Consubstantial with the Father: The Mystery of Christ

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In November of 2011, we Catholics began to use a new translation of the Roman Missal. All of us had to re-learn many of the most familiar responses in the Mass. Today it seems a lot easier to say "And with your spirit," or "It is right and just," or "I am not worthy that you should enter under my roof," than it did in 2011. *How many Sundays did it take for you to say, "And with your spirit"?* Tonight we will look at one of those phrases that was once difficult to say. It is the phrase "consubstantial with the Father." Before 2011, we said, "one in being with the Father."

"Consubstantial with the Father" is an important phrase with a rich history. I still find it difficult to say "consubstantial" rather than "one in being," not because there is anything wrong with the new translation – it is, after all, closer to the Latin "consubstantialem Patri" – but because I have said "one in being" for most of my life.

This evening is not about the *history* of the phrase "consubstantial with the Father," but about spirituality. Our focus is Christology and the mystery of Jesus Christ. I ask you to accompany me on a journey of reflection. We will reflect on Jesus as "consubstantial" with the Father. We profess that we are saved because Jesus and the Father are "one in being." I will propose two ways to think about how we are saved. They are both familiar: Jesus as an example for us to follow, and Jesus's death as a sacrifice. Then I will ask you a question. I will invite you to say which of these two understandings of Jesus is the first you usually think about, or which one means more to you. After we have discussed Jesus as an example and as a sacrifice, we will examine two modern theologians who have made the choice. Then I will ask whether their theologies have changed you. Has your understanding changed as a result of our journey of reflection?

Common Misunderstandings

To get us started, I would like to clear up a common misunderstanding among us Christians. It stems from our profession that Jesus Christ is "consubstantial with the Father." This profession is so deeply a part of our faith that we hesitate to distinguish between God the Father and God the Son. By affirming the divinity of Christ, we insist that God has really come into our midst. God abides with us. God is our salvation.

When we proclaim that Jesus Christ was consubstantial with the Father, we express our opposition to all those, like the fourth-century heretic, Arius of Alexandria, who wanted to subordinate Christ to the Father. Arius thought that the subordination of Christ was the only way to preserve the majesty of God. It took a tremendous intellectual and spiritual effort to find a way to express the divinity of Christ and to preserve the oneness of God. As a result of this effort, centuries after the close of the NT, we understood God in three persons, Father, Son, and Spirit.

For many Christians, unfortunately, the phrase "consubstantial with the Father" means that Jesus and the Father are identical. For them, in effect, Jesus was God in a human form. He wore a kind of disguise. We hear this misunderstanding occasionally in homilies. Last year I heard a preaching on the temptation of Christ in which the homilist

asked how Jesus even could take seriously the three temptations – Satan asking him to turn bread into stone, to throw himself off the Temple, or to allow Satan to make him a great ruler. "After all," said the homilist, "Jesus was God."

Undoubtedly the homilist was thinking that Jesus was "consubstantial with the Father." And since Jesus was consubstantial, why bother to distinguish between the Father and the Son? The two are one in being. Jesus even said, "I and the Father are one" (John 10:30). Jesus understood things with the all-knowing mind of his Father. To our homilist, that must have clinched the point. The temptations of Satan were unattractive offers in which Jesus had no interest. Jesus was not really tempted.

I doubt, however, that the evangelists included the stories of Jesus' temptations as an ironic comment on the foolishness of Satan. That is not how they are usually interpreted. The stories of the temptation represented a genuine trial that Jesus must have undergone, a trial that we are meant to take seriously. To do that, we have to distinguish between Jesus and his heavenly Father.

There are many passages in the New Testament that rightly distinguish between Jesus and the Father:

1. Birth. To begin, Jesus was born of Mary. Although the Son was eternally begotten by the Father, he became incarnate at a specific moment in time. He was born during the reign of Herod the Great. God the Father, by contrast, was never born, but always was.
2. Human Development. Next, we know that Jesus was like us in all things but sin. When he was separated from his parents, they found him with the rabbis in the Temple. They took him back to Galilee, where he "grew in wisdom and understanding." Jesus did not have all-knowing intellect of his Father. He had to grow and learn, just as every human being does.
3. Prayer. Above all, we know that Jesus prayed. He taught his disciples to say the "Our Father." He begged his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane that the cup of suffering would be taken from him. He asked on the cross why his Father had abandoned him. In none of these cases was Jesus praying to himself.

