

The Mystery of the Incarnation: Revelation of the Triune God as a Vulnerable God

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The Kenosis of God: Icon of the Consecrated Life

From an early age I have felt an insistent call to a contemplative life lived among the poorest of this world, intuiting, however ambiguously, that the God of Jesus cannot be found elsewhere. I have been seeking this God, revealed to me in the poor of Peru, for forty-four years, together with a spirituality of the “other” in the Andes. The reflections that I share here come not from illusive concepts but from the heart; they are the fruit of a modest, respectful, daily encounter with the Andean spirituality of Aymara indigenous peoples in the altiplano of southern Peru.

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Since as far back as Saint Paul¹, many others have contemplated and spoken of the fragility of God. For me, there are three contemporary authors who have deeply influenced my faith experience and my reflection on what Kierkegaard calls “the Christian scandal.” They are François Varillon and Maurice Zündel, writing from a Christian point of view, and Martin Buber, from a Jewish perspective.

I am not personally aware of authors who have explored the basic Christian understanding of the Holy Trinity from the angle of the fragility of God, what Paul calls the “self-emptying” of the divine in Christ.² I consider Trinitarian faith, in its intimate connection with the mystery of the Creation-Incarnation, to be Christianity’s great, novel contribution – offering a revolutionary shift in the image of God as well as a new anthropology.

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I am supported in this intuition by an Andean cosmivision (and theo-vision), based entirely on the concept of “Ayni,” or “reciprocity”. Within this framework, all creatures, in mutual solidarity and absolute, non-hierarchical equality, have as their only mission the construction, maintenance and permanent restoration of universal harmony. In the Andes, individual experience does not exist. God is not seen as a center, but rather as a kind of dynamically evolving cosmic presence. I understand the Andean cosmivision and anthropology as an acentric culture, where the relationship of mutual harmonization synthesizes all human utopias and all of theology. Without a doubt, I am deeply influenced by this approach in addressing Trinitarian faith.

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This original triad (image of God, Creation-Incarnation, anthropology) flows naturally into a new approach to human relationships (the Reign of God) for which Consecrated Life hopes to serve as a model. It also opens up a new cosmivision, a new eco-ecumenism, with which feminist theology feels intuitively very committed.³

As I address this assembly of women (in which I am honored to participate) I would like to incorporate here, in this triune rereading, insights from feminist theology which invite us to a new understanding of the mystery of the Trinity from a feminine perspective.

These, then, are the hermeneutical assumptions that I hold in reflecting with you on the theme of this gathering: Trinity and Communion. (Again, in Andean language, I would speak of *Ayni*, reciprocity.)

¹ Phil. 2, 1-11

² Raimon Panikkar many times has tackled the topic of the Trinity, but in a different perspective than I develop here, it seems to me.

³ See Alicia Puleo: *Ecofeminismo para otro mundo posible*, 2011.

I. From self-sufficiency to relationship

The masters of suspicion (Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud) have rightly denounced our unconscious image of God the all-powerful and self-sufficient as a projection, an alienation, and also a permanent temptation. Not only did religious expressions labeled “pagan” fall into this trap. There exists even now, principally in the ‘religions of the book’⁴, that is, Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, a rigid and static monolithic vision of monotheism. This image of God is undoubtedly a reflection of a patriarchal model applied to God. Such an image still continues to dominate our liturgy. We address a God far away and endowed with solipsistic power, whom we want to win over with our merits and our pleas.

The Trinitarian God

Our Trinitarian faith radically denounces this infantile image, proposing to us instead a vision of God as pure reciprocal relationship. But this affirmation brings with it various dramatic consequences that impact our spontaneous image of God and our relationship with God, within the dominant western culture. I am not at all sure that we Christians have even begun to adopt and integrate this vision into our religious experience.

In effect, if God is a relationship of persons, God is necessarily in need of the other; in other words, God is the opposite of self-sufficiency. Moreover, God presents God’s self as unfinished, free and voluntarily vulnerable to the other.

Creation as place of relationship

In the biblical vision, creation is both separated from and united to God by means of the Word. In the priestly version of the first chapter of Genesis, the creating Word is, apparently, unilateral and commanding (“let there be, and there is”). However, looking again at an insight of Buber⁵, we see that from the beginning this Word is directed to each creature as an implicit self, opening itself already to reciprocity.

In the Yahwistic version of Genesis 2, this is explicit. After a solitary conversation with itself -- in some way thanks to original “sin” -- the Word seeks and enters into dialogue with the humanity of Adam and Eve, and even with evil. From this moment, even Satan becomes part of the dialogue and reappears at various times in the Scriptures, in mysterious conversation with God and with Christ.

