

THREE IMPASSES IN CHRISTOLOGY

It is truly a privilege for me to have served as your president this past year and an honor for me to finish my term by addressing you on “Three Impasses in Christology.” My plan is to begin with some reflections on both theoretical and “real life” impasses and to differentiate impasses from stalemates. I next analyze three impasses in Christology. I then review an inadequate way of dealing with theological impasse and along the way note some clues about more adequate hopeful tactics. I conclude with a prescription for a practical way through the impasses – one that is “ever ancient, ever new” and visit three places – associated with each of the three impasses analyzed earlier – for insights on how to overcome impasses in Christology.

Impasses are serious. As we have heard, they are conflicts or problems that cannot be resolved by using normal strategies.

One sort of impasse is intellectual. Philosophers, for example, speak of “essentially contested concepts.” Such concepts are conceptual battlefields. Some are marked by words such as “truth,” “person,” “matter,” “freedom,” or “meaning.” As analysis and arguments do not get us beyond intellectual impasses, some philosophers simply stipulate the sense in which *they* will use the terms. This move does not resolve the impasse by dialectical argument. Rather, it changes the game by allowing only those who accept the stipulated definitions to play and consigning others to other games.

What Thomas S. Kuhn has called a “paradigm shift” in science results from impasses in “normal science.” Paradigm shifts are not theoretical solutions to problems. Paradigm shifts involve fundamental changes in scientific practice and theory. The classic example is that when Newtonian mechanics failed to account for the motion of subatomic particles or light near stars, Newtonian mechanics was accounted as only a “special case” that works only for more medium-sized items. The “special case” strategy is a practical resolution to the impasse, not a purely theoretical one. Only retrospectively can we see if a resolution was a good one.

Beyond impasses there can be stalemates. A stalemate is the result of playing a game to the point that neither side can win. Stalemates in chess, of course, simply mean that a game has resulted in a draw. The players simply go on to another chess match and change their tactics – or take up different games. Stalemates in academic fields are resolved more by attrition than intellection; theories are not refuted, but go out of style.

Academic stalemates may be rather benign, but stalemates in real life can be malignant. The nuclear terror of the policy of “mutual assured destruction,” for example, was not a benign stalemate, but one that scarred a generation. Electoral

stalemates – the Florida presidential vote in 2000 and the Minnesota senatorial election in 2008 – have to be wrenched out of the electoral system into the courts, a tactic that resolves the impasse by external force and sometimes even political shenanigans. Real life stalemates can be quite vicious, even destructive.

Impasses in the real life of the church can become and have become stalemates. Stalemates in the church have splintered the ecclesial community. The Great Western Schism was such a stalemate. The Protestant Reformation was such a stalemate – one that the strategies of the Catholic Reformation did not resolve, but exacerbated. These malignant stalemates destroyed the possibility of ecclesial unity – and will not be overcome as long as the shepherds of one flock demand that separated brethren repent of their errors to be accepted back into their sheepfold.

Sadly, the nexus of impasses currently facing the Church in the U.S. suggests the possibility of a church in stalemate. At least three major ecclesial impasses obtain: a shrinking, and in some places demoralized, presbyterate that cannot be enlarged significantly under present rules; a laity that loves the church but has stopped listening to the bishops,¹ and a hard-working and loyal body of religious women who are disgusted and discouraged by repeated investigations of religious life and attempted reversals of self-governance.

Some bishops have tried to work through these difficult impasses. But others have tried to “change the subject” and ignore these elephants in their living rooms. Some have followed the vigilantes of the political and religious right by making noisy attacks on Catholic institutions of higher education. Some have berated politicians – Catholic or not – whose political strategies differ with theirs.

The practice of changing the subject is really a sleight of hand strategy. It directs attention away from the impasses with which those in impasse cannot or will not deal. It may even be a strategy of denial – one that may be leading us to stalemate because the impasses are not faced squarely and resolved imaginatively. One indicator is the recent Pew survey finds that for every one person who enters the church, four, alas, leave.² As leaving the playing table is the response to stalemate

¹The laity seem to have been disaffected by the bishops’ preaching about sexual morality that is increasingly incredible, by bishops’ abetting or ignoring the sexual abuses by clergy, and by their closing parishes that members support spiritually and financially. The fact that a number of bishops have punished Catholic scholars for supporting the Obama campaign and came out against a candidate whose policies were more in line with their own social teachings than his opponents’ may also be a factor.

²The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, “Leaving Catholicism” says “While the ranks of the unaffiliated have grown the most due to changes in religious affiliation, the Catholic Church has lost the most members in the same process; this is the case even though Catholicism’s retention rate of childhood members (68%) is far greater than the retention rate of the unaffiliated and is comparable with or better than the retention rates of other religious groups. Those who have left Catholicism outnumber those who have joined the Catholic Church by nearly a four-to-one margin. Overall, one-in-ten American adults (10.1%) have left the Catholic Church after having been raised Catholic, while only 2.6%

in chess, so abandoning the Eucharistic table may be the response to stalemate in church.

