

Christ, Image of the Father. On the Lasting Importance of the Christology of Thomas Aquinas

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Abstract

This contribution discusses the expression ‘Image of the Father’ as a case in point to Aquinas’s approach of naming Christ: Christology and Trinitarian theology, as well as the discussion of analogical naming *in divinis*, need to be taken together. ‘Image’ and ‘Father’ are predicated differently of Christ and God the Father than of human beings. Moreover, God is ‘Father’ in a different way towards the Son than regarding human beings. Christ is the unique image of the Father: the invisible image of the invisible Father.

Keywords

Thomas Aquinas, Christology, God the Father, Image, Icon

A General Understanding of Aquinas’s Christology

In my view language and logic play a very important role in Aquinas’s approach to Christ. Most people think that Aquinas’s Christology is what he reflects on in the Third part of the *Summa theologiae*. That is wrong, however. It is what he reflects on both in the Third and the First part of the *Summa*. This is a truism, of course, but it may reflect the fact that scholars tend to overlook the importance and relevance of Aquinas’s analysis of analogical language *in divinis* for what he deals with in the Third part as well. All language *in divinis*, according to Aquinas, is either metaphorical or analogical, and always falls short and is inadequate.¹ That goes for nonbiblical and biblical language. Negative theology and negative Christology go hand in glove,

¹ Karl Rahner, in this regard a student of Aquinas, states the same conviction in a powerful way in probably the last lecture that he gave: ‘Experiences of a Catholic Theologian’, in

since it is through the hypostatic union that all naming of Christ falls under metaphorical and analogical God-talk. Metaphorical and analogical use of language falls under the heading of signification. But in Aquinas's Christology not only signification but also supposition are very important, supposition being the language skill that belongs to a proper dealing with the hypostatic union and the being of Christ.² Many years ago I started a discussion on this topic, when publishing my dissertation, and I have the impression that there is still much that waits to be discovered in this area.³ There exists a strong bond between Aquinas's Trinitarian theology and his Christology. One cannot interpret some of the names that are given to Christ solely on the basis of Christology. 'Image of the Father' is a case in point that we will discuss extensively below. One needs Trinitarian theology, in this case, to deepen the meaning, the supposition, if you will, of the word 'image', and by so doing give a sharp interpretation of the whole phrase. Aquinas's Christology is a Trinitarian Christology, despite any appearance to the contrary. The appearance of the contrary is mainly caused by the distinction in the *Summa Theologiae* between the *prima pars*, containing Trinitarian theology, and the *third pars*, containing Christology. Thomists and others, however, need to interpret both in their mutual relation and dependence. When modern theologians, such as David Coffey and Jacques Dupuis, develop their very interesting Trinitarian theology, they do have a medieval precursor.⁴

If one were to ask me, what I have learned most from Aquinas's approach to Christology, I would certainly answer: his understanding of the divinity of Christ. Reading and studying Aquinas's commentary on the gospel of John has had a lasting impact on me. Aquinas stands out from the others, also his peers, in considering the gospel of John as basically a witness of the divinity of the Word.⁵ The Dutch reformed theologian, Harry Kuitert, once said that in former days the problem in theology was how God could reach for human beings, whereas in modernity it is the other way around: how can human beings reach God. Applied to Christology this would mean that in former days it was Christ's human nature, which was the problem and

Declan Marmion and Mary E. Hines, *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner* (Cambridge University Press 2006) pp. 297-310, here pp. 298-301.

² Roughly speaking, signification is similar to connotation, whereas supposition is to denotation. Connotation regards the conceptual content of a given term, whereas denotation indicates what a term stands for and is therefore directly related to the analysis of a sentence.

³ *Christ the 'Name' of God. Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ* (Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, Vol. I, Louvain: Peeters Publishers, 1993).

⁴ See Anne Hunt, *Trinity. Nexus of the Mysteries of Christian Faith* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2005), pp. 70-76.

