

Thomas G. Weinandy, OFM, Cap.

Capuchin College (Washington, DC)

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. INCARNATIONAL “BECOMING” AS A MIXED RELATION

The Trinity, as the supreme Christian mystery, is the most incomprehensible of all the mysteries of our faith. The persons of the Trinity exist in a manner that is ontologically unique, and so their existence differs in kind and not in degree from that of the finite created order. We cannot fully comprehend this sublime divine mystery. Yet, I believe, in one way at least, the Incarnation is an even greater mystery and thus an even more difficult mystery to conceive and understand.

The Trinity exists in an entirely different ontological order from that of finite creation and yet, as the one God, all three persons exist in communion with one another, and so share that same divine ontological order. Because they exist in the same ontological order, when we attempt to gain greater clarity as to the precise nature of this trinitarian mystery, we have the ever so slight advantage of having to deal with only one ontological order, even if that order is completely different to our own. What adds greater mystery to the Incarnation is that the Son of God exists not only as God (within the divine ontological order), but also as man (within the finite and created ontological order). It is the twofold existence, this twofold “IS”, that makes the Incarnation even more mysterious, and so equally, in a sense, more wondrous. Aquinas was very much aware of this.

But nothing is more a source of wonder than the Son of God made man, so that everyone can fittingly ask, “What is this?”. That is, how can the Son of God be the Son of Man? How can Christ be one person with two natures? “His name will be called Wonderful” (Is. 9:6).¹

¹ *Super Ioannem*, c. 6, l. 35 [914]; translation is taken from THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, edited by J.A. Weisheipl, Albany NY: Magi Books, 1980, p. 364. Aquinas also

In this essay I want to examine the marvel of the Incarnation as grasped and articulated by Aquinas.² In particular, I wish to study how Thomas conceives the nature of incarnational “becoming,” that is, the incarnational act of the Son of God becoming man, as a mixed relation.³ Before pursuing this understanding, however, we must first be clear as to the mystery of the Incarnation itself.

THE FAITH OF THE CHURCH: THREE INCARNATIONAL TRUTHS

The church’s teaching on the Incarnation, as proclaimed and understood within the scriptures and defined by the conciliar tradition, formed the basis of Aquinas’ Christology.⁴ When treating the question of whether it is true to say: “God is man,” Thomas simply answered:

states: “Indeed, among divine works, this most especially exceeds the reason; for nothing can be thought of which is more marvellous than this divine accomplishment: that the true God, the Son of God, should become true man” (*SCG*, IV, c. 27, n. 1; the translation is taken from *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, vol. 4, translated by C.J. O’Neil, Garden City: Image Books, 1957). Or again: “For nothing more marvellous could be done than that God become man and that Christ’s humanity should become a partaker of divine immortality after his resurrection” (*Super Ioannem*, c. 2, l. 19 [398]; Weisheipl, p. 170).

² Aquinas has substantial treatments on the Incarnation in seven of his works: *In III Sent.*, d. 1–32; *SCG*, IV, c. 27–55; *De veritate*, q. 29; *Comp. theol.*, c. 199–245; *Super Ioannem*, c. 1, l. 14 [165–190]; *De unione Verbi*, a. 1–4; *ST*, III, q. 1–59.

³ I have treated this issue on three previous occasions. See T.G. WEINANDY, *Does God Change? The Word’s Becoming in the Incarnation*, Still River: St. Bede’s Publications, 1984, p. 67–100; IDEM, *Does God Suffer?*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000, p. 206–208; and IDEM, “God IS Man: The Marvel of Incarnation,” *Aquinas on Doctrine*, edited by T. Weinandy, D. Keating and J. Yocum, London: T&T Clark, 2004, p. 75–79.

For expositions of Aquinas’ Christology and on the state of the question presently under discussion, see B. BRO, “La notion métaphysique de tout et son application au problème théologique de l’union hypostatique,” I, *Revue Thomiste*, vol. 68/2 (1968), p. 181–197 and II, vol. 68/3 (1968), p. 357–380; B. DAVIES, *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992, p. 297–319; M. GORMAN, “Christ as Composite according to Aquinas,” *Traditio*, vol. 55 (2000), p. 143–157; IDEM, “Uses of the Person-Nature Distinction in Thomas’ Christology,” *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales*, vol. 67 (2000), p. 58–70; D. LEGGE, *The Trinitarian Christology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017; M.-V. LEROY, “L’union selon l’hypostase d’après saint Thomas d’Aquin,” *Revue Thomiste*, vol. 74/2 (1974), p. 205–241; F. RUELLO, *La christologie de Thomas D’Aquin*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1987; H.J.M. SCHOOT, *Christ the “Name” of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ*, Leuven: Peeters, 1993; J. WAWRYKOW, “Hypostatic Union,” *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, edited by R. Van Nieuwenhove, J. Wawrykow, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, p. 222–251; É.-H. WÉBER, *Le Christ selon Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Paris: Desclée, 1988.

⁴ The scriptural foundation of Aquinas’ theology is increasingly appreciated and this is very much the case within his Christology. Not only does Aquinas quote scripture in most of the articles of the *Summa Theologiae* and the *Summa contra Gentiles*, but he is also very concerned to ensure that his doctrinal explication is in accord with its traditional christological interpretation. See T. HIBBS, *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas*, Notre Dame: University of Notre

Supposing the truth of the Catholic belief, that the true divine nature is united with a true human nature not only in person, but also in suppositum or hypostasis; we say that this proposition is true and proper; God is man — not only by the truth of its terms, i.e. because Christ is true God and true man, but by the truth of the predication.⁵

Thus, a “christological logic” is embedded within Aquinas’ entire treatment of the Incarnation, namely that the very nature of the Incarnation demands that certain indispensable truths be preserved and that the consequences flowing from these truths also be assured. Therefore, by embracing as his own this “truth of the Catholic belief” through faith, in his writings he realized that to conceive and articulate the Incarnation properly, one’s conception and articulation must simultaneously comprise, and so ensure, three absolutely essential truths, the absence of anyone of which would nullify its truth. Simply put, these three truths are:

1. It must be truly the divine Son of God who is man. The full divinity of the Son must be maintained within the incarnational becoming and subsequent union. Within the Incarnation, to compromise the divinity of the Son in any way for whatever reason nullifies the whole import of the Incarnation; that it is precisely the Son of God who exists as man.

