

**“THE MODEL OF PARADOX IN CHRISTIAN THEOLOGY:
PERSPECTIVES FROM THE WORK OF HENRI DE LUBAC”**

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Introduction

This paper will examine paradox as a sustained but latent model in the Christian theological tradition, proposing the work of Henri de Lubac (1896-1991) as an instance of its re-emergence within Roman Catholic theology in the early twentieth century. The opening section will address the use of models in theological inquiry, drawing in particular on the work of Dulles in an assessment of the usefulness of models in illuminating complex and differentiated realities. The paper will then identify ‘paradox’ as such a model in the tradition, from its appearance in patristic and medieval thought, including the spiritual doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa and Nicholas of Cusa, to later expressions in modern philosophy, specifically Kierkegaard. The specific uses and implications of paradox in these varied historical contexts will be considered and facilitate a critical reading of de Lubac in his own employment of paradox as a model for theology.

The structure of paradox as an orienting ‘thought form’ within de Lubac’s theology will be considered in the context of the *nouvelle théologie* and its program of *ressourcement*. It will be demonstrated that it was de Lubac’s contact with the Church Fathers and his sensitivity to the *mysterium* at the centre of faith’s concern that grounds and kindles his engagement with paradox as an appropriate construct for theology. The paper will canvass, by an analysis of key texts, the meaning and implications of de Lubac’s use of paradox in his understanding of the mysteries of faith, specifically man’s desire for the supernatural, the Incarnation, and the sacramentality of the Church. The paper will conclude with an evaluation of de Lubac’s model of paradox for the present ecclesial-cultural milieu, including the practice of Christian theology. The topic is significant for discussions of theological method in the Catholic tradition and seeks, as well, to contribute toward an evaluation of the contribution of Henri de Lubac as a leading figure of the *nouvelle théologie* to contemporary Christian thought.

The place and possibility of models in theology

Interest in theological method has established itself as a central feature of Roman Catholic theology. As systematic intellectual reflection on the historical data of revelation, theology has certainly always engaged methods that have enabled an “account of the hope that is in [us]” (1Pet 3:15). However, from the science of sources in Cano’s *De locis theologicis* and through the theological renaissance of German Catholicism in the nineteenth century, the question of methodology as a focus of interest has undergone a definite process of development and thorough articulation which continues to our own time.¹ This is evidenced by the vast amount of literature that now concerns the subject.² Positively, the ‘turn to method’ has stimulated an acute awareness among practitioners of theology that conclusions are inescapably shaped by the selective patterns of operation, arrangements and relations of data, as well as the presuppositions that underpin and inform theological arguments. More challengingly, the emergence of method as a subject of focus has also given rise to ongoing questions about the appropriateness, coherence and complementarity of a multiplicity of methods in theology and the criteria by which one might assess the usefulness of a particular method in contrast to alternatives at hand.

One method that has come into prominence in this field of study is the use of ‘models’ to address theological questions, an approach that in recent decades has become almost synonymous with the work of Avery Dulles. In *Models of Revelation*, Dulles defines a model as “a relatively simple, artificially constructed case which is found to be useful and

¹ These ‘touchstones’ in the history of theological method are identified in Aidan Nichols, “Liberation Theology and the Holy See: A Question of Method,” *New Blackfriars* 65 (November 1984): 454-455. See also Yves Congar, *A History of Theology*, translated and edited by Hunter Guthrie, (New York: Double Day, 1968), 180.

² See *inter alia*, David Tracy, *Blessed Rage for Order: The New Pluralism in Theology*, (New York: Seabury Press, 1975); Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, eds. *Theological Reflection: Methods*, (London: SCM Press, 2007); Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, (New York: Crossroad, 1992); Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1972); Darren C. Marks, ed., *Shaping a Theological Mind: Theological Context and Methodology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

illuminating for dealing with realities that are more complex and differentiated.”³ Models, then, are not given by nature but are mental constructs which support and enable an understanding of reality though, significantly, without making any claim to comprehensiveness, that is, of providing an exhaustive account of the reality in view. Similarly, Barbour describes theoretical models, of which theological models are a variant, as “organising images” which allow one to notice, order and interpret complex patterns of experience in human life.⁴

It is notable, however, that models in theology are not restricted to the use of symbolic images, the Church as ‘vine,’ ‘flock’ or ‘temple’ for instance. As Bevans notes, consideration of models also extends to ‘models of operation,’ that is, to *models of theological method*.⁵ It is in this sense that paradox will be considered with reference to Christian tradition and Henri de Lubac, as a distinct way of theologising, a heuristic structure that allows one to express and interpret complex realities. The use and acceptance of such models or ‘thought forms’ in theology has a clear epistemological basis, namely, the recognition of God, Jesus Christ, and the Church as ‘mysteries,’ realities about which one cannot speak ‘directly’ or comprehensively but only ‘indirectly’ and analogously.⁶ Models of thought in theology provide a way of accounting for the data of revelation while maintaining the principle that divine mystery surpasses all that theology can say about it.

Indeed, the definitions of models provided by Dulles, Barbour and Bevans stress the fact that models, whether being symbolic images or a distinct manner of theologising, are not strict mirrors or representations of reality ‘out there;’ they are not literal descriptions of the

³ Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 30.

⁴ Ian G. Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms: The Nature of Scientific and Religious Language*, (London: SCM Press, 1974), 7.

⁵ Stephen Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 31.

⁶ Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, expanded edition, (New York: Double Day, 1987), 9-10.

world but function as ‘ideal types’ or paradigms that can enable a real, though nonetheless incomplete, knowledge of reality.⁷ Whether the model arises implicitly from the use of images or emerges from a deliberate act of the creative intelligence, the model attempts “to ‘summarise,’ as it were, the whole complex story of a reality’s constitution.”⁸ Again, it is the distance that endures between the model employed and the original phenomena which it seeks to open to expression and reflection that directs our attention to the analogical character of the model. As Dulles acknowledges, “any set of mental categories is necessarily limited and falls short of the unfathomable mystery with which theology has to deal.”⁹ Theological method has no other recourse but to created similitudes that reflect, in inevitably limited and partial ways, the mysteries at the centre of their concern. The use of models will, then, call for attentiveness to the metaphorical nature of language in which all models partake. As McFague affirms, “the key to the proper use of models is . . . to remember always the metaphorical tensions – the ‘is and is not’ – in all our thinking and interpreting.”¹⁰

Having said this, the limitation of models in their simplifying and organising function does not imply their insignificance for theology. As Barbour points out, models cannot be simply discounted as “useful fictions” or temporary psychological aids which, having served their purpose, should be discarded.¹¹ While models provide a knowledge that is always partial and incomplete, this is not the same thing as to propose the insight yielded by them is in any way artificial or subjective. As Bevans evinces, from the perspective of the critical realist, the model is not to be understood in mere instrumental terms but as genuinely

⁷ Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 29.

⁸ Terrence Merrigan, “Models in the Theology of Avery Dulles: A Critical Analysis,” *Bijdragen* 54 (1993), 142-143.

⁹ Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 52.

¹⁰ Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology: Models of God in Religious Language*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982), 74-75.

¹¹ Barbour, *Myths, Models and Paradigms*, 38-42.

disclosive of actual features of the matter under investigation. Hence, “[one] recognises that one can never fully know a reality as it is in itself, at the same time she or he realises that what is known is *truly* known.”¹² In bringing together various dimensions of reality into a constellation or arrangement, models contribute to the unity of knowledge and serve to open up insight into the whole, as well as the meaning and dynamic relations between the various elements that constitute it.

While the terminology of ‘model’ and its explicit articulation may be relatively new, the method in its essentials and use is rather traditional, as Dulles is keen to point out.¹³ The use of mental constructs or ‘cases’ to illuminate and interpret the mysteries of faith has a long theological history which can be identified through a survey of prominent authors and texts. Whether constructed to order the variegated reflections of others, or arising implicitly from a distinct theological vision or contrast of images, this paper will argue that ‘paradox’ is such a model in Christian tradition, a sustained but latent model of theological method which has enabled a genuinely theological approach to the mysteries of faith.

Paradox as a sustained theme within tradition

The various uses and implications of paradox as a model of theological discourse are best appreciated by a survey of its appearance in tradition. The structure of paradox emerges as a ‘classic’ paradigm that underpins and informs patristic thought, as well as medieval reflection on the doctrine of God, Christ and creation, and Christian philosophy in the modern

¹² Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 30. Italics in the original.

¹³ Dulles identifies the nascent presence of models in pre-Christian thought, “Aristotle, in the first book of his *Metaphysics*, gives a typology of previous positions with regard to the first principles of reality. By surveying the views of the pre-Socratics and Plato and exhibiting their ‘root metaphors’ (to use a modern term), Aristotle attempts to gather materials for constructing his own ‘first philosophy.’” See Dulles, *The Craft of Theology*, 46.

era.¹⁴ A historical survey of these various manifestations of paradox will facilitate a more critical reading of de Lubac in his own engagement with paradox as a construct for theology. It will situate de Lubac acutely within the history of this tradition and highlight the structure of paradox in his work as a significant achievement of the *nouvelle théologie* with which de Lubac's name is closely aligned.

Gregory of Nyssa

Within the 'Golden Age' of the Church Fathers, the thought form of paradox emerges most clearly in the spiritual doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa (c.335-c.395). It arises from the notion of *epektasis* which Daniélou identifies as the Cappadocian Father's "most characteristic doctrine," as well as from Gregory's understanding of faith.¹⁵ Both elements are found in Gregory's classic treatise, *The Life of Moses*, which proposes the coincidence of movement and stability, satiation and desire in the spiritual life, as well as 'the grasp of faith' within the realm of divine incomprehensibility.¹⁶ In this respect, Gregory's doctrine well represents the pattern of paradox that inhabits the apophatic tradition of theological discourse, an approach which lays stress on the ineffable mystery of God and, in so doing, directs faith beyond the limits of discursive reason.

The principle of *epektasis* arises in Gregory's treatment of the life of virtue and draws its direct inspiration from the Apostle Paul who is described in Philippians as forever running on the course of virtue, "straining toward those things that are still to come" (Phil 3:13). For Gregory, it is by this 'straining toward,' or *epektasis*, that one realises perfection in the life of

¹⁴ On the notion of the 'classic,' see David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism*, (New York: Crossroad, 1991), 102ff.

¹⁵ Jean Daniélou, *From Glory to Glory: Texts from Gregory of Nyssa's Mystical Writings*, translated and edited by Herbert Musurillo, (London: John Murray, 1962), 47.

¹⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, translated by Abraham J. Malherbe & Everett Ferguson, (New York: Paulist Press, 1978).

virtue which is none other than unending progress in the life of God himself who comes as “absolute virtue.”¹⁷ In opposition to the Eunomian claim that the divine nature was wholly comprehensible, Gregory stresses as well the incomprehensibility and infinity of God and thereby opens humanity to a life of continual conversion in virtue, to an everlasting assimilation to God. Thus, the author concludes in *The Life of Moses*, “the perfection of human nature consists . . . in its very growth in goodness.”¹⁸

As Blowers identifies, Gregory’s conception of the spiritual life gives rise to “inexplicable mixtures of contraries in created reality.”¹⁹ Specifically, the Cappadocian discloses a theological anthropology that unifies progress with stasis, “human beings enter a process of constant recreation through virtue, and, paradoxically, find their true *ontological* and eschatological stability through eternal moral change for the better and ascent toward the immutable God.”²⁰ From this juncture of human mutability and divine immutability, a spiritual precept, paradoxical in character, comes into view. For Gregory, it is perpetual progress, denoting change, that constitutes the rule of fidelity.

The structure of paradox also surfaces in Gregory’s employment of Moses as the archetype of the soul’s journey toward an infinite and incomprehensible God. Commenting on the account of Moses’ encounter with God on Mt Sinai in Exodus 33, the author remarks,

This truly is the vision of God: never to be satisfied in the desire to see him. But one must always, by looking at what he can see, rekindle his desire to see more. Thus, no limit would interrupt growth in the ascent to God, since no

¹⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 31. The theme of *epektasis* is also taken up by Gregory in his twelfth homily on the Song of Songs, in relation to Moses and the bride of the Canticles whose soul “went forth as his word” (Sg 5:5-6). See Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, translated by Casimir McCambley, (Brookline: Hellenic College Press, 1987), 217-220.

¹⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 31.

¹⁹ Paul M. Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor, Gregory of Nyssa, and the Concept of ‘Perpetual Progress,’” *Vigiliae Christianae* 46 (1992: 2), 156.