⁵ This is one of the central theses of Stefan Mangnus, *Thomas Aquinas Dividing and Reading the Gospel of John* (Publications of the Thomas Instituut te Utrecht, vol. XX, Louvain: Peeters Publishers 2022).

the focus of reflection, whereas in modernity it is his divinity. And so most modern Christology would now acknowledge an approach from above but would favor an approach from below. Aquinas cannot easily be put away in this either/or concerning from above or below; as Bernard Lonergan once wrote, Christology is not a one-way traffic affair. But I would certainly agree that the mystery of Christ according to Aquinas is primarily the mystery of the incarnation.⁶ This is the subject of the questions with which Aquinas begins the third part of the *Summa Theologiae*. Over the years I have grown into the habit of interpreting this third part according to the distinction between the first 26 questions and the rest, up until the point at which the discussion of the sacraments begins. The mysteries of the life and passion of Christ are addressed in the second part of Aquinas's treatment *De Deo Salvatore*. So much attention given to the things that happened during Christ's ministry up until his resurrection is largely new in his days. If one were to doubt the biblical nature of Aquinas's theology, a quick look at this part of the *Tertia Pars* would suffice to convince one of the opposite. Probably the biggest problem here is with the type of approach that Aquinas uses, which centers around the method of arguing from fittingness, *convenientia*. What could be the meaning which explains the ways of Jesus Christ? There is no history here, as we understand it, nor philosophy. It is reasoning based on the idea of an ongoing history of salvation which is ordered by God and therefore ordered perfectly. The task of the theologian is to discover this divine order. The first part of the treatment *De Deo Salvatore* is largely not so much of a salvation historical nature, but more fundamental, metaphysical if you will. It concerns the metaphysics of the hypostatic union, the grace of Christ, his knowledge and his being, as well as the metaphysics of what can and cannot be said about Christ incarnate. One thing applies to this treatment, other than some would allow for: it does not provide us with a biography of Christ; it does not provide us with a picture of who he was and what he did. It does provide us with a set of rules, if you want, how one should read Scripture, a reading that Aquinas proposes in the second part of his treatment. The most fundamental of rules that Aquinas implicitly formulates, when translated into our present context would be this: whenever you hear about Christ in the Gospels, be aware that you are not dealing with a mere human being. For instance, when you hear about Christ being crucified, be aware that you are not dealing with a mere human being. Whether (any)one speaks of abandoning or of delivering or of allowing suffering, it is always also the case that God allows God to suffer, delivers God to death, abandons God. God is not absent on the cross, he is there personally. It is the only way

⁶ 'Christology today: Methodological reflections', F. Crowe, *A Third Collection*. Papers by Bernard J.F. Lonergan SJ (London, 1985), pp. 74-100.

in which we can avoid understanding God to be a cruel God, which would force us to a Gnostic understanding of God and human beings. One may not understand how actually God is involved on the cross, but one cannot allow that he is not. That would be Aquinas's message in our days, I would say. It all has to do with a typical Christian understanding of the relationship between Divine transcendence and Divine immanence; they are not opposed as black and white; they have to be thought of as united: both unconfused and unchanged, as well as undivided and unseparated. It is against the background of this reading of Aquinas that I will propose an analysis of the expression 'Christ, Image of the Father'. This expression will serve to illustrate the general understanding just formulated. Having introduced the three elements of this expression, I will offer an analysis of each one of them.⁷

Introducing 'Christ, Image of the Father'

When one reads the phrase 'Christ, image of the Father', one's attention may be drawn to either part of this expression. One may notice that 'Christ' is being spoken of, and not 'Jesus' or 'Jesus Christ' (or even 'The Son of God' or 'The Word of God'). One may feel made to think about the expression 'image', and wonder, for example, what the meaning of that word might be here. How literally can you take 'image' for example, and how does the expression change if you were to replace it with the Greek variant 'icon'? Or, finally, perhaps one's attention turns primarily to the name 'Father', and one notices that it has a definite article in front of it, putting all other fathers at a distance. In my contribution, I will discuss all three parts of the phrase 'Christ, image of the Father'. But I will begin by telling what draws my attention. That is for several reasons the name 'Father'. First, it is the hesitation if not the distaste among many female theologians regarding this name of God. If God is male, Mary Daly famously said, then the male is God. To that one can really only, but convincingly, object that God's fatherhood does not necessarily imply masculinity, rather the opposite. But then one is undertaking already the necessary but not very commonly performed task of purging language about God. The combination with 'almightiness', which the creed has ('I believe in God the Father Almighty') is then problematic as well, even if it is rightly said that 'Al' is to be understood as a denial that God is powerful exactly as human beings are powerful. The word 'father' is a metaphor that in its application to God must be stripped of patriarchal and other undesirable conceptual elements, such as gender. Secondly, there is another not insignificant discomfort in determining the content of this term.

