Divine Flesh:
The Interplay Between Human and Divine in the Double Movement of Deification of Humanity and Humanization of Divinity

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Introduction

When I was still studying in high school, I had the opportunity to read a famous contemporary Italian novel, *Sostiene Pereira*, written by Antonio Tabucchi.[1] The main character, Mr. Pereira, a journalist living in Portugal during the dictatorship of Antonio Salazar, in the 1930s, is an obese middle-aged man with many obsessions. One of them, being a Catholic, is his obsessive doubt about the resurrection of the flesh. Mr. Pereira is asking himself: "How and why should this fat and flabby body resurrect?" What good can there be in it? As a teen, I was already struck by that argument. Also, having a "bad relationship" with my own body (for different reasons, though), I was asking myself how God could really love our human flesh, or, more widely put, our very humanity,[2] and make something good of it.

1 Antonio Tabucchi, *Sostiene Pereira* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1994).

2 In this paper I will consider the term "flesh," בָּשָׂר in Hebrew, σάρξ in Greek, in accordance with the Jewish tradition: "The human can only be understood as a psychosomatic unity. When the Bible speaks of 'flesh' it presupposes that very unity." See Gerhard Lohfink, *Is All There Is? On Resurrection and Eternal Life* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 175. So, though this term has been often used to signify "human vulnerability, weakness and mortality" (cf. Ibid., 173. See for instance the Pauline use of the term), in a biblical perspective it is also representative of our own whole humanity, in which the "fleshy" and the spiritual components can never be separated. I am obviously aware that the term "humanity" is wider than its mere "carnal" expression.

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Contemplating God assuming human flesh, and human nature becoming part of the very life of the Trinity with the Incarnation and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, has constantly accompanied me during the entire span of my theological studies. But, as I showed, it has already been present ever since I started to question myself about God and His action in my life and in the world. My personal spiritual journey brought me from an idea of God as abstract and distant to the contemplation of the human life of His incarnated Son. This movement was further facilitated by my experience of the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius. More and more, I came to realize that we are loved and saved by God not "in spite of" our flesh, but "in and through" our flesh. God Himself *forever* took a body. In doing so, He made clear that human and Divine, though distinct, can never be separated. Human and Divine always live and work together. As Karl Rahner wonderfully put it, all theology is eternally (also) anthropology.[3] Our very flesh, as Tertullian said in a famous and much-quoted sentence, is the "hinge" of our Salvation: *Caro Salutis Cardo*.[4]

Christianity has been defined as "the religion of Incarnation."[5] For the most part, the Incarnation itself may be seen as a *fil rouge* that accompanies and links together many principles and aspects of Christian theological reflection. Given the clear limitations of this synthesis paper, I will focus

3 Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1978), 225.

4 Tertullian, *De Resurrectione Carnis*, VIII, 2, quoted in Paolo Duarte, "Corpo e Carne. Fondamenti patristici in Ireneo e Tertulliano", *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 4037 (2018): 367-379.

5 According to the definition given in Margaret R. Miles, *The Word Made Flesh. A History of Christian Thought* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 1. See also Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 197: "The statement of God's Incarnation – of God's becoming material – is the most basic statement of Christology."

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only on a few points: first, the deep meaning of the hypostatic union of the two natures in Christ and the permanence of a glorified human nature in Him after the Resurrection; second, how human and Divine come together in the transmission of Divine Revelation itself; third, how the Body of Christ, the Church, also lives and develops through her human and Divine elements; fourth, how in the sacramental dimension our very humanity (our flesh) becomes the *locus* of our experience of the Divine. I will then give my final remarks in a short concluding section.

Jesus Christ "Truly Man and Truly God" Deification of the Humanity, "Humanization" of the Divinity

As we have seen in our studies of Christology, the "ontological questions" concerning the identity of Jesus appeared at a later stage, when Christianity became more clearly in touch with the Greek and pagan world. The issue of the relationship between the two "natures" of Christ, human and Divine, came out after the early Councils (especially Nicaea in 325 and Constantinople I in 381) clarified the divinity of His "Person." After Jesus Christ was clearly defined as a Divine "Who," especially against the Arian claims, the issue was how divinity and humanity could be present together in this same (Divine) Person. As we know, the Council of Chalcedon (451) struck that balance. This Council accepted the synthesis suggested by Pope Leo I in his letter to Flavian, Patriarch of Constantinople: "The one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son, must be acknowledged in two natures, without confusions or change, without division or separation."[6] The same Council defined Jesus as "the same