²⁰ Blowers, “Maximus the Confessor,” 156. Italics in the original.

limit to the Good can be found nor is the increasing of desire for the Good brought to an end because it is satisfied.²¹

Like Moses, who glimpses only the ‘back’ of God, the desire of Christian life is continually fulfilled and yet never satisfied in the incomprehensible presence of the divine. God comes as a constant satisfaction and yet, at the same time, as the source of an unceasing desire to see more. In short, the paradox of divine encounter is one of fulfilment and non-fulfilment, an attainment that reveals itself only as the beginning of an ever more profound desire for God. In his subsequent reading of the rock on which Moses stands as a figure of Christ, Gregory unveils yet another paradox of faith. The disciple is one who remains firmly grounded and yet, at the same time, is always and incessantly on the move,

In another Scriptural passage the progress is a standing still, for it says, ‘You must stand on the rock’ (Ex 33:21). This is the most marvellous thing of all: how the same thing is both a standing still and a moving. For he who ascends certainly does not stand still, and he who stands still does not move upwards. But here the ascent takes place by means of the standing. I mean by this that the firmer and more immovable one remains in the Good, the more he progresses in the course of virtue.²²

In this instance, the principle of growth unfolds as one of movement enabled by remaining steadfast to the Good. Unwavering faith emerges not as inimical to change but intrinsic to it, as a necessary condition for progress in the life of virtue which is itself an ever deeper participation in the God of mystery.

Finally, Gregory’s use of paradoxical statements extends to his understanding of the ‘grasp of faith’ which, within his itinerary of ascent, demands that one “leave behind all appearances and, stretching forth the mind toward the invisible and incomprehensible, as though to a mountain summit, believe God is present there where the understanding does not

²¹ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 116.

²² Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 117.

reach.”²³ As Laird notes, it is an epistemology that posits “knowing without comprehending,” more specifically, the paradox of coming to know God as ‘unknown.’²⁴ In his allegorical reading of Moses’ encounter with God in the cloud and ‘divine darkness,’ Gregory attests,

This is the true knowledge of what is sought; this is the seeing that consists in not seeing, because that which is sought transcends all knowledge, being separated on all sides by incomprehensibility as by a kind of darkness.²⁵

It is in the encounter with God in faith, which moves in maturity beyond the realms of discursive reason and sense perception, that one realises the one who is sought is known in *not* knowing.²⁶ For Gregory, entry into the “divine darkness,” a technical term that stands for God’s incomprehensibility, is the apex of an apophatic ascent and, paradoxically, brings about an enlightenment.²⁷ It underlines the encounter with God not as an act of comprehension but as a union beyond understanding.²⁸ Thus, Laird concludes of the Cappadocian’s vision, “the grasp of faith is the grasp of an open palm.”²⁹

Bonaventure

The model of paradox also inhabits medieval thought, notably in the work of Bonaventure (1221-1274) where it is employed as a rhetorical structure to express underlying metaphysical principles. The Franciscan’s engagement with paradox is detectable in the latent

²³ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 118.

²⁴ Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge, and Divine Presence*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 87.

²⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, 95.

²⁶ In the sixth homily of his commentary on the Song of Songs, Gregory intimates the same apophatic faculty of ‘unknowing’ in relation to the bride who seeks in darkness “him who my soul loved.” See Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 128-132.

²⁷ Gregory of Nyssa, *Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 202.

²⁸ Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 111.

²⁹ Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith*, 89.

notion of the ‘coincidence of opposites’ that pervades his thought, a notion that would subsequently find explicit formulation in the logic of Nicholas of Cusa.³⁰

In Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, we find the *coincidentia oppositorum* expressed in a variety of metaphysical contexts or ‘types.’ The doctrine of God, for instance, is couched in terms of the coincidence of manifesting and non-manifesting aspects of the divinity. Thus, within the divine mystery there is the coincidence of silence and communication,³¹ simplicity and fecundity,³² and, like Gregory before him, the encounter of light in darkness.³³ In the case of Christ, paradox emerges in the presentation of the incarnate Word as not only the visibility of the Godhead but, at the same time, as the invisibility of the divine.³⁴ Davies remarks of Bonaventure’s line of reasoning, “if Christ is the Way, Christ is, in short, our access to the *unknowability* of God, not so as ultimately to know it, but so as to be brought into participation with the *Deus absconditus* precisely as *unknown*.³⁵ Hence, an epistemological paradox arises within the context of an affirmation and negation, precisely

³⁰ Ewert Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites: The Theology of Bonaventure*, (Chicago, IL: Franciscan Herald Press, 1978), 3-4.

³¹ Bonaventure writes, “Trinity . . . direct us into the super-unknown, superluminous and most sublime summit of mystical communication. There new, absolute and unchangeable mysteries of theology are hidden in the superluminous darkness of a silence.” See Bonaventure, *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* Chapter 7, No. 5 in Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God, The Tree of Life, The Life of St Francis*, translated by Ewert Cousins, (London: SPCK, 1978), 114.

³² Bonaventure writes, “[T]he divine Being is both first and last, eternal and most present, utterly simple and the greatest or boundless, totally present everywhere and nowhere contained, most actual and never moved.” See *Itinerarium* Chapter 6, No. 5 in Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 107.

³³ Bonaventure identifies the paradox that flows from the blindness of the human intellect in the encounter of Being that is beyond all categories, “it does not realise that this very darkness is the supreme illumination of our mind, just as when the eye sees pure light, it seems to itself to see nothing.” See *Itinerarium* Chapter 5, No. 4 in Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 96-97.

³⁴ Bonaventure refers to “Christ the Son of God, who is the image of the invisible God by nature,” and asserts “Christ is . . . the *mystery hidden from eternity*.” Italics in the original. See *Itinerarium* Chapter 6, No. 7 in Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 108, 111.

³⁵ Oliver Davies and Denys Turner, eds., *Silence and the Word: Negative Theology and Incarnation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 23. Italics in the original.

Christ as the revelation of God who remains, nonetheless, hidden and beyond human comprehension.

Bonaventure's exercise of the coincidence of opposites is most striking in his cosmological treatment of Christ as the most intense realisation of the coincidence of divinity and creation. As the eternally begotten Son of the Father, Christ is for Bonaventure the centre and goal of all creation, both before and at the fullness of time. He is "the first and the last, the highest and the lowest, the circumference and the centre, *the Alpha and Omega*, the caused and the cause, the Creator and the creature."³⁶ We will see this emphasis on the paradoxical character of Christ as both the source and destiny of humanity recur in de Lubac's theology. Furthermore, for Bonaventure it is in Christ that the macrocosm of the entire universe meets the microcosm of man, which, by a reversal of opposites through the concept of intensity, goes on to produce the notion of Christ as both the microcosm in comparison with all creation and yet the macrocosm in being the maximum manifestation of the divinity.³⁷ In this way, the structure of paradox not only underpins Bonaventure's understanding of the Godhead, Christ and creation, but supports the relation between them with Christ as the medium in whom opposites converge and are sustained.³⁸

Nicholas of Cusa

Following on from Bonaventure, the writings of Nicholas of Cusa (1401-1464) bring the model of paradox to fresh expression by an understanding of God as "the Absolute" and in an epistemology that unfolds from this notion. In his first comprehensive philosophical-theological work, *De docta ignorantia* (1440) Nicholas formalises the 'coincidence of

³⁶ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium* Chapter 6, No. 7 in Bonaventure, *The Soul's Journey into God*, 108-109. Italics in the original.

³⁷ Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, 152.

³⁸ Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, 207.

opposites' and applies it methodologically to his study of the Trinity, God and creation, and the Incarnation.³⁹ The structure of paradox arises from a desire to provide an intellectually accessible understanding of the divine while maintaining the distinction between finite and infinite reality.⁴⁰

Within Nicholas' logic, God transcends all proportions and oppositions and so is the Absolute that can be neither greater nor smaller. Applying the concept of quantity to his account, Nicholas conceives of God as the "absolute maximum" and the "absolute minimum," enfolding as well as surpassing all contraries. He explains, "For both maximum and minimum are superlatives. Therefore absolute quantity is not maximum quantity more than it is minimum quantity, because in it the minimum is the maximum in a coincident way."⁴¹ By an analogy drawn from physics, Nicholas contests and goes beyond the 'law of contradiction' that, within the scholastic purview, binds even the power of God. The transcendence and omnipotence of God is thereby reaffirmed through a framework of paradox, namely the coincidence of absolutes in the Godhead.⁴²

This structure also extends to Nicholas' epistemology in *De docta ignorantia* which considers human nature and its capacities. As God is beyond all actual and conceptual differentiation, and as "there is no proportion between the finite and the infinite," there arises

³⁹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, translated by H. Lawrence Bond, (New York: Paulist Press, 1997), 89.

⁴⁰ David John De Leonardis, *Ethical Implications of Unity and the Divine in Nicholas of Cusa*, Cultural Heritage and Contemporary Change Series 1: Culture and Values, Volume 10, (Washington: CRVP, 1997), 20. Available at <http://www.crvp.org/book/Series01/I-10/contents.htm>, accessed 27 January, 2011.

⁴¹ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 91-92. The metaphorical nature of this claim is stressed by Bond, "... coincidence does not really describe God. Rather, it sets forth the way God works, the order of things in relation to God and to each other, and the manner by which humans may approach and abide in God. God is beyond the realm of contradictions. God . . . preceded opposites, is undifferentiated, not other, incomparable, and without opposite, precedes distinctions, opposition, contrariety and contradiction." See Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 336.

⁴² Pauline Moffitt Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus: A Fifteenth-Century Vision of Man*, (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1982), 46-47.

between God and man a fundamental separation.⁴³ Man can never know God directly and, as Watts identifies, it is this “metaphysical and epistemological *disjunction*” that conditions and explains Nicholas’ notion of “learned ignorance.”⁴⁴ Man’s innate desire to know, in order not to be frustrated, takes as its goal the knowledge of its own incomprehension:

... since the desire in us for knowledge is not in vain, surely then it is our desire to know that we do not know. If we can attain this completely, we will attain learned ignorance. For nothing more perfect comes to a person, even the most zealous in learning, than to be found most learned in the ignorance that is uniquely one’s own. One will be the more learned, the more one knows that one is ignorant.⁴⁵

It is notable that Nicholas may have drawn this paradoxical notion of *docta ignorantia* from Bonaventure’s condensed *summa*, *Breviloquium* and was likely also influenced by his reading of the *Itinerarium* which, while containing no explicit use of the term, provides the nascent framework for the ‘coincidence of opposites.’⁴⁶

While sharing this common tradition, differences in emphases emerge in Nicholas’ and Bonaventure’s application of paradox. For instance, in the case of the relation between God and the world, Bonaventure accents the incarnate Word as the *medium* through whom opposites coincide, as is apparent from his cosmological perspective.⁴⁷ In Nicholas, we detect a movement from a world of multiplicity and contraries, of maximum and minimum, to God where opposites coincide in the divine unity. As Cousins remarks, Nicholas could be interpreted here in a more ‘monistic’ sense, in that polarities are transcended in the undifferentiated unity of God, while Bonaventure’s view evinces a thorough “mutually affirming complementarity” between unity and difference through the notion of the *medium*

⁴³ Nicholas of Cusa, *Selected Spiritual Writings*, 88.

⁴⁴ Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 25. Italics in the original.

⁴⁵ Watts, *Nicolaus Cusanus*, 27.

⁴⁶ Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, 223.

⁴⁷ Bonaventure, *Itinerarium* Chapter 2, No. 7 in Bonaventure, *The Soul’s Journey into God*, 72-73.

who is Christ.⁴⁸ In this sense, the ‘coincidence of opposites,’ as an expression of paradox, lies open to various interpretations in the approach of the elemental tension between distinction and unity.

Kierkegaard

The model of paradox comes into renewed prominence in the modern era in the philosophical works of Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855). As Klemke identifies, Kierkegaard’s engagement with paradox is set within the context of the collision of human reason with God as the ‘unknown,’ a recurring basis of paradox in the authors and texts surveyed thus far.⁴⁹ Due to the “infinite qualitative difference” that exists between God and humanity, Kierkegaard holds that reason cannot even conceive of man’s absolute *unlikeness* from God.⁵⁰ Indeed, it is only with the help of God that humankind comes to the knowledge of its absolute difference from divinity, which is its unlikeness in sin. Thus, in *Philosophical Fragments*, Kierkegaard concludes, “the supreme paradox of all thought is to discover something that thought cannot think.”⁵¹ What is more, the “absolute paradox” of faith is completed by Christ, the God-man, in whom God “[does] away with the absolute unlikeness in absolute likeness.”⁵²

Within Kierkegaard’s epistemology, then, paradox emerges as a condition of faith for it guarantees, as it were, that the assurance sought in faith is not treated as if it were

⁴⁸ Cousins, *Bonaventure and the Coincidence of Opposites*, 224-226.