In theology today, at least some of the serious impasses are Christological. I focus on three impasses: one methodological, one soteriological, and one properly Christological.

The methodological impasse has to do with the starting point of Christology: Does one begin with scripture and tradition or does one begin with the current situation? While many of us would question this dichotomy, it is a prominent one in the current situation. For the complaint of excessive “presentism” is common to the notifications given by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith regarding the works of both Roger Haight, S.J. and Jon Sobrino, S.J.,

The CDF finds Haight’s method of critical correlation defective. It subordinates “the contents of the faith to their plausibility and intelligibility in postmodern culture.” Haight’s work, it is claimed, does not transmit “the immutable sense of the dogmas as understood by the faith of the Church, nor does it clarify them, enriching comprehension.” Rather, Haight’s work is said to be opposed to “the true meaning of the dogmas.” The author “undermines the basis of Christological dogma that, beginning with the New Testament, proclaims that Jesus of Nazareth is the person of the divine Son/Word made human.”³

In passing, I want to note that the New Testament contains many varied christological moments and narratives. One of the patterns can be captured in a sentence: “God made the Son a human” as in John 1. However, the CDF seems to neglect another pattern, that “God made a human God’s Son,” as in Romans 1:4, Acts 2:22-24, 33, 36 and even John 20:31, among other places. Both patterns are clearly discernible in the New Testament, but not in the classic dogmas nor in the CDF’s notification.⁴

The CDF finds that Sobrino’s method gives christology a foundation in the “‘Church of the poor’ ... [a foundation] which properly belongs to the faith of the Church. It is only in this ecclesial faith that all other theological foundations find their correct epistemological setting.” In other words, the CDF identifies Sobrino’s method as fundamentally un-Catholic. As the CDF correctly says, “The ecclesial foundation of Christology ... is found rather in the apostolic faith transmitted through the Church for all generations.”⁵

of adults have become Catholic after having been raised something other than Catholic.” See <<http://pewforum.org/docs/?DocID=411>> (accessed 28 May 2009).

³See the CDF notification as at <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20041213_notification-fr-haight_en.html>(accessed 28 May 2009).

⁴For further discussion of the multiple Christologies in the New Testament, see my *Story Theology* (Wilmington, DE: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1985), chapter seven.

⁵See the CDF Notification as at <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20061126_notification-sobrino_en.html> (accessed 28 May 2009).

In passing, I want to note that the church of the poor is not the foundation of, but rather the setting for, doing christology today for Sobrino. If there is a “preferential option for the poor,” an option valorized by both liberation theologians and the Vatican, then that option has not merely moral, but also epistemic, weight. The church of the poor is not the foundation for theology, but a privileged resource for developing insight into how to live in and live out the tradition today.

The CDF goes on to criticize Sobrino’s way of dealing with the classic conciliar doctrines. It claims that the doctrines were not a mere capitulation to the culture of the times, but that the inculturation of the Christian message transformed Greek philosophical concepts.⁶ Patristic theologians adapted concepts in use in their culture to express the theological concepts of value to the tradition. In doing so, they changed the meaning of the words that expressed those concepts. That is, they used the same words as their contemporaries did, but with different meanings. Isn’t that what Sobrino and others are trying to do today? If it was the right approach to inculturate the gospel message in the fourth and fifth century, why not in the twentieth and twenty-first? As John Paul II put it, “A faith which has not become inculturated is a faith which has not been fully received, which has not been completely thought through, which has not been fully lived.”⁷ Of course, the notifications have much more to say about the problems the CDF finds in these authors’ works. However, the fundamental methodological problem the CDF identifies is a valorizing of the present situation in a way that undermines the correct representation in the present of the concepts used to express the faith in the past.

Here, then, is the methodological impasse: to express the faith in the present we must use terms appropriate to the present while the CDF demands in effect Christology must be represented in the terms used to inculturate the faith in cultures that exist no longer, terms like hypostasis, physis, prosopon, persona, substantia or modern transliterations of them. Adhering to the Greek and Latin terms of late antiquity runs the real risk of distorting the meaning of the faith for people today, yet they are alleged to be the right terms to use. Impasse!

⁶See *ibid.*, paragraph three: “The Church continues to profess the Creed which arose from the Councils of Nicea (AD 325) and Constantinople I (AD 381). The first four Ecumenical Councils are accepted by the great majority of Churches and Ecclesial Communities in both the East and West. If these Councils used the terminology and concepts expressive of the culture of the time, it was not in order to be conformed to it. The Councils do not signify a hellenization of Christianity but rather the contrary. Through the inculturation of the Christian message, Greek culture itself underwent a transformation from within and was able to be used as an instrument for the expression and defense of biblical truth.”