6 ND 615.

perfect in Divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and truly man composed of rational soul and body, the same one in being with the Father as to the Divinity and one in being with us as to the humanity, like unto us in all things but sin."[7] As we can see in this last statement, Chalcedon made even clearer that Jesus Christ is not only ὁμοούσιος with the Father, as already emphasized by Nicaea and Constantinople I, but that He is also ὁμοούσιος with the humanity, *with us*. If the modality of this "hypostatic union" remains basically a mystery, we can say, with Gerald O'Collins, that "in addition to the characteristics of Divinity that He already possessed from eternity, the Word of God acquired [...] all the essential characteristics of a human being. That made Him, and continues to make Him, a genuine human being. His loving 'descent' from heaven 'altered' him by adding the human nature through which He could operate visibly."[8] In spite of the "infinite qualitative difference between the uncreated Divine nature and the created human nature," that cannot be treated "as if they were two of the same kind or two more or less equal species of the same genus,"[9] I feel how it is important as well not to downplay the aforementioned "alteration" that the Word of God, the Second Person of the Trinity, "experienced" from the moment of the Incarnation onwards. As Romano Guardini put it, a "piece of Creation is assimilated into the eternity of God's existence."[10]

In our studies of soteriology, we met the important concept of "deification," or θέωσις, which has been particularly developed in the Eastern theological reflection. As St. Athanasius put it, "[The Word of God], indeed assumed

7 ND 614.

8 Gerald O' Collins, *Incarnation* (London: Continuum, 2002), 66.

9 Ibid., 69.

10 Cf. Romano Guardini, *The Lord* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1954), 412-413.

humanity that we might become God,"[11] or, as St. Irenaeus said in the terms of the *admirabile commercium*: "In his immense love He became what we are, that He might make us what He is."[12]

It is important for us, though, to keep noticing and affirming also the other correlated movement, that of the "humanization" of God Himself, experienced with the Incarnation, which does not cease even after the Resurrection. As we see in the Resurrection narratives in the Gospels, the Risen One preserves His human nature, though in a transfigured and glorified body, remaining for all the eternity the necessary and permanent Mediator of all Salvation.[13] If it is so, we can say that with the Incarnation, something human has forever entered the very heart of the Trinity. If Incarnation happened "for us men and for our Salvation,"[14] even more it is striking the Love of a God who takes forever into His very being, as it were, the flesh of our humanity.

The Interplay of Human and Divine in the Transmission of Revelation

We have observed the particular interplay of human and Divine in the hypostatic union in the Person of Jesus Christ, which effectively acts for our redemption and "deification," by the indwelling of the Divinity in the humanity, and by

11 St. Athanasius, *De Incarnatione*, § 54, quoted in Andrew Louth, "The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology," Michael J. Christiansen and Jeffrey A. Wittung (eds.), *Partakers of the Divine Nature: The History and Development of Deification in the Christian Tradition* (Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 34.

12 St. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, 5 praef., quoted in Louth, "The Place of *Theosis* in Orthodox Theology," 34.

13 Cf. Karl Rahner, "The Eternal Significance of the Humanity of Jesus for Our Relationship with God," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 3 (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 43-44.

14 ND 7 (Symbol of Nicaea) and ND 12 (Symbol of Constantinople).

assuming the humanity into the Divinity. We can see the same dynamic *in actu* also in the transmission of the Revelation itself.

The Dogmatic Constitution of Vatican II *Dei Verbum* states: "[...] the words of God, expressed in human language, have been made like human discourse, just as the Word of the Eternal Father, when He took to Himself the flesh of human weakness, was in every way made like man."[15] The same passage speaks in terms of a marvelous "condescension." As we can see, we find here a parallelism between the movement of the Incarnation of the Divine Word and the transmission of Divine Revelation through Sacred Scripture. As we find in another passage of *Dei Verbum*, "In composing the sacred books, God chose men and while employed by Him, they made use of their powers and abilities, so that with Him acting in them and through them, they, as true authors, consigned to writing everything and only those things which He wanted."[16] For this reason, as the same passage states, these writings have to be considered as written "under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" and they have "God as their author." Further on, it is said also that "God speaks in Sacred Scripture through men in human fashion."[17] Without going into the details of the different theories of inspiration of the Sacred Scripture, what we find here is a deeply interwoven human and Divine action, which forces us to use a sort of "paradoxical" (but not contradictory)[18] language: human beings are true authors, and God is the true Author of Scripture. If we follow the so-called

15 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 13.