⁴⁹ E.D. Klemke, *Studies in the Philosophy of Kierkegaard*, (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), 58.

⁵⁰ Kierkegaard also refers to the unlikeness between humanity and God as an “infinite qualitative contradiction” and a “chasmal qualitative abyss.” See Søren Kierkegaard, *Practice in Christianity*, edited by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 28-29, 131; and Søren Kierkegaard, *Sickness Unto Death*, edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 122.

⁵¹ Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, translated by Howard V. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1962), 46.

⁵² Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, 59.

achievable by some human effort.⁵³ Once again, it is only by the ‘impossible’ revelation of God in Christ that humanity learns of the way to redemption, or ‘likeness’ with God. Hanson names the paradox at the heart of our “happiness” or “offence” as follows: “God is on the street in Jerusalem despite the fact that he cannot appear there.”⁵⁴ The task of faith, then, for Kierkegaard emerges as twofold,

. . . first to discover in every moment what is improbable, paradoxical; and then to hold firmly to it with an inner passion . . . Where the understanding despairs, there is faith, making the despair properly decisive, so that the movement of faith does not become a mere exchange where the understanding strikes up bargains. To believe against the understanding is martyrdom; to begin to move the understanding a bit in one’s favour is temptation and retrogression.⁵⁵

For Kierkegaard, human understanding must experience a ‘crucifixion’ to a paradox in the realm of faith, the epistemological death being one’s need to comprehend. However, as Dunning reiterates, this is not a fideistic sacrifice of the intellect for Kierkegaard presupposes that it is “the passion for thought that leads to the collision with the paradox.”⁵⁶ In other words, the state of faith will lead the passion for understanding through an “infinite resignation,” a surrender that reveals itself as the attainment of true understanding.⁵⁷ Kierkegaard sharpens this point in *Fear and Trembling*, affirming that it is the faith of Abraham in the binding of Isaac that means the patriarch will not only not lose his son but

⁵³ Alastair Hannay, “Søren Aabye Kierkegaard,” *The Philosophers: Introducing Great Western Thinkers*, edited by Ted Honderich, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 152.

⁵⁴ Jeffrey Hanson, “Michel Henry and Søren Kierkegaard on Paradox and the Phenomenality of Christ,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 17 (July 2009), 444.

⁵⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), 233-234.

⁵⁶ Stephen N. Dunning, “Paradoxes in Interpretation: Kierkegaard and Gadamer,” *Kierkegaard in Post/Modernity*, edited by Martin J. Matuštík and Merold Westphal, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 129.

⁵⁷ See Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, edited and translated by Howard V. and Edna H. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), 37.

that he will gain him. The paradox revealed by the faith of Abraham is that “[only] he who draws the knife gets Isaac,” – that is, the one who can resign everything gains everything.⁵⁸

It is clear that paradox is critical to Kierkegaard’s exposition of faith, one which emphasises passionate personal involvement in the mystery of God, the ‘impossible’ gift of God’s entry into human existence, and a surrender of self that leads to true understanding. Kierkegaard’s thought would prove influential for scholars of the *nouvelle théologie*, affirming as it did the “infinite qualitative difference” between the God who reveals in history and humanity who responds.⁵⁹ In advancing this return to Mystery, as opposed to the treatment of God as an object, Kierkegaard presents as a significant precursor to Henri de Lubac’s own engagement with the model of paradox, as we shall see. It is to this particular twentieth-century expression which we now turn.

The foundations of paradox in the thought of Henri de Lubac

Remember, after all, that the Gospel is full of paradoxes, that man is himself a living paradox, and that according to the Fathers of the Church, the Incarnation is the supreme paradox.⁶⁰

The above quotation, taken from a collection of aphorisms and reflections written by de Lubac in the 1940s, is indicative of the provenance and centrality of ‘paradox’ in the theology of its author.⁶¹ For the French Jesuit, the model of paradox was suggested by the

⁵⁸ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, 27.

⁵⁹ Daniélou cites Kierkegaard as a vital influence in the 1946 essay which would prove programmatic for the *nouvelle théologie*. See Jean Daniélou, “Les Orientations présentes de la pensée religieuse,” *Études* 249 (1946), 16.

⁶⁰ Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, translated by Paule Simon et al., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 8.

⁶¹ This collection of writings originally appeared as two smaller works, *Paradoxes* and *Nouveaux Paradoxes*, the first published before World War II and the other in the immediate aftermath of the war. All references are taken from the English translation, *Paradoxes of Faith* cited above.

mysteries of faith themselves, above all the Incarnation which involved the supreme union of opposing natures, human and divine, in the person of Christ. Discernable, also, is the fact that de Lubac's employment of paradox as a construct or 'thought form' for his own theology was based not on a desire for innovation but justified on the basis of its appearance in Scripture and the thought of the Fathers. In short, paradox was an orienting model that arose from tradition and thus recommended itself to de Lubac for application in his own work.

These origins are manifest in de Lubac's first book, *Catholicism* (1938) in which the author draws on the "imposing unity" of Christian tradition as a departure point in his identification of paradox as a deep-rooted concept, "The whole of dogma is . . . but a series of paradoxes, disconcerting to natural reason and requiring not an impossible proof but reflective justification. For if the mind must submit of what is incomprehensible, it cannot admit what is unintelligible."⁶² Thus, de Lubac's engagement with paradox, as in the case of Kierkegaard, does not express a fideistic sacrifice of the intellect but arises from the structure of revelation in which antinomies abound.⁶³ In *Catholicism*, de Lubac draws attention to three examples: the New Testament as both foreshadowed by and yet the 'model' for the Old Testament,⁶⁴ the dogma of the Trinity which upholds the unity of three persons in one divine essence,⁶⁵ and humankind's natural desire for a fulfilment that can only be received as divine gift:

⁶² Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, translated by Lancelot C. Sheppard and Elizabeth Englund, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 322, 327.

⁶³ For a comparative analysis of de Lubac and Kierkegaard in their employment of paradox, see Eric Lee, "From Copenhagen to Cambrai: Paradoxes of Faith in Kierkegaard and de Lubac," *Belief and Metaphysics*, edited by Conor Cunningham and Peter M. Candler Jr., (London: SCM Press, 2007), 236-259.

⁶⁴ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 173.

⁶⁵ De Lubac writes, "It is impossible to imagine greater distinctions than those of this pure threefold relationship, since it is these very distinctions that constitute them in their entirety. And do they not arise in unity, the unity of one same Nature? The most complete expression of Personality appears to us thus in the Being of whom every being is a reflection – an image, a shadow, a trace – the consequence as well as the consecration of the highest unity." See de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 329.

God creates the world for his own glory, *propter seipsum*, and yet out of pure goodness; man is capable of action and free, and yet he can do nothing without grace, and grace works within him ‘both to will and to perform’; the vision of God is a free gift, and yet the desire of it is at the very root of every soul.⁶⁶

Here we have the seeds of an anthropology that would constitute the focus of de Lubac’s magisterial work, *Surnaturel* (1946), the ‘paradox of man’ to be addressed in the following section.⁶⁷ Further instances from tradition are raised in *Paradoxes of Faith*, which Léna singles out as “a kind of ‘discourse on method.’”⁶⁸ In this text, de Lubac denotes the paradox of purgatory, “not only is the soul suffering in Purgatory joyful, but its suffering makes its joy;”⁶⁹ that of the paschal mystery, “Death and resurrection do not destroy the work of incarnation; they consummate it;”⁷⁰ as well as the paradoxical statements of Christ and St Paul.⁷¹ In light of this datum, de Lubac establishes from the outset that “it is a question, at least, whether all substantial spiritual doctrine must not of necessity take a paradoxical form.”⁷²

That de Lubac situates his own engagement with paradox in continuity with a longer history of its development and use is clear. In *The Mystery of the Supernatural* (1965), de Lubac cites Gregory of Palamas who, in turn, attests to the consensus of the Fathers in respect of the paradoxical structure that mystery poses to thought,

⁶⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 327.

⁶⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Études Historiques*, (Paris: Aubier, 1946). An English translation of the conclusion of *Surnaturel* can be found in David Coffey, “Some Resources for Students of *La nouvelle théologie*,” *Philosophy and Theology* 11 (1999: 2), 368-380.

⁶⁸ Marguerite Léna, “The Sanctity of Intelligence,” *Communio* 19 (1992: 3), 344.

⁶⁹ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 12-13.

⁷⁰ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 67.

⁷¹ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 11.

⁷² De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 13.

. . . the most venerable theologians – Athanasius, Basil, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom, Maximus – teach us two things. First they tell us that the divine essence is incommunicable; then that it is in some way communicable . . . We must therefore hold both assertions and set them together as the rule of the true faith.⁷³

Thus, for the ancient Fathers, and so for de Lubac, it is in the harmony of several truths, including those which appear to contradict one another, that the Christian mystery is evoked yet never encapsulated, becomes present to faith but is never possessed by human reason.⁷⁴

In his appropriation of medieval sources, de Lubac draws upon the authority of Nicholas of Cusa in confirming the “end of the intellect is simply to penetrate all things while not penetrating them,”⁷⁵ noting that this epistemological paradox need not paralyse, rather “something analogous to a conversion takes place within it, a kind of rebirth, an entry into a new world.”⁷⁶ Present also in de Lubac’s work is high praise for Kierkegaard, for the Dane “restores faith to its towering height,” specifically by the paradox of man’s personal involvement in the utterly transcendent reality of God.⁷⁷ In his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, Kierkegaard has revealed for de Lubac “in what conditions the individual receives the mystery into himself without stripping it of its essentially mysterious quality.”⁷⁸ Indeed, this same paradox of divine presence and transcendence would be appropriated and extended by de Lubac in his incisive treatment of nature and grace, to be examined. It was this

⁷³ Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 218-219. All citations from *The Mystery of the Supernatural* are taken from the 1967 English translation unless otherwise indicated.

⁷⁴ In *Paradoxes of Faith*, de Lubac insists, “As each truth becomes better known, it opens up a fresh area of paradox. Thought which failed to leave it its place then, which in other words did not recognise this universal place that it has, would be paradoxical in the bad sense.” See de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 10.

⁷⁵ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 264.

⁷⁶ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 226.

⁷⁷ Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, translated by Edith M. Riley et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 100.

⁷⁸ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 103.

principle that was retrieved by de Lubac as part of a broader shift from neoscholasticism to a more historically conscious methodology.⁷⁹

In this regard, it is necessary to acknowledge the influence of the *nouvelle théologie* upon de Lubac's theological outlook. This project of religious revitalisation, led largely by Francophone historians and theologians, forms the broader context in which to appreciate de Lubac's use of paradox as a heuristic model which he deliberately carries forward from tradition. The immediate setting of de Lubac's thought, and thus his methodology, was the flourishing of the intellectual and spiritual life of the French Church in the period from 1930 to 1950. Led by the Jesuit house of studies in Fourvière, the *nouvelle théologie*, as it became known, was indebted to the earlier achievements of Jacques-Paul Migne who in his monumental *Patrologia* (1844-1857) had provided ready access to the vast storehouse of Greek and Latin Christian literature.⁸⁰ These texts had enabled and promoted intense study of the Church Fathers which would ultimately reveal discrepancies between patristic theology and the reigning neoscholasticism. Engaging theologians and historians such as Jean Daniélou, Henri Boulliard, Henri Rondet, Émile Delaye and de Lubac himself, the concern for *ressourcement*, literally a 're-sourcing' of theology in the classic 'principles' and 'spirit' of tradition, was, in part, a reaction to the limitations of neoscholastic Thomism.⁸¹ As Kerr affirms, in the view of the *nouvelle* scholars, theology since the seventeenth century had been marked by Enlightenment rationalism, anti-Protestant polemic, compartmentalisation, and

⁷⁹ Dennis Doyle, *Communion Ecclesiology: Visions and Versions*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 59.

⁸⁰ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2008), 75. The basic inspiration for the *ressourcement* movement is also traced to the writings of French poet and essayist, Charles Peguy. See Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "Ressourcement theology, *aggiornamento*, and the hermeneutics of tradition," *Communio* 18 (Winter 1991), 537.

⁸¹ As Williams notes, however, this dissatisfaction with neo-Thomism should not be construed as 'anti-Thomism' for the *ressourcement* theologians, which included Dominicans Congar and Chenu, were concerned to rescue the original thought of Thomas from his "reverent embalmment" in the neo-Thomist system. See A.N. Williams, "The Future of the Past: The Contemporary Significance of the *Nouvelle Théologie*," *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (October 2005), 349.

extrinsic speculation that had impoverished theology's sense of mystery and of the unity of the economy of salvation.⁸² By a conscientious grasp of the ancient sources of tradition, as well as the original thought of Thomas Aquinas, theology was opened to perspectives that were broader, deeper and more integral to the faith than the existing scholastic manuals could make available.⁸³ It is notable that the intent was neither a 'theology of repetition' nor the replacement of one era with another but of a thoroughgoing analysis of the sources of Christian faith with the view of drawing out the implications of this inheritance for contemporary life and thought.