⁷John Paul II, *Letter Instituting the Pontifical Council of Culture*, 20 May 1982 as at <<http://www.ewtn.com/library/papaldoc/jp2inde.htm>> (accessed 24 May 2009).

The second Christological impasse is how to account for God's salvific will being effective beyond the community of the baptized.⁸ No one denies that God can save any person God wants to save – to deny this would be to deny divine omnipotence. The problem is to say how God can save others. There seems to be an impasse between an exclusivist position that claims that salvation is accomplished only for those who believe in the name of Jesus Christ, and a form of the pluralist position that finds that other religious traditions can be effective and graceful paths to salvation. Some pluralists use the modern Kantian split between the noumenal and the phenomenal many to explain religious diversity. The One Beyond the Many, the God beyond all gods, is unknowable in his/her/itself, but appears partially as the gods of the many religious traditions. This form of modern pluralism, however, turns out to be an exclusivism that tends to ignore the particularity and specificity of the various great faith traditions in favor of a “correct” universal philosophical picture. The inclusivist theories, such as the notion of “anonymous Christians” propounded by Karl Rahner, S.J., are supposed to be satisfying mediating positions. However, not only do they fail to resolve the impasse, but also they turn out to be exclusivisms with a happy face.⁹

The real shape of the impasse, however, becomes clear when we consider Judaism. Either Christianity is or is not supersessionist. If it is, then the First Covenant is abrogated, superseded by the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ, and either we should seek to convert Jews, as advocated by the late Avery Cardinal Dulles, S.J., and others, or we should co-opt Judaism by inclusivist tactics and theory that render it an incomplete outpost, ignorant of the salvation wrought in Jesus Christ. If the First Covenant is not superseded, then that covenant is sufficient, the claims for the universal salvific mediation of Jesus Christ are untenable, and, incidentally, the practice of attempting to convert Jews is improper. When we consider the hard case of the tradition of the First Covenant, no position on how God saves avoids the impasse. Much more could be said to develop this point.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the real impasse here is the supersessionist one – not a

⁸Those whose lives are shaped in other profound living faith traditions do not aim at ends (*teloi*) that are even analogous to the Christian *telos* to “know, love, and serve God in this world and be happy with Him forever in the next,” as the Baltimore Catechism put it. Some theologians even find that the forms of life that constitute each of these faith traditions and their visions of human destiny are incommensurable. See Terrence W. Tilley *et al.*, *Religious Diversity and the American Experience: A Theological Approach* (New York: Continuum International, 2007), chapters seven and eight.

⁹This is the view implied in Tilley *et al.*, *Religious Diversity and the American Experience* which not only argues for abandoning the exclusivist-inclusivist-pluralist schematic, but also prefers a non-foundationalist, practical approach to interreligious interaction in terms discussed below.

¹⁰See the remarks of Gavin D’Costa in his review of *The Catholic Church and the Jewish People: Recent Reflections from Rome* edited by Philip A. Cunningham, Norbert J. Hofmann SDB and Joseph Sievers (New York, NY: Fordham University Press, 2007) in

completely novel one, as a reading of St. Paul's letter to the Romans, chapters 9-11, shows.

We cannot account theologically for Judaism without disrespecting that faith-tradition or disrespecting the faith-tradition that finds Jesus Christ both necessary and sufficient for salvation of all people, even for those who know nothing of him or who explicitly reject – for good reasons or weak ones – the Christian tradition. This impasse is especially troubling as we remember the victims of the sad history of Christian anti-Judaism and Gentile anti-semitism. Another impasse!

The third Christological impasse is an ancient one: how could Jesus Christ be both divine and human? The Council of Chalcedon intended its symbol to resolve the messy christological controversies of the Patristic era. They adapted the Tome of Leo to overcome an impasse between Antiochene and Alexandrian approaches in Christology. Since the ground-breaking 1951 essay of Karl Rahner, S.J., "Chalcedon: End or Beginning?" theologians have accepted the Chalcedonian symbol as a timely resolution of the historic Christological impasse, but no longer take it as a timeless archetype to which all theology must conform, but as a prototype for theologians to use as a pattern or to accept in substance, but to clarify (as the CDF permits) for the present.

