

Kenosis, Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas

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IN ORDER TO GRASP the notion of the kenosis (*exinanitio*) of Christ according to Thomas Aquinas, we propose a study comprised of four parts. The first part looks into the exegesis of Philippians 2:6–8 in Aquinas’s commentary on St. Paul. The second provides some further details, drawn from other works of Aquinas, regarding the *exinanitio* of the Son. The goal of these two first parts is specifying the way in which Aquinas understands kenosis in the context of Philippians 2. They are indispensable for understanding the question of kenosis as it is presented in Aquinas without beginning by projecting upon his work problematics that are foreign to him. A third part offers a brief survey of Trinitarian “processions,” “missions,” and creation, in order to clarify the Thomistic meaning of the *exinanitio*. Lastly, in the fourth part, we present two Trinitarian foundations of the kenosis of the Son that Aquinas develops in reference to Philippians 2.¹

¹ In the references to Aquinas’s works, the numbers (no., nos.) refer to the numbering of the Marietti edition: *Super epistolas S. Pauli lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, 8th rev. ed., 2 vols. (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1953); *Super evangelium S. Ioannis lectura*, ed. Raffaele Cai, 5th rev. edition (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1952); *In librum beati Dionysii de divinis nominibus [In de div. nom.]*, ed. Ceslas Pera (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1950); *Liber de veritate catholicae fidei contra errores infidelium seu Summa contra gentiles [SCG]*, vols. II and III, ed. Ceslas Pera, Pierre Marc and Pietro Caramello (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1961). I used the Leonine edition for all other works, except for: *Scriptum super libros Sententiarum*, vol. I, ed. Pierre Mandonnet (Paris: Lethielleux, 1929); vol. III, ed. Marie-Fabien Moos (Paris: Lethielleux, 1933); *Catena aurea in quatuor evangelia*, ed. Angelico Guarienti, 9th ed., 2 vols., (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1953); *De potentia* and *De unione Verbi incarnati*, in *Quaestiones disputatae*, vol. 2, ed. Pio Bazzi, Mannes Calcaterra, Tito

Aquinas's Commentary on Philippians 2

In the writings of Thomas Aquinas, the notion of “kenosis” (*exinanitio*) is essentially *ethical* and *Christological*. If one considers the context of Philippians 2, the interpretation of Thomas is “moral,” as in most of the Fathers of the Church and medieval authors: St. Paul exhorts Christians to fraternal unity, to the virtue of humility, to respect for others, and to mutual care. Like most of his contemporaries and his patristic sources,² Thomas does not have knowledge of the liturgical origin of Philippians 2:6–11 (he does not know that it is a hymn) and he has not clearly understood the literary unity of verses 6–11. He connects these verses to verse 5, which he interprets as a call to “be humble” and to “hold by experience what was in Christ Jesus.”³ The example of Christ (*exemplum Christi*) includes three moments: first, the majesty of Christ (*Christi maiestas*: Phil 2:6); second, his humility in his Incarnation and his Passion (*eius humilitas*: Phil 2:7–8); third, his exaltation (*exaltatio*: Phil 2:9–11). This ensemble is concluded by an exhortation to do the good according to the example of Christ, and thereby to accomplish the works of salvation (Phil 2:12–18). This final exhortation directly takes up the example of Christ: “Since Christ thus humbled himself and was exalted for it, you ought to realize that if you are humbled, you shall also be exalted.”⁴

Aquinas does not set in opposition (as is sometimes done today in the exegetical literature on Philippians 2:5–11⁵) the Trinitarian and Christological interpretation on the one hand, and the moral or ethical interpretation on the other hand. His general framework is that of the *exemplum* of Christ (moral interpretation) which includes, at its center, the *mysterium* of Christ (Trinitarian and Christological interpretation).⁶ In Thomas's exegesis, the Trinitarian and Christological doctrine of verses 6–11 finds a

S. Centi, et al. (Turin and Rome: Marietti, 1965), 7–276 and 421–35. English translations of Aquinas's Latin texts are taken, with modifications, from dhspriority.org/thomas. Unless otherwise noted, other translations are my own.

² See Gilbert Dahan, “L'exégèse médiévale de Philippiens 2, 5–11,” in *Philippiens 2, 5–11: La kénose du Christ*, ed. Matthieu Arnold, Gilbert Dahan, and Annie Noblesse-Rocher, *Études d'histoire de l'exégèse* 6 (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 75–113, at 77–84. See also Michel-Yves Perrin, “Variations tardo-antiques sur Philippiens 2, 5–11,” in Arnold, Dahan, and Noblesse-Rocher, *Philippiens 2, 5–11*, 41–73, at 45–46.

³ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 52): “Dicit ergo: sitis humiles, ut dixi, ideo *hoc sentite*, id est experimento tenete quod fuit in Christo Iesu.”

⁴ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 3 (no. 75).

⁵ Cf. Perrin, “Variations,” 51–54.

⁶ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 1 (no. 44); lec. 2 (nos. 51 and 56).

place, by a kind of *inclusio*, within a moral exhortation (it is preceded and followed by ethical teaching) whose principal themes are the humility and obedience that should be present in the Christian community.⁷

In his commentary on St. Paul, Thomas identifies the subject of the kenosis as the person of Christ (*Christus*) according to his divinity (*in forma Dei*), that is to say the Son as “true God” (*verus Deus*) according to his “equality” (*aequalitas*) with the Father.⁸ In other places, he designates the subject of the kenosis as the “Word of God” (*Verbum Dei*),⁹ or the “Son of God” (*Filius Dei*),¹⁰ or even simply “God” (*Deus*).¹¹ In accord with St. Cyril of Alexandria, the subject of the kenosis is also designated as the “Only-Begotten” (*Unigenitus*)¹² or the “true Son of God” (*verus Dei Filius*).¹³ In every case, conforming to the tradition of interpretation dominant among the pro-Nicene Fathers, the preexistence of the Son is clearly underlined: “It is said that *he was in the form of God*; therefore, he was in the form of God before taking the form of a servant.”¹⁴

In the exegesis of St. Thomas, the act of kenosis (v. 7: *semetipsum exinanivit*) concerns the “mystery of the Incarnation” (*mysterium incar-*

⁷ One finds a similar interpretation in the exegesis of the similar passage of 2 Corinthians 8:9 (“though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich”). Aquinas places at the forefront the *exemplum* of Christ (*Super II Cor 8*, lec. 2 [no. 294]), which he then develops in two ways (no. 295): first, the *exemplum* properly so-called (moral interpretation); second, the *sacramentum* (the mystery of Christ the Savior). The binary *sacramentum-exemplum* is common in the patristic sources of St. Thomas, especially in St. Augustine and St. Leo the Great; for Augustine, see Albert Verwilghen, *Christologie et spiritualité selon saint Augustin: L’hymne aux Philippiciens*, Théologie historique 72 (Paris: Beauchesne, 1985), 295; for Leo, see Laurent Pidolle, *La christologie historique du pape saint Léon le Grand*, Cogitatio fidei 290 (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 107–108.

⁸ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 54).

⁹ See, for instance, *SCG IV*, ch. 34 (nos. 3715 and 3718).

¹⁰ See, for instance, *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, resp.

¹¹ *SCG IV*, ch. 34 (no. 3721): “legitur quod Deus sit exinanitus, Philipp. 2,7, *Exinanivit semetipsum* [We read in Philippians (2:7) that God has been emptied: ‘he emptied himself’].”

¹² *Catena in Matt 1*, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1:11). St. Cyril of Alexandria, *First Letter to the monks of Egypt*; English translation in John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts* (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 245–61, at 252 (see *PG*, 77:24).

¹³ *Catena in Lucam 14*, lec. 4 (Marietti ed., 2:207).

¹⁴ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 62): “dicitur *cum in forma Dei esset*. Ergo prius in forma Dei erat, quam acciperet formam servi.” Cf. *SCG IV*, ch. 34 (no. 3715): “[Phil 2:6–7] must be understood of the Word of God who was first [*prius*] eternally in the form of God, that is, in the nature of God, and later [*postmodum*] emptied himself, made in the likeness of men.”

nationis), while the humiliation of Christ (v. 8: *humiliavit semetipsum*) relates to the “mystery of his Passion” (*mysterium passionis*).¹⁵ Concerning the kenosis itself, Thomas’s exegesis proceeds in four steps that we may summarize in the following manner: (1) the self-emptying of the Son, (2) the personal identity of the Son who underwent kenosis, (3) the truth of Christ’s humanity and its kenotic conditions, and (4) the heresies to which Aquinas pays a special attention in his theological exegesis of Philippians 2.

“He Emptied Himself”

The principal sources of medieval theologians concerning the *exinanitio* of Christ are St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, Ambrosiaster, and St. Gregory the Great.¹⁶ The exegesis of Thomas is not limited, however, to reprising that of his sources: it offers advances and shows originality on many points. First, Thomas clarifies the meaning of the verb *exinanivit*:

He *emptied himself*. But since he was filled with the divinity, did he empty himself of that? No, because he remained what he was; and what he was not, he assumed. But this must be understood in regard to the assumption of what he had not, and not according to the assumption of what he had. For just as he descended from heaven, not that he ceased to exist in heaven, but because he began to exist in a new way on earth, so he also emptied himself, not by putting off his divine nature, but by assuming a human nature.¹⁷

On the one hand, the divine immutability of the subject of the kenosis is clearly affirmed, in words that literally reprise the exegesis of St. Augustine and St. Leo the Great, in particular the formula “quod erat permansit et quod non erat, assumpsit” (“he remained what he was, and he assumed

¹⁵ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 56). On Phil 2:7 as signifying the “mystery of the Incarnation” (*mysterium incarnationis*), see also *Catena in Marcum* 1, lec. 12: “exinanitionis, idest incarnationis mysterium” (Marietti ed., 1:443); *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 39, a. 6, obj. 2.

¹⁶ See Dahan, “L’exégèse médiévale,” 76–77 and 92–93.