⁷ A first version of this analysis appeared in Dutch in *Internationaal Katholiek Tijdschrift Communio*, 47.1 (2022) pp. 2-12: 'Christus, Beeld van de Vader. Een analytische benadering'.

After all, in what respect are we referring to God, when we speak of God the Father? Are we speaking of the Father of the only begotten Son, or are we speaking of the Father of all people who are children of God? After all, if Christ as Son of God is the only begotten one, as the Evangelist John writes, then Fatherhood and Sonship indicate unique relationships, which are not simply transferable to others. People are sons and daughters of God in a different way than Jesus. To put it another way, under which respect are we praying to God, when we pray 'Our Father'? To God as the Father of Jesus or to God as the Father of all people? And on top of that, Jesus is both Son of God in eternity, and in time; or to put it another way, Jesus is Son of God both according to his divine nature, and according to his human nature, and while there is a definite similarity between both, it is still not the same sonship. If this is true for the Son, it is therefore also true for the Father, and thus in relation to the Son alone there is a double Fatherhood of God. Finally, there is also a third reason why my attention is drawn to 'Father'. I learned my Trinitarian theology from Thomas Aquinas, who, after Augustine, has been largely influential in thinking about the Triune God in the Western theological tradition. That Western church tradition is known for taking its starting point not in the distinctness of the divine persons, but in their unity, their divinity. For the Eastern tradition, the Father as source, as 'monarch' is the starting point for thinking about the Triune God, but in the West, this is not the case. For Thomas, for example, Father and Son are the same in everything except their so-called relations of origin: the Father brings forth the Son, the Son is born of the Father. That is the only difference between Father and Son. Even though at first glance the Gospel seems to assume something else - where, after all, there is constant dialogue between Jesus and the Father - this is what is considered in the West to be the consequence of the statement in the Creed that the Son is one in being with the Father. In other words, theologically it is then not so interesting to elaborate on God's Fatherhood, if it leads anyway only to a personal difference and not to substantial differences. On top of that, the numerous times God is called 'Father' in the New Testament are mostly not descriptive in nature at all, but purely indicative. It has the qualities of a proper name rather than being used because of a particular conceptual content. Thus, the expression 'Christ, the image of the Father' provides us with food for thought, especially because of the fatherhood expressed.

Jesus - Christ

I hardly make a distinction between 'Jesus' and 'Christ' in my speaking and writing. This is not because I do not know that many prefer to speak of 'Jesus' when referring to the historical Jesus and of 'Christ' when referring to the risen Lord or the Christ of faith. The problem, however, is

that the term ‘historical Jesus’, as well as its abbreviation ‘Jesus’, is an ambiguous one, because it can stand for what we know with historical certainty about Jesus or for the earthly Jesus about whom Scripture and Tradition speak. History and faith can thus be placed in opposition to each other, whereas the challenge for theology is precisely to think both together. Moreover, for me Christ is not another than Jesus. This will come as no surprise to many. But wait, there are theologians, and not just in modern times, who are thinking about whether Christ is not greater than Jesus. In the context of interreligious dialogue, for example, it is necessary to consider whether Christ can be known and is at work, albeit in a hidden way, in other religions. Not Jesus, but Christ. Others point out that the revelation of God that is Jesus can never mediate God wholly, as God is; God is greater than any mediation, and so is the Son of God. In other words, the created categories of being and language can never adequately express the uncreated reality of God. God cannot be captured in created reality. In Protestantism, this conviction has received the designation ‘*extra Calvinisticum*’: there is more (‘extra’) to God than Jesus can reveal.⁸ While the Magisterium of the Catholic Church has clearly stated that there can be no separation between Jesus and Christ (*Redemptoris Missio* 6), it also cannot deny that God is not limited by created reality; Christ or the eternal Word of God is not exhausted by the revelation Jesus is, so to speak.