As a lodestar of this project of renewal, de Lubac had himself recognised the inadequacies of neoscholastic theology and, more positively, the revitalisation that deepening contact with the 'sources' of faith could promote and enable. Writing during the Nazi occupation of France (in essays later published as *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*), de Lubac warned of a rationalist spirit that threatened the cultural alienation and irrelevance of theology, and so of Christianity itself,

We are recognising, too, that 'wine has to ferment before it becomes clear,' and that 'rationality at any price' is 'a dangerous force which undermines life.' We know that mere abstract principles are no substitute for a *mystique*, that the most penetrating criticism cannot produce one atom of being . . . We no longer want a divorce between knowledge and life.⁸⁴

Influenced by the pioneering work of Maurice Blondel, whose *History and Dogma* had provided a generation of students with a renewed philosophy of theology, de Lubac came to resist the neoscholastic conception of theology as a 'science of revealed truths' in which

⁸² Fergus Kerr, *Twentieth-Century Catholic Theologians: From Neoscholasticism to Nuptial Mysticism*, (Maiden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 30-31, 76.

⁸³ As Lennan submits, the customary compendia could supply answers but, notably, "only if there were no new questions." See Richard Lennan, *Risking the Church: The Challenges of Catholic Faith*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 24.

⁸⁴ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 85-86.

revelation was understood less as the historical, personal self-communication of God than as the promulgation of true propositions *about* God.⁸⁵ The consequent deficiency of neoscholasticism was its tendency to describe the divine mystery as entirely within the grasp of human reason and thus, as de Lubac identifies, a misapprehension of theology as “a build up of concepts by which we try to make our paradoxes less obvious.”⁸⁶ Indeed, from his earliest writings, de Lubac recognised that a rationalist spirit had brought about an exile of theology from the concerns of the world and human history, from contemporary thought and broader cultural and scientific developments,

What a shabby theology it is that treats the object of faith as an object of science, that does not know how to discern religion in its inner and universal reality and so sees it only as a system of truths and precepts, imposing themselves only on the basis of a certain number of facts! It confines dogma to the extremities of knowledge, in a distant province, out of touch with other provinces.⁸⁷

The remedy for this *séparation* was a return to “a more substantial tradition,” capable of “gradually restoring the climate of ‘mystery’ which was eminently the climate of patristic thought.”⁸⁸ In an article on the development of dogma, de Lubac insists,

⁸⁵ Rudolf Voderholzer, “Dogma and History: Henri de Lubac and the Retrieval of Historicity as a Key to Theological Renewal,” *Communio* 28 (2001: 4), 649.

⁸⁶ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, cited by de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 231.

⁸⁷ Henri de Lubac, “Apologetics and Theology,” *Theological Fragments*, translated by Rebecca Howell Balinska, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 94-95.

⁸⁸ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 85. In a posthumously published article on the historical theology of Jules Lebreton, professor at the Institut Catholique, de Lubac reassured the need for theology to recognise the breadth and depth of Tradition: “To the degree that theology organises itself in a more rigorous way, in an effort to be more ‘scientific’ – to the degree that it tends, in its own trajectory, towards a higher level of systematic perfection – it is undoubtedly fatal for it to leave outside of its grasp any part of the concrete riches conveyed, century after century, by the single yet multiform tradition of the Church. How could it embrace at once the full infinity of the Mystery? How could it do justice to all aspects at once? The theologian, too, must avoid, as a trap, the temptation to enclose all of his theological thought in his own system. No great theologian has even done this.” See Brian Daley, “The *Nouvelle Théologie* and the Patristic Revival: Sources, Symbols and the Science of Theology,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 7 (October 2005), 377.

Under its form of action and under its form of revelation, as reality and as the object of faith, this unique and total Thing carries one and the same name in Scripture and in Christian Tradition: it is *mystery*. It is already a first abstraction, therefore, to separate completely the gift and the revelation of the gift, the redemptive action and the knowledge of redemption, the mystery as act and the mystery as proposed to faith.⁸⁹

De Lubac advanced the need for theology to deepen, if not re-establish, its contact with its original framework of coherence, that is, with the incomprehensible mystery of God which could neither be confined nor grasped on the level of deductive, rational thought. He contends, “We seek to penetrate into its understanding and we do in fact reach it: the mystery is incomprehensible, it is not unintelligible. But the more we reach, the more we sense at the same time that this truth surpasses us, that it overflows us and disconcerts us.”⁹⁰ Balthasar identifies this central principle in de Lubac’s thought as “the paradox of the ever-greater,” an appreciation that the living mystery expressed itself in historical forms, and so was accessible to human reason, and yet that the mystery always transcended these forms.⁹¹ Sensitivity to this *mysterium* at the centre of faith’s concern grounds and kindles de Lubac’s engagement with paradox as an appropriate heuristic structure. The permanent character of mystery, constitutive of Christian life and thought, brings forward paradox in his work as “the hallmark of truth that is beyond our depth.”⁹²

These conceptual foundations are laid bare in *Paradoxes of Faith* which contains de Lubac’s most explicit discussion of paradox as a thought form for theology. Here de Lubac remarks,

⁸⁹ Henri de Lubac, “The Problem of the Development of Dogma,” *Theology in History*, translated by Anne Englund Nash, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 274. Italics in the original.

⁹⁰ De Lubac, “The Problem of the Development of Dogma,” 265.

⁹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac: An Overview*, translated by Joseph Fessio and Susan Clements, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991), 101.

⁹² De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 218.

Paradox is the reverse of what, properly perceived, would be synthesis. But the proper view always eludes us. Each of us contributes by his existence to the weaving of a wonderful tapestry but it cannot yet be comprised entirely within our range of vision. In the field of facts as of spirit, synthesis can only be sought.⁹³

Thus, for de Lubac, paradox comes to light as “the search or wait for synthesis. It is the provisional expression of a view which remains incomplete, but whose orientation is ever towards fullness.”⁹⁴ As Balthasar comments, within de Lubac’s epistemology the tensive union of opposing expressions in the paradox “[brings] to light in the conceptual realm the ever-greater richness of the original phenomenon.”⁹⁵ Hence, as a model for theology, the form of paradox is genuinely disclosive of the mystery at its source, rousing the human spirit beyond the limits of intelligibility, and the law of non-contradiction, into the higher realm of spiritual truth. De Lubac maintains in this respect,

. . . [paradoxes] do not sin against logic, whose laws remain inviolable: but they escape its domain. They are the *for* fed by the *against*, the *against* going so far as to identify itself with the *for*; each of them moving into the other, without letting itself be abolished by it and continuing to oppose the other, but so as to give it vigour.⁹⁶

It is this ‘paradoxical rhythm’ that truth has that leads faith beyond the totalising pretensions of reason and into the realm of divine inexhaustibility. Drawing inspiration from the spiritual doctrine of Gregory of Nyssa, previously outlined, de Lubac concludes,

Paradox has more charm than dialectics; it is also more realist and more modest, less tense and less hurried; its function is to remind the dialectician when each new stage is reached in the argument, that however necessary this forward movement is, no real progress is being made. As the scholars of old

⁹³ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 9.

⁹⁴ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 9.

⁹⁵ Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 97.

⁹⁶ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 11-12. Italics in the original.

say, in a rather different sense, of eternal life itself, we are ever going from ‘beginnings to beginnings.’⁹⁷

Certainly, in proposing paradox as a model for theology, de Lubac was only too aware that the holding of apparent contradictions in harmony, without separation or confusion, was not easily realised in human thought. Historically, he points out, the fruitful tension of opposites has more often than not given way to “an over-eagerness to reconcile the contrasting elements of the mystery.”⁹⁸ De Lubac cites the early trinitarian and christological heresies as evidence, embodying as they do a failure to maintain the coexistence of contraries, principally the human and the divine, diversity and unity.⁹⁹ Such deviations from the faith arise from the recurrent error of denying one truth to exalt its opposite, “Heretics being unable to reconcile two opposing truths, and believing that to admit one involves excluding the other, therefore accept one and reject the other, and think that we are simply doing the reverse.”¹⁰⁰ It is notable that Balthasar marks the specific achievement of de Lubac’s theology as its ability to affirm the unity of God’s mystery and the totality of God’s plan without partiality, selectivity or the disassociation of analogies, “it is precisely the power of inclusion that becomes the chief criterion of truth.”¹⁰¹ De Lubac himself warned that theology’s embrace of contrasting elements was “usually superficial,” indeed, continually under threat, “hence the ever open possibility, but also the frequent injustice of charges about unorthodox tendencies.”¹⁰² It was a charge with which de Lubac would become only too familiar, particularly in the wake of his treatment of nature and the supernatural, grounded as

⁹⁷ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 9-10. See also Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, translated by Sergia Englund, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), 73-74.

⁹⁸ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 228.

⁹⁹ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 227-229.

¹⁰⁰ Blaise Pascal, cited by de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 218.

¹⁰¹ Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 28.

¹⁰² De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 228, fn. 32.

it was in the model of paradox and nurtured by a thorough *ressourcement* of the tradition. It is this specific application of paradox in de Lubac's thought that now becomes our focus of discussion.

The Nature-Supernatural Relation

“[The] vision of God is a free gift, and yet the desire of it is at the very root of every soul.”¹⁰³ As intimated, we find in *Catholicism* the outline of an anthropology that stands among the most significant applications of paradox in de Lubac's theology. It is a thesis anticipated by de Lubac's earlier reflections on the term ‘supernatural’ and a theme that pervades his later address of the declining sense of the sacred in contemporary culture, his critique of atheism, as well as his thoughts on the discovery of God in human life and consciousness.¹⁰⁴ As Schindler affirms, the “technical core” of all these writings is the relation between nature and the supernatural.¹⁰⁵ It is this thematic that grounds de Lubac's consideration of the ‘paradox of man’ and that finds fullest expression in his classic work, *Surnaturel* (1946).

Acclaimed as “arguably the key theological text of the twentieth century,” de Lubac's work provides a historical analysis of the concept of the supernatural, with its fourth and final

¹⁰³ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 327.

¹⁰⁴ See Henri de Lubac, “Remarques sur l'histoire du mot ‘surnaturel,’” *Nouvelle revue théologique* 61 (1934), 350-370; “The Internal Causes of the Attenuation and Disappearance of the Sense of the Sacred,” *Theology and History*, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2006), 223-240; *The Discovery of God*, translated by Alexander Dru, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1960), and *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

¹⁰⁵ David L. Schindler, “Introduction to the 1998 Edition,” in Henri de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, translated by Rosemary Sheed, (New York: Crossroad, 1998), xv. Note that de Lubac occasionally employs the expression ‘nature-grace’ as a synonym for ‘nature-supernatural,’ though, as will become evident, at other times the former specifies not simply the distinction between man and God but the *distance* between the two on account of man's sinfulness. As such, de Lubac writes, “‘Grace’ can also mean ‘forgiveness.’ Grace is also mercy and pardon. The distinction between nature and grace in this instance is much more radical than in the case of the general differentiation between nature and the supernatural . . . Between sinful human nature and divine grace we have not only a dissimilarity, a heterogeneity between the two orders of being, an infinite distance that man alone cannot bridge. There is an antagonism, violent conflict . . .” See Henri de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, translated by Richard Arnandez, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1984), 118-119.

chapter addressing the desire of human nature for God as its final end.¹⁰⁶ Here the author establishes what Balthasar identifies as “the paradox of the spiritual creature that is ordained beyond itself by the innermost reality of its nature to a goal that is unreachable for it and that can only be given as a gift of grace.”¹⁰⁷ The intent was to show that human nature was embedded within, and oriented toward, the supernatural for its fulfilment while maintaining that this natural desire did not exact any claim on the vision of God. As will become clear, it was by renewed contact with patristic and scholastic sources that this paradoxical notion of man’s natural desire for supernatural gift arose, as supportive of a deeper unity between the orders of nature and grace than prevailed in existing theological discourse.