But Chalcedon's "solution" was hardly a solution. As Gerald Hall, S.M., of Brisbane succinctly put it, "the first half of the fifth century was a most turbulent and unseemly period in Christian history that owed as much to political intrigue as to theological argument. There were rigged Councils, banished bishops, imprisonments, ecclesiastical witch-hunts, and even physical fights resulting, in one case, with the death of a bishop (Flavian, patriarch of Constantinople)."¹¹ What happened after Chalcedon was the political imposition of a dyophysite Christology in some areas. Some of the churches of the East drew away from the Western churches. Some were called "Nestorian" because Nestorius was thought to be non-Chalcedonian, although he finally affirmed Chalcedon. Dyophysite bishops imposed their views, sometimes by force, on communities in Egypt and Syria where many monks were monophysites. The church's unity was splintered. The political response to the impasse was to resort to force or divorce – this impasse became a stalemate.

Theologically, Chalcedon simply restated the problem of how one person could have a personal identity while being both human and divine. The impasse between dyophysites and monophysites was not resolved. The continuing demand that Mary be called "theotokos," not 'merely' "christotokos," cast out so-called "Nestorians" who could have accepted a Chalcedonian Christology –

Modern Theology 25.2 (June 2009): 349-352. This not only "is a debate that has hardly begun" (352), but also one whose resolution requires breaking through the impasse described here.

¹¹See his text on christology as at <<http://dlibrary.acu.edu.au/staffhome/gehall/XTOLOGY6.htm>> (accessed 11 May 2009).

a stalemate only rectified in 1994 with the common Christological statement of John Paul II and Mar Dinkha IV which recognized that the Assyrian Church of the East and the Roman Catholic Church expressed the same faith in different ways.¹²

That the impasse was merely papered over is further indicated by the inability of theologians over the centuries to resolve satisfactorily the impasses of Christ's limited human and unlimited divine will (e.g. evangelical philosopher William Lane Craig in the present)¹³ and Christ's finite human and infinite divine knowledge (e.g. Thomas Aquinas in the past).¹⁴ The problem of how a *person* could have both divine and human *properties* was not resolved. The theological effect of the Chalcedonian strategy of attributing properties to two natures, rather than to the person of Christ, basically left the impasse intact. The practical effect of this strategy was legitimating docetism – a condition that Rahner correctly diagnosed 58 years ago.

The recent CDF notifications mentioned earlier regarding christology may not be docetic. Nonetheless, they appear to support a thoroughly Alexandrian understanding and downgrade the Antiochene concerns in their reading of the Chalcedonian symbol. These notifications also insist that theologians use Chalcedonian terminology or modern words that are transliterations of that terminology. Rather than using the contemporary concepts with clarified and expanded meaning – just what the Fathers did – the CDF's notifications insist on using words whose meanings are substantially different from what they were in the fifth century. Is this is not another instance of a political imposition of dyophysitism rather than a resolution that carries us beyond this christological impasse?

There are a number of tactics that have been tried and found wanting in the attempts to resolve these christological impasses. The key failed tactic, however, is stopping the dialogue, often done by silencing theologians. The notifications and instructions of the CDF can be and are often helpful theologically and pedagogically. They can and do contribute to continuing dialogue. They can and do demand and deserve the attention of other theologians. However, when the CDF resorts to star-chamber tactics and political sanctions – some direct, some indirect – the CDF may recapitulate the vicious politics of the early Church. If and when it does so, the theological impasse remains in place; and when a solution is imposed by force, not argument, one has begun to walk the path that ends in stalemate.

¹²See the text as at <<http://www.cnewa.com/ecc-bodypg-us.aspx?eccpageID=94&IndexView=alpha>> (accessed 11 May 2009).

¹³See the discussion at his website: <<http://www.reasonablefaith.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=6606>> (accessed 24 May 2009).

¹⁴On Aquinas, see Gerald O'Collins, S.J., *Christology: A Biblical, Historical, and Systematic Study of Jesus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 207; also see Thomas G. Weinandy, O.F.M. Cap., *Jesus the Christ* (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor Press, 2003) 88-95 for an attempt to resolve this issue, but I am not convinced that positing Jesus had both a human "I" and a divine "who" does so.

The tactic of stopping the dialogue does not get us beyond impasse. The alternative, more adequate tactic is what my Marianist friends taught me when I taught at the University of Dayton: we are to stay at the table no matter what until we can find a way together around the impasse. This alternative is exemplified in the Lutheran-Roman Catholic joint declaration on justification¹⁵ reached after decades of serious theological labor or the joint declaration of Mar Dinkha IV and John Paul II noted above. Perhaps the fifth century bishops and emperors had to have a quick solution, but perhaps they could not or would not stay at the table.

Moreover, this gives us our first clue to more adequate tactics for resolving impasses. The virtues of hope, constancy, fidelity, tenacity, and solidarity are crucial. The vices of inertia, expediency, marginalizing the other, and changing the subject are deadly. Dare I say that without loving, thoughtful, active patience in solidarity, we can get beyond no impasse, but will be condemned to stalemate?