This reflection can help us discern various questions that the first word of ‘Christ, Image of the Father’, namely Christ, raises. Who do we have in mind: Jesus according to the historians, the earthly Jesus, or the risen Lord? Historically speaking, there are at least two interesting things to note. First, the fact that Jesus called God ‘abba’. This has received much attention from historians and theologians and is leading to interesting insights. ‘Abba’ is Aramaic and Hebrew and is best translated not by ‘daddy’ but by ‘Father’. It presupposes a certain closeness and familiarity, yes ordinariness that contrasts with, say, ‘Lord’ or ‘God’. In the New Testament Jesus calls God literally ‘abba’ only once (Mk. 14, 36, cf. Ro. 8, 15 and Ga. 4, 6), and we cannot know whether the other times Jesus calls God father in Greek are a translation of ‘abba’ or not. However, and this is the second interesting point to mention, since the choice of words of Jesus, unlike in previous Judaism, ‘Father’ has become a central word for God. All the time Jesus addresses God, he does so with ‘Father’ (to which the words on the cross are the only exception). After Jesus, God is called Father. Jesus established the image of God as Father, at least as a title of address. The ‘Our Father’ bears witness to this as well. At the same time, it is the only time the earthly Jesus speaks of ‘our Father’ in the Gospels; all other times there is a sharp distinction between my Father and your

⁸ See the study of James R. Gordon, *The Holy One in Our Midst. An Essay on the Flesh of Christ* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press 2016).

Father. The Scriptures put the reader on notice of whether there is then a difference between Jesus' relationship with the Father and the believers' relationship with God the Father, and especially where that difference lies. Consider, for example, the risen Lord meeting Mary Magdalene: 'Don't hold me', Jesus said. 'I have not yet ascended to the Father. Go to my brothers and sisters and tell them that I am ascending to my Father, who is also your Father, to my God, who is also your God' (Jn. 20, 17). The same Father, and yet different. We will come back to this later, when it comes to the Father. For the Son, this means above all that he expresses the Father in a perfect way. After all, in everything the Son is equal to the Father. The Son is pre-eminently able to reveal the Father. He is the very image of the Father. This idea is not only religiously and theologically plausible, as a glance at John's Gospel can make clear, but also historically. In the life, preaching, and actions of Jesus there are elements that indicate that in him we are dealing with more than a prophet, more than a teacher. According to historians, Jesus does not say much about himself, but his actions are significant. Most importantly, he forgives sins at various times, whereas in the tradition in which he stands, the forgiveness of sins is reserved for God. This indicates a hidden claim. The way Jesus handles the Tanach is also significant, for in the Sermon on the Mount, for example, it is clear that he not only interprets the Tanach authoritatively, but even goes beyond it: Moses said to you, but I say to you! Jesus teaches in his own name, not invoking 'Word of the Lord' like a prophet. Jesus is also said to eat meals with sinners and tax collectors, giving his action an eschatological, an end-time character: it anticipates the restoration of exclusion and righteous judgment reserved for God. Also important in this regard is the way Jesus interacts with his disciples. It is not that Jesus, like a rabbi, has interpretive conversations of the Jewish law with them. On the contrary, their vocation is a mission, a mission to proclaim the Kingdom of God in word and deed. And that Kingdom depends on each one's own yes or no to Jesus; for or against is life or death. Moreover, the disciples' calling is less an invitation or an offer than a kind of word of creation: it expresses an unprecedented form of authority.⁹ This authority also manifests itself in his free handling of the rules for the Sabbath and especially in his attitude toward the temple. Historians, such as John Meier, are inclined to evaluate the story of the cleansing of the temple in combination with the accusation against Jesus that he would have threatened to destroy the temple as historically plausible. It may well have been the main reason for Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion. If so, it would also fit into what Walter Kasper calls his two-phase Christology, and what Thomas Rausch

⁹ Most of what was just mentioned can be found in Walter Kasper, *Jesus der Christus* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag 1974).

calls a dialectical Christology: a Christology that shows how much a historically-purged representation of the action of the earthly Jesus fits with the resurrection-confirmed status of Jesus as Son of God.¹⁰ One phase fits another, a believer's reading of Jesus as the Christ is tested against what is historically plausible about him. It is, as Schillebeeckx has sometime said, not Mr. X who is risen, but Jesus in whose action there was a hidden claim that becomes public and receives confirmation with the resurrection. Now I turn to the next element in the expression 'Christ, Image of the Father', the word.