2. It must be truly man that the Son of God is. Equally, if the Son of God is not truly and fully human, living an authentic and complete human life, then the whole point of his being the true Son of God, obviously, vanishes. The

Dame Press, 1995; M. LEVERING, *Christ’s Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002; *Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, edited by P. Roszak, J. Vijgen, Turnhout: Brepols, 2015; H.J.M. SCHOOT, *Christ the “Name” of God Thomas Aquinas on naming Christ*; J.P. TORRELL, *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, vol. 2, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003; W.G.B.M. VALKENBERG, *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Leuven: Peeters, 2000; and *Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries*, edited by T. Weinandy, D. Keating, J. Yocum, London: T&T Clark, 2005.

It is also fascinating that, while Aquinas is perceived by many contemporary Eastern theologians as the quintessential Western Scholastic, his Christology was very much influenced by the Eastern Fathers — Cyril of Alexandria and especially by John Damascene, through whom he obtained knowledge of the ecumenical councils. He obtained this knowledge because the Pope asked him to study the Greek Fathers with the goal of facilitating a reunion between the East and West. Moreover, he was the first Scholastic to quote from Chalcedon directly. See I. BACKES, *Die Christologie des hl. Thomas von Aquin und die griechischen Kirchenväter*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1931; and *Thomas Aquinas and the Greek Fathers*, edited by M. Dauphinais, A. Hofer, OP, R. Nutt, Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2019.

⁵ *ST*, III, q. 16, a. 1; translation is taken from *Summa theologiae*, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947.

significance of the divinity and of the humanity of Christ lies in their reciprocal relationship with one another. There is no point in upholding the divinity of the Son if that divine Son is not man. Nor, equally, is there any point in upholding the full humanity if the one who is fully man is not the divine Son of God.⁶

3. The Son of God must truly be man. As implied in the above, it is of no use upholding either the full divinity or the full humanity, if the divine Son of God does not actually exist as an authentic man. The incarnational “becoming” must terminate in the extraordinary fact that the Son of God now simply is man, and it is this “is” and only this “is” that impregnates the terms of predication, that is, “the Son of God” and “man,” with their full incarnational significance and meaning, for it is this “is” that establishes their shared ontological unity or oneness. As we will see, this incarnational “to be,” this incarnational “to exist,” this incarnational “is” is the cornerstone to Aquinas’ whole Christological enterprise. His Christology is a Christology of “is” whereby the Son who is God is also the same Son who is man. As the opening quotation exemplifies, for Aquinas it is this incarnational “is” that makes the Incarnation the most marvellous of all mysteries.⁷

⁶Those contemporary authors who deny the divinity of Jesus in order to accentuate and so ensure his humanity miss the point of why Jesus must be fully human, that is, in order to ensure that this is what the Son is — man. For example see J. MACQUARRIE, *Christology Revisited*, London: SCM, 1998, p. 43–60; IDEM, *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, London: SCM, 1990.

While it cannot be treated in this paper because of space restraints, I have emphasized elsewhere, in accordance with Aquinas (see *ST*, III, q. 4, a. 6; q. 14 and 15; *SCG*, IV, c. 29, n. 7; and *Super Philip*, c. 2, l. 7–8 [59–61]), that the Son of God assumed a humanity from the fallen race of Adam. Only if he assumed a humanity tainted by sin, though not sinning himself, could he save sinful humankind. See T. WEINANDY, *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993. See also P. GONDREAU, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2002, p. 166–189; M. McCool ADAMS, *What Sort of Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology*, Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1999.

⁷Aquinas’ Christology must never be seen in isolation from his soteriology. The reason that the Incarnation is fitting in that through it humankind’s salvation is assured (see *ST*, III, q. 1–4, and *Super Ioannem*, c. 1, l. 14a [169]). Aquinas repeatedly emphasizes in his *Summa contra gentiles* that the goal of the Incarnation and the redemptive acts of Jesus is our obtaining the beatific vision (see *SCG*, IV, c. 29, n. 13; IV, c. 42, n. 1). J.F. Boyle notes that there is a twofold structure in the *tertium pars* of the *Summa Theologiae*. The first delineates who Christ is as the Son of God incarnate and the second specifies what he accomplished for our salvation precisely because of who he is as the incarnate Son. See J.F. BOYLE, “The Twofold Division of St. Thomas’s Christology in the *Tertium Pars*,” *The Thomist*, vol. 60 (1996), p. 439–447.