¹⁷ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 57): “Dicit ergo *Sed semetipsum*, etc. Sed quia erat plenus divinitate, numquid ergo evacuavit se divinitate? Non, quia quod erat permansit et quod non erat, assumpsit. Sed hoc est intelligendum secundum assumptionem eius quod non habuit, sed non secundum assumptionem eius quod habuit. Sicut enim descendit de caelo, non quod desineret esse in caelo, sed quia incepit esse novo modo in terris, sic etiam se exinanivit, non deponendo divinam naturam, sed assumendo naturam humanam.”

what he was not”).¹⁸ On the other hand, the kenosis is understood as the assumption of a human nature, that is to say, as the Incarnation. In many other passages, Thomas expressly identifies the *exinanitio* of Philippians 2:6–7 with the hypostatic union¹⁹ or the Incarnation.²⁰ In his commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians, Aquinas understands the *exinanitio* as the “Incarnation”²¹ or the “union in the person.”²² Because the *exinanitio* involves no modification, loss, or diminution of the divinity of the Son, it is necessary therefore to specify in what sense the Incarnation is an *exinanitio*. Here is Thomas’s explanation:

[The Apostle] beautifully says that [Christ] *emptied himself*; for the empty is opposed to the full. For the divine nature is adequately full, because every perfection of goodness is there. But human nature, as well as the soul, is not full, but in potency to fullness, because it was made as a slate not written upon. Therefore, human nature is empty. Hence he says, he *emptied himself*, because he

¹⁸ According to Verwilghen, this is “the most global and most general formula” used by St. Augustine for defining the *forma servi* in the kenosis (*Christologie et spiritualité*, 209). For the use of the same formula by Leo the Great, see Pidolle, *La christologie historique*, 93.

¹⁹ See, for instance, *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 203: “Hanc enim unionem Dei et hominis Apostolus exinanitionem nominat, dicens Phil. II de Filio Dei ‘Qui cum in forma Dei esset, non rapinam arbitratus est esse se equalem Deo, sed semet ipsum exinaniuit formam serui accipiens (This union of God and man [in the Incarnate Son] is called by the Apostle an ‘emptying’; in Philippians 2:6 he says of the Son of God: ‘Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant’)” (Leonine ed., 42:159). The same statement is found in the question *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, resp. (“Apostolus ad Philipp. hanc unionem exinanitionem Filii Dei vocat [In the letter to the Philippians, the Apostle calls this union an emptying of the Son of God]”) and in *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 7 (no. 176, on John 1:14: “Apostolus enim Phil. II unionem Dei et hominis exinanitionem vocat [The Apostle calls the union of God and man an emptying]”). See also *Super Col* 2, lec. 2 (no. 98).

²⁰ See, for instance, *SCG* IV, ch. 27 (no. 3636). Aquinas indicates here *two* biblical passages that bear witness to the revelation of the Incarnation (“Hanc autem Dei incarnationem mirabilem auctoritate divina tradente, confitemur [We confess this marvelous Incarnation of God, which divine authority hands down]”: John 1:14 and Phil 2:6–7).

²¹ *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 62): “Apostolus incarnationem nominat exinanitionem (The Apostle calls the Incarnation an emptying)” (see also no. 56).

²² *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 62): “Ipse semetipsum exinaniuit, ergo est unio in persona (He himself emptied himself: therefore, the union is in the person).”

assumed a human nature.²³

The exegesis of Thomas is completely literal: the verb *exinanire* is understood to the letter as “to become empty.” Therefore, *semetipsum exinanivit* signifies: “he emptied himself.” Aquinas also knows the word *vacuatum* (literally: “made empty”) as an equivalent to *exinanitus*.²⁴ This exegesis is not common among Aquinas’s contemporaries. Its originality consists first in opposing the “emptiness” of the humanity to the “fullness” of the divinity (cf. Col 2:9), and second in understanding this “emptiness” as signifying the potentiality of the soul or the human nature with respect to the acquisition or reception of a perfection or plenitude. Certainly, Aquinas does not reduce human nature to the soul (since human nature consists in the substantial union of the soul and the body), nor does he reduce the soul to the intellect, but he “pulls” human nature somewhat toward the soul, in order to make the most of the Aristotelian doctrine of the *tabula rasa* that he applies to the intellect (and by extension to the soul), and in order to show that the human nature is “empty” as a *tabula rasa*. The expression *tabula rasa* is not very frequent in Aquinas: when Thomas cites Aristotle from *De anima* 3.4.430a1, he omits the adjective *rasa*.²⁵ This expression first relates to the possible intellect. It signifies that, before understanding in actuality, the intellect is in potency in relation to intelligibles “like a tablet on which nothing is written in act, but several [things] can be written on it; and this also happens in the possible intellect, because no intelligible is in it in act, but only in potency.”²⁶ On this basis, we should note

²³ *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 57): “Pulchre autem dicit *exinanivit*. Inane enim opponitur pleno. Natura autem divina satis plena est, quia ibi est omnis bonitatis perfectio. Ex. XXXIII: *Ostendam tibi omne bonum*. Natura autem humana, et anima non est plena, sed in potentia ad plenitudinem; quia est facta quasi tabula rasa. Est ergo natura humana inanis. Dicit ergo *exinanivit*, quia naturam humanam assumpsit.”

²⁴ *Catena in Matt* 1, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1:11).

²⁵ The Latin translation of Aristotle on which Thomas comments in his *In de anima* is the following: “Potencia quodam modo est intelligibilia intellectus, set actu nichil, ante quam intelligat. Oportet autem sic sicut in tabula nichil est actu scriptum, quod quidem accidit in intellectu” (Leonine ed., 45/1:214). This text can be translated as follows: “The intellect is, in a way, potentially all intelligibles; but it is actually nothing [of them] until it understands. What happens in the intellect has to be like [what happens on] a tablet on which nothing is actually written upon. For the sources of Thomas and the parallel places, see the long note by the Leonine editor, Fr. René-Antoine Gauthier (Leonine ed., 45/1:215).

²⁶ *In III de anima*, ch. 3 (Leonine ed., 45/1:215): “Intellectus igitur dicitur pati in quantum est quodam modo in potentia ad intelligibilia, et nichil eorum est actu, ante quam intelligat. Oportet autem sic esse sicut contingit in tabula in qua nichil

that Aquinas often uses the word “intellect” for “soul” by synecdoche (that is, when the name of a part is used to refer to the whole). In the *Summa theologiae* [*ST*], for instance, before showing that the soul’s powers differ from the soul’s essence,²⁷ Aquinas writes that “the human soul . . . is called the intellect or the mind.”²⁸ And even when the soul is distinguished from the possible intellect, we speak of the soul in the light of what we know about its powers.²⁹ In this way, potency applying to the possible intellect is extended to the soul. Further, such attribution of potency to the soul is consistent with Aquinas’s teaching, since the human soul, though being the act of the body (according to Aristotle, the soul is defined as “the first act of a physical organized body having life potentially”³⁰), still remains in potency under two aspects: first, with regard to its operations;³¹ and second, with regard to the act of being (*esse*).³² And therefore, since not only the body but the soul as well is marked by a potency, human nature

est actu scriptum, set plura possunt in ea scribi; et hoc etiam accidit in intellectu possibili, quia nichil intelligibilium est in eo actu, set in potencia tantum (The intellect is called passive insofar as it is, *in a way, in potency* to intelligible [objects], and *nothing* of them is actual [in the intellect] *until it understands*. It is like a tablet on which nothing is yet written, but many [things] can be written. *What happens in the possible intellect has to be like what happens on a tablet on which nothing is actually written upon*, but many [things] can be written on it. And this also *happens in the possible intellect*, because nothing of the intelligibles is in it actually, but only in potency).” See also *ST I*, q. 79, a. 2, resp.; q. 101, a. 1, sc.).

²⁷ *ST I*, q. 77.

²⁸ *ST I*, q. 75, a. 2, resp.: “Relinquitur igitur animam humanam, quae dicitur intellectus vel mens, esse aliquid incorporeum et subsistens.”

²⁹ Cf. *ST I*, q. 77, a. 1, ad 7.

³⁰ See, for instance, *SCG II*, ch. 61 (no. 1397): “Aristoteles . . . definit animam dicens quod est actus primus physici corporis organici potentia vitam habentis.”

³¹ *ST I*, q. 76, a. 4, ad 1: “Aristotle does not say that the soul is the act of a body only, but ‘the act of a physical organized body having life potentially.’ . . . The soul is said to be the ‘act of a body, etc.’ because by the soul it is a body, and is organic, and has life potentially. Yet the first act is said to be in potency to the second act, which is operation [*actus primus dicitur in potentia respectu actus secundi, qui est operatio*]; for such a potency [*talis enim potentia*] ‘does not reject’—that is, does not exclude—the soul.”

³² *ST I*, q. 75, a. 5, ad 4: “Everything participated is compared to the participator as its act [*omne participatum comparatur ad participans ut actus eius*]. But whatever created form be supposed to subsist ‘per se,’ must have existence by participation. . . . Now participated existence is limited by the capacity of the participator; so that God alone, who is his own existence, is pure act and infinite. But in intellectual substances there is composition of actuality and potentiality, not, indeed, of matter and form, but of form and participated existence [*in substantiis vero intellectualibus est compositio ex actu et potentia; non quidem ex materia et forma, sed ex forma et esse participato*].”

clearly appears to be “in potency to fullness,” in such a way that the *tabula rasa* which characterizes the possible intellect is extended to human nature.

So, applied to the Incarnation, this example means that the kenosis of the Son of God concerns not only the *assumption* of a human nature, but also *the human nature itself* that, in itself, is characterized by a state of “emptiness.” And in this manner, the Incarnation understood as the assumption of a human nature can indeed be understood as a “self-emptying.”

The Personal Identity of the Incarnate Son

Aquinas constantly insists, in a notable and oft-repeated manner, on the *personal identity* of the subject and the term of the kenosis. His exegesis is resolutely anti-Nestorian: this is one of its most striking characteristics for us today. Aquinas denies that, in his *exinanitio*, the Son assumed a human person or hypostasis. He perceives an indication of this in the fact that the Pauline text does not say “taking a servant” or “taking a slave” (*servum accipiens*),³³ but “taking the form of a servant” (*formam servi accipiens*). The *forma servi* does not mean a human supposit, but a human *nature*: “human nature is the form of a servant.”³⁴ The kenosis of Philippians 2:7 therefore means: “He took a [human] nature into his own person, so that the Son of God and the son of man would be one in person.”³⁵

In accord with the heresiological tradition transmitted by St. Cyril of Alexandria and the Council of Constantinople II,³⁶ Thomas identifies “Nestorianism” with the doctrine of “two sons” (one is the Son of God and the other is a human son, that is to say: one is the person of the Son and the other is the person of the man Jesus), implying that the Incarnation would be accomplished by an “inhabitation,” by grace, of the hypostasis of the Son in a human hypostasis.³⁷ This is the *principal* error that Thomas seeks

³³ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 58): “Servant [*servus*] is the name of a hypostasis or of a supposit, which was not assumed, but the nature was; for that which is assumed is distinct from the one assuming it. Therefore, the Son of God did not assume a man, because that would lead to understand that [this] man was someone else than the Son of God.”

