and so the very possibility of a coherent denunciation either of clerical sexual abuse or of any other evil. Obviously, one doesn’t have to be a visible member of the Catholic Church to affirm the primacy of good over evil, recognition of which belongs, in fact, to any genuinely human wisdom. Nevertheless, the visible Catholic Church has been entrusted with the task of witnessing to, and making present, the ultimate confirmation and foundation of this affirmation: the Logos who was made flesh, died, and rose again on the third day. To the extent that the Church is composed of (recovering) sinners, it can accomplish this mandate only within an attitude of confession. Yet by God’s grace, confession transforms unvarnished acknowledgment of sin into a living proof of the ever-greater reality and power of divine mercy; through confession, frank acceptance of God’s righteous judgment on sin becomes an appropriately humble manifestation of the indestructible ontological primacy of the good, the only alternative to whose affirmation is . . . nihilism.