THE TRUTH OF THE CATHOLIC FAITH:
THE SON SUBSISTS AS MAN

Aquinas discourses at length on those who deny the three incarnational truths in some manner, including the classical ancient heresies, such as Arianism, Nestorianism, and Monophysitism, as well as inadequate expressions during his own time, such as the *assumptus-homo* and *habitus* theories of Peter Abelard and his followers.⁸ However, Aquinas insists that one must follow the truth of the Catholic faith and so endorses a “subsistence” understanding” of the Incarnation.⁹ This conception maintains that “in Christ there is a perfect divine nature and a perfect human nature,...and that these two natures are united in Christ not by indwelling only, nor in an accidental mode,...but in one hypostasis and one supposit.”¹⁰ While he is upholding the authenticity of each nature here, Aquinas is also designating a twofold oneness in Christ. He is confirming that Christ is one ontological reality/supposit, and the one ontological reality/supposit is that Christ is the one person/hypostasis of the Son existing as man.¹¹ Thomas declares that “only in this way can we save what the Scriptures hand on about the Incarnation.” Significantly, Aquinas grasped that the “subsistence theory” alone ensures the scriptural employment of the communication of idioms, that is, that divine and human attributes are predicated of one and the same person.¹²

Traditionally, as witnessed from Ignatius of Antioch to Cyril of Alexandria and the Council of Chalcedon, the communication of idioms was both a litmus test for Christological orthodoxy and the catalyst for properly conceiving and articulating that orthodoxy.¹³ For Thomas, the communication of idioms is at the heart of the scriptural proclamation because it embodies and expresses all

⁸ See especially *SCG*, IV, c. 28–38 and *Comp. theol.*, c. 202–208. See PETER LOMBARD, *Sententiae*, III, q. 6, 7, 10, 21, 22 for contemporary incarnational theories. For a study of Aquinas’ treatment of these contemporary theories see W.H. PRINCIPE, “St. Thomas on the *Habitus*-Theory of the Incarnation,” *St. Thomas Aquinas (1274–1974). Commemorative Studies*, vol.1, edited by A. Maurer, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974, p. 381–418.

⁹ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 6. See also *Comp. theol.*, c. 209.

¹⁰ *SCG*, IV, c. 39, n. 1.

¹¹ Aquinas states that Christ is two “in the neuter,” in that he exists in two natures, but that he is only one in the masculine, in that he is the one Son (see *In III Sent.*, d. 6, q. 2, a. 1, and *De unione Verbi*, a. 3). In his *Quodlibetal Questions*, Aquinas states that while the two natures must be maintained and even that the “human nature in Christ is a certain individual or singular or particular,” it is nonetheless “necessary to posit one person, so also one hypostasis, one suppositum and one thing of two natures” (*Quodlibet*, IX, q. 2, a. 1[2]; translation is taken from J.L.A. West, *The Aquinas Translation Project*). See also *Comp. theol.*, c. 210–212.

¹² See *SCG*, IV, c. 39, n. 1.

¹³ See T. WEINANDY, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 172–177.

three incarnational truths, especially in accentuating the incarnational “is.” Only if the Son of God is man can divine and human attributes be predicated of the one and the same person of the Son. While the Catholic faith demands this understanding of the Incarnation, and Aquinas wished to endorse it, how did he conceive and articulate such an understanding?

In harmony with the church’s Christological tradition, Aquinas understood that the incarnational “becoming” was the uniting of the humanity to the person or hypostasis of the Word.

The Word of God from all eternity had complete being (*esse completum*) in hypostasis or person; while in time the human nature accrued to it, not as if it were assumed unto one being (inasmuch as this is of the nature (*non quasi assumpta ad unum esse prout est naturae*) even as the body is assumed to the being of the soul), but to one being inasmuch as this is of the hypostasis or person (*sed ad unum esse prout est hypostasis vel personae*). Hence the human nature is not accidentally united to the Son of God.¹⁴

While the incarnational union is not a compositional union of natures, which would suppress them, the union does bring about “one being” in that the human nature is ontologically united to the person of the Son, so that the one reality of the Son incarnate comes to be.

Since the human nature is united to the Son of God, hypostatically or personally...and not accidentally, it follows that by the human nature there accrued to him no new personal being (*esse personale*), but only a new relationship of the pre-existing personal being (*esse personale*) to the human nature, in such a way that the Person is said to subsist not merely in the divine but also in the human nature.¹⁵

¹⁴ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 6, ad 2.

¹⁵ *ST*, III, q. 17, a. 2. See also *SCG*, IV, c. 49, n. 16; *In III Sent.*, d. 5, q. 1, a. 3 and *Super Philip.*, c. 2, l. 7–8 [57–61]. As the above quotations exemplify, Aquinas insisted that the union between the divine and human natures was not accidental, that is, a moral union such as through indwelling. Some medieval scholastics wanted to see the human nature as an accident within the divinity of the Son. As whiteness would inhere in the substance of a man, so the humanity would inhere and so exist within the divinity of the Son. However, for humanity to be an accident in this sense would be a form of monophysitism, for humanity is now not united to the person of the Son, but actually subsumed within the divine nature itself. Aquinas clearly recognized this distinction when he wrote: “Now, the things which accrue to one having a nature, but do not belong to the integrity of that nature, seem either to be accidents — say whiteness and music; or to stand in an accidental relation — say, a ring, a garment, a house, and the like.” Neither are in accord with the Incarnation, for “God is not susceptible to an accident; and because human nature, being in the genus of substance, cannot be the accident of anything;” and an accidental union cannot account for the Son actually existing as man (*SCG*, IV, c. 41, n. 5). R. Cross makes much of some of the Scholastics seeing the humanity as an accident within the divinity; see *IDEM*, *The Metaphysics of*

In uniting the human nature to the person of the Son, the Son did not become a different person (“there accrued to him no new personal being”), for if he did so, it would no longer be the person of Son who existed as man. Rather, the human nature was ontologically united to the Son such that the Son now actually existed as man.