³⁴ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 58): “natura humana est forma servi.”

³⁵ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 58): “Accipit ergo naturam in persona sua, ut esset idem in persona Filius Dei et filius hominis.” Cf. *ST III*, q. 17, obj. 1, obj. 2, ad 1, and ad 2.

³⁶ The thought of Nestorius himself is more complex: see André de Halleux, “Nestorius: Histoire et doctrine,” *Irénikon* 66 (1993): 38–51 and 163–78.

³⁷ *ST III*, q. 2, a. 6, resp.: “Alia vero fuit haeresis Nestorii et Theodori Mopsuesteni separantium personas. Posuerunt enim aliam esse personam Filii Dei, et filii hominis. Quas dicebant sibi invicem esse unitas, primo quidem, secundum inhabitationem, in quantum scilicet verbum Dei habitavit in illo homine sicut in templo (The other heresy was the one of Nestorius and Theodore of Mopsuestia, who separated

constantly to avoid when he explains the meaning of Philippians 2:7. This point should be noted, because it shows that Aquinas's central concern, in his interpretation of the kenosis, differs notably from our contemporary preoccupations: in many places, when Aquinas refers to Philippians 2:7, he denies that the Incarnation boils down to an "inhabitation by grace." And this is precisely the reason why he judges that the idea of a "kenosis of the Father" or a "kenosis of the Holy Spirit" is "false" (*falsum*)³⁸ or even "absurd" (*absurdum*).³⁹ The Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in the saints by grace, but the Father and the Holy Spirit are not incarnate. Aquinas is very clear: the kenosis is (1) proper to *the Son*, to the exclusion of the Father and the Holy Spirit, and (2) proper to the Son *in his Incarnation*. Moreover, since according to Thomas (who here follows St. Cyril of Alexandria) the "Nestorian" understanding of Christ introduces a separation between

the persons. For they held the person of the Son of God and the person of the Son of man to be different, and said these were mutually united: first, 'by indwelling,' inasmuch as the Word of God dwelt in this man as in a temple.'" On this, see Martin Morard, "Une source de saint Thomas d'Aquin: le deuxième Concile de Constantinople (553)," *Revue des sciences philosophiques et théologiques* 81 (1997): 21–56, at 43. Concerning typical formulae such as *habitavit sicut in templo*, or *sicut et in aliis hominibus*, Morard also notes (at 26) the influence of Pope Vigilius's *Constitutum* I (cf. Denzinger, no. 417).

- ³⁸ *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 62): "Constat autem quod Pater inhabitat et Spiritus Sanctus: ergo et isti sunt exinaniti, quod est falsum (It is clear that the Father indwells [in the saints], and the Holy Spirit [indwells] as well; therefore, they too are emptied: which is false)."
- ³⁹ *Super Rom.* 1, lec. 2 (no. 35): "Nestorius taught that the union of the Word with human nature consisted solely in an indwelling [*inhabitatio*], in the sense that the Son of God dwelt in that man more fully than in others. . . . This is shown to be false [*falsum*] by that fact that the Apostle in Philippians 2[:7] calls this sort of union an emptying of himself [*unionem huiusmodi vocat exinanitionem*]. But since the Father and the Holy Spirit dwell in men [*inhabitant homines*], as the Lord says in John 14[:23]—'We will come to him and make our home with him'—it would follow that they, too, would be emptying themselves [*essent exinaniti*]; which is absurd [*quod est absurdum*]." The same argument is developed at great length in *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 203: "Otherwise the Father and the Holy Spirit would also be emptied [*exinanirentur*], since they too dwell in the rational creature by grace [*creaturam rationalem per gratiam inhabitant*]." See also: *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 7 (no. 176) ("quia sic Pater et Spiritus Sanctus exinanirentur [because then the Father and the Holy Spirit would be emptied]"); *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, resp. ("Inhabitatio gratiae non sufficit ad rationem exinanitionis. Alioquin exinanitio competere non solum Filio, sed etiam Patri et Spiritui Sancto [the indwelling of grace is not enough to account for the notion of 'emptying.' Otherwise emptying would belong not only the Son, but also to the Father and the Holy Spirit]"); *Catena in Matt* 1, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1:11).

the Word and the man, the “Nestorian” view would mean that the subject of the *exinanitio* is not a divine person but, rather the human person of the man Jesus (“it was the man who underwent kenosis”⁴⁰), a position that Aquinas excludes firmly.

All this shows that, in the kenosis of Philippians 2:7, Aquinas understands very precisely the Incarnation of the Son, with an anti-Nestorian accent placed upon the personal identity and unity of the subject of the kenosis: “*He emptied himself: therefore it is the same who ‘was emptied’ and who ‘emptied’ [himself]. And this is the Son, because he himself emptied himself; therefore, the union is in the person.*”⁴¹ This *same* exegesis, with the *same* anti-Nestorian concern, is found in the interpretation of John 1:14, Philippians 2:7, and Colossians 2:9.⁴²

The Truth of Christ’s Humanity, and Its Kenotic Conditions

In his exegesis of Philippians 2:6–8, Thomas underlines the truth of the humanity assumed (the *forma servi*) and its conditions. The truth of the body of Christ and of his human soul is often emphasized,⁴³ as well as the ordinary way he lived as a man among men.⁴⁴ For Aquinas, Christ’s *forma servi* implies not only that, as man, Christ was obedient to his heavenly Father, but also that he was obedient to his parents (during his childhood) and that he was subject to the governing authorities: he lived under the

⁴⁰ *Catena in Matt 1*, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1:11): “The Apostle says in regard to the Only Begotten: ‘Who being in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself: Who is it, then, who is ‘in the form of God’? Or in what manner is he ‘emptied out’? Or how did he descend to humiliation in the ‘form of a slave’? There are some [heretics] who divide the one Lord Jesus Christ into two, that is into a man alongside the Word [*in duo dividentes Christum, idest in hominem et Verbum*]. These people maintain that it was the man who underwent the ‘emptying out’ [*hominem dicunt sustinuisse exinanitionem*], and in this way they separate him from the Word of God.” This is taken from St. Cyril of Alexandria, *First Letter to the monks of Egypt*, in McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 252 (see *PG*, 77:24). This Letter dates from the spring of 429, when St. Cyril had heard of Nestorius’s teaching infiltrating Egypt; it is especially interesting, since it “marks the opening of the Nestorian controversy” (McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria*, 245n1).

⁴¹ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 62): “Item dicit: *Semetipsum exinanivit*, ergo idem est qui exinanitus est, et exinaniens. Sed huiusmodi est Filius Dei, quia ipse semetipsum exinanivit, ergo est unio in persona” (the emphases in the translation are mine).

⁴² See Gilles Emery, *Présence de Dieu et union à Dieu: Création, inhabitation par grâce, incarnation et vision bienheureuse selon saint Thomas d’Aquin* (Paris: Cerf, 2017), 133–40.

⁴³ See, for instance: *ST III*, q. 5, ad 2; q. 14, a. 1, resp.

⁴⁴ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 60); *Super Ioan 2*, lec. 13 (no. 246).

Law (*sub lege*, in reference to Gal 4:4). The *concrete* and *historical* integrity of Christ's humanity is well shown.⁴⁵

On the one hand, Aquinas observes the "conformity of nature" between the man Christ and other men, in reference to Hebrews 2:17 ("Therefore he had to become like his brothers in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God").⁴⁶ This teaching appears again in the preaching of Aquinas:

Christ wanted to be conformed to others. This is why St. Paul [wrote] to the Philippians: "he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men." Christ made himself small by taking our smallness [*Christus se paruum fecit nostram paruitatem accipiendo*]. And so as to show himself really small [*paruum uere*], he was made in the likeness of men.⁴⁷

This conformity calls to mind the theme of Christ as "Head" of the Church, in the measure to which the notion of "Head," applied to Christ, implies a conformity of nature with his members. In his writings prior to the *Summa theologiae*, Thomas emphasizes with great insistence the conformity of nature between Christ the Head and his members.⁴⁸ And in this context, he makes reference to Philippians 2: "In the head is found a conformity of nature [*conformitas naturae*] to the other members; likewise in Christ with respect to other men, as it says in Phil 2[:7]: 'Taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form.'"⁴⁹ This exegesis of Philippians 2:7 reprises that of St. Augustine.⁵⁰ If one follows the progression of Aquinas's works, however, this theme of the "conformity of nature" loses importance in his manner of rendering account of Christ as Head, and this theme finally only occupies a very marginal place in the *Summa theologiae*.⁵¹

⁴⁵ *Super Gal.* 4, lec. 1 (no. 195): "As man, he seemed to differ nothing from a servant. Phil. II: 'He emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being made in the likeness of men, and in habit found as a man.' Furthermore, he was under tutors and governors [*sub tutoribus autem et actoribus*], because he was made under the Law [*sub lege factus erat*] . . . and was also subject to men, as is said in Luke II[:51]: 'He was subject to them.'"

⁴⁶ *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 59).

⁴⁷ Sermon *Puer Iesus* (Leonine ed., 44/1:104).

⁴⁸ See *In III sent.*, d. 13, q. 2, a. 2, qa. 1, resp.; *De veritate*, q. 29, a. 4, sc 2 and resp.; *Super Col* 2, lec. 2 (no. 100); *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 214.

⁴⁹ *Super I Cor* 11, lec. 1 (no. 587).

⁵⁰ See Verwilghen, *Christologie et spiritualité*, 282–84.

⁵¹ In q. 8 of the *tertia pars* of *ST*, the conformity of nature no longer intervenes in a

On the other hand, Thomas applies himself to showing the “conditions” (*conditiones*) of the humanity assumed. This is an important point in Aquinas’s understanding of the kenosis: not only has the Son of God assumed a human nature, but “he assumed all the defects and properties associated with the human species, except sin [*defectus omnes et proprietates continentes speciem, praeter peccatum*]; therefore, St. Paul says, ‘and being found in human form,’ namely, in his external life, because he became hungry as a man, and tired, and so on: ‘One who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning’ (Heb 4:15); ‘Afterward [he] appeared upon earth and lived among men’ (Bar 3:37).”⁵² The *exinanitio* of Christ thus includes all that, in the *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas treats under the rubric of “defects” of the body (*defectus corporis*) and of the soul (*defectus animae*) that Christ voluntarily assumed, that is to say, his corporeal passibility, the innocent passions of his soul, and all that concerns his state of *viator* (*ST III*, qq. 14–15).⁵³

The exegesis of the word *habitus* in Philippians 2:7 (*et habitu inventus ut homo*: “being found in human form”; literally “and in habit found as man”) furnishes the occasion for two clarifications. First, Aquinas denies that the subject of the kenosis (the Son of God) has undergone a change with respect to his form of God. Second, Aquinas denies that the Incarnation has not brought about a change in the human nature assumed by the Son of God: the assumed human nature has indeed undergone a change (*mutatio*) in the sense that, by virtue of the union in the person of the Son, this human nature “was changed for the better [*mutata est in melius*], because it was filled with grace and truth: ‘We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father’ (John 1:14).”⁵⁴

Against Heresies

Before turning to the Passion of Christ (Phil 2:8: *humiliavit semetip-*

significant manner, and it is displaced in the discussion of Christ as Head of the angels (*ST III*, q. 8, a. 4, obj. 1 and ad 1).