Stopping the dialogue by silencing theologians does not resolve impasse. You can kill theologians, but you cannot silence them – short of gagging their mouths and tying their hands behind them. Theologians keep writing and keep talking. The *habitus* of their vocation is too strong to be stopped by human authorities. As I said yesterday, you cannot shut us up. The French liberals of the first third of the nineteenth century – Lamennais, Lacordaire, and Montalambert – called for freedom of conscience, the press, and religion in a new political era. They were condemned, but they kept writing and talking and some of their ideas lived on and became – in properly criticized and developed versions – cornerstones of Catholic Social Teaching and Vatican II. The European modernists of the turn of the twentieth century – Loisy, Tyrrell, von Hugel and others – called for serious historical, biblical and theological investigations – and even investigating, *quelle horror*, human experience – to provide tools for uncovering the beauty and truth of the faith in a new intellectual era that valorized human experience. They were condemned, but they kept writing and speaking and their ideas lived on, and became – in properly criticized and developed versions – cornerstones of Vatican II. The *nouvelle* theologie that developed in the middle of the twentieth century in response to new cultural and intellectual conditions was suppressed, but de Lubac, Congar, and others kept speaking and writing, and their ideas lived on and became influential at Vatican II. The American John Courtney Murray, S.J., was silenced, but his ideas became the basis for the Declaration on Religious Freedom of Vatican II only a decade later.¹⁶

¹⁵The declaration can be found at <http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/documents/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_31101999_cath-luth-joint-declaration_en.html> (accessed 28 May 2009).

¹⁶Another theologian silenced was Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. And this silencing was a tragedy. Teilhard's ideas about noogenesis and christogenesis were novel responses to the growing scientific understanding of evolution. They were unusually creative products of a visionary. But the silencing of Teilhard produced an uncritical theological stance, an influential, but fragile, vision untempered by the fire of theological debate. As beautiful

Theologians do not create ideas. They seek to find new language and ideas to faithfully communicate the tradition in eras radically different from the past.¹⁷ Changed historical, cultural and intellectual climates means that repeating the same words from another cultural and intellectual climate – or transliterations of them using words that already have different established meanings in the present climate – not only is a novelty, as Gary Macy pointed out Thursday evening, but also is an imprudent tactic that may miscommunicate the faith.

Stopping the dialogue is an inadequate tactic for resolving impasse. Good theological ideas live despite official authoritarian repression because these ideas capture the old creeds in the new world, using a new idiom for giving voice to new ways in which the old faith can live on in a new context. These are not new ideas, nor creative ideas. Nor are they the ideas of a genius or two. No, if those ideas live, they live because they enable thoughtful people to live in and live out the faith tradition in new contexts.

When traditional formulae meet novel formulae, the path through the dilemma is the ongoing intellectual, ecclesial, and practical engagement until the novel either becomes one of many legitimate expressions of the old creeds or withers away. The guardians of orthodoxy who mobilize the legionnaires of repression do little to resolve theological impasses. Theologians who stubbornly maintain their positions and, in effect, refuse to rethink them – not necessarily to change them – do little to resolve theological impasse.

The way through impasse is to keep hope alive. In theology, we are to engage the intellectual virtues, to develop new imaginative trial solutions, to test them in the fire of mutual criticism until they ring out the faith like a perfectly tuned bell, and to trust the fire of the Spirit which is never extinguished, but which does consume the trivial and trendy while tempering the true. And most of all, we must stay at the table of dialogue until we can hear the Spirit who gets us through the impasse as the impasse moves through and in us. The key is patience with each other.

Where do we learn how to engage in such more adequate tactics? That question takes me to the final, more constructive section of my talk. My prescription for the way through theological impasses is not to construct theological systems

as *Le Milieu Divin* is, as a mature theological proposal, Teilhard's work was a failure. The basic ideas live on in work by Jack Haught, Tom Berry, and others, but had Teilhard's works not been relegated to cyclostyled materials that never got serious critique from other theologians, perhaps his contribution would have been better developed as were the ideas of other theologians mentioned. Silencing theologians does not squelch their ideas, but silencing theologians can stunt the development of ways of communicating the old faith in new contexts.

¹⁷I have sought to lay out the relationships between history and theology as distinctly different professional practices on the one hand and practicing the faith on the other in *History, Theology and Faith: Dissolving the Modern Problematic* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004).

or symbols. Rather the way through them is to engage in faithful practice together, a path we all too often take for granted and leave unexamined. To flesh out this out, I want to visit three places, each associated with the christological impasses surveyed earlier. These brief visits show at least part of what my prescription of faithful practice means.