In short, the New Testament does *not* allow us to think that Jesus and the Father were identical. Although the phrase "consubstantial with the Father" does suggest identity to some people, we know better. Jesus stood somewhat at a distance from the Father because he had a created human nature. He learned from his earthly parents to pray. He possessed a human soul and consciousness. He had a human will, and turned to his Father in obedience. To some people, consubstantial may mean identical, but that is not what the Church teaches.

Soteriology

If we take seriously the humanity of Jesus, we see him standing at a created distance from his Father in faith, obedience, and prayer. Consubstantial with the Father differs from the *identity* with the Father that we first saw. The Church teaches that the Father "begot" the divine Word from all eternity. Then, two thousand years ago, after the incarnation, Jesus addressed God as " Father." That provides a clue. Jesus was consubstantial because he knew himself as the Father's spiritual Son. Jesus identified

with his Father and made God's will his own. With his very person he ushered in God's kingdom. By imitating Jesus, or in the phrase of St. Paul, by "putting on Christ," we share in the life of God. In short, consubstantial means that Jesus made God the Father present to us. He was an example for us, his disciples.

At the same time, however, our faith acknowledges that Jesus was more than an example to follow. We recognize ourselves to be sinners. God has called to us, and we have fallen short. We need help. Jesus is God's own Son, who descended from heaven and humbled himself to be one with us. John's Gospel calls him "the lamb of God" because his life was a sacrifice. Like the sacrifice of a choice lamb, Jesus' death was an offering made to the Father. By dying on the cross, he took upon himself the sins of the world. No ordinary person could do that. And that too is a clue to the meaning of consubstantial. Only one begotten by God and belonging to God could perform a sacrifice worthy of God. Jesus was consubstantial, we could say, because he alone could pay the price for human salvation.

Putting it very simply, we have two models by which to understand salvation by Christ. Both of them shed light on tonight's topic, "consubstantial with the Father." According to the first model, Jesus is our master and example. He is one in being with the Father, and we are his disciples. Jesus shows us how to unite ourselves with God. He reconciles us to the Father. We can call this first model "exemplary atonement." Jesus was one in being with the Father and leads us to Him as the perfect exemplar.

Then there is a second model. The second model can be called "expiatory atonement." According to this model, Jesus saves us by making expiation. In other words, he paid the price for our sins. He took upon himself the world's evil. He showed that God is stronger than Satan. He reconciles us to God by dying on our behalf. The resurrection showed that Jesus was consubstantial. The Father raised the Son as the first fruit leading to our own resurrection from the dead. Because of his death and resurrection, we can hope thatour earthly deaths will not be final.

So I invite you to consider these two ways of understanding how we are saved by Christ: exemplary atonement and expiatory atonement. I ask you to choose which one you prefer, or which is the first you usually think about, or which one means more to you.

Why Choose?

Now I know that some of you will ask, "Why choose?" You will say that both models express Christian faith. Jesus is our human example and Jesus is the divine sacrifice. You may object that I am asking you to do something that the Church never asks, namely, to divide Christ in two. But bear with me. I want you to choose in order to illuminate the words "consubstantial with the Father." I want you to see that there is a tension between the two models:

- Image of God. If we understand Jesus as the divine sacrifice, we imply that a God who is pleased by sacrifice is pleased by Jesus' death.
- Human Responsibility. If Jesus paid the price for human sinfulness, did his death remove our own responsibility for repairing our sins and misdeeds?

- Reconciliation. If we are reconciled to the Father by Jesus' example of unselfish love, then couldn't any unselfish example reconcile us with God?
- Scapegoat. If Jesus' death alone can take away the sins of the world, does that not make Jesus a scapegoat who was unfairly punished?

It is important to see the tension in the choice between atonement accomplished by Jesus as the perfect example and atonement accomplished by a sacrificial death. Whichever one we choose, the choice will have consequences for our understanding of consubstantial. So I invite you to take a few moments, make your choice, and talk with your neighbor about why you made your choice.