In *Surnaturel*, as well as in later companion texts, de Lubac points out that the neoscholastic theology that had developed in the wake of Leo XIII’s *Aeterni Patris* (1879) was dependent on baroque commentators, chiefly Cajetan and John of St Thomas, who were proponents of the hypothetical notion of ‘*natura pura*,’ a notion that does not appear in Aquinas himself.¹⁰⁸ According to this dominant line of reasoning, every nature has an end proportionate to its nature. Since human beings are created, man’s natural end must be short of God himself. The intent of proposing a ‘purely natural finality’ had been to protect the irreducible gratuity of grace, as a gift of God completely ‘unowed’ to nature (*indebitum naturae*).¹⁰⁹ However, by the beginning of the twentieth century, what had been a hypothetical notion – once useful for safeguarding the integrity of fallen human nature against Protestant denials – had attained the force of an actual reality in the minds of Catholic

¹⁰⁶ John Milbank, *The Suspended Middle: Henri de Lubac and the Debate concerning the Supernatural*, (London: SCM Press, 2005), 3.

¹⁰⁷ Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 13.

¹⁰⁸ See Henri de Lubac, *Augustinianism and Modern Theology*, translated by Lancelot Sheppard, (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1969) and *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, both of which address actual and possible objections to the central thesis of *Surnaturel*.

¹⁰⁹ Bruno Forte, “Nature and grace in Henri de Lubac: from *Surnaturel* to *Le mystère du Surnaturel*,” *Communio* 23 (1996: 4), 730.

theologians. The result was a separation between nature and the supernatural, a theology of a *duplex ordo* which raised a sharp divide between humanity and the divine with only an extrinsic relation between the two.

The consequences of this separation, a rift that de Lubac demonstrates to be alien to patristic and medieval theology, were severe, “Out of a desire to protect the supernatural from any contamination, it has been isolated, set apart both from the living spirit and from social life, and the field was left open to the invasion of ‘secularism.’”¹¹⁰ With human nature conceived of as an autonomous, fully-constituted system, oriented toward its own purely natural end, the supernatural had been rendered something ‘superadded,’ extraneous to human life and, in this way, superfluous. This separated theology, de Lubac maintained, had contributed to the association of Catholics with fascist movements in Europe such as *L’Action Française*. As Boersma explains, “In no way related to the supernatural, the realm of nature could move in its own, self-chosen direction, unencumbered by any higher call than the gospel, Jesus Christ, or the Church might issue.”¹¹¹ The fractured unity of the nature-supernatural relation had the further effect of isolating Christian thought from the concrete questions of human existence. De Lubac observes of its proponents,

They were dooming themselves to see [the supernatural order] as merely a kind of superstructure. It followed inevitably that man could not only manage quite well without it, but that even now he could with impunity disregard it. [The supernatural] was deprived of any hold on human thinking or human existence. Christian thought was thus bounded by a narrow circle, in a quiet backwater of the intellectual universe where it could only waste away.¹¹²

¹¹⁰ Henri de Lubac, “The total meaning of man and the world,” *Communio* 35 (2008: 4), 621. Elsewhere, de Lubac describes the distortion of the nature-supernatural relation as one of the “deepest roots” of secularisation. See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 234.

¹¹¹ Hans Boersma, “Accommodation to What? Univocity of Being, Pure Nature, and the Anthropology of St Irenaeus,” *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 8 (2006: 3), 281.

¹¹² De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 232-233.

In his rejection of the notion of ‘pure nature,’ de Lubac was equally alert to the threat of immanentism or ‘naturalism’ in which “all the values of the supernatural order . . . [would] be gradually reabsorbed into that ‘purely natural’ order that has been imagined.”¹¹³ In other words, the question of the nature-supernatural relation would simply collapse with the identification of grace *with* nature. Such confusion of the two orders was no more acceptable than a merely extrinsic relation for in this case, as de Lubac points out, “What remains peculiar to the supernatural order, except the word?”¹¹⁴ The inadequacies of both an extrinsicist and immanentist approach of nature and the supernatural stimulated de Lubac to address the question through the framework of paradox, in continuity with the greater tradition of its use.

De Lubac’s accomplishment was to relate human nature and the supernatural without separation or admixture of the two, respecting the distinction between the orders while asserting their intrinsic unity. This ‘paradox of man’ was established through the testimony of the Church Fathers and by drawing on the original Thomistic notion of the *desiderium natural videndi Deum*, the natural desire to see God. In *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, de Lubac affirms,

All tradition . . . passing from St Irenaeus, by way of St Augustine and St Thomas and St Bonaventure, without distinction of schools, presents us with the two affirmations at once, not in opposition but as a totality: man cannot live except by the vision of God – and that vision of God depends absolutely upon God’s good pleasure.¹¹⁵

¹¹³ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 51. In relation to this danger, de Lubac takes note of the “direct natural vision of God” proposed by his former professor Descoqs, as well as Boyer’s notion of the “natural possession” of God. See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 52-53.

¹¹⁴ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 52.

¹¹⁵ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 234.

Tradition clearly stressed the coincidence of two apparently opposed elements *a propos* man's supernatural destiny: that it was fundamental to human nature and yet a destiny realised only in the free gift of God. This paradoxical insight rendered unnecessary any attempt to 'naturalise' humanity in order to defend the gratuity of grace. As de Lubac himself recognised, it also cleared him of any charge of heterodoxy or innovation as outlined in Pius XII's encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950).¹¹⁶ For de Lubac, the truth is never 'protected' by isolating one truth from another: "the authentic reign of the 'supernatural' is never established on a depreciation of 'nature.'"¹¹⁷ On the contrary, de Lubac maintains, "the greater the capacity of the vase, the more it cries out for fullness."¹¹⁸ This *capacitas* for the supernatural, affirmed by the weight of tradition, is an absolute constituent of human nature but is incapable of fulfilling itself.

In response to concern that any notion of a 'natural desire' for the vision of God would compromise the gratuity of grace, precisely as what is not owed to man, de Lubac supplies the qualification vis-à-vis this "paradox of the human spirit,"

[It] does not desire God as an animal desires its prey. It desires him as gift. It does not at all seek to possess an infinite object: it wills the free and gratuitous

¹¹⁶ The reference assumed by many to refer to de Lubac on the subject of the supernatural comes at *Humani Generis* 26: "Others destroy the gratuity of the supernatural order, since God, they say, cannot create intellectual beings without ordering and calling them to the beatific vision." However, this is not a condemnation of de Lubac's actual view for he argued God does not create rational beings without ordering them to the Beatific Vision (nature) but he can create them without *calling* them to the Beatific Vision (that is, without supernatural grace). On reading the encyclical, de Lubac remarked, "I have read nothing in it, doctrinally, that affects me. The only passage where I recognise an implicit reference to me is a phrase bearing on the question of the supernatural; now it is rather curious to note that this phrase, intending to recall the true doctrine on this subject, reproduces exactly what I said about it two years earlier in a [sic] article in *Recherches de science religieuse*." See Henri de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church: Henri de Lubac Reflects on the Circumstances that Occasioned His Writings*, translated by Anne Elizabeth Englund, (San Francisco: Communio Books, 1993), 71. *Humani Generis* available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_12081950_humani-generis_en.html, accessed 27 January, 2011.

¹¹⁷ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 464-465.

¹¹⁸ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 465.

communication of a personal Being. If therefore, *per impossibile*, it were able on this occasion to capture its supreme good, it would no longer be its good.¹¹⁹

Furthermore, de Lubac maintains “This desire is in us, yes, but it is not of us.”¹²⁰ That is, this innate desire in humanity is itself a gift of divine initiative. Thus, de Lubac’s engagement of paradox ‘succeeds’ because it preserves the integrity of nature as distinct from the supernatural order but, at the same time, sustains it as inseparable in its desire and satisfaction from the gift of God.¹²¹ Nor is the relation merely one of juxtaposition, the flaw of the extrinsic approach, but one in which nature and the supernatural truly co-inhere.¹²² Balthasar summarises de Lubac’s thesis as follows:

. . . God’s fundamental intention in creation: to communicate himself as absolute love and to inscribe this wish *of his* in the innermost being of the spiritual creature, so that it recognises therein the ‘call of God to love’ and, instead of making demands himself, stands by his very essence under God’s demand inscribed in his nature . . . the entire natural order stands ‘within’ a supernatural order that realises this ultimate intention of God, so that every natural demand by the creature upon God always comes too late and is reduced to silence by the grace already offered.¹²³

This paradox – reciprocity in unity, of the one and the other – allows de Lubac to overcome the baroque and neoscholastic tincture that had placed nature ‘outside’ of the supernatural in

¹¹⁹ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 483 as translated in Coffey, “Some Resources,” 368-369. Note that de Lubac’s reference to the “human spirit” here should not be understood in opposition to his conception of “human nature.” See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 12-15, and Noel O’Sullivan, *Christ and Creation: Christology as the Key to Interpreting the Theology of Creation in the Works of Henri de Lubac*, Religions and Discourse Series 40, (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009), 225.

¹²⁰ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 488 as translated in Coffey, “Some Resources,” 373.

¹²¹ Maintaining the integrity of nature, de Lubac draws the analogy, “‘Without the presence of a certain salt in the mouth, no one would want to drink;’ yet it is quite clear that the salt which makes us thirsty is not the water which quenches our thirst. Thus this fact does not mean that God is in the smallest degree bound. Nor does it mean that that nature does not have its own proper stability and its own definite structure.” See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 41.

¹²² Elsewhere de Lubac describes the relationship as “circumcession,” drawing on the paradigm of the three persons of the Trinity who, although distinct, possess the same Godhead. See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 43.

¹²³ Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 67. Italics in the original.

Catholic theology, re-establishing the traditional doctrine that “the measure of our desire is the very measure of our dependence.”¹²⁴

In highlighting the profundity of de Lubac’s insight, Milbank reverses the perspective to bring the unity of the supernatural and human existence into proximity, “that which is wholly done for us by God, namely deification by grace, is yet also our highest act and as such properly our own – even that which is most properly our own.”¹²⁵ In other words, de Lubac’s paradox of man affirms the vision of God as the integral human vocation, the ultimate end to which creation is ordered and the gift in which it is realised. This was a doctrine not only recovered by de Lubac from patristic and medieval sources but also nourished and deepened by his christology. As will become clear, it is the union of the human and divine in the person of Christ which provides for de Lubac the foundation and fulfilment of the paradox of the supernatural.

The paradox of the Man-God

While we do not find a fully developed christology in de Lubac’s *oeuvre*, an omission for which de Lubac himself expressed regret,¹²⁶ the Incarnation is for him the “supreme paradox,”¹²⁷ the personal centre that grounds and sheds light on all the analogous tensions or ‘paradoxical axes’ of the mysteries of faith. In Christ, true God and true man, de Lubac

¹²⁴ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 488 as translated in Coffey, “Some Resources,” 373.

¹²⁵ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, ix.

¹²⁶ In his memoir, de Lubac laments in personal terms his failure to undertake a long-intended work on christology, “I cannot help thinking that it is a certain weakness of spirit, rather than the sense of my intellectual deficiencies, or even the belief that I am not really up to such a subject ever to dare tackling it head-on, that has always made me postpone undertaking this work on Jesus Christ.” In the same work, de Lubac expresses regret for the lack of an explicit christology in *Surnaturel*, “I should have made it clear, from the beginning, that it presupposed a basic abstraction, when it considered the question as the entire scholastic tradition had done and continued to do; which explains an almost total absence of any consideration of historical revelation or of creation in Christ and for Christ.” See de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 147, 198.

¹²⁷ De Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 8.

identifies the “mystery of mysteries”¹²⁸ that at once confronts and defies human comprehension, “The idea of a God-man is itself something that hits the mind head-on; even though we can see that there is no contradiction with the idea, the whole chain of realities associated therewith creates a mental atmosphere of bewilderment.”¹²⁹ For de Lubac, the apparent antinomies of the Christian mystery – the human and divine, immanence and transcendence, the finite and infinite, time and eternity, and diversity and unity – coalesce in the person of Christ who alone realises the absolute synthesis.¹³⁰

In his concern for the unity of God’s plan, de Lubac establishes that this convergence in Christ does not remain exterior to human existence but permeates the very mystery of humanity, suggesting an intrinsic connection between christology and anthropology.¹³¹ Specifically, it is the ultimate paradox of Christ that illuminates and sustains the relation of nature and the supernatural, treated above. Certainly, as Wood submits, the analogue of the human condition is the hypostatic union of the divine and human natures in Christ which are neither mingled nor confused.¹³² However, for de Lubac, the relation runs much deeper for it is Christ who opens human nature to its own dimension of religious depth as well as enables it to attain the supernatural end for which it is created. As Milbank explains, the dynamic link between the gift of creation and that of man’s deification must be, for de Lubac, “the gift of

¹²⁸ Henri de Lubac, “Sur la liberté du Christ,” cited by O’Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 306. Elsewhere de Lubac affirms, “Christ is not only *a* mystery: he is *the* mystery – there is no other.” Italics in the original. See Henri de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, translated by James R. Dunne, (Shannon: Ecclesia Press, 1969), 14.