16 Ibid., 11.

17 Ibid., 12.

18 "The Incarnation is a paradox, but not a blatant logical contradiction." Cf. Gerald O'Collins, "The Incarnation: The Critical Issues," Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, Gerald O'Collins (eds.), *The Incarnation. An interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 8.

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"social inspiration" theories, we see how inspiration is a charism involving not just single individuals, but an entire community, even in an extended time span.[19]

If this can be said about Sacred Scripture, a similar interplay can be observed also for the other and interrelated channel of transmission of Revelation, Tradition. According to *Dei Verbum*, while "Sacred Scripture is the Word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit," Sacred Tradition "takes the Word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this Word of God faithfully, explain it and make it more widely known."[20] While Sacred Scripture in its written form is now fixed in a Canon, Tradition (which includes also the living interpretation of Sacred Scripture) remains "alive," and through it "God, who spoke of old, uninterruptedly converses with the bride of His beloved Son."[21] Consequently, in the process of handing on of Tradition, there is an ongoing "dialogue" between God and His Church, which is constantly operating also through the *sensus fidei*.[22] In this dialogue, like in the process of inspiration of the Sacred Scripture, human and Divine are both called into play, and the Holy Spirit assists the

19 This is for instance the opinion of R. A. F. Mackenzie and J. L. Mackenzie, basing also on Rahner's insights. Cf. Aidan Nichols, *The Shape of Catholic Theology: An Introduction to its Sources, Principles and History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 128: "It is the community which was inspired, and the inspiration of individuals consists in greater or lesser intensities of participation in the corporate charism of inspiration."

20 Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 9.

21 Ibid., 8.

22 Defined as that "supernatural instinct intrinsically linked to the gift of Faith [...] which enables Christians to fulfil their prophetic calling, that is, to recognize and endorse authentic Christian doctrine and to reject what is false." See International Theological Commission, Sensus Fidei *in the Life of the Church* (2014), 2.

Teaching Office of the Church not only in "listening devoutly, guarding scrupulously and explain carefully" the *depositum fidei*,[23] but also in prudently discerning and accompanying "Spirit-leaded" developments of doctrine, facilitated by the aforementioned *sensus fidei*, as we can clearly see in the history of doctrines and of the Church itself.

The Church, Hierarchical Structure and Mystical Body

The Church has been defined as the "Body of Christ," and, similarly to her Head, she lives and grows through her human and Divine components. The dogmatic constitution *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II states that "the society structured with hierarchical organs and the Mystical Body of Christ, are not to be considered as two realities [...]; rather, they form one complex reality which coalesces from a Divine and a human element. For this reason, by no weak analogy, it is compared to the mystery of the incarnate Word."[24] As we have seen talking also about Tradition, our "pilgrim Church,"[25] rather than being a static *societas perfecta*, keeps dynamically to move and to walk towards her eschatological fulfillment. As we have already noted, the developments in the interpretation of Scriptures, the developments of doctrines, and even of the theology and of the practice of the Sacraments show a dynamic of growth, in a constant dialogue between the human and institutional component of the Church and her being a "mystery,"[26] the mystical Body of Christ. This deep interplay of humanity and divinity is emphasized also where

23 Cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum*, 10.

24 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 8, which quotes especially Pope Pius XII's encyclical *Mystici Corporis* (1943).

25 Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

26 "The Mystery of the Church" is the title of the first chapter of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*.

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it is said that the Church "already on this earth is signed with a sanctity which is real although imperfect."[27] If we consider ourselves as part of the Body of Christ that is the Church, we see how we are ourselves part of this history of holiness and imperfection, of completeness and incompleteness, of a humanity which is "on the way" of its deification, and of a Divinity which is not afraid to "mingle" with the flesh of our own limitations and shortcomings. Even more, as we have seen above, we are dealing with a Triune God who has forever assumed our (glorified) humanity, our flesh, in His own very Being.

From this awareness, we see how the presence and the action of the human and Divine components, though always clearly distinct, as Chalcedon teaches us,[28] can never be separated, even in our Church. Another powerful image that has been used to convey the same idea is that of the Church as "universal sacrament of Salvation,"[29] and as fundamental sacrament of Christ Himself. If Christ has been regarded as the "primordial Sacrament of God,"[30] "the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely-knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race."[31] This last consideration opens us to the final passage of this paper, which is related to the sacramental dynamic at work in this interplay between human and Divine.

27 Ibid., 48.

28 Cf. again ND 615.

29 Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 48.