It is John, in his prologue, who offers the ultimate revelation of this relationship with the Word. For him, as well as for us, the Word “is” God, at the same time that it is “before” God⁶. (*Once again, in Andean cultures, we would speak here of God as “Ayni”.*)

Creation as the “limit” of God (Simone Weil).

In the Bible, to create means to separate and limit each creature so as to allow others to not only exist but also, and essentially, to be able to speak and dialogue among themselves and, finally, with God. Simone Weil affirms that in creation God self-limits, then withdraws in some way (the seventh day is still happening, according to the Letter to the Hebrews), in order that all of creation enter into the logic of the creating conversation. For Weil, the existence of evil is, in some way, the most convincing proof of a self-limited God. Satan becomes a witness of God the Word!⁷ (*In the Andean cosmovision,*

⁴ Marc Ellis: *Unholy Alliance. Religions and atrocity in our times.*

⁵ Martin Buber: *Yo y Tú*, 1923.

⁶ John 1:1.

⁷ Simone Weil: *La Gravedad y la Gracia.*

the forces of evil are situated in the "underworld" and are an indispensable part of this permanent cosmic dialogue among opposites.)

God is vulnerable, unfinished and self-limited, because God is eternally committed to reciprocity, in order to make of our relationships the very movement of divinity. Here is the unbearable Christian scandal that provoked among the Nazarenes the desire to push their fellow countryman Jesus off a cliff⁸, or the disciples, upon hearing the discourse of the Bread of Life⁹, to no longer follow him. And would we put up with this God, if, by chance, we understood God?

II. Incarnation and kenosis of the Triune God

Seated at the edge of Jacob's well, conversing with the Samaritan woman¹⁰, Jesus presents us the newest and most comprehensive revelation of "his" God: "If you knew the gift of God!" I don't believe I'm manipulating John's text by broadening this affirmation to say: "If you knew that God IS gift!" The entire first letter of St. John encourages this same idea by declaring repeatedly that "God IS Love."

In hearing, seeing and accompanying Jesus, every disciple arrives at the conclusion, even, that this God is "ONLY LOVE." There is nothing more or nothing less, in the God of the Gospels, than LOVE. This means that, when God "gives", God can only "give" God's very self (since this is all God has as gift). And, if this is so, we have to conclude, in the end, that when God gives, God can only give God's self totally. Such is the tremendous depth of the sacramental mystery in the Church. God cannot give only a part of God's self, or else God would not be Love. Nor can God give us "things," since we have already been given everything in creation and in Jesus, the very Son of God.

This is how I receive the mystery of the Incarnation as the necessary, ultimate and definitive revelation of the Trinity: God self-gives, and self-gives totally, from all eternity and for all eternity. Is this not the full meaning of "grace upon grace" that ends the prologue of the fourth Gospel? The Incarnation becomes, then, the eternal "kenosis of the Triune God" in Jesus of Nazareth and in all creation, forever. This kenotic process does not have an end, given that, in Christ, God chose to pitch God's tent in our midst, not for a specific time but for eternally¹¹.

When Jesus, before dying on the cross, cries out this terrible verse from psalm 22: "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?", how should we interpret the silence of the Father? The very impotence of the Father is acknowledged in the impotence of the Son! The death of Jesus on the cross is not an error of the Father. It is the Father's own death voluntarily accepted with that of the Nazarene on the cross.

This sublime trinitarian fresco also flows into the being of every believer, of every human being, worthily represented by the Samaritan woman. The fountain of this constant kenosis, from which the living water of the Spirit overflows eternally, is each person him- and her-self¹².

The Incarnation: historical event or permanent theophany?

No one doubts the historical advent, life and death of Jesus of Nazareth, whom we call the Christ, For us Christians, it is the most important event in all human history, which we confirm by our faith in the Resurrection. Could it also be that this event contains in and of itself the totality of the mystery

⁸ Luke 4.

⁹ John 6.

¹⁰ John 4.

¹¹ John 1:16.

¹² John 4:14.

of the Incarnation? If so, should we not broaden our view? This is precisely what our paschal faith demands of us.

In the spirit of evolutionary theology, we can consider the Incarnation as a continuous and progressive process, a “theophany” or “Christophany,” as Raimon Panikkar would call it¹³. This almost photographic movement of progressive revelation of divinity runs through all of created reality since its origin, and never arrives at its historical end.

Even if historical revelation ends with the last book of the New Testament, the Incarnation, as an all-encompassing mystery, is still in process in the heart of history and in creation’s birth pains. Paul suggests this.¹⁴ In this birth, all of us participate, at the same time as and in communion with the entire cosmos. Personally, I read the letters of the captivity (Colossians and Ephesians) as an immense Christophany that little by little invades the whole universe. This vision aligns with the brilliant insights of Teilhard de Chardin.