⁵² *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 60). Cf. *ST III*, q. 14, a. 1, resp. (with reference to Phil 2:7).

⁵³ See, for instance, *ST III*, q. 14, a. 1, resp. (on the bodily defects assumed by Christ): “It was fitting for the body assumed by the Son of God to be subject to human infirmities and defects [*humanis infirmitatibus et defectibus*].” Here Aquinas mentions three “reasons of fittingness” for this: first, satisfaction for sin, by the assumption of *poenaltates* due for original sin (“death, hunger, thirst, and the like, are the punishment of sin”); second, enhancement of faith in the Incarnation (with reference to Phil 2:7); third, an example of patience “by valiantly bearing up against human passibility and defects.”

⁵⁴ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 61).

sum), the exegesis of Philippians 2:7 on “the mystery of the Incarnation” concludes with a discussion of the errors to which this verse has given rise.⁵⁵ First of all, the interpretation of the word *habitus* in Philippians 2:7 leads Aquinas to exclude the third Christological opinion reported by Peter Lombard in distinction 6 of the third book of the *Sentences*,⁵⁶ namely the “*habitus* theory” of the Incarnation. Thomas summarizes and refutes it thus: according to this opinion, “Christ’s humanity accrues to him as an accident [*accidentaliter*]. This is false, because the supposit of divine nature became a supposit of human nature [*suppositum divinae naturae factum est suppositum humanae naturae*]; therefore, it [the humanity] is united to him [the supposit of divine nature] not as an accident, but substantially [*substantialiter*].”⁵⁷ We find here a summary of his interpretation of Philippians 2:6–7. The Son is united to a humanity in the unity of his divine person (in this context, *substantialiter* means “personally” or “hypostatistically”), of such a kind that the incarnate Son is a single and identical person who subsists in two natures. Philippians 2:6–7 excludes *a fortiori* any form of adoptionism, because a union to God by the habitation of grace would be an “accidental” union.⁵⁸

For Aquinas, the formulations of Philippians 2:6–8 exclude *all* the principal Christological errors. Thus, the correct understanding of the *habitus* and the phrase *cum in forma Dei esset* (which signifies the preexistence of the divine subject of the kenosis) excludes adoptionism (*error Photini*).⁵⁹ The expression *non rapinam arbitratus est esse se aequalem Deo* excludes the error of Arius, which Thomas defines here as the inequality of the Son in relation to the Father (*minor Patre*).⁶⁰ With regard to the phrase *semetipsum exinanivit*, as we have seen, it excludes Nestorianism (*error Nestorii*), since this phrase signifies “union in the person.” In his exegesis of Philippians 2:6–8, it is incontestably to Nestorianism (and to the erroneous theory of the Incarnation as inhabitation by grace) that Aquinas is

⁵⁵ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 62).

⁵⁶ See: *In III sent.*, d. 6, q. 3; *ST III*, q. 2, aa. 5–6.

⁵⁷ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 62).

⁵⁸ On Phil 2:6–7 as excluding adoptionism, see also *SCG IV*, ch. 4 (no. 3369) and ch. 28 (no. 3643).

⁵⁹ See Gilles Emery, “Le photinisme et ses précurseurs chez saint Thomas: Cérinthe, les ébionites, Paul de Samosate et Photin,” *Revue thomiste* 95 (1995): 371–98.

⁶⁰ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 62): it is according to his *forma servi*, that is to say his humanity, that Christ is inferior to the Father (see John 14:28: “the Father is greater than I”), and not according to his form of God; because according to the *forma Dei*, the Son is perfectly equal to the Father (no. 55). See also: *SCG IV*, ch. 8 (no. 3430); *Super Ioan 14*, lec. 8 (no. 1970).

opposed the most often, and with the greatest number of details.⁶¹ In the same way, the words *formam servi accipiens* exclude Monophysitism (*error Eutichetis*).⁶² Lastly, the expressions *in similitudinem hominum factus* and *habitu inventus ut homo* exclude the Gnostic dualism that did not recognize the true humanity of the body of Christ (*error Valentini*: Christ would have taken his body from heaven),⁶³ as well as Apollinarianism (*error Apollinaris*: Christ would not have had an intellectual soul, which is excluded by the words *in similitudinem hominum factus*).

This list may appear “Scholastic,” and it certainly corresponds to a didactic intention.⁶⁴ More profoundly, however, it shows two principal things: first, for Aquinas, Philippians 2:6–7 offers *complete* teaching about the Incarnation; second, Thomas is convinced that the exegesis that he has set forth on the basis of his patristic sources is perfectly sure and safe, to the point that the correct interpretation of these verses of St. Paul permits the theologian to accomplish the twofold task of the sage: not only to make manifest the truth, but also to exclude errors (because the exclusion of errors is part of the manifestation of the truth).⁶⁵

Complements of Doctrinal Exegesis

In order to grasp well Aquinas’s understanding of Philippians 2:6–7, we

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- ⁶¹ Besides the passages mentioned above, see also, concerning Nestorius (and Theodorus of Mopsuestia) with reference to Phil 2:6–8: *SCG* IV, ch. 34 (nos. 3715 and 3718); *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 203; *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, resp.; *Catena in Matt* 1, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 1:11); *Super Ioan* 1, lec. 7 (no. 176); *Super Col* 2, lec. 2 (no. 98).
- ⁶² *Super Phil* 2, lec. 2 (no. 62): “[This excludes] also the error of Eutyches, who said that from the two natures one nature only resulted. Therefore [according to Eutyches] Christ did not take the form of a servant, but a different one, which is contrary to what the Apostle says.” On Phil 2:6–7 as excluding the error of Eutyches, see also *De articulis fidei et Ecclesiae sacramentis* (Leonine ed., 42:251).
- ⁶³ On Phil 2:6–7 as excluding Valentinus’s error about the Incarnation, see also *SCG* IV, ch. 30 (no. 3668).
- ⁶⁴ The list of errors discussed in Aquinas’s commentary on Phil 2:6–7 is also found in his treatise *De articulis fidei et Ecclesiae sacramentis*, in the section on Christ’s humanity (*humanitas Christi*); however, this treatise adds other errors: those of the Manichaeans (distinguished from the Valentinians), of the Monothelites, of Carpocrates, and of Elvidius (Leonine ed., 42:250–51). For Aquinas’s sources on these heresies, see Aquinas, *Traité: Les raisons de la foi, Les articles de la foi et les sacrements de l’Église*, trans. Gilles Emery with introduction and annotation (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 206–8.
- ⁶⁵ In *SCG* I, ch. 1 (no. 7), Aquinas explains that the “twofold office of the wise man” (*duplex sapientis officium*) is “to meditate and speak forth of the divine truth” and “to refute the opposing errors.”

provide here three complements drawn from his other works. First, in numerous places, Thomas is very firm regarding the immutability and inviolable permanence of the divine nature of the Son in his *exinanitio*. In emptying himself, the Son took the form of a slave “without losing his divine nature,”⁶⁶ “not by changing his own nature.”⁶⁷ “He did not lose the fullness of the form of God,”⁶⁸ since “the glorification did not absorb the lesser nature, nor did the assumption lessen the higher.”⁶⁹ As a summary: “He is not said to have ‘emptied himself’ by diminishing his divine nature, but by assuming our deficient nature.”⁷⁰ Aquinas accords great importance to this aspect, so much so that he mentions it, in citing the *Tome to Flavian* of St. Leo the Great, in the opening lines of the *praefatio* of his *Catena aurea*: “That self-emptying (*exinanitio*) whereby the Invisible made himself

⁶⁶ SCG IV, ch. 30 (no. 3668): “formam servi accepit, ita tamen quod divinitatis naturam non perdidit.” See Augustine’s quote in the *Catena in Ioan* 14, lec. 8 (Marietti ed., 2:525): “Ipse ergo Filius Dei aequalis Patri in forma Dei, quia semetipsum exinanivit, non formam Dei amittens, sed formam servi accipiens (The Son of God, being equal to the Father in the form of God, emptied himself, not losing the form of God, but taking that of a servant).” Cf. Augustine, *Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium* 78.1 (*Corpus Christianorum, Series Latina* [CCSL], 36:523).

⁶⁷ SCG IV, ch. 34 (no. 3715): “non mutatione propriae naturae.”

⁶⁸ ST III, q. 5, a. 1, ad 2: “formae Dei plenitudinem non amisit.” Under the name of St. Augustine, Aquinas here quotes Fulgentius of Ruspe, *De fide ad Petrum* 21 (with reference to Phil 2:7); cf. Fulgentius of Ruspe, *Opera*, ed. Jean Fraipont, CCSL 91A:725: “Exinaniens ergo semetipsum, formam serui accepit, ut fieret seruus; sed formae Dei plenitudinem non amisit, in qua semper est aeternus atque incommutabilis Dominus (Emptying himself, he took the form of a slave, so as to become a slave; but he did not lose the fullness of the form of God, in which he is always the eternal and immutable Lord).” See also ST III, q. 57, a. 2, ad 2.

⁶⁹ ST III, q. 5, a. 1, obj. 2: “nec inferiorem naturam consumpsit glorificatio, nec superiorem minuit assumptio” (Aquinas here quotes St. Leo the Great, *Sermon 1 on the Nativity of the Lord*; cf. *Sources chrétiennes* [SCb] 22a:70–71).

