

Partakers of the Divine Nature

Like many people of about my age – people who were children at the time when space travel became a reality – I find that the Apollo missions hold an enduring fascination. The aim of the Apollo programme was to put a man on the moon. On my shelves I have a book that explains in some detail how the various engineering challenges of this undertaking were met. It is quite a technical book and apart from a few general statements in the introduction there is very little explicit reference to the overall goal of the project. It is taken for granted, for example, that when reading about the finer points of Apollo's navigation systems the reader knows that the overall context is the problem of how to get from the earth to the moon.

I sometimes wonder whether something similar may be true of the witness of the Judaeo-Christian Scriptures. When it comes to working out the overall goal to which these Scriptures point, is it possible that we sometimes fail to see the wood for the trees? Might we sometimes mistake a sub-component of the narrative for its overall purpose? What, indeed, is the ultimate objective towards which the New Testament witness is drawing us, the earth-to-the-moon factor in Christian discipleship? Perhaps it is to bring us to confess that Jesus is the incarnate Word, the eternal Son of God? Maybe it is to enable us to receive redeeming grace through Jesus' life, death and resurrection? Or perhaps it is simply to know – and to live out the consequences of knowing – that “God is Love”?

All of these, I agree, are part of the good news. But I suspect that they are not the main event. They may be aspects of what is needed for the fulfilment of God's ultimate purposes, but I wonder whether in Scripture, as in a technical account of the Apollo missions, these purposes might be referred to only obliquely. Not, of course, because the overall goal is deliberately concealed, but because it is simply taken for granted. If so, I suggest that a candidate for this understated earth-to-the-moon factor in the Christian worldview might be this: that we are called to become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Peter 1: 4, King James Version).

One reason why the idea of participation in the divine nature has been relatively neglected, especially in Western Christianity, may be simply that it is so astonishing. To see why it is so radical we might want to make a distinction between two different kinds of participation. Let us call these 'weak' and 'strong' participation. If I draw a circle, it will share with other circles the property of circularity. In that sense it 'participates' in circularity. One way of understanding how we could participate in God would be similar. By God's grace, we might say, we are made in a way that mirrors God's being. And by being an 'image' of God we could be said to participate in God's own nature.

That would be participation in a weak form. Now, consider a stronger version. A little while ago I became interested in jazz music. I started listening to jazz records and learning about the extraordinary lives of the jazz greats, such as Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and Charlie Parker. As my appreciation of the music grew, I felt I had to find out whether I would be capable of playing the saxophone, so I bought an instrument and began having some lessons. Some time later I was persuaded to join a wind-band to which I now make what I hope is a useful (though not virtuosic) contribution on tenor sax. Each of these stages of my interest in jazz represent, to some degree, 'participating' in jazz. But playing in a band is, I think you would agree, a stronger form of participation than practising with a pre-recorded backing track, and each of these is a stronger form of participation than putting my precious vinyl on the turntable (joyous though that form of participation may be).

Now the question of *theosis*, to use the technical term for participation in the divine life, is not, I think, an abstract question of how we participate in the divine nature in the weak sense. Rather, it is a concrete question of how we enter the divine life in the strong sense. The Christian concept of *theosis* is not of participation in the way that a circle 'participates' in circularity or an audience 'participates' in jazz by attending a gig. It is more a matter of being drawn into the very life of God, just as I have been graciously incorporated into the musical life of a band.

This immediately means that the idea of *theosis*, of participation in God's life, must raise questions about the church. What is the church? What are the sacraments? How, if at all, does the sacramental life of the church draw us into the life of God? Moreover, what is the connection between Jesus being the incarnate Word of the Father and the hope that we, and all creatures, may have an eternal share in the being of God? How, in other words, do we get from Incarnation to *theosis*?

We can begin to answer these questions by recalling that, according to the semiotic model, the inner life of the Trinity may be thought of

(as far as the inner life of God can be understood at all) as the eternal interpretation of the Word by the Spirit. The Word, which became incarnate in the person of Jesus, is the full and perfect representation (sign) of the Father. And this sign is made living and active by the power of the Spirit, who is the ground of all mediation, the one who enables the Word to be interpreted as a sign of the Father. What is eternally represented by the Word and interpreted by the Spirit is the very quality of the being of God. Through the Word and by the power of the Spirit, God is known to God's-self. This, then, is the eternal life of the Trinity: the Spirit's eternal interpretation of the Word as a perfect sign of the Father.

Participation in the divine life, in the strong sense of *theosis*, is not just a question of knowing something *about* God. It is an involvement in, an incorporation into, the very process of God's self-knowledge. If we were merely talking about a weak form of participation we might be looking at a simple mirroring of this process in the processes of human knowing. The strong version of participation in God implies much more than this. Strong participation in the divine life, fully fledged *theosis*, involves adopting, or rather being adopted into, the place held by one (or more) of the persons of the Trinity within the process of God's self-knowing.