Trinitarian kenosis and Incarnation.

Let us return to this triune God who completely and permanently gives of self. In the history of Creation, the Incarnation is the perfect and total expression of this absolute gift. In Creation-Incarnation, the kenosis, the complete emptying of God into nothingness, becomes flesh. This involves not only the kenosis of Christ. Without this rootedness in the trinitarian gift, the Christic Incarnation would be just a simple anecdote, much like the story of the Greek gods. But, without the historical Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth, we also would never be able to reach or partake of the God-Love in our own flesh.

The Trinitarian emptying of the Father in the Son and of the Son in the world through the Spirit is the absolute meaning of the Incarnation, as Saint John notes in the prologue and in chapter 17 of his Gospel. These two texts affirm the original humanity of God as well as the divinity in process in humanity, enveloping the world.

Eastern Christians affirm that the cross of Christ is in the heart of the Father from before creation, and Blaise Pascal proclaims that Christ suffers on the cross until the end of the world, while resurrected and glorified: two brilliant icons of this cosmic-historical Incarnation without beginning or end.

The Trinity needs Creation-Incarnation in order to reveal itself. This in turn reveals the trinitarian vocation of humanity and of the world: kenosis, emptying, the reciprocal making oneself nothing! As the Father self-empties in the Son and likewise in the world, our divine vocation is also to empty ourselves, in a reciprocity that is universal, interpersonal, intercultural, inter-gender, and inter-cosmic.

In summary, this kenosis speaks the eternity of God in its self-giving movement. It is not only a moment, an occurrence, a parenthesis. The kenosis is the “glory” of God. This is how I interpret the famous expression of St. Irenaeus: “The glory of God is the human being fully alive, and the life of the human being is the vision of God.”

III. Trinitarian Reciprocity

¹³ Raimon Panikkar: *La plenitud del hombre: una cristofanía*, 1999.

¹⁴ Romans 8.

The unity of the triune God is the fruit of a continuous flow of mutual solidarity among the persons. The Father without the Son would not be God, and vice versa. It is the eternal movement of their relationship that unites them and reveals God to us. This is the real mystery of the Spirit-Movement.

"Begotten not made."

For this to be so, it is necessary for some kind of "limit" in the very nature of God, from where difference arises. The Father is not the Son. This lacking in God's very self makes difference a vital source of the divine in the process of infinite interchange.

With bold insight, our creed uses the paradoxical formula: "begotten, not made," to speak of Christ in the trinitarian mystery. Trinity again suggests birthing. God both begets and is begotten by an infinite mutuality of differences, since the uncreated God has no beginning and God's reign will have no end.

In this, the insights of feminist theology take on great significance, making the Spirit that place of reciprocity where, from the very beginning, the entire creation is included in a process of Christification, or deification. The *Rhwa* that flutters above the original chaos is, in some way, the great maternal womb of God as "different."

For this reason, I prefer to no longer identify the feminine or the masculine with one or the other of the Three Persons, perpetuating a narrow patriarchal anthropomorphism. Rather, it is the singular movement of divine mutuality that integrates difference, the feminine and the masculine, in God begotten not made, as in an eternal choreography.

Difference, Spirit, mutual obedience and growth

Trinitarian faith has elevated difference, in all aspects, (including, perhaps, the difference between good and evil as it is addressed in Andean spirituality) to the level of the divine. Is this not, then, the specific place of the Spirit? It is the Paraclete, in Trinitarian mystery, who "makes" the difference between the Father and the Son. This same Spirit assures the continuity of difference in all creation from its origin, locating us, in our divinely different humanities, in the heart of the Trinity. It is difference, then, rather than a false, excluding, and inert uniqueness, that marks the direction of divinity. If our differences are the place and space of the divine, then our incompleteness is the condition for true fullness.

To integrate difference in the movement of our divinization implies the deeply liberating experience of interdependence and mutual obedience, which creates newness. In this sense Isaiah, and later, Apocalypse, could say: "I make all things new." This is only possible when difference is personally integrated and processed in love.

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It is imperative that we situate the ministry of leadership in religious life within this dynamic of creative mutual dependence, of obedient kenosis. The Gospel offers two parables that relate this kenosis to religious leaders. The first is of John the Baptist who seeks to diminish himself in order for the "Other" to grow. Leadership, accordingly, becomes a loving listening to the "voice of the friend" in our sisters, brothers and communities, adopting a spirituality of fertile "nothingness." Yet the paradigmatic icon of this kenotic leadership is, evidently, Jesus himself, the teacher who strips himself in order to wash the feet of his disciples.

When I speak of difference(s), I think of multiple expressions of gender as well as cultural and religious diversity, generational difference, and in a broader sense the personal ontological singularity of each creature that makes each and all unique in our divine fragility.