⁷⁰ *In de div. nom.* 2, lec. 5 (no. 207): “Communicavit nobis, assumens nostram naturam absque variatione divinae naturae et absque commixtione ipsius et confusione ad humanam naturam, ita quod per exinanitionem ineffabilem, de qua Apostolus loquitur ad Philipp. II, *nihil passus est ad superplenum ipsius*, idest nihil diminutum est de plenitudine suae deitatis: non enim dicitur *exinanitus* per diminutionem deitatis, sed per assumptionem nostrae naturae deficientis (He communicated with us by assuming our nature, without the divine nature being changed, and without confusion of the divine nature and human nature. And so, by the ineffable emptying of which the Apostle speaks in Philippians 2, *he suffered no damage as to his superplenitude*, that is, nothing was subtracted from the plenitude of his divinity. He is not said to have *emptied himself* by diminishing his divine nature, but by assuming our deficient nature).” In this reading, Philippians 2:6–7 is understood as a foundation for the Christological dogma of Chalcedon.

visible, and the Creator and Lord of all things chose to join the ranks of mortals, was an act of mercy [*inclinatio fuit miserationis*], not a failure of his power [*non deservio potestatis*].⁷¹ Unsurprisingly, Philippians 2:6–7 is invoked as biblical teaching supporting the communication of idioms:⁷² “He who is in the form of God is man. Now he who is in the form of God is God. Therefore God is man.”⁷³ Aquinas makes equally clear that the *exinanitio* is a *voluntary* act of the Son who becomes incarnate, just as it is a voluntary act of the Father who sends the Son.⁷⁴

Second, again in many places, Aquinas’s interpretation of Philippians 2:6–7 employs the vocabulary of “divine missions.” This vocabulary is already found in his patristic sources.⁷⁵ In his theological account of the missions of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, Aquinas explains that “the [divine] person who is sent does not begin to exist where he did not previously exist, nor cease to exist where he was,” but this divine person “begins

⁷¹ *Catena aurea, Praefatio* (Marietti ed., 1:5). Regrettably, the *Catena* omits the beginning of St. Leo’s sentence: “He took on the form of a servant without the defilement of sin, thereby enhancing the human and not diminishing the divine [*humana augens, divina non minuens*]”; see *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 78.

⁷² *SCG IV*, ch. 34 (no. 3721).

⁷³ *ST III*, q. 16, a. 1, sc (with explicit reference to Phil 2:6–7).

⁷⁴ *Catena in Marcum* 1, lec. 12 (Marietti ed., 1:443; quoting St. John Chrysostom): “‘That is why I have come’ (Mark 1:38). . . . In these words he manifests the mystery of his ‘emptying himself,’ that is, of his incarnation [*exinanitionis, idest incarnationis mysterium*], and the sovereignty of his divine nature, in that he here asserts that he came willingly into the world. Luke however says ‘To this end was I sent (*missus sum*)’ (Luke 4:43), which indicates the economy [*dispensationem*], and the good will of God the Father concerning the incarnation of the Son.” Cf. *Catena in Lucam* 4, lec. 10 (Marietti ed., 2:71; quoting an unidentified Greek author): “Mark says, ‘to this I came’ [*ad hoc veni*], showing the loftiness of his divine nature [*divinitatis eius celsitudinem*] and his voluntary emptying himself of it [*voluntariam exinanitionem*].”

⁷⁵ See, for instance, *Catena in Lucam* 14, lec. 4 (Marietti ed., 2:207; quoting St. Cyril): “Iste servus qui missus est, ipse Christus est, qui cum esset naturaliter Deus, et verus Dei Filius, exinanivit seipsum formam servi accipiens (That servant who was sent is Christ himself, who being by nature God and the true Son of God, emptied himself, taking the form of a servant).” See also *Catena in Marcum* 1, lec. 12 (see note 74 above), and *Catena in Ioan* 6, lec. 9 (Marietti ed., 2:427, quoting Augustine’s *Tractatus XXVI*, 19 on John’s Gospel): “If we understand the words ‘I live by the Father’ in the sense of those below, ‘My Father is greater than I,’ then it is as if [Christ] said that ‘I live by the Father,’ i.e., I refer my life to him as to a greater life: this was done by my self-emptying, in which he sent me [*exinanitio mea fecit, in qua me misit*].”

to be there in some way in which he was not there hitherto,” so that the divine person’s mission means “a new way of existing in another.”⁷⁶ These expressions and other similar ones (“he did not desert heaven, but he assumed a terrestrial nature in unity of person”⁷⁷) are employed precisely for explaining the meaning of Philippians 2:6–7.⁷⁸ This leads to apprehending Philippians 2:6–7 in the sense of the Incarnation understood as *the “visible mission” of the Son*.

Third, in accord with contexts, Thomas employs other expressions for describing the *exinanitio*. For example, the Arian controversy over John 14:28 (“the Father is greater than I”) leads Aquinas to speak of the *exinanitio* as *minoratio* of the Son: the Son “was lessened (*minoratum*) by assuming the form of a servant, in such a way, however, that he exists as equal to the Father in the divine form, as it is said in Philippians 2.”⁷⁹ In his anti-Arian exegesis, Thomas associates this “lessening” (cf. John 14:28) with Hebrews 2:9: “Nor is it wondrous if . . . the Father is said to be greater than he; since he was made lesser than the angels, as the Apostle says: ‘We see Jesus, who was made a little lesser [*minoratus*] than the angels, for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor.’”⁸⁰ In the same sense, Aquinas explains that, in his kenosis, “the Word of God emptied himself, that is to say, was made small [*parvum factum*], not by the loss of his own greatness, but by the assumption of human smallness [*humana parvitas*].”⁸¹ Or again: “He is said to have emptied himself [*dicitur exinanitus*], not by losing his fullness, but because he took our littleness upon himself

⁷⁶ *ST* I, q. 43, a. 1, resp. and ad 2.

⁷⁷ *ST* III, q. 57, a. 2, ad 2: “Sicut enim dicitur exinanitus, non ex eo quod suam plenitudinem amitteret, sed ex eo quod nostram parvitatem suscipit; ita dicitur descendisse de caelo, non quia caelum deseruerit, sed quia naturam terrenam assumpsit in unitatem personae (For just as he is said to be emptied, not by losing his fullness, but because he took our smallness upon himself, so likewise he is said to have descended from heaven: he did not desert heaven, but he assumed a terrestrial nature in unity of person).”

⁷⁸ See, for instance, *In III sent.*, d. 22, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2: “Dicitur . . . descendisse secundum divinam naturam in quantum se exinanivit formam servi accipiens, Phil. II, et in quantum per novum effectum fuit in terris, secundum quem ibi ante non fuerat (He is said to have descended from heaven . . . according to his divine nature, insofar as he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant (Phil 2:7), and insofar as he was on earth by reason of this new effect, an effect by which he was not on earth before).”

⁷⁹ *SCG* IV, ch. 8 (no. 3430); see also *Super Boetium de Trinitate*, q. 3, a. 4, ad 1.

⁸⁰ *SCG* IV, ch. 8 (no. 3430).

⁸¹ *SCG* IV, ch. 34 (no. 3715).

[*nostram parvitatem suscepit*].⁸² The *exinanitio* understood as the assumption of the “smallness” of our human condition is a constant interpretation of Thomas, which one finds in numerous places.⁸³ “He emptied himself: he made himself small not by putting off greatness, but by taking on smallness.”⁸⁴ In the same vein, Aquinas interprets Philippians 2:6–7 by means of the theme of the *Verbum abbreviatum*:

The Lord, i.e., God the Father, “will execute his brief word” [Rom 9:28: *verbum breviatum faciet Dominus*], i.e., [his] incarnate [Word], because the Son of God emptied himself (*exinanivit semetipsum*), taking the form of a slave. He is called “emptied” (*exinanitum*) or “brief” (*breviatum*), not because anything was subtracted from the fullness or greatness of his divinity, but because he assumed our thinness and smallness [*nostram exilitatem et parvitatem suscepit*].⁸⁵

An illuminating exegesis of Philippians 2:6–7 is found in Aquinas’s explanation of Jesus’s washing of the disciples’ feet in John 13:4. The biblical text reads: “He [Jesus] rose from supper, laid aside his garments, and girded himself with a towel.” St. Thomas offers two “mystical” (*mystice*) interpretations of this action, that is, interpretations that refer to the disclosure of Christ’s own mystery. The first interpretation refers to the Incarnation (the second one deals with Christ’s Passion):

This action tells us three things about Christ. First, he was willing to help the human race, indicated by the fact that he *rose from supper*. For God seems to be sitting down as long as he allows us to be troubled; but when he rescues us from it, he seems to rise, as the Psalm (43:26) says: “Rise up, come to our help.” Secondly, it indicates that he emptied himself [*exinanitio eius*]: not that he abandoned his great dignity, but he hid it by taking on our smallness [*non quidem*

⁸² *ST* III, q. 57, a. 2, ad 2.

⁸³ See also the quote from the Sermon *Puer Iesus* above (at note 47).

⁸⁴ *Super Gal* 4, lec. 2 (no. 203): “Parvum se fecit non dimittendo magnitudinem, sed assumendo parvitatem.”

⁸⁵ *Super Rom* 9, lec. 5 (no. 805). For more on this topic (with special attention to Aquinas’s sources), see Agnès Bastit, “*Sermo compendiatius*. La parole raccourcie (Is. 10, 23 LXX / Rom. 9, 28) dans la tradition chrétienne latine,” in *Nihil veritas erubescit: Mélanges offerts à Paul Mattei par ses élèves, collègues et amis*, ed. Camille Gerzaguet, Jérémy Delmulle, and Clémentine Bernard-Valette (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 389–407.

quod suae dignitatis maiestatem deponeret, sed eam occultaret, parvitatem assumendo): “Truly, thou art a God who hidest thyself” (Isa 45:15). This is shown by the fact that he laid aside his garments: “he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Phil 2:7). Thirdly, the fact that he girded himself with a towel indicates that he took on our mortality [*assumptio nostrae mortalitatis*]: “Taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (Phil 2:7).⁸⁶

This exegesis understands the *action* of the washing of the feet as an explication of the kenosis. It underlines, first, the voluntary nature of the kenosis of Christ: it is by will, freely, that the Son of God emptied himself. Second, the kenosis does not involve any diminution of the divine majesty of Christ, but it signifies the assumption of our human nature. On the one hand, Thomas’s exegesis contrasts the “majesty” of the divinity and the “smallness” of our humanity. On the other hand, Aquinas adds here an important element of exegesis: the divinity of Christ is not lost but it is “veiled” or “hidden” in the Incarnation. In this connection, we note that in his *Catena* on Matthew, Aquinas records Origen’s exegesis explaining that, in his *exinanitio*, Christ exercises a limited power (*virtus . . . modica*) in comparison with the great power (*virtus multa*) that he will exercise at his glorious return at the end of time.⁸⁷ Third, the Son of God has assumed not only a humanity, but also the weaknesses of our condition: Thomas mentions here “mortality” (which one can extend to the *defectus* that the Son has assumed, with the exception of sin). According to this exegesis, Philippians 2 and John 13 reveal the whole mystery of Christ as the incarnate Son of God. The mystery is disclosed and really given within the *dispensatio*.