Image - Icon

Genesis 1 speaks of humans as the image of God, humans are created in God's image and likeness. An image, however, is more than a likeness. Every image harbors a likeness, but not every likeness is an image. For an image requires a resemblance to something specific to the example, and furthermore, the image must have a relationship of origin to the example; it must derive from it. One egg resembles another but is not an image of it. The son of the king resembles the king and can thus be called his natural image. But even the image of the king on a coin is an image of the king, albeit a non-natural and imperfect image.¹¹ Along these lines, the words from Genesis can be interpreted. Thomas Aquinas points out that humans are an image of God both by nature and by grace.¹² By nature, because man is a spiritual being and because man determines his or her own actions. In this, man is by nature an image of God, because God is spiritual, intellectual, and because God is free, sovereign. And to the extent that each person knows and loves God, man is again and in another way an image of God: his or her faith is, as it were, a reflection of the divine, so that man can even be thought to be an image of the Triune God. Traditionally, this also includes the idea that man is an image of God and animals and plants are not, and that man is therefore called to rule over animals and plants. But for Thomas this is only a side issue, for him it is about the orientation towards God of every human being, so that every human being is pre-eminently the image of God. But the image that man has of God is an imperfect image, just as a coin resembles the king, but is of a different nature. Since Jesus is fully and truly human, he too is in this way image of God. But if Scripture says of Christ that he is 'image of the

¹⁰ Thomas P. Rausch SJ, *Who is Jesus? An Introduction to Christology* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press 2003).

¹¹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 35, a. 1.

¹² *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 93, a. 4. To these two Aquinas adds *imago gloriae*. Henk J.M. Schoot, 'Thomas Aquinas on Human Beings as Image of God', *European Journal for the Study of Thomas Aquinas* 38 (2020) pp. 33-46.

invisible God', as Colossians famously does (Col. 1, 15), then in the continuation of the hymn in which this is said, it quickly becomes clear that we are dealing with a unique, perfect image: 'in him all things were created . . . , he exists before all things, and all things exist in him . . . in him all the fullness has wished to dwell . . .'. The expression 'image of the *Father*', however, is not found in Scripture. Also, Scripture does not say much about Jesus using the expression 'image'. But when it occurs, it is immediately very significant. The light of the Gospel, says Paul, is the glory of Christ who is the image of God (2 Cor 4, 4). In the letter to the Hebrews, it is said that in the Son God's splendor shines, he who is his image, the image, the figure of his substance, carries creation with his mighty word, cleanses from sin and takes his place at the right hand of God's heavenly majesty (1, 3). It is clear that the attributes and actions attributed to Christ here are of a divine nature, *figura substantiae*. Creation, forgiveness, judgment, fullness. The image of God that Christ is, is of a different order than the image of God that any man or woman is. John says so without using the word 'image': 'I and the Father are one' (10, 30) and, above all, 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (14, 9). Aquinas expresses this in the *Summa Theologiae*, saying that when human beings are said to be made in the image of God, the word image is used improperly, whereas it is used properly for the eternal Son being the image of the Father.¹³

In Colossians and Corinthians where 'image' is spoken of, the Greek word '*eikoon*' is used, which we also know as 'icon', as a designation for the well-known painted images that have great religious significance especially in Eastern Christianity. There are many different icons of the image of God that is Christ. Some people in the West have to get used to them, because of their uniformity and apparent lack of movement. Yet Christ icons possess a certain appeal. An icon has the power to draw the viewer into the icon, as it were. The eyes of Christ are often expressionless, seemingly looking through the viewer. It is as if the eyes of Christ cast the gaze of God upon you. In the eyes of Christ, God draws near to you; his splendor is a divine splendor. This, then, immediately explains why at various times in the history of the Church there has been so much to do about images, whether it was the Eastern iconoclast struggle in the eighth and ninth centuries, or the Western iconoclasm in the sixteenth century. The defenders of the image see themselves as defenders of the incarnation of God in Christ. It is both permitted and possible to manufacture and venerate religious images precisely because Christ, through his incarnation, became the visible image of the invisible God. The core of the Christian faith is at stake. It is about the nearness of God. The right of the religious image goes back to Christ as the image of God.