The mystery of the Incarnation was not completed through God being changed in any way from the immutable state in which he had been from all eternity, but through his having united himself to the creature in a new way or rather through his having united it to himself.¹⁶

To grasp Aquinas’ incarnational notion of “become” with its ensuing incarnational “is,” it is necessary to perceive the significance of his use of *esse personale* and his emphasis that the human nature is united to the Son, rather than vice versa. Among human beings, relationships are established by some mediating act which unites the persons: hugs, kisses, and sexual relations. The incarnational act, the “becoming,” is not the uniting of the human nature to the very person of the Son by some mediating act. Rather the incarnational act, the “becoming,” is the uniting of the human nature immediately, and so unmediatedly, to the Son as the Son actually personally exists in his *esse personale*. Thus, while the Son does not accrue any new personal being, any new *esse personale* that would establish him as a different person, he acquires a new mode of existing, that is, as man, and this is achieved only because the humanity is ontologically united to him as he actually exists personally as God. Thomas’ use of the *esse personale* thus accentuates and establishes the three incarnational truths.

Firstly, the uniting of the human nature to the Son as the Son is in his *esse personale* establishes the singular ontological depth of the incarnational “becoming,” so that it terminates in the truth that the Son is man.¹⁷ Secondly, such

the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. See also M.-V. LEROY, “L’union selon l’hypostase d’après saint Thomas d’Aquin,” p. 218–219.

¹⁶ *ST*, III, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1. I have argued at length that historically, both within the Fathers and Aquinas, the immutability of the Son as divine was defended not merely to protect the divinity of the Son insofar as he is God, but also for the sake of the Incarnation. If the Son changes in becoming man, then it is no longer the Son who is man. See T. WEINANDY, *Does God Change?*, p. 33–100.

¹⁷ Aquinas grasped the difference between what I am referring to as the incarnational “becoming” and the incarnational “is” when he differentiated between “assumption” and “union.” “Union implies the relation; whereas assumption implies the action, whereby someone is said to assume, or the passion, whereby something is said to be assumed” (*ST*, III, q. 2, a. 8). Thomas argues that the union between the Son and his humanity is the greatest of all unions, even greater than that between the body and soul within human beings. It is even in one sense greater than that between the divine persons within the one nature of God. While the divine persons are the one God, the Son is not the Father or vice versa. Whereas, in the incarnation, the Son simply is man

a union guarantees that it is actually the Son who is man, since the humanity is ontologically united to the Son as the Son actually exists personally as God, without any change in his *esse personale*. Thirdly, such a union equally guarantees that it is actually man that the Son is, since it is precisely the human nature that is ontologically united to the Son as the Son exists in his *esse personale*. To state this all succinctly: the human nature in being ontologically united to the person of the Son in his *esse personale* confirms simultaneously that the Son truly is man, that it is truly the Son who is man and truly man that the Son is.¹⁸

THE INCARNATION: A MIXED RELATION

Aquinas gives his understanding of the incarnational “becoming” with its terminating incarnational “is” greater depth, though at times not without some ambiguity, when he places these within the context of a “relationship.” While “become” normally implies change in the one who “becomes,” Thomas holds that this is not the case within the Incarnation.

The union of which we are speaking is a relation which we consider between the divine and the human nature, inasmuch as they come together in one person of the Son of God. Now, as was said above (I, q. 13, a. 7), every relation which we consider between God and the creature is really in the creature, by whose change the relation is brought into being, whereas it is not really in God, but only in our way of thinking, since it does not arise from any change in God. And hence we must say that the union of which we are speaking is not really in God, except only in our way of thinking, but in the human nature, which is a creature, it is really.¹⁹

Aquinas further attempts to clarify this understanding in his first reply: “The Union is not really in God, but in our way of thinking, for God is said to be united to a creature inasmuch as the creature is really united to God without any change in him.”²⁰ Later in the *Summa Theologiae* Thomas again states:

Whatever is predicated relatively (by way of relation) can be newly predicated of something without its being changed, as a man may be made to be on the right side without being changed, and merely by the change of him on whose left side he was. Hence in such uses, not all that is said to be made is changed, since it

and so one supposit (see *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 9; see also F. RUELLO, *La christologie de Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 202–203).

¹⁸ See *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 2.

¹⁹ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 7.

²⁰ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 7, ad 1. See also *In III Sent.*, d. 2, q. 2, a. 2, qcl. 3, ad 2 and d. 5, q. 1, a. 1, qcl. 1.

may happen by the change of something else.... Now to be man belongs to God by reason of union, which is a relation. And hence to be man is newly predicated of God without any change in him, but by a change in the human nature, which is assumed to a divine person. And hence when it is said, “God was made man,” we understand no change on the part of God, but only on the part of the human nature.²¹

While I have written extensively already on Aquinas’ notion of “relation” with regard to the Incarnation, it is necessary that I summarize my understanding here. This is not only because it is pertinent to the present discussion, but also because it has been the subject of much misunderstanding and criticism from within the theological community.²²

The common criticism levelled against Aquinas’ position is that such an understanding of relations denies that God is actually related to the world at all, and specifically, within the Incarnation, denies that the Son is related to his humanity and so is not actually incarnate. He may seem to be related to our way of thinking, but in actual fact he is not. Is this criticism valid?

For Thomas, relations are of three types. The terms of a relationship can be related logically or really, or their relationship can be logical in one term and real in the other. This latter type of relationship is often referred to as a mixed relation. Logical relations (*rationis relatio*) or relations according to reason (*secundum rationem*) are relations “in idea only, as when mutual order or habitude can only be between things in the apprehension of reason.”²³ Logical relations then are established by the mind and its understanding of the terms, such as the relating of “Fido” to the “canine species.” When such terms are related by the mind, there is obviously no change within either of the terms related. Real relations are those in which there is something in the terms themselves which

²¹ *ST*, III, q. 16, a. 6, ad 2. See also *Super Ioannem*, c. 1, l. 14a [172].