Trinitarian Processions, Missions, and Creation

We have already observed that, on many occasions (in an anti-adoptionist context and above all in the anti-Nestorian context), Aquinas excludes an

⁸⁶ *Super Ioan* 13, lec. 2 (no. 1746). This exegesis comes from Origen and St. Augustine. See *Catena in Ioan* 13, lec. 1 (Marietti ed., 2:504); Augustine, *Tractatus in Iohannis Evangelium* LV, 7 (CCSL, 36, 466); Origen, *Commentary on John* 32.4.42–53 (*SCh*, 385:204–9). In Origen, the episode of the washing of the feet in John 13 is the “principal image” of the kenosis of the Son; see Vito Limone, “La *kénosi* del Figlio: L’incarnazione di Cristo nel *Commento a Giovanni* di Origene,” *Annales Theologici* 29 (2015): 77–96, at 73–76.

⁸⁷ *Catena in Matt* 24, lec. 8 (Marietti ed., 1:355; for Origen’s text, see *PG*, 13:1677–78).

economic kenosis of the person of the Father and the person of the Holy Spirit. He therefore expressly rejects any economic kenosis of the Trinity. More profoundly still, the Trinitarian doctrine of Aquinas excludes an immanent kenosis (a kenosis of the Trinity in its inner life). Indeed, Thomas apprehends the Trinitarian processions as the eternal communication of the plenitude of the divine nature in the perfect simplicity of God which excludes all mutability, because God is pure Act.

The intra-Trinitarian processions amount to a pure order (*ordo*) of origin that excludes any confusion of divine persons. The “order” signifies that one person is distinguished from another according to origin: the Son is engendered by the Father, the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son.⁸⁸ More precisely, the divine persons are distinguished and constituted by their personal relations, in which the Trinitarian *order* precisely consists. First, with respect to their being (*esse*), these relations do not modify the divine essence, but they include the divine essence: personal relations are really identical with the divine essence, which is numerically one in the three persons. Second, with respect to their formality (*ratio*), the relations do not posit “something” (*aliquid*) but “a reference to someone else” (*ad aliquid, ad aliud*).⁸⁹ Thus, the origins (generation and procession) bring about neither a change nor a diminution of the persons who are the subject of the act of generation and of spiration, and they imply no “distance” or “separation” between the divine persons.⁹⁰

Further, for Aquinas, the divine processions do not imply any “passivity” in the Son who is begotten or in the Holy Spirit who is spirated. *To proceed is an act*. It is by one and the same operation that the Father begets and that the Son is born from all eternity, but this one operation is in the Father and in the Son under *distinct relations*: paternity and filiation.⁹¹ The same teaching applies to the procession of the Holy Spirit: it is by one and

⁸⁸ *De potentia*, q. 10, a. 2, resp.: “It is only the order of the processions, which arises from their origin, that multiplies [processions] in God” (“Et sic solus ordo processionum qui attenditur secundum originem processionis, multiplicat in divinis”).

⁸⁹ *ST I*, qq. 28–30 and q. 40.

⁹⁰ *ST I*, q. 31, a. 2 (no diversity, no separation, no division, no disparity, no discrepancy); q. 33, a. 1, ad 1 (no diversity, no distance); q. 42, a. 5, ad 2 (no distance).

⁹¹ *In I sent.*, d. 20, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1: “Generation signifies relation by way of an operation. . . . And although ‘to beget’ does not belong to the Son, this does not mean that there would be some operation belonging to the Father and not to the Son. Rather, it is by one and the same operation that the Father begets and the Son is born, but this operation is in the Father and in the Son according to two distinct relations.”

the same operation that the Father and the Son spirate the Holy Spirit, and that the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son: however, in the Father and the Son this one operation possesses the relative mode of “spiration,” while in the Holy Spirit it possesses the relative mode of “procession.” Aquinas strictly maintains, as a fundamental rule, that “the only ‘passive’ that we posit among the divine persons is grammatical, according to our mode of signifying; i.e., we speak of the Father *begetting* and of the Son *being begotten*.”⁹²

With regard to the sending (“mission”) of the Son and the Holy Spirit, it involves no distance or separation of the persons who are sent in relation to the persons who send,⁹³ and it excludes all change in the persons sent.⁹⁴ For Aquinas (and this matters for the understanding of Philippians 2:6–7), the mission of the divine person “is not essentially different from the eternal procession, but only adds a reference to a temporal effect.”⁹⁵ All the change implied in the mission is found in the creature and not in the divinity of the person sent. The “newness” (*novitas*) that is found in God’s effects implies no newness in God himself.⁹⁶ This applies not only to creation but also to the Incarnation, and therefore to the kenosis of the Son as understood by St. Thomas: the hypostatic union “is a relation [*relatio*] which is found between the divine and the human nature, inasmuch as they come together in the one person of the Son of God.”⁹⁷ To be more precise: the relation is real in the creature, but it is “of reason” in God “since

⁹² *ST I*, q. 41, a. 1, ad 3: “Non ponuntur ibi passiones [in divinis personis], nisi solum grammaticae loquendo, quantum ad modum significandi; sicut Patri attribuiamus *generare*, et Filio *generari*.”

⁹³ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 1, ad 2.

⁹⁴ *ST I*, q. 43, a. 2, ad 2: the only change is found in the creature to which the divine person is sent.

⁹⁵ *In I Sent.* d. 16, q. 1, a. 1, resp.: “Processio temporalis non est alia quam processio aeterna essentialiter, sed addit aliquem respectum ad effectum temporalem.” The phrase “temporal procession” (*processio temporalis*) refers to the same reality as the mission (*missio*), with a nuance: in the concept of “mission,” the relationship to the created effect is put in the foreground, whereas the phrase “temporal procession” first stresses the relationship to the sender, that is, the coming forth of the person sent (*In I sent.*, d. 15, q. 1, a. 2, resp.). See also *ST I*, q. 43, a. 2, ad 3: “A mission includes the eternal procession, and adds something, namely, a temporal effect” (“*missio* includit processionem aeternam, et aliquid addit, scilicet temporalem effectum”).

⁹⁶ *SCG II*, ch. 35 (no. 1112).

⁹⁷ *ST III*, q. 2, a. 7, resp. As a conclusion, and quite significantly, Aquinas maintains that the hypostatic union is “something created” (*aliquid creatum*).

it does not arise from any change in God.”⁹⁸

Lastly, a final clarification is required with regard to the action of God the Trinity in the world. In creating, God does not withdraw from the world, but rather he is present in the world. *Creatures exist in the measure to which God is present in them*, an intimate presence.⁹⁹ When God acts in the world, (1) he does not withdraw in any way from creatures, but instead communicates to them a participation in his goodness, and (2) he does not lose anything of himself. “God communicates his goodness to creatures so that nothing is subtracted from him” (“Deus sic suam bonitatem creaturis communicat quod nihil ei subtrahitur”).¹⁰⁰ This theological principle is explicitly applied to Christ’s *exinanitio*: nothing was subtracted from the fullness or greatness of his divinity.¹⁰¹

Trinitarian Foundations of the Son’s Exinanitio

In the context of the exegesis of Philippians 2:6–7 (we limit ourselves to this context), Aquinas presents two Trinitarian foundations of the kenosis of the Son. The first foundation consists in the notion of “divine person” in relation to the notion of “nature.” The second foundation resides in the relation between the “form of God” (Phil 2:6) and the personal properties of the Son.

Divine Personality, Nature, and Subsistence

We recall first that, for Aquinas, the assumption of a human nature belongs supremely to the divine person (*propriissime competit personae assumere naturam*), since the act pertains properly to the person (*personae proprie competit agere*) and since it also pertains to the person to be the term

⁹⁸ *ST* III, q. 2, a. 7, resp. Aquinas considers the relations of God and the creature as a pair of relations wherein one is “real” (in the creature) and the other “of reason” (in God); cf. *ST* I, q. 13, a. 7. On this, see Gilles Emery, “Ad aliquid. Relation in the Thought of St. Thomas Aquinas,” in *Theology Needs Philosophy: Acting Against Reason is Contrary to the Nature of God*, ed. Matthew L. Lamb (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2016), 175–201.

⁹⁹ See Emery, *Présence de Dieu*, 62–65 and 94–95.

¹⁰⁰ *SCG* IV, ch. 34 (no. 3715). I have dealt at greater length with this issue in my essay “The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the ‘Suffering of God,’” in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James F. Keating and Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009), 27–76.

¹⁰¹ *Super Rom* 9, lec. 5 (no. 805): “Filius Dei exinanivit semetipsum . . . non quia aliquid subtractum sit plenitudini vel magnitudini divinitatis ipsius (The Son of God emptied himself . . . not because anything was subtracted from the fullness or greatness of his divinity).”

(*terminus*) of the assumption.¹⁰² Admittedly, to be the principle of the assumption can also belong to the divine nature in itself (*natura divina secundum seipsam*), since the action is brought about by the power (*virtus*) pertaining to the nature, “but to be the term of the assumption [*esse terminum assumptionis*] does not belong to the divine nature in itself, since [it belongs to the divine nature] by reason of the person [*ratione personae*] in whom [this nature] is considered.”¹⁰³ This is why “in the primary and most proper sense, it is the person who is said to assume [*primo quidem et propriissime persona dicitur assumere*],” although “in a secondary sense, it can also be said that the nature assumes a nature to its person [*secundario autem potest dici quod etiam natura assumit naturam ad sui personam*].”¹⁰⁴

Now, in his disputed question *De unione Verbi incarnati*, Aquinas formulates the following objection against the doctrine of “the union in the person”: “Nothing that is included in another stretches out to something outside. . . . But the suppositum of any nature is found in that nature, hence it is called a thing of nature. . . . So, since the Word is a suppositum of the divine nature, it is not able to stretch out to another nature so as to be its suppositum, unless one nature is brought about.”¹⁰⁵ This objection is quite clear: the hypostatic union takes place in one nature, and not in a person that would have two natures, because the person does not extend itself beyond its nature. The core of the objection lies in the fact that a person is a person of *this nature*, in a manner similar to the way according to which an individual is included under a species, so that this individual cannot extend beyond this species. Here is Aquinas’s response:

The person of the Word is included under the nature of the Word, nor can it extend itself to something beyond. But the nature of the Word, by reason of its own infinity, includes every finite nature. Thus, when the person of the Word assumes a human nature, it does not extend itself beyond the divine nature, but the greater receives what is beneath it. Hence, it is said in Philippians II [:6–7] that “while” the Son of God “was in the form of God, he emptied

¹⁰² *ST* III, q. 3, a. 1, resp.