What the Theologians Say

When I put the choice to seminarians, they usually say that we are saved by the death of Jesus, more so than by imitating his life. Above everything most seminarians honor Jesus' act of unselfish love, his passion and self-offering to the Father. The crucifixion is the high point of salvation, they usually say – more so, for example, than the sermon on the mount, or the confrontations with the Pharisees, or the teaching in parables, or even the incarnation itself. Jesus saves by his sacrifice on the cross.

The choice of the seminarians is easy to understand. After all, they hope to be priests, and priesthood has to do with sacrifice. In the Eucharist, we unite the sacrifice of our lives with the sacrifice of Jesus. We pray that our sacrifices will be accepted by God. By offering the sacrifice of the Mass, the priest enables us to put on Christ. By celebrating the death of Christ, he allows us to offer our lives along with Jesus' life of self-sacrificial love.

Sacrifice is the most common way to understand the atonement, but it is not the only way. Every Christian knows that we are reconciled to the Father by the sacrifice of Christ. But the atonement is also achieved by the transformation that happens when we imitate Christ. So now I would like to reflect on these two ways of understanding the atonement. I want to show how Karl Rahner, a Catholic priest and theologian who served the bishops of the Second Vatican Council, understood Jesus as the perfect example. And I will show how Hans Urs von Balthasar, another priest and theologian of twentieth-century Europe, understood the death of Jesus as an atoning sacrifice.

Hans Urs von Balthasar

Let us begin with Balthasar (1905-1988), a Swiss theologian and priest. Pope John Paul II had named him a cardinal but he died two days before the ceremony that would have granted him the red hat. He entered the Jesuits in 1929 and was ordained in 1936. In 1940, Balthasar received Adrienne von Speyr, an MD and a mystic, into the Church. Together they founded a religious society and secular institute, the Community of Saint John. The Jesuits did not see running the institute as compatible with belonging to the Society, so in 1950 Balthasar chose to leave the Jesuits but remained a priest. He wrote more than 70 individual books, including the multi-volume collections entitled *Theo-Logic* (3 vols.), *Theo-Drama* (5 vols.), and *The Glory of the Lord* (7 vols.).

I am not an expert in the theology of Balthasar, but one of my colleagues is. Father Gregory Semeniuk, a Vincentian priest, is completing at Boston College a doctoral

dissertation on the theology of Balthasar. Last summer he invited me to read his dissertation. My summary is based on Father Gregory's analysis of Balthasar's view of the doctrine of salvation.

The central premise of Balthasar is that, if we are to understand salvation in Jesus Christ, we have to closely follow biblical teaching, especially about Christ's sacrificial death. This includes fidelity to the Book of Leviticus, in which God instructs Moses about the importance of offering animal sacrifice. In its first chapter, Leviticus tells about how the animal is to be killed and explains that the animal's death shall "make atonement" (Lev. 1:4). In chapter 16, we read about the practice of designating a goat as a sin offering. In this case, the goat is not to be killed, Instead the priest confesses over the living goat the sins of the community, and then drives the goat into the wilderness on behalf of the people. In that way the animal may "bear all their iniquities upon him," transporting the people's sins "to a solitary land" (Lev. 16:22). This Old Testament teaching is one basis for the New Testament view of Jesus as a sacrificial victim.

Balthasar connects the teaching from Leviticus with St. Paul. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, St. Paul speaks about how we are reconciled to God in Christ. Paul puts it this way to the Corinthians:

> We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:20-21).

Balthasar seizes upon this passage. He takes literally the phrase, "he made him to be sin." In Balthasar's theology, the passage is not a figure of speech. Christ is literally the bearer of our sin. "All this," writes Balthasar, "is 'loaded on' to him by God."[1] Jesus indeed "becomes sin," just as St. Paul had written.

How can Jesus, who was like us in all things but sin (Heb. 5:15), be "made sin"? Balthasar's answer presents the agony of Jesus in the starkest possible terms. Jesus embodies, in his very person, the reality of human sinfulness. He also embodies the reality of God's inscrutable will. From Balthasar's viewpoint, Jesus has been thrust into a hellish situation. He is isolated both from us (who have condemned him to death) and from his heavenly Father (whose anger against Jesus as the embodiment of sinful humanity is justified). Jesus is utterly alone, cut off from every human being he loved, and even cut off from the Father in his righteous anger.