²² See T. WEINANDY, *Does God Change?*, p. 88–98; IDEM, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 127–143, 206–208. What is known as Process Philosophy, and with it Process Theology, has frequently criticized Aquinas on this point — see for example the prominent Process theologian, D.R. GRIFFIN, *A Process Christology*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973. More recently, a number of Protestant evangelicals have argued against the traditional understanding of God and the Incarnation. Their position has come to be known as Open Theism. See for example C. PINNOCK, R. RICE, J. SANDERS, W. HASKER, D. BASINGER, *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994. There is also a good article in Wikipedia on Open Theism, giving the history of its origins, its main proponents and its theological impact, see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Open_theism.

²³ *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 7. See A. KREMPPEL, *La doctrine de la relation chez Saint Thomas*, Paris: Vrin, 1952; M. HENNINGER, *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989, p. 13–39; E. MULLER, “Real Relations and the Divine Issues in Thomas’s Understanding of God’s Relation to the World,” *Theological Studies*, vol. 56 (1995), p. 673–695; and H.J.M. SCHOOT, *Christ the “Name” of God*, p. 133–144.

causes the relationship. One person can be relatively taller than another because they have height in common. Or, more commonly understood, some action between the terms causes them to be related. A man becomes a husband because he marries a woman (and so becomes related), who in turn becomes his wife. Real relations established by actions on the part of both of the terms bring about a change within the terms related.²⁴

Besides these mutually logical and real relations, there can be relations that are real in one term and logical in the other and “this happens whenever two extremes are not in the same order.”²⁵ By “order” Thomas means ontological order, and so mixed relations would be those between Creator and creature, knower and known, and the divinity and humanity within the Incarnation. In this type of relationship, the Creator, the known and the divinity, are the logical terms of the relationship and as such they do not change. The creature, the knower, and the humanity are the real terms of the relationship and so do change. On a number of occasions Aquinas gives the example of being on the right or the left of a column. For a man to move from the right to the left of the column only brings about a change in himself and not in the column, and so the relationship is real in man, but logical as to the column. The column is only related to man logically and so remains unchanged by the man’s movement. This example has caused a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding, since it implies that God as Creator and the Son within the Incarnation are like the column, which has no actual relationship to man. However, this example merely portrays an illustrative similarity to a real mixed relation, since such a relation only truly exists between terms of different ontological orders. Aquinas wished merely to illustrate how one term (the “logical” term) can be related to the real term only because the latter is related to the former, and thus how and why the logical term remains unchanged. In an authentic mixed relation, the logical term (God as Creator and the Son as man) is in an entirely different situation.

How, then, does Aquinas conceive the Incarnation as a mixed relation? We emphasized previously that Aquinas saw the incarnational “becoming” as the uniting of the humanity to the Son of God in such a manner that it terminated in the incarnational “is,” that is, the Son actually came to subsist as man. Placed now within the context of a mixed relation, we can grasp more clearly the exact nature of that incarnational “becoming” with its resulting incarnational “is.” The real effect in the humanity is both that it comes to be and is ontologically united, simultaneous to its coming to be, to the Son of God, so that the humanity only is/exists as united ontologically to the Son. “From the moment of conception the

²⁴ See *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 7.

²⁵ *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 7.

human nature was united to the Word of God.”²⁶ For Thomas the actual effect of the humanity coming to be and being really related to the Son is a created effect, and thus the union itself is a created union.²⁷

It is here as well that we see why the humanity is a real substance for Aquinas, but not a separate supposit that would constitute a distinct human person, a human “who.” The humanity comes to be and so there is a true man, but since that humanity is simultaneously united to the person of the Son when it comes to be, it is the person of the Son who is this man.²⁸ “The human nature in Christ, although it is a particular substance, nevertheless cannot be called a hypostasis or suppositum, seeing that it is in union with a completed thing, viz. the whole Christ, as he is God and man. But the completed being with which it concurs is said to be a hypostasis or suppositum.”²⁹ For Thomas, this in no way undermines the integrity of the humanity. “The human nature of Christ has a greater dignity than ours, from this very fact that in us, being existent by itself, it has its own personality, but in Christ it exists in the person of the Word.”³⁰ This does not mean that Christ does not have his own personality in the sense of his own human distinctiveness and singularity. “Its proper personality is not wanting to the nature assumed through the loss of anything pertaining to the perfection of the human nature but through the addition of something which is above human nature, viz. the union with a divine person.”³¹ This is all very well summarized in the following passage:

Thus, therefore, since the human nature in Christ does not subsist separately through itself but exists in another, i.e. in the hypostasis of the Word (indeed not as an accident in a subject, nor properly as a part in a whole, but through an ineffable assumption), thus the human nature in Christ can indeed be called some individual or particular or singular, yet it cannot be called a hypostasis or suppositum, just as it cannot be called a person. Hence, it remains that in Christ there is only one hypostasis or suppositum, namely the divine Word.³²

Moreover, by conceiving the Son as the logical term of the incarnational relation, Aquinas specifies the ontological intimacy of the union and the depth of the real effect in the Son’s humanity. The humanity is ontologically united to the Son as the Son actually exists as God in his *esse personale* and not by some mediating act. This ensures that it is truly the Son as God who is man. Equally, the created

²⁶ *SCG*, IV, c. 43, n. 4.

²⁷ See *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 7; q. 2, a. 10.

²⁸ See *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 5.

²⁹ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 3, ad 2; see also *SCG*, IV, c. 49, n. 11.

³⁰ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2.

³¹ *ST*, III, q. 4, a. 2, ad 2.