¹⁰³ *ST* III, q. 3, a. 2, resp.

¹⁰⁴ *ST* III, q. 3, a. 2, resp.

¹⁰⁵ *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, obj. 14: “Nihil quod comprehenditur sub alio, extendit se ad aliquid extrinsecum. . . . Sed suppositum cuiuslibet naturae comprehenditur sub natura illa, unde et dicitur res naturae. . . . Cum ergo Verbum sit suppositum divinae naturae, non potest se extendere ad aliam naturam ut sit eius suppositum, nisi efficiatur natura una.”

himself.” Not laying aside the greatness of the form of God, but assuming the smallness of human nature.¹⁰⁶

In this answer, Aquinas maintains that the person of the Word cannot “extend itself” *beyond* the divine nature. But this does not imply that the person of the Word cannot assume a created nature. The reason for this statement lies in the *infinity* of the divine nature of the Word. The created nature assumed by the Word does not add anything to the divine nature, since the divine nature cannot receive any addition. The divine nature and the human nature cannot be connumerated, because they are not of the same order. Since God is absolutely simple, he is beyond every genus. God is not part of any genus; rather, he is the principle of all genera, “outside the order of all creatures” of which he is the transcendent cause.¹⁰⁷ And not only is the divine nature outside the order of creatures, but the divine nature or essence also *contains in itself*, in a supereminent mode, all the perfections that are found in creatures: “The divine essence is . . . above every genus, embracing in itself [*comprehendens in se*] the perfections of all genera.”¹⁰⁸ The reference to the Son’s *exinanitio* in Philippians 2 makes it quite clear: because of the infinity of his divine nature, which “includes every finite nature [*comprehendit omnem naturam finitam*],” the person of the Son can assume a “smaller” nature in the unity of his own person. This is not far from Aquinas’s statement that “it is a greater dignity to exist in something nobler than oneself, than to exist by oneself. Hence the human nature of Christ has a greater dignity than ours, from this very fact that in

¹⁰⁶ *De unione Verbi incarnati*, a. 1, ad. 14: “Persona Verbi comprehenditur sub natura Verbi, nec potest se ad aliquid ultra extendere. Sed natura Verbi, ratione suae infinitatis, comprehendit omnem naturam finitam. Et ideo, cum persona Verbi assumit naturam humanam, non se extendit ultra naturam divinam, sed magis accipit quod est infra. Unde dicitur Ad Philipp. II, quod *cum in forma Dei esset Dei Filius, semetipsum exinanivit*; non quidem deponens magnitudinem formae Dei, sed assumens parvitatem humanae naturae.”

¹⁰⁷ *ST I*, q. 3, a. 6, ad 2: “Quamvis Deus non sit primum contentum in genere substantiae, sed primum extra omne genus, respectu totius esse (Although God is not the first [thing] contained in the genus of substance, he is first—outside of every genus—in respect to all being).” *ST I*, q. 4, a. 3, ad 2: “Deus non se habet ad creaturas sicut res diversorum generum, sed sicut id quod est extra omne genus, et principium omnium generum (God is not related to creatures as belonging to a different genus, but as being outside of every genus and as being the principle of all genera).” *ST I*, q. 28, a. 1, ad 3: “Deus est extra ordinem totius creaturae (God is outside the order of all creatures).”

¹⁰⁸ *De potentia*, q. 8, a. 2, ad 1: “Sed essentia divina non est in genere substantiae, sed est supra omne genus, comprehendens in se omnium generum perfectiones.”

us, being existent by itself, it has its own personality, but in Christ it exists in the person of the Word.”¹⁰⁹

The *Summa theologiae* offers a similar teaching. In the question asking “whether it is fitting for a divine person to assume a created nature,” an objection states that “to be incommunicable” belongs to the very notion of “person” (*de ratione personae est quod sit incommunicabilis*),¹¹⁰ so that a divine person cannot assume a created nature, since the person in which a created nature is assumed somehow “communicates” itself to the created nature that is assumed into this person, “just as dignity is communicated to the one that is assumed to a dignity.”¹¹¹ Aquinas’s reply reads as follows:

A divine person is said to be incommunicable inasmuch as it cannot be predicated of several supposita; but nothing prevents several things being predicated of the person. Hence it is not contrary to the notion of “person” to be communicated so as to subsist in several natures. For even in a created person several natures may come together accidentally, as in the person of one man we find quantity and quality. But the characteristic proper to a divine person is that, on account of its infinity, the coming together of natures in it [the person] is wrought not accidentally, but in subsistence.¹¹²

We find here (though without mention of Phil 2:7) the same reference to the divine infinity already seen in the disputed question *De unione Verbi incarnati*. In the *Summa theologiae*, however, infinity is attributed directly to the *person*. The context (the incommunicability of the person) leads Aquinas to formulate this clarification: the person is communicated to the human nature that subsists in this person, in such a way that the person conserves his incommunicability as person, since his subsistence

¹⁰⁹ *ST* III, q. 2, a. 2, ad 2.

¹¹⁰ See *ST* I, q. 29, a. 3, ad 4. In Aquinas’s understanding of the definition of *persona* given by Boethius, the person’s *incommunicability* is signified by the “individual substance.” See also *ST* I, q. 29, a. 4, ad 3.

¹¹¹ *ST* III, q. 3, a. 1, obj. 2.

¹¹² *ST* III, q. 3, a. 1, ad 2: “Persona dicitur incommunicabilis in quantum non potest de pluribus suppositis praedicari. Nihil tamen prohibet plura de persona praedicari. Unde non est contra rationem personae sic communicari ut subsistat in pluribus naturis. Quia etiam in personam creatam possunt plures naturae concurrere accidentaliter, sicut in persona unius hominis invenitur quantitas et qualitas. Hoc autem est proprium divinae personae, propter eius infinitatem, ut fiat in ea concursus naturarum, non quidem accidentaliter, sed secundum subsistentiam.”

is not communicated to another person. In addition to the theme of the “personalization” of the human nature *by* and *in* the person of the Word, and in addition to the exclusion of Nestorianism (an omnipresent problematic), one also finds here what Aquinas explains when he defines the “grace of union,” that is to say, the hypostatic union itself: “The ‘grace of union’ [*gratia unionis*] is the personal being itself [*ipsum esse personale*] that is given gratis from above to the human nature in the person of the Word, and that is the term of the assumption (*terminus assumptionis*).”¹¹³ In this way, “the eternal being of the Son of God, which is the divine nature, becomes the being of man, inasmuch as the human nature is assumed by the Son of God to unity of person.”¹¹⁴

Here I suggest that we should consider Cajetan’s interpretation. In his commentary on *ST* III, q. 2, a. 2, Cajetan recalls several times the following principle as a key to understanding the relation between nature and person in the Incarnation: “Everything that is found in a person, whether it belongs to its nature or not, is united to it in the person.”¹¹⁵ Then, in his commentary on q. 3, a. 1, Cajetan recalls that, in the hypostatic union, nothing is added to God, but God is united to a man so that this man is God: an infinite perfection is added, not to God who is immutable, but to the human nature.¹¹⁶ On this basis, Cajetan focuses on the self-communication of the divine person that takes place by virtue of its infinity, and

¹¹³ *ST* III, q. 6, a. 6, resp. Cf. *Super Rom* 1, lec. 3 (no. 46): Christ’s humanity is united to his divinity “through a union in personal being [*per unionem in esse personali*]: and this is called the grace of union [*gratia unionis*].” See also *Super Ioan* 3, lec. 6 (no. 544): “The grace of union . . . is a certain gratuitous gift that is given to Christ in order that in his human nature he be the true Son of God, not by participation, but by nature, insofar as the human nature of Christ is united to the Son of God in person.”

¹¹⁴ *ST* III, q. 17, a. 2, ad 2: “Illud esse aeternum Filii Dei quod est divina natura, fit esse hominis, in quantum humana natura assumitur a Filio Dei in unitate personae”; cf. *ibid.*, resp.

¹¹⁵ Cajetan, *In III ST*, q. 2, a. 2 (Leonine ed., 11:25–29): “Omne quod inest alicui personae, sive pertineat ad naturam eius sive non, unitur ei in persona.” This principle is formulated by Aquinas himself in *ST* III, q. 2, a. 2, resp.

¹¹⁶ Cajetan, *In III ST*, q. 3, a. 1, no. ii (Leonine ed., 11:54). In a sense, however, something is added to the *notion* of “person”: “Unio naturae humanae in mysterio incarnationis non addit aliquid rationi naturae, sed bene addit aliquid rationi personae, quia addit subsistere in natura humana: et ideo unio facta est, non in natura, sed in persona (The union of the human nature, in the mystery of the Incarnation, does not add anything to the ‘reason’ of nature, but it does add something to the ‘reason’ of person, since it adds [that the person] subsists in the human nature; and therefore, the union did not take place in the nature, but in the person)” (Cajetan, *In III ST*, q. 2, a. 2, no. viii [Leonine ed., 11:27]).

he makes this illuminating distinction: the Word is infinite *radicaliter* by reason of his deity, and he is infinite *formaliter* by reason of his personality (namely, his divine filiation), since divine subsistence (which is infinite) is formally included in the personality of the Word.¹¹⁷ This is perfectly consistent with Aquinas's own teaching. On the one hand, Aquinas identifies the divine person of the Son with his relation (or personal property) of filiation;¹¹⁸ on the other hand, since the Son is a person who subsists by virtue of his relation of filiation, Aquinas also identifies the Son's "personality" with his relation of filiation.¹¹⁹ So, it is because of *the infinity of the personality of the Word*, which formally includes divine subsistence, that the person of the Word can subsist in two natures by "substantifying" the human nature in himself, so that the incarnate Word is a person of human nature.¹²⁰

By his Incarnation, the Word, who is a person of divine nature, becomes

¹¹⁷ Cajetan, *In III ST*, q. 3, a. 1, no. v (Leonine ed., 11:54): "Verbum est infinitum secundum rationem deitatis radicaliter, quia ex deitate quidquid est in Deo infinitatem habet: sed secundum suam personalitatem est formaliter infinitum, quoniam personalitas divina non est constitutiva personae nisi infinitae. Et quemadmodum personalitas Verbi, scilicet filiatio divina, est formaliter subsistens, alioquin non esset constitutiva personae, quae formaliter est subsistens, ita est formaliter infinita: quia subsistentia formaliter inclusa in personalitate Verbi nec est finita (The Word is radically infinite according to the 'reason' of deity because, by virtue of the deity, everything that is in God has infinity; but according to his personality, the Word is formally infinite, because divine personality constitutes an infinite person. And just as the personality of the Word, that is, divine sonship, is formally subsisting—otherwise it would not constitute a person who is formally subsisting—so this personality is formally infinite: because the subsistence that is formally included in the personality of the Word, is not finite)."