¹²⁹ Henri de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, translated by Michael Mason, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1999), 48-49.

¹³⁰ Francesco Bertoldi, “Henri de Lubac on *Dei Verbum*,” translated by Mandy Murphy, *Communio* 17 (1990), 92.

¹³¹ As Forte observes, “the christological question that occupied the first Christian centuries, that is, the exact definition of the relationship between the human and the divine in the unity of the incarnate Word, became, in the horizon of the emerging interest in man characteristic of the second millennium, especially in the West, the question of the relation between nature and grace.” See Forte, “Nature and grace,” 726-727.

¹³² Susan Wood, “The nature-grace problematic within Henri de Lubac’s christological paradox,” *Communio* 19 (1992: 3), 396.

something at once wholly divine and wholly human,” that is, precisely the covenant of Christ.¹³³ Accordingly, de Lubac elaborates an intrinsic, twofold relationship between the paradox of man and that of the eternal Word incarnate: the first, in the order of creation; the second, in the order of redemption.

Considered under its first aspect, Christ is, for de Lubac, the definitive disclosure of humanity’s origin in, and innate capacity for, God. De Lubac remarks, “In revealing to us the God who is the end of man, Jesus Christ, the Man-God, reveals us to ourselves, and without him the ultimate foundation of our being would remain an enigma to us.”¹³⁴ Christ, “the *illuminating mystery*,”¹³⁵ sheds light on the fundamental paradox of human creation – a natural longing for the gift of divine embrace – as the union of the human and divine in the Incarnation serves as the ‘pledge’ that such a supernatural end is indeed possible for human beings.¹³⁶

Intimations of a theology of ‘creation in Christ’ also surface in de Lubac’s work, notably in his elaboration of humanity’s innate desire for God. In *Surnaturel* and other writings, the paradox of man’s natural desire is reinterpreted in the biblical terms ‘image’ and ‘likeness,’ precisely the language of the Church Fathers.¹³⁷ De Lubac avers, “deep in human nature (and so in every man) the image of God is imprinted, that is, a quality that constitutes in it – and even without it – a kind of secret call to the object of the full and supernatural

¹³³ Milbank, *The Suspended Middle*, 39.

¹³⁴ De Lubac, “The total meaning of man and the world,” 626-627.

¹³⁵ Henri de Lubac, *La Révélation Divine*, (Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1983), 100. Italics in the original.

¹³⁶ De Lubac writes of “the wonderful union which the Incarnation of the Word offers both as pledge and pre-eminent model.” See de Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 69.

¹³⁷ De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 367. See also de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 15; *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 275-6; and *Catholicism*, 248. O’Sullivan notes that in his earliest writings de Lubac emphasises the greatness of man (created in the image of God) and his supernatural destiny (corresponding to likeness), though also acknowledges “while de Lubac follows the patristic tradition which distinguished between image and likeness, he sometimes slipped from this position and used them interchangeably, to the extent of emphasising the need for image to be restored. This usually happened when preoccupied with the effects of sin.” See O’Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 43.

revelation, brought by Jesus Christ.”¹³⁸ The parenthetical expression is significant, affirming once more the character of humanity’s constitutive desire as gift. Moulins-Beaufort goes further, noting the quality of encounter that de Lubac denotes in this image in man, “Fr de Lubac’s originality, an originality he draws from the whole of Tradition, is to see clearly that the image of God is not a dead stamp, a mere attribution of certain faculties to man. It is a presence.”¹³⁹

The *christological* character of this innermost depth is made clear in a number of texts. In *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, de Lubac writes, “every man, Christian or not, in the ‘state of grace’ or not, orientated towards God or not, whatever his knowledge or lack of it, has an organic link with Christ – and has it in such a way that he cannot lose it.”¹⁴⁰ In his reflection on Christian mysticism, de Lubac presupposes “a certain capacity to receive the mystery that is at once revealed to us and given to us in Jesus Christ; a capacity which is naturally accompanied by desire, a desire that we would have to qualify as ontological.”¹⁴¹ These texts extend and supplement de Lubac’s earlier thoughts in *Catholicism* in which he cites patristic testimony with regards the primordial nature of the relationship between humanity and Christ,

Christ from the very first moment of his existence virtually bears all men within himself . . . his Incarnation was not a simple *corporatio*, but, as St Hilary says, a *concorporatio*. He incorporated himself in our humanity, and incorporated it in himself.¹⁴²

¹³⁸ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 72.

¹³⁹ Eric de Moulins-Beaufort, “The Spiritual Man in the Thought of Henri de Lubac,” *Communio* 25 (1998: 2), 292. De Lubac notes, “God reveals himself continuously to man by imprinting his image upon him. That divine operation constitutes the very centre of man.” See de Lubac, *The Discovery of God*, 16.

¹⁴⁰ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 72.

¹⁴¹ Henri de Lubac, “Mysticism and Mystery,” *Theological Fragments*, translated by Rebecca Howell Balinska, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 52.

¹⁴² De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 37-38.

It is clear that in the thought of de Lubac the paradox never slackens. The proper relation between created humanity and the divine is sustained, in this case, through reliance on the term *concorporatio* which, as O'Sullivan affirms, by its prefix, “implies unity between Christ and humanity, but not absorption: union without confusion.”¹⁴³ As McPartlan points out, the “union of divine and human natures in Christ, without division or confusion, is now the pattern for the union between the incarnate Christ (the Mystery) and each Christian.”¹⁴⁴

The same concern for differentiation in unity is seen in that de Lubac distinguishes the primordial gift of man's constitutive desire, “that gift which is himself,”¹⁴⁵ from the wholly supernatural gift of grace. In *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, de Lubac is keen to stress,

... for Christians created nature is no kind of divine seed. The ‘depths’ of the spiritual soul, that ‘mirror’ where the image of God is reflected secretly, is indeed, as Tauler says, in the ‘birthplace’ of our supernatural being: but it is not its seed or embryo. It is indeed our ‘capacity’ for it – to take a word used by Origen, St Bernard, St Thomas, and many others – but that does not make it a participation in it, even initially or distantly, ‘which needs but to be developed and enriched.’ ... The longing that surges from this ‘depth’ of the soul is a longing ‘born of a lack,’ and not arising from ‘the beginning of possession.’¹⁴⁶

In this way, relating Christ and humanity from the standpoint of creation, the initial gift of creation, including humanity's natural desire, is upheld as *distinct from* but *fulfilled* in the second, exceptional gift by which Christ makes man, if he responds to it, “a new creation.”¹⁴⁷ Thus, the structure of paradox recurs for de Lubac. Human nature, while naturally endowed in Christ with a capacity for supernatural being, has no claim or power to reach this end apart

¹⁴³ O'Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 317-318.

¹⁴⁴ Paul McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church: Henri de Lubac and John Zizioulas in Dialogue*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1993), 55.

¹⁴⁵ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 98.

¹⁴⁶ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 109-110.

¹⁴⁷ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 98.

from God's gracious offer of deifying grace.¹⁴⁸ The supernatural vocation of man, "his fundamental ordering to a higher destiny," is realised only in the "raising up," the "new birth," brought about by and in Jesus Christ.¹⁴⁹

This brings us to consider de Lubac's treatment of Christ's unique, redemptive character, as the one who enables humanity to attain its 'likeness of God,' that supernatural destiny to which human desire is ordered. In *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace*, de Lubac establishes that the 'natural dignity of man,' his inherent capacity for God, cannot express the term of humanity's supernatural desires, "If the union of nature and the supernatural was brought about in principle by the mystery of the Incarnation, the union of nature and grace can be fully accomplished only through the mystery of the redemption."¹⁵⁰ The shift in terminology here, from the union of 'nature-supernatural' to that of 'nature-grace,' is significant for de Lubac now takes account of human sinfulness. The Incarnation, and our creation, is related to the supernatural while redemption is connected to grace, though de Lubac cautions, "these two distinctions must obviously not be separated from each other . . . the notion of the supernatural would remain an abstraction unless it were made concrete in the reality of the Covenant consummated in the God-man . . . the reality of the new Sacrifice."¹⁵¹ While the union of the divine and human in Christ reveals the supernatural end to which humanity is ordered, it is Christ's redemptive and definitive act of sacrifice on the Cross that brings about the possibility of its actualisation by grace. De Lubac affirms in this regard,

¹⁴⁸ De Lubac notes, "Between nature as it exists and the supernatural for which God destines it, the distance is as great, the difference as radical, as that between non-being and being: for to pass from one to the other is not merely to pass into 'more being,' but to pass to a different type of being. It is a crossing, by grace, of an impassable barrier." See de Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 107-108.

¹⁴⁹ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 466.

¹⁵⁰ De Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 121-122.

¹⁵¹ De Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 168.

However genuine and unsullied the vision of unity that inspires and directs mankind's activity, to become effective it must first be dimmed. It must be enveloped in the great shadow of the Cross. It is only by abandoning all idea of considering itself as its own end that mankind can be gathered together . . . There is no smooth transition from a natural to a supernatural love . . . Through Christ dying on the Cross, the humanity which he bore whole and entire in his own Person renounces itself and dies.¹⁵²

It is the “economy of the Passion,” understood by de Lubac as “‘the Economy’ par excellence,” that leads humanity – both created and sinful – to “what was in the beginning with God,” that is, to the restored spiritual unity of the Creator’s plan.¹⁵³ Man’s innate nobility, imprinted as it is with the image of God, is a deception if his supernatural transfiguration into the ‘likeness of God’ is beyond reach.¹⁵⁴ For de Lubac, it is the crucified Christ who carries humanity to this consummation, via the reconciliation of the Cross,

Naturam in se universae carnis adsumpsit (‘He assumed in himself the nature of all flesh’). Whole and entire he will bear it then to Calvary, whole and entire he will raise it from the dead, whole and entire he will save it. Christ the Redeemer does not offer salvation merely to each one; he effects it, he is himself the salvation of the whole, and for each one salvation consists in a personal ratification of his original ‘belonging’ to Christ, so that he be not cast out, cut off from this Whole.¹⁵⁵

It is the redeeming death of Christ that effects the ‘new creation,’ the Cross representing “the historical resolution of the polarities between the two orders of nature and the supernatural,” and thus arising as inseparable from the ultimate fulfilment that humanity desires.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵² De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 367-368.

¹⁵³ Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen*, translated by Anne Englund Nash, (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), 86. See also de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 35-40.

¹⁵⁴ O’Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 388.

¹⁵⁵ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 39.

¹⁵⁶ Wood, “The nature-grace problematic,” 400. Wood notes de Lubac’s citation of Teilhard de Chardin for this insight, “The Cross of Jesus signifies to our thirst for happiness that the term of creation is not to be sought within the temporal zones of our visible world, but that the effort expected from our fidelity must be consummated beyond a total metamorphosis of ourselves and beyond everything that surrounds us.” See Wood, “The nature-grace problematic,” 400.

The synthesis of the nature-supernatural relation in Christ's person is central to O'Sullivan's observation, "the Act of Love reaches its apogee in the Act of Calvary. This is not an external act performed on our behalf to make satisfaction for our sins; it is rather one which transforms us from within through love."¹⁵⁷ Eschewing any temptation to extrinsicism, which would understand the supernatural action of Christ as wholly exterior to human nature and thereby reduce it to "an optional and insignificant 'plus,'"¹⁵⁸ de Lubac understands salvation in terms of the *concorporatio* of Christ and humanity already outlined. It is by the incorporation of humanity in, as well as its inward conversion to, Christ's entirely gracious action – as de Lubac has it, by man's "personal ratification of his original 'belonging' to Christ" – that humanity becomes most fully itself. In *Catholicism*, de Lubac expresses the redemptive impact of Christ in similar terms of personhood, "That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and gives back to its glory, is 'I myself,' it is also the other, every other."¹⁵⁹ In other words, it is by participation in Christ that individuals, and humanity as a whole, are raised and become personal beings, specifically through his Paschal Mystery,

[Humanity] cannot reach completion without a total different process – or rather a 'passion': a turning around of the whole being, a mysterious passage through death, a revival and a recasting that are nothing other than the evangelical *metanoia*. No external 'revolution' will ever dispense with this inner revolution . . . humanity as a whole must die to itself in each of its members in order to live, transfigured, in God.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ O'Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 346.

¹⁵⁸ Forte, "Nature and grace," 726.

¹⁵⁹ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 340.

¹⁶⁰ De Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 465.