For Balthasar, the crucified one has been, in Paul's words, "made sin." When we look at the cross, according to Balthasar's theology, we do not see the man Jesus. Balthasar writes: "The true subject who acts on the Cross is therefore God, and the instrument he employs in acting is sin."[2] Jesus Christ, the instrument of God's action, is not the suffering man of the cross. No, he is the opposite: the reality of sin itself. Jesus (Balthasar implies) is no longer Jesus, but sin itself. God has placed upon him the sins of the world. What looks to all the world like an occasion of cruel death is (to Balthasar)

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[1] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7, *The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 209.
[2] Ibid.

something different: it is the action of God who, in accepting the death of Jesus, accepts a sin offering and reconciles humanity.

Balthasar insists that the statement of St. Paul, that the Father made Christ "to be sin," is not figurative language. Jesus is not merely "like sin," but made to "be" sin. The passion, Balthasar says, is not merely symbolic or liturgical action. God the Father really loaded sin onto him. At the same time, however, Balthasar views Jesus in liturgical terms drawn from the Bible. Just as the goat became a sin offering in the Book of Leviticus, so Jesus becomes, in the New Testament, the Lamb of God.

The glorification of the Son after the resurrection marks the fulfillment of what Balthasar calls the "cosmic liturgy." Balthasar writes that the cosmic liturgy is "the act whereby the created 'Thou' gave back all glory to the absolute 'I.'"[3] The created "Thou" is Jesus Christ. By dying, he gave back all glory to the absolute "I," the Father. When the Son surrendered himself to the Father, the Father received the offering and glorified the Son. In this cosmic liturgy, Father and Son exchanged gifts of mutual love.

Balthasar's theology presents the sacrificial death of Jesus in terms drawn from the biblical record. The Old Testament writers recognized the presence of sin in ancient Israel. In order to atone for sin and to purify the people, Leviticus called for animal sacrifices that would reconcile the people with God. These included the expulsion of an animal, laden with the people's sins, from the community.

New Testament writers applied these concepts to Jesus Christ. Recalling the cultic liturgy of ancient Israel, St. Paul said this about the relationship between the Father and the Son: "he made him to be sin who knew no sin." Although Jesus prayed that his hour of agony would pass, the Father willed that he would die. It was the Father who acted on the cross, Balthasar says. The instrument he employed in acting is sin, namely, the Son who was "made sin." The death of Jesus was God's judgment against sin. The Son's death was a gift that the Father accepted and reciprocated by raising him from the dead. In this we see what it means for Christ to be "consubstantial" or one in being with the Father.

Balthasar's theology of the sacrifice of Christ presents an enormous challenge to our modern way of thinking. We no longer believe, as ancient Israel did, that God is gratified by the death of an animal, even if it is the best of the flock. Today we insist on the ethical treatment of animals. The understanding of Jesus as priest and victim is a great challenge. So let us turn to the second way of understanding the atonement of Jesus, the reconciliation with the Father accomplished by Jesus' perfect example.

Karl Rahner

Atonement by example is a way of summarizing the view of Karl Rahner, perhaps the most famous theologian of the twentieth century. Born in Germany in 1904, he remained a Jesuit throughout his life, working in the classroom and at his writing desk. Rahner's collected works recently have been reissued in a 32-volume edition. By the end of his life, in 1984, he was well-known throughout the Catholic world, his books had been translated into the principal modern languages.

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[3] Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 6, *The Old Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, CRV, and Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis, ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), p. 144.

Rahner described his understanding of Jesus Christ as "transcendental."[4] He meant that, when God's Word became flesh, the incarnation had consequences for every human being. Jesus Christ revealed in his own person the human capacity for oneness with God. Although the Church teaches that Jesus alone was "consubstantial with the Father," nevertheless Jesus reveals a possibility that every human being enjoys. It is the possibility of union with God. By participating in the Word made flesh, by imitating Christ, we "transcend" what we were before. God's Word is active in every human being, at least potentially. By "hearing" the divine Word in Jesus Christ we transcend our old selves and grow closer to God.

Let us look more closely at Rahner's way of understanding the atonement. He begins by recognizing the reality of sin. As Christians, we say that we bear the guilt of Adam's sin. We acknowledge our complicity in the sins of the world. There are evils that we cannot escape, even if there are particular sins that we ourselves did not commit. The marvelous grace is that we can recognize our sins and confess them. God forgives us by giving us a second chance. It is a chance, says Rahner, to repair the wrong that we have done. This is how we turn to God, namely, by recognizing God's law as our own and by striving to follow it.