³² *De unione Verbi*, a. 2.

relational effect in the humanity is not “ordained to (another) act, but to the personal being (*ad esse personale*)” of the Word.³³ Since the created relational effect within the humanity is that it comes to be and is ontologically united (“ordered”) to the Son as the Son exists as God in his *esse personale*, this ensures that it is as man that the Son actually now exists. “The grace of union is the personal being itself (*ipsum esse personale*) that is given gratis from above to the human nature in the person of the Word, and is the term of the assumption.”³⁴ The Son of God gave himself as he is in himself (in his *esse personale*) to his humanity by uniting the humanity to himself as he is in himself (in his *esse personale*). The terminal created effect of such a relationship is that the Son now exists as man.³⁵

We are now in a position to grasp clearly what Thomas means when he says that the Son is the logical term of the incarnational relationship. Equally, it is now clear what he means when he states that “union is not really in God, but only in our way of thinking, for God is said to be united to a creature inasmuch as the creature is really united to God without any change in him.”³⁶

Aquinas neither means that the Son is not actually related to the humanity and thus is not actually man, nor that he is only conceived to be related by our way of thinking, but actually is not. With such a criticism in mind Aquinas states: “It cannot be said, however, that these relations exist as realities out-

³³ *ST*, III, q. 8, a. 5, ad 3.

³⁴ *ST*, III, q. 6, a. 6.

³⁵ See *ST*, III, q. 3, a. 1. I have argued elsewhere that, since both the one God is conceived as pure act and the persons of the Trinity are conceived as subsistent relations fully in act, they must be placed within the rubric not of nouns, but of verbs. It is only because God is pure act (*actus purus*) and equally the persons of the Trinity as subsistent relations fully in act (and so verbs) that they are able to unite something to themselves as they are in themselves. Because the Son as God in his *esse personale* is a subsistent relation fully in act, he does not have any self-constituting relational potential to enact in order to establish further relations. Being fully relational in himself when, in the incarnation, the humanity is ontologically united/related to him, by the power of the Holy Spirit, it is united to him as he actually is as Son and so he is able actually to exist as man. Thus it is the Son’s immutable and unchangeable actuality as a person (a subsistent relation) fully in act that enables him to establish an incarnational relationship. Far from being a detriment to the Incarnation, immutability, as Aquinas well knew, is an absolute prerequisite for allowing, empowering, and warranting the incarnational “becoming” with its consequent incarnational “is.” See T. WEINANDY, *Does God Change?*, p. 88–96; IDEM, *Does God Suffer?*, p. 113–146, 206–208.

Moreover, I have argued that since the terminal created effect is the Son of God existing as man, Christ’s humanity must possess a “created *esse*.” Of course, this is a controversial issue. Does Thomas hold that there is only one *esse* in Christ and that divine, or does he hold that there are two — one divine and a secondary created *esse*? For my treatment of this contested issue wherein I hold that Aquinas ultimately maintains that there are two, see my “Aquinas: God IS Man: The Marvel of the Incarnation,” p. 79–83.

³⁶ *ST*, III, q. 2, a. 7, ad 1.

side God."³⁷ What Aquinas does mean is that the Son is understood to be related, and is actually and authentically related, not by some effect or change in him, but because the humanity is really related to him as he actually exists as God. It is because the humanity is really related to the Son as the Son is that the Son becomes and is man, and we thus understand him in a new way, that is, as man.³⁸

It should also be noted that in placing the incarnational union within the context of a mixed relation, Aquinas has allowed us to perceive more clearly the astounding implications of the Communication of Idioms. Since the human nature is really related ontologically to the Son as the Son exists in his *esse personale*, it was truly the Son, in the fullness of his divinity, who was born, suffered, died and rose from the dead. Equally, since it is truly an authentic human nature that is ontologically united to the Son, it is truly human birth, suffering, death and resurrection that the Son experienced. For Thomas, it is this understanding that Christological logic demands when confronted with the marvellous and awesome mystery of the Incarnation.³⁹

³⁷ *SCG*, II, c. 13, n. 1. See also *ST*, I, q. 13, a. 7, arg. 5, where Aquinas gives this interpretation as an objection to his own position. See also *De veritate*, q. 3, a. 2, arg. 8. Part of the difficulty lies in Aquinas' ambiguous use of the expression "logical term" and "logical relation." I have dealt with this issue elsewhere; see *Does God Change?*, p. 94–95.

³⁸ Thomas confirms this in his understanding of the term "Lord" when applied to God. "Since God is related to the creature for the reason that the creature is related to him; and since the relation is real in the creature, it follows that God is Lord (and thus Creator also) not in idea only, but in reality, for he is called Lord according to the manner in which the creature is subject to him" (*ST*, I, q. 13, a. 7, ad 5). See also *SCG*, II, c. 11, n. 2. For a similar explanation, see D. BURRELL, *Aquinas: God and Action*, Notre Dame University Press, 1979, p. 84–87. What Aquinas forgot in his use of Aristotelian terminology is that Aristotle never had to deal with the Creator/creature relationship nor with the Incarnation, and so he seems unaware of how radically he had altered Aristotle's understanding of relations. For a discussion of this in relation to Mary being truly the Son of God's mother, see P.J. BEARSLEY, "Jesus the Son of Mary according to St Thomas Aquinas," *Angelicum*, vol. 55 (1978), p. 104–123.

³⁹ For a good discussion of Aquinas' understanding of the Communication of Idioms see H.J.M. SCHOOT, *Christ the "Name" of God*, p. 147–152. A number of authors have been critical of Aquinas' understanding of the Communication of Idioms. See A. BÄCK, "Aquinas on the Incarnation," *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 56/2 (1982), p. 127–147; R. CROSS, "A Recent Contribution on the Distinction between Monophysitism and Chalcedonianism," *The Thomist*, vol. 65/3 (2001), p. 361–383; IDEM, *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation*, p. 184–205; T.V. MORRIS, "St. Thomas on the Identity and Unity of the Person of Christ: A Problem of Reference in Christological Discourse," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 35 (1982), p. 419–430. I do not believe the authors of these critiques properly grasp the ontological nature of the incarnational "is." For my critique of Cross, see my review of his book in *The Thomist*, vol. 66/4 (2002), p. 637–643.