The conversion of humanity to Christ brings its fulfilment by the paradox of a life-giving death, for Christ constitutes within himself the essential vocation of every human being.¹⁶¹ In this context, the full promise and demand of de Lubac's christology becomes clear, "we are fully persons only within the Person of the Son."¹⁶²

It is evident that in his relation of Christ to humanity de Lubac upholds the unity, and continuity, of God's plan in the orders of creation and redemption. The paradox of man's nature and destiny is held together by the 'Chalcedonian' union of Christ who communicates and embodies within himself the realisation of humanity's highest possibility in assuming human nature. In this sense, the Incarnation is "the beginning of consummation."¹⁶³ However, as Forte reiterates, the supernatural destiny of humanity, while "deduced entirely from the fact of revelation and salvation offered in Jesus Christ . . . does not find this fact in any way."¹⁶⁴ This end is accessible only in the order of redemption, in the second gift of Christ's sacrifice by which man, if he enters into it, experiences a surpassing but genuine *fulfilment* of his nature.¹⁶⁵ In this way, de Lubac elaborates a series of paradoxes that structure his anthropology and christology, as well as mark the relation between the two. In Christ, he unites the orders of creation and redemption without confusion, and distinguishes them without separation. By maintaining this tension, de Lubac is able to bring the fullness and unity of God's plan for humanity into expression, above all the 'double gratuity' of

¹⁶¹ Cf. de Lubac's comment: "The mystery of Christ is ours also. What was accomplished in the Head must be accomplished also in the members. Incarnation, death and resurrection: that is, taking root, detachment, and transfiguration. No Christian spirituality is without this rhythm in triple time." See de Lubac, *Paradoxes of Faith*, 66.

¹⁶² De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 342.

¹⁶³ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 267.

¹⁶⁴ Forte, "Nature and grace," 733.

¹⁶⁵ Nicholas Healy, "Henri de Lubac on Nature and Grace: A Note on Some Recent Contributions to the Debate," *Communio* 35 (2008: 4), 541.

Christ as both the Alpha and Omega of man, his ultimate revealer and redeemer. In this spirit, de Lubac concludes,

... we are created in Jesus Christ, and that as God living is the principle of our existence in nature, so God mortal and dying is the principle of our existence in grace: *Creati in Christo Jesu*. It teaches us that we come from God in two ways, and have two different beings, we also have two entries into two very different worlds and for two very different ends. For in the first creation, we enter this world that we see, and in the second creation we enter a world that we adore; in other words we enter, we live, we act in Jesus; *Creati in Christo Jesu*. And as he is our principle, he is our universe too, he is our world and we live in him.¹⁶⁶

The Paradox of the Church

It is in the context of Christ as the revelation and supernatural fulfilment of human desire that de Lubac situates the mystery of the Church and brings its own paradoxical character to the fore. For de Lubac, the Church is both the locus and means where humanity embraces in freedom its supernatural destiny in Christ, all the while containing the “endless contradictions that are in man.”¹⁶⁷ As will become clear, the tensive structure of distinction in unity – of the divine and human, eternal and historical – already observed in de Lubac’s anthropology and Christology, carries over into his ecclesiological vision.¹⁶⁸ It is the *ecclesiae mysterio* that forms, as Balthasar affirms, “the real centre of [de Lubac’s] whole life’s work: the meeting point of God’s descending world and man’s world ascending to

¹⁶⁶ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, 120.

¹⁶⁷ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 2.

¹⁶⁸ Indeed, in *A Brief Catechesis on Nature and Grace* de Lubac asserts, “a correct idea of the distinction between nature and the supernatural and of their unity is . . . necessary for an understanding of the Church and her role.” See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 109. Boersma notes the contemporaneity of de Lubac’s writing on the nature-supernatural relation to his first publications on the Church, with both *Catholicism* and *Corpus Mysticum* coming to completion at around the same time, before the end of 1938. See Hans Boersma, “Sacramental Ontology: Nature and the Supernatural in the Ecclesiology of Henri de Lubac,” *New Blackfriars* 88 (2007), 244-245.

him.”¹⁶⁹ For the *ressourcement* theologian, it is the primordial understanding of tradition that “[the] complete Christian mystery forms one body with that of the Church.”¹⁷⁰

It is no surprise that de Lubac’s ecclesial paradox is grounded in his conception of the Church as mystery, a mystery that he addresses through a theology of sacrament. In *The Splendor of the Church*, a key text that would provide inspiration for the content and structure of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, de Lubac declares,

The Church is a mystery; that is to say that she is also a sacrament. She is ‘the total *locus* of the Christian sacraments,’ and she is herself the great sacrament that contains and vitalises all others. In this world she is the sacrament of Christ, as Christ himself in his humanity, is for us the sacrament of God.¹⁷¹

For de Lubac, this notion of ‘sacrament’ – elaborated here through a communication of idioms between Christ and the Church – reveals the multidimensions and paradox of the Church’s mystery and underlines its inseparability from Christ without which the Church has “no existence, value or efficacy.”¹⁷² Analogous to Christ who makes God present in history, de Lubac understands the Church as the continuation of Christ and in a sense more profound and intrinsic than can be claimed of any human institution and its founder.¹⁷³ For in its sacramental constitution, the divine element of the Church, that is Christ, is intrinsic to its human element. The paradox resounds in the unity of these contrasting aspects of the

¹⁶⁹ Balthasar, *The Theology of Henri de Lubac*, 105.

¹⁷⁰ De Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, 21.

¹⁷¹ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 202. Italics in the original. See *Lumen Gentium* 1, “. . . the Church, in Christ, is a sacrament – a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race . . .” Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents*, (New York: Costello, 1996). The influence that de Lubac’s thought exercised on the Council Fathers is confirmed by the first and final chapters of *Méditation sur l’Eglise* which address, as those of *Lumen Gentium* would do, “The Church as Mystery” and “The Church and Our Lady.” For an account of de Lubac’s direct involvement in the deliberations of the Council, see Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, Volume 5, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 63, 145, 212, 220-221.

¹⁷² Susan K. Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church in the Theology of Henri de Lubac*, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1991), 106. See also de Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 15.

¹⁷³ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 76.

Church's life, as Wood remarks of de Lubac's sacramental vision, "the human element of the Church makes the divine element present by making Christ present."¹⁷⁴ Accordingly, de Lubac avoids any dualism between the transcendent Christ and the Church's socio-historical reality in upholding that it is the Church as visible and historical institution that makes accessible the supernatural mystery of Christ. Writing in *The Splendor of the Church*, de Lubac concludes of the paradox, "In her structure the Church shows not only a mixture of visible and invisible but also a mixture of the divine and the human within the visible alone."¹⁷⁵ Within the depths of this sacramental unity, as "the sensible bond between two worlds," the Church arises not as a mere intermediate between God and humanity but the very *mediation* of Christ to humanity, existing "solely to put us into relation with him" and making present the one she evokes.¹⁷⁶

In the same text, de Lubac draws on the controversy associated with the often overspiritualised metaphor of the Church as 'mystical body,' as well as its treatment *apart* from the more concrete Pauline notion of the 'body of Christ,' to demonstrate the dangerous disassociation that finds its way into ecclesiology when the structure of paradox is allowed to slacken. For de Lubac, a misapprehension of the complex unity of the human and divine union in the Church almost inevitably results in the separation of the visible and invisible, which reverberates in the false opposition of "charismata and hierarchy, or spirit and authority" or, in general terms, the separation of a "sociological Church" from a Platonic or otherwise invisible, 'purely inward' community of grace.¹⁷⁷ Contrary to these anomalies, the Church's mystery is to be understood in its paradoxical unity, and not independently, as of

¹⁷⁴ Wood, *Spiritual Exegesis and the Church*, 107.

¹⁷⁵ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 88.

¹⁷⁶ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 202.

¹⁷⁷ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 91, 97.

God (*de Trinitate*) and of man (*ex hominibus*), invisible and visible, eternal and earthly.¹⁷⁸ She is a *complexio oppositorum*,¹⁷⁹ a complex of opposites held in tension, “at once a gift from above and a product of this earth” and, thus, a genuine sharer in “the paradoxical logic of the Incarnation.”¹⁸⁰ It is with this sense of continuity between the Church and the unity of the divine human in Christ that de Lubac makes frequent reference to the Church as “the Incarnation continued,”¹⁸¹ meaning “Christ perpetuated among us, Christ ‘spread abroad and passed on.’”¹⁸² De Lubac forestalls, once again, the perils of extrinsic interpretation for it is the Church as mysterious reality and visible society that “really makes him present.”¹⁸³

The correlation of the paradox of the Church and Christ is also illuminated by de Lubac in his emphasis on the Church as both a means and an end within the economy of salvation. In no mean analogy to Christ who, as we have indicated, opens human nature to its own dimension of religious depth and is himself the fulfilment of man’s supernatural end, so the Church is revealed as the means which calls humanity to its deepest vocation as well as containing within itself the destination, in containing Christ. Thus, de Lubac concludes of the ecclesial body, “she is at the same time both the way and the goal.”¹⁸⁴ This paradox of the Church as “a double mystery of communication and communion” is present throughout de Lubac’s ecclesiological writings.¹⁸⁵ In *Catholicism* and *The Splendor of the Church*, the

¹⁷⁸ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 23f.

¹⁷⁹ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 2.

¹⁸⁰ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 2. See also de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 88.

¹⁸¹ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 24. See also Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages*, translated by Gemma Simmonds et al., (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 24.

¹⁸² De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 49. See also de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 48.

¹⁸³ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 76.

¹⁸⁴ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 73. See also de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 80.

¹⁸⁵ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 106.

Church emerges in her duality as *convocatio* and *congregatio*, as both the instrument of unity and that assembly of the human race reunited in Christ.¹⁸⁶ She is the “divine calling together” and the “community of the called-together,”¹⁸⁷ “the sanctifying Church” and “the Church sanctified by the Holy Spirit,”¹⁸⁸ “a reconciling power” and “the family of the reconciled,”¹⁸⁹ “she baptises” and “she is baptised.”¹⁹⁰ In *The Motherhood of the Church*, de Lubac addresses the Church at once “unfolding in history and already breathing within the Eternal.”¹⁹¹ Thus, the deep mystery for de Lubac is that the Church is what she is yet to become, a communion in Christ as both realisation and hope. It is in this vein that de Lubac cites the paradoxical thought of the Church Fathers who conclude, “Every day the Church brings forth the Church.”¹⁹² It is clear that the model of paradox is key to de Lubac’s interpretation of the sacramentality of the Church, enabling him to approach the Church not simply as a pedagogue that leads man to Christ but also as a historical body which extends and makes accessible Christ’s saving presence in human history. It is in its twofold character as transmitter and receiver of divine life that the whole Church, for de Lubac, remains “constantly present to the dialogue of the soul with its Lord.”¹⁹³

However, in relating the paradox of the Church to that of Christ, it is imperative to note that if de Lubac is unwilling to accept any separation of Christ and the Church, neither does he admit their confusion. While Christ is God, the Church is not Christ, and so there are

¹⁸⁶ Cf. De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 64. See also de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 103.

¹⁸⁷ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 104.

¹⁸⁸ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 105.

¹⁸⁹ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 106.

¹⁹⁰ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 68.

¹⁹¹ De Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, 20.

¹⁹² De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 109.

¹⁹³ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 204.

no grounds for a triumphalist ecclesiology. In *The Splendor of the Church*, de Lubac identifies the point of departure: the Church is unable to say, as Christ does, “Which of you convicts me of sin?” (Jn 8:46).¹⁹⁴ The astounding paradox of the Church’s constitution, then, lies more particularly in its identity as the *Corpus Christi mixtum*, “the mixed body of Christ,” containing within itself all the ambiguities and sin of the “all too human, and that without any alternative.”¹⁹⁵ In de Lubac’s *Catholicism*, the unity of contrary elements of the Church, at once holy and humiliated in sin, is brought forth with lucidity: she is “an assembly of sinners” and “mother of saints,” “wheat gathered with the straw, a field with tares growing in it,” “the ark which shelters clean and unclean animals,” “adulterous in too many of its members” and yet “an unspotted virgin.”¹⁹⁶ It is on account of this simultaneous plenitude and privation that the Church emerges within de Lubac’s thought as a paradox even more overwhelming to human comprehension than the union of the divine and human in Christ. He concludes of this irreducible mystery, “If a purification and transformation of vision is necessary to look on Christ without being scandalised, how much more is it necessary when we are looking at the Church!”¹⁹⁷

The depth of this ecclesial paradox is further underscored by de Lubac in *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, most notably in his application of the patristic image *mysterium lunae* to the Church. The author explains that as the moon illuminates the night so does the Church shed light on the “darkness of the age and of our ignorance.”¹⁹⁸ As well, as the moon waxes and wanes in its reflection of the sun’s glorious light, so too does the Church grow and

¹⁹⁴ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 49. It is notable in the context of his ecclesiology that de Lubac regarded the 1953 English title, *The Splendor of the Church*, as a “pompous” and “triumphantist” deviation from its original imprint, *Méditation sur l’Eglise*. See de Lubac, *At the Service of the Church*, 77.