First, the impasse Chalcedon left was dealt with in the Egyptian desert of the fifth century. William Harmless, S.J., has pointed out that some desert monks were Chalcedonian and others non-Chalcedonian. In working with the late fifth century collection, the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers (Aphrothegmata Patrum)*, Harmless noted the inclusion of sayings from both anti-Chalcedonian monks and Chalcedonians. He also noted its lack of christological reflection in that text despite “the christological noisiness of the monastic world at the time of the editing of the *Aphrothegmata*. . . . Christology was dividing monk against monk. . . . The editor(s) who created the text of the *Aphrothegmata* knew that whereas theology divided monk from monk, *praktikē*, ascetic practice, united them. . . . The *Aphrothegmata*, I would argue, is the work of a peacemaker (or a circle of peacemakers).”¹⁸ While the monks were ideologically at odds on christology, the editors of the sayings realized that monastic practice, the ascetic practices that make a community of practitioners possible, could still knit the ideologically diverse monks into a community. Monks rooted in both the practices of monastic life at Scetis in Egypt and in the christological battles of fifth century Palestine sought “to mark out an ecumenical common ground by consciously seeking to remain silent about christology and by focusing instead on what united monks in their common quest for purity of heart.”¹⁹ My point is this: Where ideology divides, solidarity in shared ascetic practices, especially including shared prayer, unites.

The very sharing of prayer and table fellowship in spite of theological impasse is a reconciling practice. Reconciling practices are the hallmark of the Jesus-movement, past and present.²⁰ Demanding theological conformity in a time of impasse is a divisive practice. Time may work out those theological disagreements, but failure of solidarity, failure to share practices, will destroy the possibility of having an enduring community with the time to live through and work out theological impasses. Failure to share our faithful practices in patience can lead finally to stalemate. Practice, not theory, is the heart of Christian life together; to

¹⁸William Harmless, S.J., “Desert Silence: Why Christology is Missing from the *Aphrothegmata Patrum*,” a paper presented to the Fifteenth International Patristics Conference, Oxford, August 10, 2007: 15. I am grateful to Professor Harmless for a copy of his not yet published paper and for permission to quote from it in *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008) 232-33, from which this paragraph is adapted.

¹⁹Harmless, “Desert Silence,” 18.

²⁰This is the core of the argument in *The Disciples’ Jesus*.

insist on ideological identity – one way, one model, one language, especially in a time of impasse – is destructive and, as I said yesterday, idolatrous.²¹

Second, in terms of the Christological impasse in the theology of religions regarding Judaism, I consider an analogy. The christological impasse in the theology of religions is analogous to the impasse in theodicy. Building theodicies leads to impasse: no theory can satisfactorily explain why God allows evil in the world. The very attempt to build theodicies turns out to be part of the problem, not part of the solution. Nevertheless, logical defenses show that we can reasonably believe two things that seem contradictory: that God is omniscient, omnibenevolent, and omnipotent; and that there is profound evil in the world. We can affirm the reality of God and recognize the reality of evil even though we do not have – and I would say cannot have – a theory to explain why God allows evil in the world.²²

As the way through the theodical impasse is to abandon theodicy and work for healing and reconciliation, so the way through the christological impasse in

²¹“Theologically, I want to remember an insight of our late, great colleague Avery Dulles. S.J. Avery borrowed the concept of ‘model’ from the Anglican theologian Ian T. Ramsey on whom I wrote my doctoral dissertation. One of Ramsey’s books was entitled *Models and Mystery* (London: Oxford University Press, 1964). Ramsey’s and Dulles’s great insight was that when we are confronted with true mystery, we can only properly speak of that mystery in models – models for the mystery of the Church, models for the mystery of revelation, and models for the triune God. . . .

These models are not the mystery. But in order to communicate the mystery, we need models. We may need to adapt the traditional models, to change their language. Indeed, we have done so in a small way in my lifetime. As a boy, I was taught to make the sign of the cross ‘In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost.’ But however literal rendering *heilige Geist* as ‘Holy Ghost’ might be, we have changes the model of God with which we sign ourselves. It is just as well because *the meaning of the word we used in my youth – ghost – changed*. No more in English does ‘ghost’ recall ‘geist.’ Rather, it now recalls Casper the friendly ghost, or the spooks hunted down by ghost-busters. In short, to be faithful to the tradition, to communicate the mystery, and to pray faithfully, we had to change the words, we had to adapt the model, we had to take up a usage rooted in romance languages and abandon our traditional germanic-rooted way of praying the basic Trinitarian prayer of our tradition.