While the traditional understanding of the communication of idioms has been severely criticized by many contemporary theologians since it does not allow for the Son to suffer as God, I have argued that what is soteriologically essential is not that the Son suffer as God, and so

CONCLUSION

In concluding this paper, I want to end as I began. For Thomas Aquinas, the Incarnation is the most marvellous of all mysteries and it is precisely because of the incarnational “is.” Jesus is the Son of God existing as man. I have examined Aquinas’ understanding of the incarnational “becoming” with its resulting incarnational “is,” and in particular as to how Thomas has placed this “becoming” within his insight that the incarnating act is a mixed relation. Hopefully, this article has brought some clarity to Aquinas’ Christology and perhaps even some insights. Nonetheless, it should be obvious that, while we have examined Aquinas’ notion of the incarnational “is” very closely as it pertains to his understanding of the hypostatic union, the Incarnation as a mixed relation, we still do not actually know the “essence” of that incarnational “becoming” or its terminating “is.” It is not surprising that one constantly stumbles across phrases when reading Aquinas on the Incarnation such as: the human nature was united to the Son “in such a way that person is said to subsist” as man.⁴⁰ Or he can speak of “the uniqueness of the union in Christ.”⁴¹ The humanity is united to the Son “in an ineffable way”⁴² (emphasis added in all the above quotations). Finally, for Thomas, there is no adequate example found among creatures to compare with the Incarnation.⁴³ While we can say what the incarnational “becoming” and “is” is and is not to some extent, it remains a unique and ineffable mystery. The best we can do is state in faith that the Son of God is united to his

experience human suffering and even death in a divine manner, but rather that the Son experience suffering and death in a human manner as man. See my *Does God Suffer?*, p. 199–208.

While E. Stump wishes to defend Aquinas’ understanding of the communication of idioms, she does not do so in a satisfactory manner. She speaks of Christ “borrowing properties” from each of his natures. “So, for example, Christ is limited in power and not limited in power, but he borrows the first attribute from his human nature and the second from his divine nature.... Because the incompatible properties are borrowed properties, Christ does not have them in the same respect” (E. STUMP, “Aquinas’ Metaphysics of the Incarnation,” *The Incarnation. An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, edited by S. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 214). As the above authors Stump does not grasp the nature of the incarnational “is.” The term “Christ” (in a manner reminiscent of Nestorius) does not denote a “someone” apart from his divine and human natures and from which he “borrows” various divine and human attributes. Christ is the divine Son of God existing as man, and therefore to speak of various divine and human attributes as “borrowed” makes no sense. One does not “borrow” what one is. The Son of God is omniscient as God and the Son of God is ignorant as man. The omniscience and ignorance are intrinsic to what the Son of God is, that is, God and man.

⁴⁰ *ST*, III, q. 17, a. 2.

⁴¹ *Super Ioannem*, c. 1, l. 14a [169].

⁴² *De unione Verbi*, a. 2, ad 15.

⁴³ See *De unione Verbi*, a. 1.

humanity “in such a way” that he actually did come to exist as man, even though we do not fully grasp what “in such a way” means. For Aquinas the Incarnation will always remain a mystery and so a marvel. The mystery and the marvel of the Son of God incarnate will even be the heart of our heavenly life, for only in union with the risen incarnate Christ, having been conformed into his perfect likeness by the indwelling Spirit, will we behold the glory of the Father. Our only response, in the end, is to marvel joyfully in awe, adoration, and praise.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Sources

- THOMAS AQUINAS, *Commentary on the Gospel of John*, edited by J.A. Weisheipl, Albany NY: Magi Books, 1980.
- THOMAS AQUINAS, *On the Truth of the Catholic Faith*, vol. 4, translated by C.J. O’Neil, Garden City: Image Books, 1957.
- THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa theologica*, vol. 1–3, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province, New York: Benziger Brothers, 1947.

Secondary literature

- Aquinas on Scripture: An Introduction to his Biblical Commentaries*, edited by T. Weinandy, D. Keating, J. Yocum, London: T&T Clark, 2005.
- BÄCK A., “Aquinas on the Incarnation,” *The New Scholasticism*, vol. 56/2 (1982), p. 127–147.
- BACKES I., *Die Christologie des hl. Thomas von Aquin und die griechischen Kirchenväter*, Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1931.
- BEARSLEY P.J., “Jesus the Son of Mary according to St Thomas Aquinas,” *Angelicum*, vol. 55 (1978), p. 104–123.
- BOYLE J.F., “The Twofold Division of St. Thomas’s Christology in the *Tertium Pars*,” *The Thomist*, vol. 60 (1996), p. 439–447.
- BRO B., “La notion métaphysique de tout et son application au problème théologique de l’union hypostatique,” I, *Revue Thomiste*, vol. 68/2 (1968), p. 181–197 and II, vol. 68/3 (1968), p. 357–380.
- BURRELL D., *Aquinas: God and Action*, Notre Dame University Press, 1979.
- CROSS R., “A Recent Contribution on the Distinction between Monophysitism and Chalcedonianism,” *The Thomist*, vol. 65/3 (2001), p. 361–383.
- CROSS R., *The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- DAVIES B., *The Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992.