Christ, however, is more than a reminder of God's law. He is God's presence, the presence of God's Word in history. In Christ, said Rahner, God reveals the divine will for all of humanity. God desires a relationship with every human being akin to the relationship that the Father enjoys with the Son. The Father did not take over Jesus' personality. The Father did not absorb his soul. He did not cancel his human will. No, Jesus freely obeyed the Father. He made the Father's will his own. He turned to the Father in prayer. In that way Jesus was consubstantial with the Father.

To obey God, to pray to God, to freely choose to do God's will – in all of this, Jesus is the perfect example. As an example, said Rahner, he reconciled us to the Father. He believed that he was not merely announcing God's kingdom, but actually bringing it about through his very person. With his human nature and limited human knowledge, Jesus lived in faith and hope. He hoped that, after his death, the Father would validate his life. That validation in fact occurred at the resurrection. The Father raised him to new life. So Jesus reconciles us to the Father by being our example of faithfulness.

Like Jesus, we place our faith in God. Like him, we hope that our lives have purpose and meaning. We believe that God shall raise us as well. St. Paul tells us that Jesus is the "first fruits" of those who have fallen asleep (1 Cor. 15). We hope that we will be the eventual harvest.

Karl Rahner's theology presents us, in summary, with a different image of how Jesus Christ reconciles us to God. As the perfect example, Jesus showed how it is possible for a man to be one with God. He freely chose to subordinate his human will to the divine will. He taught us to pray. He obeyed God, even when it meant his death sentence. In him, God reveals His will for all humanity. His will is to save us. In imitating Christ, who was consubstantial with the Father, we accomplish God's will.

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[4] Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. by William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1978). See Ch. VI.3, "Transcendental Christology," pp. 206-212.

By emphasizing the humanity of Jesus, however, Rahner's view of the atonement presents its own challenge. In Rahnerian theology, the similarities between Jesus Christ and us, his followers, are so pronounced that it may see that Jesus differed from us only in his total dedication to the Father. How can Jesus, whom Rahner called "this man who is one of us,"[5] also be what the Church calls the unique mediator of salvation? That is the challenge posed by Rahner's theology.

Conclusion

It is time to draw our reflection to a close. We have envisioned Jesus Christ as a sacrificial victim and as a perfect example. Has this reflection changed you?

As we reflect on the theologies of Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, we see two different understandings of how Jesus saves us, and thus two different ways of understanding the phrase "consubstantial with the Father." In Balthasar's theology, Jesus saves us by being the central actor in a cosmic liturgy. This liturgy transforms the Old Testament liturgies by which the priests would sacrifice an animal. Instead of a sacrificial animal, Jesus himself is sacrificed, allowing himself to be led to death. The sins of the world are laid upon him, just as the Old Testament priest laid the sins of the community on the head of an animal. At the crucifixion, the Father strikes down our sin in the person of the Son who, though sinless, has been "made sin." Then after the sinless bearer of our sin was thrust down to hell, the Father raised him up. In this liturgical exchange of gifts, we see the Trinity, Father and Son united by the Spirit who exists as the love between them. That is Balthasar's image of the passion.

How different Balthasar's image is from the one presented by Karl Rahner. There the emphasis is on Jesus as a model for us and as the one who perfects our faith. Jesus shows what it means for a human being to be one with God. He was not a God in a human disguise. Like us, he had to place his faith in his heavenly Father, even if this had moral consequences. In full human freedom he chose to do the Father's will. He proclaimed the closeness of God's kingdom. He prayed to his heavenly Father and taught us to pray. He is our model because he is like us in all things but sin. His death was not a liturgical gesture by which the Father judged human sinfulness, but an expression of faith, hope, and love. By imitating him we are reconciled to the Father and receive the Holy Spirit's power to renew the earth.

Thank you for your willingness to accompany me on this journey of reflection. Together we have entered into the mystery of Christ, the mystery of God becoming man. We have seen two ways for understanding how Jesus was one in being with the Father. Jesus is both the sacrificial victim and the perfect example, but the two stand in tension. I invite you now to say whether this evening's journey of reflection has changed you, and if so, how you have been changed.

[5] Ibid., p. 284.