Models are human words blessed to communicate the mystery. Father-Son-Spirit, creator-redeemer-sustainer, mother-lover-friend, Unoriginate One-begotten logos-processed pneuma, three-formed wisdom/sophia – these are all models in human words, none of which can do justice to the mystery of the Trinity, but can be prisms through which the awesome, invisible mystery is refracted in a rainbow of models so we can see the divine beauty. The multiplicity of models is a good thing, for as Ramsey taught us, the way to heresy is to ride one model of God to death and reject all others. Rejecting other models makes an idol of the one.” From my “Reflections of the CTSA President” given at the Annual Eucharist of the CTSA, 8 June 2009 (The Feast of the Holy Trinity), unpublished.

²²This is the thesis of my *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991).

theology of religions is to leave explanation aside and to engage in the practices recommended by the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue in 1991. Dialogue among faith traditions and proclamation of our tradition “are both oriented towards the communication of salvific truth” (*Dialogue and Proclamation* § 3). Dialogue takes four forms. The *dialogue of life* is the very practice of living together supporting each other in a local context of religious diversity. The *dialogue of action* is the practice of collaboration across faith traditions to work for justice and development for all people. The *dialogue of theological exchange* is the practice of scholars seeking to understand more clearly their own heritage and to appreciate others’ heritages as well — and, clearly, we can learn much about our own tradition by listening to and appreciating the testimony and criticism of others. The *dialogue of religious experience* emerges in the practice of sharing spiritual values and practices across traditions, as when Tibetan Buddhist and Western monastics share their traditions and practices (cf. *Dialogue and Proclamation* § 42). Just as we cannot explain the mystery of how God deals with evil, so we cannot explain the mystery of God’s salvific will regarding all the faith traditions. But we can continue the dialogue. We can have hope.

The most effective form of dialogue and proclamation is witness. Our practices, including the practice of believing, are our primary form of witness. The saying attributed to St. Francis of Assisi, “Preach the Gospel always; if necessary, use words,” is relevant here. Yet even if there may be times that explicit proselytizing is counter-productive or productive of impasse, as with proselytizing Jews, witness is always relevant and proper. The practice of dialogue is the kind of witness that is “staying at the table” in co-operation with those who differ from us despite our disagreements with them. This practice is an example of the more adequate practical, not theoretical, approach to the christological impasse in the theology of religions exemplified in the impasse we reach in attempting to account for the enduring value of the First Covenant. We need no explanation of “how God works” and “what God’s plan is” in order to be in dialogue and solidarity with others who differ with us.

And what of the issue of method? The third place we can visit to see an example of this practical approach to resolving impasse is *our own theological practice*. We need to look at what we actually do when we do christological reflection. We must — inevitably — begin where we are. We cannot begin from above. We are not in heaven. We cannot begin in the past. We are here and now. We cannot begin in the future. It is not here yet. We must start when and where we are.

We start as disciples living in a suffering world. We live in a tradition that enabled us to encounter Jesus the Christ. We must begin telling stories, sharing our faith, addressing those within and without the tradition who are suffering. For many of us, we cannot but tell a story that begins in heaven: God made the Word flesh. For many of us, we cannot but tell a story that begins on earth: God made a human, Mary’s child, God’s Son. Both of these narrative patterns — and many others, as noted above — are bequeathed to us by the New Testament.

As disciples, we theologians are called to engage in the reconciling practices that constitute living in and living out *basileia tou theou*. We share the practices

of healing each other's wounds and the wounds of the world; of teaching as Jesus taught; of forgiving those who have sinned against us, of praying together; of sharing table fellowship, and especially the table fellowship of the Eucharist.

However, the key practice for us as theologians *qua* theologians is communication. Unlike the desert monks of the fifth century, we rarely, if ever, communicate through silence. We want to figure out how to shout out the Good News. To do so we must use concepts that make sense to fellow-disciples and others in the present and that are also faithful to – but not mere repetitions or transliterations of – the past. Just as the Council of Nicaea deemed the remarkably novel term *homoousios* the expression most faithful to the tradition, the challenge in the present is to find those terms that fit the present context as *homoousios* fit the fourth century context (despite its use by heretics like the Monarchians and some Arians). We cannot merely repeat late antique concepts in a postmodern world. The world has changed and those ancient words and concepts can no longer express the same meaning as they once did. We need to experiment with multiple models and concepts and may wind up with a host of models for communicating the mystery.

The impasse of how Jesus can be both human and divine was not really resolved by the Chalcedonian symbol. The problem is that contemporary christologies cannot both communicate effectively and use transliterated terms of the past that seem faithfully to represent the truth Chalcedon sought to capture. Repeating those terms does not guarantee that we faithfully communicate the significance of the past doctrinal claims in the present.