¹³ *Summa Theologiae* I q. 35, a.1 ad 1.

We need to return for a moment to how Christ can be thought to be image of God. The passages of Scripture that I have mentioned and quoted indicate an image that shares in divine attributes. The image that Christ is is, as it were, both the natural image that is the son of the king and the image of the king that is depicted on the coin, to quote Augustine's example again. But it is not only the case that Christ is one in essence with the Father, 'shares' one and the same nature, but it is also the case that the Son proceeds from the Father and is called Son by virtue of that proceeding, by virtue of that 'birth'. As an image, the Son is the expression of the Father. This means that a specifically Trinitarian content must be assigned to the concept of Christ as image, namely that He is image of the Father precisely because He is His Son, and not merely because He is of the same divine nature. This is why in medieval theology the Latin word for image, *imago*, along with *verbum*, word, are the two proper personal names for the Son par excellence, the Son of the Father. Image is said *personaliter*, not *essentialiter*. This is the reason why in the proper sense of image, the Spirit cannot be said to be image of the Father, at least according to the Latin theologians. So Aquinas says, for instance, in his *Contra errores Graecorum*.¹⁴ And this brings us back to what we had already started with: the Father.

My Father - Your Father - Our Father

As mentioned earlier, the expression 'Our Father' in its application to God in the New Testament occurs only where Jesus teaches the Lord's Prayer. In all other cases it is 'The Father', 'Father', 'My Father' or 'Your Father'. This means that the fatherhood that Jesus attributes to God has a dual form. On the one hand, there is the unique fatherhood towards the only begotten Son, and on the other hand, the fatherhood regarding all people. But the fatherhood of all people is also a unique fatherhood. After all, Jesus says emphatically in Matthew's gospel 'you shall not call anyone your father on earth, for one is your Father, He who is in heaven' (Mt. 23, 9). Conversely, Jesus probably intentionally skips the fathers when he paints who his disciples will receive in terms of new family when they have left theirs (Mk. 10, 30). Jesus creates a clear distance between God the Father and the fathers of here and now, making it immediately clear that 'Father' is a metaphor whose very meaning transcends all other application of 'father'. There are theologians who read into this that Jesus distances himself from patriarchal representations. In any case, there seems to be no denying that Jesus is holding out to his disciples that it is not the paternal, patriarchal rulers of his day who are first and foremost entitled to reverence and

¹⁴ *Contra Errores Graecorum* I, 10; *Summa Theologiae* I q. 35 a. 2.

obedience, or who must be looked to for sustenance, but God. These are also the distinct elements of meaning that Thomas Aquinas brings to bear in his explanation of the 'Our Father.' God is called Father for three reasons, Thomas says: because he created us in his image and likeness; because he governs us as administrators; and because he adopted us as children and heirs: creation, administration, adoption.¹⁵ On this basis, we owe the Father four things: honor, imitation, obedience, and patience when we are corrected by him. So, when we address God as Our Father, it is all of our essential humanity that is unfolded in that prayer: as spiritual, intellectual people, as free people, and as people who are focused on the future of life with God, which is already beginning in prayer. What Thomas does not do, but perhaps should have done, is add to his understanding of fatherhood the essential element of mercy. God the Father is also and perhaps especially the Father of the prodigal son, the Father who forgives people their sin and debts, as is, of course, strikingly evident in the prayer of the 'Our Father' itself.

'Our Father' means 'Your Father.' The expression 'My Father', while denoting the same person, has a different meaning. 'My Father' signifies the unique Father-Son relationship that exists between God the Father and God the Son, a relationship of eternal generation and a relationship of being brought forth and sent forth in time. No one else stands in that relationship with the Father, but only the Son. That is why John calls him the Only begotten. This is also why the name 'image' for Christ is a unique name: no one is image of God as Christ is, because he is image of the Father. To that extent, one could also call the name 'image' a negative name. 'Image' denies that there are other images of God the Father that come close to the image that Christ is. Then again, that is not unique to the phrase 'image' because the same is true of all the names of Christ. All the names of Christ are analogical in nature, either because of Christ's divinity, or because of his humanity being graced and hypostatically united to him. All naming of Christ leads one to say that Christology is always negative, as in negative theology. Here, however, it has to do specifically with the relationship of origin of the Son with the Father. The mission of the Son, his birth in time, mirrors his eternal birth, and thus shares in the same unique, ineffable character.