¹⁹⁵ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 69. See also de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 49.

¹⁹⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 68-69.

¹⁹⁷ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 50.

¹⁹⁸ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 16.

subside in her responsiveness to the radiance of Christ, “in proportion to the measure of . . . her inner fervour; for the vicissitudes of the human condition are always her lot.”¹⁹⁹ It is in reflection on the Church’s waning that de Lubac introduces the paradox of the paschal mystery to his ecclesiology: for de Lubac, the throes of the Church’s diminishment are, in her profound truth, the means of her renewal. Alike the hidden glory of the crucified Son, the entry of the Church into renunciation and death to self leads to life, “she plunges into the darkness only to re-emerge into the secret fullness of the life of the Resurrected.”²⁰⁰ The emptying of the Church, far from being an irreversible decline, emerges for de Lubac as “even at the same time a dawning. It foretells the definitive absorption of the moon into the sun.”²⁰¹ Even in diminishment, as “a symbol of perpetual decline and mortality,” the Church, then, announces Christ who she awaits as her consummation.²⁰²

The structure of paradox also underlies de Lubac’s approach of the Church’s mission, specifically his understanding of the relationship between the Church and world. In his treatment of the Church as the sacrament of salvation, as the locus and means of communion with Christ, de Lubac retrieves a notion of society that goes even further than a natural society toward a supernatural society which is the Church as redeemed humanity. Created in the image of God, who is one, humanity is enabled to recover its lost unity in the Church which, like a mother, “brings about the birth of Christ in us.”²⁰³ In patristic terms, it is the Church which enables man’s ‘image’ to become ‘likeness’ through her life and sacraments,

¹⁹⁹ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 16.

²⁰⁰ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 17.

²⁰¹ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 17. In this metaphor de Lubac’s writing well represents the vital re-entry of the eschatological into ecclesiology in the mid-twentieth century. Dulles adds, “The recognition that the Church was still groping within the darkness of history led to a more modest ecclesiology and encouraged a more critical stance toward the actions of the Church at various stages of its development.” See Avery Dulles, “A Half Century of Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 50 (1989: 3), 427.

²⁰² De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 24.

²⁰³ De Lubac, *The Church: Paradox and Mystery*, 5.

“her whole mission [being] to give birth to the new humanity in Christ.”²⁰⁴ This ecclesial vision is quite totalising for society simply *is* the Church in its proper nature. Hence, de Lubac can declare, “the Church is the world, reconciled” and affirm “the world was ‘made for her.’”²⁰⁵ The same intrinsic relation between the Church and humanity is found in *Catholicism*,

In the fullest etymological sense of the word, [the Church] creates beings whom she gathers into a single Whole. Humanity is one, organically one in its divine structure, and it is the mission of the Church to reveal to human beings that pristine unity which they have lost, to restore it and complete it.²⁰⁶

As O’Sullivan notes, the verb ‘reveal’ is significant here for “it is not a question of imposing a unity, of changing humanity into something it never was. It is a question, rather, of holding the mirror up to nature where it can see its pristine unity and have it restored.”²⁰⁷ It highlights for us that de Lubac’s conception of the Church’s mission is sustained by a paradox that echoes, and is bound up with, the relation of Christ and man. In the same way that the grace of Christ is intrinsic to the deepest meaning of man, though is never assimilated to human nature and remains ‘totally other,’ so is the Church integral to the vocation of human society and yet it is not the world. The world possesses no natural perfectibility and it is only the gift of the Church that calls and enables man to attain his supernatural end by incorporation into Christ. Thus, in his address of the Church’s mission the tension of union without confusion is maintained between world and Church, in the same manner as the relation of nature and the supernatural.

²⁰⁴ De Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, 120.

²⁰⁵ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 184, 63.

²⁰⁶ De Lubac, *Catholicism*, 53. De Lubac later observes, “For [the Fathers] . . . in a certain sense the Church was nothing else than the human race itself.” See de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 191.

²⁰⁷ O’Sullivan, *Christ and Creation*, 419.

Most essentially for de Lubac, it is in the Eucharist that the Church is gathered and defined as the sacrament of salvation. The relationship between the sacramental body and ecclesial body is understood within a unity, expressed in de Lubac's famous axiom "the Church makes the Eucharist but the Eucharist also makes the Church."²⁰⁸ In this, de Lubac offered a remedy, drawn from tradition, for the extrinsic tendencies of neoscholasticism which inclined to consider the Eucharist as a supernatural intervention unconnected to the life of the Church.²⁰⁹ The structure of paradox allowed de Lubac to appreciate the simultaneity and indivisibility of one and the other – the Eucharist as the body of Christ which brings about Christ's body, the Church, through its reception. It is this 'reciprocal guarantee' between the two mysteries of Eucharist and Church that forms the core of de Lubac's *Corpus Mysticum* (1944). Here the author demonstrates that prior to the middle of the twelfth century 'mystical body' had referred not to the Church but to the Eucharist, to distinguish it from 'the body born of the Virgin,' while Christ's ecclesial body was understood as the *veritas*, or truth, of the mystical eucharistic body.²¹⁰ However, through a slow inversion, the Church came to be more commonly and recently ascribed as the 'mystical body,' the consequence being that its members could be interpreted as having only an *extrinsic* connection with Christ as its head, rather than forming his body proper.²¹¹ De Lubac's achievement was to reclaim, by keen historical study, the ecclesial body as the 'truth of the body of Christ' and

²⁰⁸ De Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 133. There are echoes of de Lubac's thought in John Paul II's 2003 encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Available at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html, accessed 27 January, 2011.

²⁰⁹ Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 249.

²¹⁰ De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 73, 79.

²¹¹ De Lubac notes that even the first uses of 'mystical body' for the Church had underscored the Eucharistic origin of the Church, "the first theologians to speak of the Church as the *mystical* body of Christ . . . speak of it in a Eucharistic context . . . they mean the *corpus in mysterio*, the body mystically signified and realised by the Eucharist – in other words, the unity of the Christian community that is made real by the 'holy mysteries' in an effective symbol (in the strict sense of the word 'effective')." Italics in the original. See de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 132.

the Eucharist not as an ‘objectified host’ but as the sacrament of ecclesial unity, that which realises the Church through communion with and in Christ. Thus, he retrieves from tradition the interrelation – indeed, the identity – of sacramental and ecclesial communion, and reiterates the paradoxical nature of the Christian mystery in which ‘one becomes many and many become one’ in the Eucharist. Within de Lubac’s ecclesiology, it is the Eucharist that most intensely expresses, makes present, as well as anticipates the coincidence of our common origin and destiny in Christ. As he avers in *Corpus Mysticum*,

. . . [the Eucharist] signifies us to ourselves – *our own mystery, a figure of ourselves* – in what we have already begun to be through baptism (*one baptism*), but above all in what we ought to become: in this sacrament of unity, *is prefigured what we will become in the future.*²¹²

Conclusion

In his introduction to the 1998 edition of *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, Schindler identifies the principal achievement and abiding significance of de Lubac’s thought for contemporary theology – it was his concern “to secure theologically the truth of creation as understood in the Gospel, which requires a non-divine subject that is nonetheless always-already, in the one order of history, invited to participate in the divine trinitarian *communio* revealed in Jesus Christ.”²¹³ De Lubac was able to uphold and bring to light the fullness and unity of the divine plan through his engagement with the model of paradox. Building upon its appearance in the Gospels, the Church Fathers and wider tradition, de Lubac employed paradox as a ‘thought form’ to respond to the extrinsicism that marked the Catholic theology of his time, involving as it did a separation of theology and life which threatened the

²¹² De Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, 66-67. Italics in the original. In *The Splendor of the Church*, de Lubac remarks, “It would be . . . wrong to do no more than talk of a ‘physical’ body of Christ present in the Eucharist and then of another body that is ‘mystical,’ merely linking the two more or less closely . . . Both are the Body of Christ – the same Body . . . the Church herself is simply ‘the fullness of him who fulfills himself wholly in all things.’” See de Lubac, *The Splendor of the Church*, 156-157. For a thorough exposition of de Lubac’s eucharistic ecclesiology, see McPartlan, *The Eucharist Makes the Church*, *passim*.

²¹³ David Schindler, “Introduction to the 1998 edition,” xxvi.

relevance of the Christian fact as such. The ability of de Lubac's paradox to hold distinct realities – nature and supernatural, Christ and man, creation and redemption, the earthly and eternal, world and Church – in an intrinsic unity accounts for the richness and dynamism of his thought which, in turn, supplies significant insights for the present ecclesial-cultural situation.

In the first instance, the fundamental and paradoxical relation between nature and the supernatural, so well elaborated by de Lubac, arises as critical in the contemporary context of growing secularism, a phenomenon to which de Lubac was already attuned in the mid-twentieth century. In *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, he warns,

. . . though the dualist – or, perhaps better, separatist – thesis has finished its course, it may be only just beginning to bear its bitterest fruit . . . While wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, people had in fact exiled it altogether – both from intellectual and from social life – leaving the field free to be taken over by secularism. Today that secularism, following its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They too seek to find a harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead back to him, is pushed so far into the background as to look like disappearing for good.²¹⁴

In essence, de Lubac cautions of any drift toward methodological atheism in Christian theology, that is, a course of thinking that would accommodate a notion akin to 'pure nature' – a domain or sphere of human life and activity that lies *outside* the mystery of the supernatural. It was precisely this separation that de Lubac's paradoxical theology sought to resist and remedy.

Surveying the contemporary theological landscape, Schindler underlines the particular import of de Lubac's methodology in light of the practice of modern apologetics and theological method within the academy. He draws attention to the propensity of apologetics

²¹⁴ De Lubac, *The Mystery of the Supernatural*, xi-xii. De Lubac would later comment, "In the past a theocratic temptation may have threatened; today, on the contrary (but because of a similar confusion . . .), the secularist temptation has come to the fore most strongly." See de Lubac, *A Brief Catechesis*, 110.

to draw on the metaphor of ‘common ground’ in the pluralistic dialogue of non-believers, non-Christians, non-Catholic Christians, and Catholics, as well as the methodical abstractions that recur in the academy, whereby ‘x’ is temporarily ‘bracketed out’ in order to first gain clarity about ‘y.’²¹⁵ While some notion of ‘common ground’ and mental abstractions are necessary for intelligent inquiry, Schindler points out, “the subtle but absolutely crucial point required by de Lubac’s theology is that none of these tendencies can any longer be rightly understood as implying *neutrality* with respect to the truth by God in Jesus Christ.”²¹⁶ That is, de Lubac’s method forewarns practitioners of theology that any ‘withdrawal’ from the order of grace is never innocent of implications in relation to the truth of Christ as the common origin and destiny of man. Any ensuing ‘superaddition’ of the economy of grace in theological reflection would belie the unity of the faith that theology properly serves.

Ultimately, de Lubac’s astute reintegration of nature and the supernatural in their paradoxical, intrinsic unity nourishes, as well as promotes, a broader recovery of what Boersma identifies as a “sacramental ontology” within contemporary Christian thought.²¹⁷ This sensibility, characteristic of the *nouvelle théologie* as a whole, is the conviction “that historical realities of the created order [serve] as divinely ordained, sacramental means leading to eternal divine mysteries.”²¹⁸ As de Lubac evidenced in the nature-supernatural relation, his Christological-anthropology, and the deep sacramental ecclesiology canvassed in this paper, it is the recognition of the convergence and reciprocity of history and grace, time and eternity, finite and infinite, grounded in the Incarnation, that remains key to theology’s fidelity to mystery. In its orientation toward fullness, the model of paradox that governs de Lubac’s thought presents an enduring challenge to any reduction of ecclesiology to

²¹⁵ Schindler, “Introduction to the 1998 edition,” xxix.

²¹⁶ Schindler, “Introduction to the 1998 edition,” xxx. Italics in the original.

²¹⁷ Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, *passim*.

²¹⁸ Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie*, 289.

sociology, theology to anthropology, missiology to pragmatic humanism, as well as to the 'objectification,' or else, privatisation of the Eucharist. De Lubac imbibed from the Gospel and the treasury of tradition that the essential paradox of faith is no less than the mystery of the supernatural, entirely concrete and social in character, penetrating and encompassing the origin and history of man, and opening humanity to the gift of its common fulfilment in union with Christ.

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