The more adequate approach to resolving this impasse begins by realizing that *success in accuracy of representation is dependent on success in the practice of communication, not vice versa*. We literally cannot represent the tradition in the present if we cannot communicate it in the present, in terms that communicate the old creed in a new world. This insight from the philosophy of language of the priority of communicative practice over representation – from Ludwig Wittgenstein and John L. Austin in the Anglophonic world, adapted by Jürgen Habermas in the German-speaking world, and debated among the post-structuralists so influential today – is crucial. That is, if we try to communicate our faith using terms like “nature” when “nature” in the present does not mean what “physis” did in the past, we cannot effectively communicate what “physis” did in the past and so necessarily fail to represent the mystery of Christ accurately and adequately. In short, when our language and culture cannot avoid attributing properties to persons, not to “natures,” a Chalcedonian approach cannot communicate the faith any longer in a way our interlocutors – both Christians and others – can understand. If we cannot communicate the faith well, then we cannot represent the mystery of Jesus the Christ, the truly divine and truly human one. Theology is a practice that begins and ends in communication.

Nevertheless, how can we test contemporary christologies for their fidelity to the tradition? It is a profound mistake to test christologies by their use or non-use of transliterated terminology. I hope I have made that obvious. Rather, we shall know relatively adequate models by their practical fruits. Does our theological

communication help us to be communities of faithful discipleship that remember our past as *past*, that work for justice within the church and the society, that seek reconciliation in a world desperate for healing, that keep at the table of dialogue so as to keep impasse from degenerating into a deadly stalemate? Those are some of the practical tests of effective theological communication.

To communicate the mystery of Christ we use stories and models. As I said, these are not the mystery. Rather, these stories and models communicate the mystery. Neither an incarnational nor an assumptionist story alone will do in Christology. To communicate the truth, we must be prepared to tell many stories and formulate many models in order to be faithful to the mystery of Christ. To use one model alone, as I said yesterday, is tantamount to idolatry.

It is not psychologically or logically impossible to have multiple models or even incommensurable stories to communicate the Mystery. We need many stories of God and humanity to live in and live out our religious tradition. Coping with such multiplicity may not be possible for those who have a dialectical imagination, but can be possible for those who have developed an “analogical imagination.”²³

We must admit, finally, the inadequacy of a single theory to communicate the mystery of Christ. As with the mystery of the Trinity, the mystery of evil, so with the mystery of Christ. We need to work with many models, not a final theory. And just as did the disciples at Emmaus, so disciples today will recognize him in the breaking of the bread; as did the centurion at the foot of the cross, so people today will recognize him in the sacrificial love that makes atonement – at-one-ment – possible; as did the skeptics who doubted his forgiving a paralytic’s sins, so witnesses today will recognize him in the healing of the broken lives of women and men reduced to lying on stretchers and in the exorcising of the demons of distrust, discord, and despair from our lives; and as did the crowds past and present who recognized his authority in teaching that afflicted the comfortable and comforted the afflicted, so too will our interlocutors recognize him when we communicate faithfully in practice what it means to live in and live out the reign of God.

So, more practically, how do we discern the faithful models? By their fruits you will know them. Do they empower us to be the eternal God’s temporal agents in scattering the proud, putting down the mighty from their thrones, exalting the lowly, filling the hungry, and sending the rich away? (cf. Lk 1:51-53). Do they enable us to love our enemies, do good to those who hate us, bless those who curse us, pray for those who abuse us, and do to others as we would wish they would do to us? (cf. Lk. 6:27-31). What do they enable us to do for others, especially the poor, to do to others, especially the poor, and to enable others, especially

²³For an argument that an analogical imagination is central to the Catholic intellectual tradition, see *Inventing Catholic Tradition* 125-34 and the literature cited there.

the poor, to do for themselves? (cf. *Economic Justice for All*, § 24).²⁴ Theology is tested by its performative communication, by how well it empowers communities of disciples to live in and live out God's reign here and now.

To conclude, merely conceptual and political responses to christological impasses are failures. We can imagine the way through the impasses as the impasses work their way through us only if we stay at the table, virtuously engaging in faithful practices of praying together as did the monks of the desert, of dialogue in solidarity with all the peoples, *panta ta ethne* (cf. Matt. 28:19), as Christians are enjoined to do in so many ways today, and by communicating our faith clearly as theologians who serve both the eternal God and God's people here and now. The way through our impasses in Christology is not for theologians to repeat the formulae of the past or transliterations of them, not for authorities to insist on one model for the mystery, nor for theologians to close their ears to criticisms, but for all to work to *communicate* the tradition in the present using many models understandable in the present so that we can, together, by the grace of God, continue to practice the faith despite ideological diversity, and thus to allow these impasses, like all temporalities, to pass.

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²⁴For the text of this 1986 statement of the U.S. Catholic bishops, visit <http://www.osjspm.org/economic_justice_for_all.aspx> (accessed 9 June 2009).