Conclusion

A well-known and moving spiritual is called 'Wade in the water'. Americans of African descent sing this song not only to remember the passage through the Red Sea, but also to make it present in their own

¹⁵ Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in orationem dominicam*, prooemium.

lives. It is a prayer for liberation from slavery and racism, which is also connected in a special way to enslaved people who fled to freedom, in the times of the civil war, and to the history of the civil rights movement in the United States. Through the water to the other side. The refrain of the song reads, 'God's gonna trouble the water'. The warp is certainly the story of Exodus, but the weft comes from the Gospel of John. John's gospel contains the story of the healing at the bath of Bethesda (Jn. 5, 1–18). At the bath, a large number of sick people lay waiting for an angel of the Lord to descend and set the water in motion. It would heal the first to enter the moving bath of any disease. Jesus heals a man who has been sick for 38 years. The word that Jesus speaks is like the angel moving the water. Jesus sets the water of healing in motion. In this context of healing and deliverance, Jesus brings up his Father. 'The Jews' objected to Jesus working on the Sabbath. But Jesus says, 'My Father is at work until now, so I am at work' (Jn. 5, 17). The commentary of the evangelist is significant: 'From that time on, the Jews tried to kill him, because he not only undermined the Sabbath, but moreover called God his own Father, thus equating himself with God' (Jn. 5, 18). This then forms the introduction to a long explanation Jesus gives of his relationship with the Father. The work of the Father is that of the Son, and *vice versa*; and that work revolves around life and death: raising the dead to life. Therefore, Jesus is equal to God the Father, the one he calls 'My Father'. Thus, Jesus is an image of the Father in his actions and in his speech. But also by who he is: because Christ is the only begotten Son of God, he is image of the Father. And Christ is not only the only begotten, but also the first-born of creation (Col. 1, 5). In the letter to the Romans, Paul writes that the Father from eternity has known and predestined all the elect 'to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren' (Rom. 8, 29; see *Lumen Gentium* 2). Thus, Christ is at the same time the only begotten image of the Father and the first-born example for all brothers and sisters.

What have I now come to know about the fatherhood of God of which Christ is the image, and thus about Christ being the Son of the Father? It matters whether you speak of the Jesus of the historians, the earthly Jesus, or the risen Lord, but either way it is plausible that he is said to be the image of the Father. In any case, I also now know that there is a stratification to be made in that notion of 'Image of the Father'. Image is first of all a negative name: only Christ perfectly expresses the Father, and people are images of God in other ways. The same is true of the name 'Father': only God may rightly be called Father; if anything, created fatherhood is measured against God and not the other way around. And not only fatherhood, but motherhood as well, I should add. And finally, that God is Father in a different way towards the Son than regarding human beings; in the latter respect we can well speak of creator, ruler, merciful and adoptive Father. Christ

sets the waters in motion, and thus shows himself to be the unique image of the Father.

And in case of any doubt, do read what Aquinas has to say in his commentary on Colossians. When explaining the expression ‘Image of the invisible God’, his last remark is against the Arians, who misunderstood this phrase thinking that only the Father is invisible, but the Son was, manifesting the goodness of the Father, visible. Aquinas says that they mistake the image Christ is with images people make of their ancestors or of saints. ‘And thus, the Son is not only the image of the invisible God, but he himself is invisible like the Father’.¹⁶ Since Christ is the image of the invisible Father, and a perfect image, he as Son is himself invisible as well. According to Aquinas, Christ is both the visible and the invisible image of the Father.

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¹⁶ *Super Epistolam Ad Colossenses* I, 1. 4, #32: ‘Et sic est imago non solum Dei invisibilis, sed etiam ipse est invisibilis sicut pater. *Qui est imago invisibilis Dei*’.