30 According to the expression used by Edward Schillebeeckx, quoted in Thomas P. Rausch, *Systematic Theology. A Roman Catholic Approach* (Quezon City: Claretian Communications Foundation Inc., 2018), 219.

31 Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 1.

The Sacramental Dynamic as Place of Encounter Between a Humanity on the Way of Deification and a "Humanized" God

The continuous dialogue, communication, and interpenetration between human and Divine are clearly manifested in the liturgical action, in which "the sanctification of man is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of those signs."[32] If a common definition of "Sacrament" is related to its being a visible sign signifying and conveying an invisible Grace, we can see again how in the sacramental reality human and Divine are deeply bound and interrelated. In the Sacraments, Grace adapts itself *ad modum recipientis*, becomes accessible through our very human senses. Paraphrasing again Tertullian, our flesh, by means of speaking, of listening, of tasting the Body and Blood of Christ, of laying hands, of being immersed in water, of being anointed with sacred oils, etc., becomes the *locus* of the Divine self-communication.[33] This is true for the seven Sacraments, and also for the sacramental reality and dynamic in general, as we have seen in the definition of Jesus Christ Himself as the Sacrament of God, and of the Church as the Sacrament of Christ and of our Salvation. The double movement of the sacramental dynamic, given by the moment of signification and the moment of being "cause" of Grace,[34] is deeply rooted in the Incarnation of the Eternal Word of God. If the Word would not have assumed for the eternity our human nature, our flesh, we would not be able to experience

32 Vatican II, Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

33 Cf. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 87, talking about "the transcendental self-communication of God which is already intrinsic to the concrete world." Or, said in other words, "God in his own most proper reality makes Himself the innermost constitutive element of man." See Ibid., 116.

34 Cf. Rausch, *Systematic Theology*, 215.

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in the very depth of our being the fullness of His presence and of His salvific action. The Incarnation, as the basis of the sacramental dimension, allows us to have an authentic experience of God in a *human* way. The special presence of Christ in the Eucharistic Sacrifice, "fount and apex of the whole Christian life,"[35] and particularly in the Eucharistic Species (though not exclusively in them),[36] shows us even more clearly the desire of God to be known and experienced through our own very sensorial and "carnal" experience, and how "glorification of God" and "sanctification of men"[37] are two dimensions always interrelated and inseparable in Christian worship and life.

Conclusion

Tertullian's treatise *De Carne Christi* passionately and vibrantly defended the reality of Christ's flesh against those, like Marcion and his disciples, who denied it. Tertullian realized that to deny Christ's coming in the flesh equals to deny His real humanity. Our humanity and our flesh are created as good. They are mysteriously part of God's "image and likeness" (Gn 1:26), though tainted by the original sin, and they have really been assumed by God Himself, at the point of becoming, as Tertullian says, the "hinge" of our Salvation.[38]

Moving from the consideration of the hypostatic union of Divine and human nature in Christ, this paper has attempted to analyze how these two dimensions always work and walk together, taking as main examples the two channels of

35 Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

36 Cf. Vatican II, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 7.

37 Cf. Ibid., 10.

38 Cf. Duarte, "Corpo e Carne. Fondamenti patristici in Ireneo e Tertulliano," 371.

transmission of the Revelation, the two dimensions of the Church as the Body of Christ, and finally the sacramental dynamic. Our human nature, our flesh, has been assumed by the Incarnated Word of God, and has been transfigured and glorified in His Resurrection. Though still dogmatically professing God "unchangeable and unchanging," in the Incarnation, we see that actually God can "become" something.[39] Human nature, a glorified flesh, enters through the Incarnated Word of God, in some mysterious way, even the inner life and being of the Trinity.

Why is that so? Without understating the mystery involved, we can say with Tertullian that "evidently God loves human beings:" "Along with man, He loved also his nativity, and his flesh besides: nothing can be loved apart from that by which it is what it is."[40] "God so loved the world that He gave His only Son" (Jn 3:16a). This loving κένωσις,[41] this Divine συμπάθεια,[42] assuming our human flesh, opens to the "deification" of humanity, through Its own "humanization." If that is so, our humanity can become the most wondrous epiphany of the depths of the Divine Love, in our own glorified bodies in the final Resurrection that is to come, but also and even in our imperfect and flawed flesh of this life.

39 Cf. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 219-220: "He who is not subject to change in Himself can *Himself* be subject to change *in something else*." The Italics are in the text.

40 Tertullian, *Treatise on the Incarnation* (London: SPCK, 1956), 15.

41 Cf. Phil 2:6-11.

42 Cf. Heb 4:15.

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