¹¹⁸ *ST I*, q. 30, a. 2, ad 1: "Paternitas est persona Patris, filiatio persona Filii, processio persona Spiritus Sancti procedentis (Paternity is the person of the Father, filiation is the person of the Son, procession is the person of the Holy Spirit proceeding)" (cf. q. 32, a. 2, ad 2).

¹¹⁹ *In I sent.*, d. 19, q. 3, a. 2, ad 1: "Filius ex ipsa relatione est persona subsistens; sua enim relatio est sua personalitas (The Son, by virtue of his relation [namely, filiation], is a subsisting person: for his relation is his personality)."

¹²⁰ Cajetan, *In III ST*, q. 3, a. 1, no. v (Leonine ed., 11:55): "Filius Dei, quatenus subsistens, naturam humanam substantificat. Unde patet quod Verbum, secundum illam suae personalitatis rationem qua est subsistens, ac per hoc infinitae subsistentiae, vices humanae personae formaliter et eminenter in mysterio incarnationis supplet: est enim Verbum persona humanae naturae (The Son of God, insofar as he subsists, substantifies the human nature. Therefore, it is clear that the Word, according to the very 'reason' of his personality by virtue of which he is subsisting and is of an infinite subsistence, formally and eminenter fills in for a human person in the mystery of the Incarnation: indeed, the Word is a person of human nature)."

a “person of human nature” (*persona humanae naturae*),¹²¹ without ceasing to be a person of divine nature: this is precisely the center of Aquinas’s understanding of Christ’s *exinanitio*. As a result, the first Trinitarian foundation of Christ’s kenosis lies in the *infinity* of the person of the Word, that is to say, in the infinity of his divine subsistence and personality, by virtue of his personal relation of filiation.

The “Form of God” and the Personal Property of the Son

The second Trinitarian foundation of the *exinanitio* of the Son is found in the theological explanation of the *forma Dei* (Phil 2:6). Most of the Latin Fathers by whom Aquinas is inspired (such as Ambrose, Augustine, and Leo) identify *forma* with *natura*: the “form of God” is the “divine nature.”¹²² This identification (*forma = natura* or *essentia*) appears massively in the medieval theologians (the *Glossa interlinearis*, Peter Lombard, Gilbert of Poitiers, etc.) and in the contemporaries of Aquinas.¹²³ St. Thomas repeats it in many places,¹²⁴ but this is not his only interpretation. In his commentary on the Letter to the Philippians, Aquinas begins by explaining the Latin word *forma* in the sense of *natura rei*. Then he brings forward a first nuance by explaining that, due to the perfect simplicity of God, “the form

¹²¹ Aquinas, *De rationibus fidei*, ch. 6: “Cum igitur Filius Dei, unigenitum scilicet Dei Verbum, per assumptionem habeat humanam naturam, . . . sequitur quod sit suppositum, hypostasis vel persona humanae naturae; et cum habeat ab aeterno divinam naturam, . . . dicitur etiam hypostasis vel persona divinae naturae, secundum tamen quod divina humanis verbis exprimi possunt. Ipsum igitur unigenitum Dei Verbum est hypostasis vel persona duarum naturarum, divinae scilicet et humanae, in duabus naturis subsistens (Since the Son of God, that is, the only-begotten Word of God, has assumed a human nature, . . . it follows that he is a supposit, a hypostasis or person of human nature; and since he has the divine nature from eternity, . . . he is also called a hypostasis or a person of divine nature, insofar, however, as divine things can be expressed by human words. Therefore the only-begotten Word of God is a hypostasis or person of two natures, namely, divine and human, and he subsists in these two natures)” (Leonine ed., 40B:64).

¹²² Pidolle, *La christologie historique*, 91–92.

¹²³ Dahan, “L’exégèse médiévale,” 85–86.

¹²⁴ See, for instance, *SCG IV*, ch. 7 (no. 3413): “Per formam autem Dei non aliud intelligitur quam natura divina (By the ‘form of God,’ nothing else is understood than the divine nature).” See also *ST III*, q. 19, a. 1, resp.: “Dicit Leo Papa, in Epistola ad Flavianum: *agit utraque forma*, scilicet tam natura divina quam humana in Christo, *cum alterius communione, quod proprium est, Verbo scilicet operante quod Verbi est, et carne exequente quod carnis est* (In his *Letter to Flavian*, Pope Leo says: *Both forms*, namely, both the divine nature and the human nature in Christ, *do what is proper to each in communion with the other, that is, the Word performs what belongs to the Word, and the flesh carries out what belongs to flesh*).”

of God” (*forma Dei*) is nothing else than “God himself” (*ipse Deus*).¹²⁵ On this basis, Aquinas introduces a second nuance by asking: “Why does St. Paul say ‘in the form’ [*in forma*] rather than ‘in the nature’ [*in natura*]?” Here is his answer to this question:

Because this belongs to the proper names of the Son [*competit nominibus propriis Filii*] in three ways. For he is called the *Son*, the *Word*, and the *Image*. [1] The Son is the one who is begotten, and the end of begetting is the form. Therefore, to show the perfect Son of God [*perfectus Dei Filius*] he says “in the form,” as having the form of the Father perfectly. [2] Similarly, a word is not perfect unless it leads to the knowledge of a thing’s nature; and so the Word of God is said to be “in the form of God,” because he has the entire nature of the Father [*totam naturam Patris*]. [3] Similarly again, an image is not perfect unless it has the “form” of that of which it is the image: “He reflects the glory of God [*splendor gloriae*] and bears the very stamp of his nature [*figura substantiae eius*; Heb 1:3].”¹²⁶

This Trinitarian interpretation is extremely interesting. Aquinas affirms clearly the perfect consubstantiality of the Son with the Father (their perfect unity of nature), but he is not satisfied with a pure and simple identification or equivalence between “form” and “nature.” Rather, in Philippians 2:6, *forma* refers to the divine nature *inasmuch as it is possessed by the Son*, that is to say, the divine nature *according to the proper mode that it has in the person of the Son*. “Forma” here refers to the divine nature (1) insofar as the Son receives this nature *through his generation from the Father*, (2) insofar as the Father’s nature is perfectly *expressed in the Word of the Father*, and (3) insofar as the Son, *being the perfect Image of the Father, reflects the Father’s glory*. Put otherwise, by associating *forma Dei* with names proper to the Son, Thomas interprets this *forma Dei* in the light of the *personal property of the Son* signified by his three proper names.¹²⁷ Thus, the point of departure of the *exinanitio* is found in the *person of the Son* inasmuch as he possesses the very nature of the Father in his *proper mode*, which is being the Son, Word, and Image of the Father.¹²⁸ We are here very near to

¹²⁵ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 54).

¹²⁶ *Super Phil 2*, lec. 2 (no. 54).

¹²⁷ “Son,” “Word,” and “Image” are the three proper names that Thomas sets forth in his study of the Son in *ST I*, qq. 34–35.

¹²⁸ On the mode of existence (*modus existendi*) proper to each divine person, see: *De potentia*, q. 2, a. 1, ad 13; q. 2, a. 5, ad 5; q. 3, a. 15, ad 17; q. 9, a. 5, ad 23.

explanations that, in his synthetic works, Thomas puts forward to show the *fittingness of the Incarnation of the Son*.¹²⁹

Thus, the Trinitarian foundations of the *exinanitio* of the Son bring us back to the teaching of Aquinas on the assumption of a human nature by the divine person and on the fittingness of the Incarnation of the Son, that is to say, to the teaching of the first questions of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*.

Conclusion

For Aquinas, the *exinanitio* of Christ means that the Son of God assumes, in the unity of his divine person, the “smallness” or “emptiness” of a human nature with all the “defects” (body and soul) that befit his mission of salvation (and therefore that are compatible with his sinlessness). The *exinanitio* applies only to the *Son* (and not to the Father, nor to the Holy Spirit, nor to the Trinity as such), and to the Son *in his Incarnation*. This *exinanitio* does not imply any intra-Trinitarian distance, nor any change of the divine nature of the Son. It corresponds to the manner in which Thomas understands the relationships between the *theologia* and the economy (*dispensatio*).¹³⁰

Aquinas offers an intertextual exegesis of Philippians 2:6–8 that he connects with other biblical texts, in particular John 1:14 and Colossians 2:9. This exegesis pays great attention to the errors that can arise, especially to Monophysitism but also, in a striking manner, to Nestorianism. The Trinitarian dimension is not absent from the theology of Aquinas on the *exinanitio* of the Son. This Trinitarian dimension does not imply change in God the Trinity, or distance between the persons, or modification of the Trinitarian order. Rather, Aquinas renders account of the kenosis of the Son by invoking the *infinity* that the person of the Son possesses in virtue of his divine nature, because this infinity allows one to understand

¹²⁹ See *In III sent.*, d. 1, q. 2, a. 2, resp., where the fittingness (*decentia*) of the Incarnation of the Son (rather than of the Father or of the Holy Spirit) is explained by means of what is *proper to the Son* (*ex propriis ejus, in propriis ipsius*: “He is the Son, the Word, and the Image”) and by means of the essential attributes that are appropriated to him (wisdom, *virtus*, equality, and beauty). See also *SCG IV*, ch. 42 (nos. 3801–803), where the fittingness of the Incarnation of the Son is explained by means of his personal property as Word and Image, and *ST III*, q. 3, a. 8, resp.: “It was most fitting that the person of the Son should become incarnate,” since the person of the Son (*persona Filii*) “is the Word of God.”

¹³⁰ *ST III*, q. 2, a. 6, ad 1: “*in theologia*, idest in deitate personarum, *et in dispensatione*, idest in mysterio incarnationis (*in the theology*, i.e. in the deity of the persons, and *in the dispensation*, i.e. in the mystery of the Incarnation).” See Gilles Emery, “*Theologia* and *Dispensatio*: The Centrality of the Divine Missions in St. Thomas’s Trinitarian Theology,” *The Thomist* 74 (2010): 515–61.

that the Son “has become what he was not, without ceasing to be what he was.”¹³¹ Aquinas also renders account of the kenosis by means of the personal property of the Son, in a manner very close to his arguments of fittingness in favor of the Incarnation of the Son. Thus, for Aquinas, the kenosis of Philippians 2:6–8 offers a complete summation of the doctrine of the Incarnation, a teaching that stands in perfect consonance with the Christology of his synthetic works. N·V

¹³¹ See notes 17 and 18 above.