- GONDREAU P., *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Münster: Aschendorff Verlag, 2002.
- GORMAN M., "Christ as Composite according to Aquinas," *Traditio*, vol. 55 (2000), p. 143–157.
- GORMAN M., "Uses of the Person-Nature Distinction in Thomas' Christology," *Recherches de Théologie et Philosophie Médiévales*, vol. 67 (2000), p. 58–70.
- GRIFFIN D.R., *A Process Christology*, Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1973.
- HENNINGER M., *Relations: Medieval Theories 1250–1325*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989.
- HIBBS T., *Dialectic and Narrative in Aquinas*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995.
- KREMPEL A., *La doctrine de la relation chez Saint Thomas*, Paris: Vrin, 1952.
- LEGGÉ D., *The Trinitarian Christology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.
- LEROY M.-V., "L'union selon l'hypostase d'après saint Thomas d'Aquin," *Revue Thomiste*, vol. 74/2 (1974), p. 205–241.
- LEVERING M., *Christ's Fulfillment of Torah and Temple: Salvation according to Thomas Aquinas*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2002.
- MACQUARRIE J., *Christology Revisited*, London: SCM, 1998.
- MACQUARRIE J., *Jesus Christ in Modern Thought*, London: SCM, 1990.
- MCCOOL ADAMS M., *What Sort of Nature? Medieval Philosophy and the Systematics of Christology*, Marquette: Marquette University Press, 1999.
- MORRIS T.V., "St. Thomas on the Identity and Unity of the Person of Christ: A Problem of Reference in Christological Discourse," *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 35 (1982), p. 419–430.
- MULLER E., "Real Relations and the Divine Issues in Thomas's Understanding of God's Relation to the World," *Theological Studies*, vol. 56 (1995), p. 673–695.
- PINNOCK C., RICE R., SANDERS J., HASKER W., BASINGER D., *The Openness of God: A Biblical Challenge to the Traditional Understanding of God*, Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1994.
- PRINCIPE W.H., "St. Thomas on the *Habitus*-Theory of the Incarnation," *St. Thomas Aquinas (1274–1974). Commemorative Studies*, vol.1, edited by A. Maurer, Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974, p. 381–418.
- Reading Sacred Scripture with Thomas Aquinas: Hermeneutical Tools, Theological Questions and New Perspectives*, edited by P. Roszak, J. Vijgen, Turnhout: Brepols, 2015.
- RUELLO F., *La christologie de Thomas d'Aquin*, Paris: Beauchesne, 1987.
- SCHOOT H.J.M., *Christ the "Name" of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ*, Leuven: Peeters, 1993.
- STUMP E., "Aquinas' Metaphysics of the Incarnation," *The Incarnation. An Interdis-*

- ciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God*, edited by S. Davis, D. Kendall, G. O’Collins, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 197–217.
- Thomas Aquinas and the Greek Fathers*, edited by M. Dauphinais, A. Hofer, OP, R. Nutt, Ave Maria: Sapientia Press, 2019.
- TORRELL J.P., *St. Thomas Aquinas: The Person and His Work*, vol. 2, Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2003.
- VALKENBERG W.G.B.M., *Words of the Living God: Place and Function of Holy Scripture in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Leuven: Peeters, 2000.
- WAWRYKOW J., “Hypostatic Union,” *The Theology of Thomas Aquinas*, edited by R. Van Nieuwenhove, J. Wawrykow, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005, p. 222–251.
- WÉBER É.-H., *Le Christ selon Saint Thomas d’Aquin*, Paris: Desclée, 1988.
- WEINANDY T.G., *Does God Change? The Word’s Becoming in the Incarnation*, Still River: St. Bede’s Publications, 1984.
- WEINANDY T.G., *Does God Suffer?*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2000.
- WEINANDY T.G., “God IS Man: The Marvel of Incarnation”, *Aquinas on Doctrine*, edited by T. Weinandy, D. Keating and J. Yocum, London: T&T Clark, 2004, p. 67–89.
- WEINANDY T., *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ*, Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1993.
- Weinandy T., “*The Metaphysics of the Incarnation: Thomas Aquinas to Duns Scotus* by Richard Cross”, *The Thomist*, vol. 66/4 (2002), p. 637–643.

ST. THOMAS AQUINAS. INCARNATIONAL “BECOMING” AS A MIXED RELATION

S U M M A R Y

This essay examines the Incarnation as grasped and articulated by St. Thomas Aquinas. First it states the three incarnational truths that must be present for a proper conception and articulation of the mystery of the Incarnation. 1) It must be truly the Son of God who is man. 2) It must be truly man that the Son of God is. 3) The Son of God must truly be man. Second, this essay studies what it means, according to Aquinas, for the Son of God to subsist as man. Aquinas holds that only this ontological notion of the Incarnation is in keeping with the truth of the Catholic faith. Third, the issue concerning the

meaning of “become” is considered. The term “become” cannot mean either that the Word comes into a man or that the Word is changed into a man. “Become” must mean that the Son of God comes to exist as man. Thus, the incarnational “becoming” must terminate in a genuine incarnational “is.” Lastly, Aquinas’ understanding of the Incarnation as a mixed relation is investigated. For Thomas, the humanity must be related to the Son’s divinity such that neither the humanity nor the divinity is changed, and yet simultaneously, that the Son of God does actually exist as man. Such an understanding is properly conceived within Aquinas’ notion of a mixed relation, that is, the incarnational act is the act of the Father, through the power of the Holy Spirit, bringing into existence the humanity and uniting it to the divinity of the Son such that the Son comes to exist as a man. Thus, Thomas, through his understanding of a mixed relation, provides a greater depth and clarity to the incarnational “becoming.”

KEYWORDS: Incarnation, incarnational “becoming”, incarnational “is”, incarnational truths, mixed relation, communication of idioms (*communicatio idiomatum*), Thomas Aquinas

SŁOWA KLUCZE: wcielenie, wcieleniowe “stawanie się”, wcieleniowe “jest”, wcieleniowe prawdy, relacja mieszana, współorzekanie przymiotów (*communicatio idiomatum*), Tomasz z Akwinu