For those in the ministry of leadership in religious life, the increasing fragility of institutions, persons and communities is almost always seen as a dying. We tend to respond urgently, with attempts to compensate, to rescue: aggressive vocational outreach, emergency appeals to associates, etc. Would this be a gospel attitude?

From my own personal and community experience, I can testify to the contrary. First, in spite of opposing advice from the “wise,” my local community chose to place itself in an extremely harsh environment in terms of climate, altitude, poverty and a culture quite resistant to Christian discourse. We consciously opted for vulnerability. Little did we know to what extent the Lord was going to take us seriously.

After a few years of apparent vocational fecundity, our entire institutional dream collapsed. Only two monks remained, looking at each other, asking “What do we do now?” We decided to trust, and we stayed. Out of this liminal fragility emerged the most prophetic experience of Providence. And we had done nothing to “save” a sinking ship.

Good news came by itself from places we did not expect. A recently married young couple appeared, wanting to share our adventure. Later, various women arrived and wanted to pitch their tents in our midst, requiring our unprecedented creativity in forming a mixed, contemplative Benedictine community.

Today, we continue to be more vulnerable than ever while also sensing a surprising vitality, in that “different” way of the Triune God, so beyond our mental categories.

The ministry of leadership is to believe, trust and permit the providential and surprising fruitfulness of fragility... not to resist it.



The mystics have taught us a common Christian paradox: “All” is “Nothing,” and vice-versa. Communion, the theme of this gathering, is not a utopia of shared omnipotence, but rather the condition of our process of divine kenosis. Here death and life embrace.

IV. Vows in the heart of our kenotic deification.

The theology of vows reflects this kenotic idea of liberating, mutual dependence. Each vow affirms the vulnerability of our relationships, and of our relating in vulnerability. It is as if we were proclaiming, in anthropological polyphony (celibacy, poverty and obedience): “I need you in order to be and I want to exist with you, so that you can be “you” with me.” This cry goes out to all humanity, our brothers and sisters, as well as to the very God-Relationship.

Communion as risk of vulnerabilities.

Contrary to what we might spontaneously feel, communion, the communitarian utopia *par excellence*, is not the end of rifts and divisions among us. It is born of the choice to share with one another our vulnerabilities, fragilities and wounds in a spirit of Trinitarian trust.

We need a fresh understanding of our hope for communion, seeing in it a reciprocal freedom among those who risk making public their vulnerability.

The tragedy of individualism.

The “theology of Satan,” however, always threatens us with a manipulation of truth. The “serpent” tries to convince us of the myth of self-sufficiency, a false self-fulfillment of the “ego.”

This lie would have us cover over the reality of our vulnerability, as with an absurd and ridiculous makeup, dealing with differences as allegedly antagonistic forces in competition. Violence, with its

one goal of eliminating the other, would be the only way to achieve such illusory independence. The communitarian crisis in religious life is the fallout of this theology of Satan, a competitive anti-Trinitarian individualism.

A community's option for the poor and for poverty.

The gospel preference for the poor and for poverty is not an ideological position. It is essentially theological. Only from the victims, from their wounds that are our own, can we come to recognize this ontologically poor God, eternally emptying God's self. No one is poorer than God, in this sense. The poor and our own poverty bring us closer to divine poverty. Our vow of poverty is not basically pragmatic, ideological nor ascetical. It is fundamentally theological.

Celibacy: choosing the loving emptiness of God

The voluntarily self-limiting God calls us to renounce naïve illusions: seeking artificial fullness in the other; trying to fill empty spaces through the complementarity between differences.

Communion is not fullness but rather the shared fecundity of desire. Celibacy is the conscientious embrace of an emptiness that both leaves us heartbroken and causes us to yearn for another person, and in him or her, for the "Other."

God, spouse of the prophets, is above all, a God in need of love, one who infinitely desires God's creatures, seeking to be incarnated in them in that desire never fully satisfied. Celibacy is an intense search for the beloved who eludes us. It is the reciprocal thirst and groaning of the lover of humanity and of the lover of divinity. It makes us empty and fertile in the manner of God-Love. Communion is a shared, fertile emptiness: such is the theological meaning of our celibacy.

Obedience and kenosis.

Finally, the mutual, fertile, liberating dependence which characterizes Trinitarian life is incarnated for us religious in the folly of obedience. The kenotic communion that we choose in interdependent freedom places the common project, reciprocally created, and the community's incarnation in history above the aspirations of our ego.

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From the Andean perspective, the vows, then, would have to be understood as a commitment to harmony in the entire universe, a harmony which humanity is responsible for carefully tending and for restoring when broken. Our religious life is incarnated in this mutuality at the heart of the world, caring for and restoring universal harmony through the symphony of our differences