Consider first how we might adopt, or be adopted into, the role of the Spirit. We will truly participate in the divine life if we rightly interpret the Word as the perfect representation of the Father. In that case, we are being allowed to do exactly what the Spirit normally does. Within the eternal life of the Trinity the Spirit's role is that of perpetual interpretation of the Word. But we finite temporal creatures have likewise been granted the capacity – and the opportunity – to interpret the Word as a sign of the Father. In doing so we participate in the divine life just as the Spirit does.

Importantly, such interpretation of the Word as a sign of the Father is not just an exercise of the intellect. As we saw in Chapter 3, interpretation is not merely a matter of thoughts, but also of feelings and actions. We may not employ all of these modes of interpretation every time we respond to the various ordinary signs around us, but in the case of our response to the Word we are called to respond with the fullness of our being. That means responding not only intellectually, with interpretative thoughts, but also emotionally and practically with interpretative feelings and interpretative actions. The eternal life of the Trinity involves the fullness of the Word and Spirit in their representation and interpretation of the being of the Father. Full participation in the divine life therefore requires the

engagement of our whole selves. The more fully our interpretative responses to the Word complement and replicate the Spirit's work of interpretation, the more fully we will be incorporated into the divine life. The fullness of our interpretative response is brought forth when we strive to respond to the Word with the best of our thoughts, the deepest of our feelings, and the noblest of our actions.



We can take the next step towards seeing how we come to participate in God's life if we remember that every interpretation involves a response, a change in state of the interpreter. Whether the interpretative response is a feeling, a thought or an action, the interpreter changes in some way. The interpreter is now feeling, thinking or doing something that they were not before. When an interpreter changes state in this way the change, or the new state itself, can in turn be interpreted as a sign.

It follows that when the Spirit interprets the Word as a sign of the Father there must be some 'change' in the Spirit.¹ However, within the eternal Godhead there can be no imperfection. Therefore, if the Spirit interprets the Word, then any change in state that she undergoes in doing so cannot become a sign of anything less than the perfect goodness of the Father, as already represented by the Word. In which case, we must say that the eternal dynamic of the Spirit interpreting the Word can only ever generate further signs of the Father. The 'change' that the Spirit undergoes in interpreting the Word must result in some kind of qualitative echo of the Word. This is not to say that the Spirit simply becomes the Word, but that in interpreting the Word nothing is generated that is not further interpretable as an exact likeness of the Father.

This means, astonishingly, that if we truly adopt the place of the Spirit in interpreting the Word, we must be thereby transformed into a likeness of the Word, who is the perfect representation of the Father. This is indeed what Scripture says:

What we do know is this: when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is. And all who have this hope in him purify themselves, just as he is pure. (1 John 3: 2-3)²

1 I put 'change' in inverted commas here because in the eternal life of the Trinity it is not entirely clear what change can mean. But this is not a new problem, and it is impossible to speak of God's life, or the dynamic of the mutual indwelling of the trinitarian persons, without using some kind of language of change.

2 See also Romans 8: 29; 1 Corinthians 15: 49; 2 Corinthians 3: 18.

If we become transformed into a likeness of Jesus, the Word, we are adopted into the place of the Word within the eternal Trinity. If we ourselves become like the Word, then the Spirit may interpret us truly as a sign, an image of the Father. So the process of participation in God's life begins when we take the Spirit's role, interpreting the Word as a sign of what God is like. In doing so, we are ourselves transformed into signs of what God is like, and become available as signs to be interpreted. When the Spirit interprets us as signs (even if incomplete ones) of God's quality of love, we become further incorporated into the Trinity in the place eternally occupied by the Word.



What is the role of the sacraments in our adoption into God's divine life? According to one definition, a sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace. A fuller definition, which does not contradict the first, is that a sacrament is a sign that causes the grace that it signifies.³ I am going to rephrase this slightly and say that a sacrament *actualizes* what it signifies. I prefer the word 'actualize' in this context because it emphasizes that we mean that a sacrament *causes to become actual* the thing that it signifies.

Two things are actualized when a sign is formed and interpreted. The first is whatever the sign is in itself. The second is whatever interpretative response is made to it. But it can immediately be seen that various kinds of sign and interpretative response might actualize what they signify, and not all are called sacraments. For example, a kiss can signify the love between two people. The love is represented by the kiss. But the kiss is also an actualization, an embodiment, of that love.

A sacrament, then, may indeed be a form of signification that follows this pattern of causing what it signifies to become actual, but it must presumably be something more (unless we want to call kisses sacraments, which perhaps in a sense they are). The something more is that a sacrament is a sign that actualizes what it signifies, *where what it signifies is the gift of participation in the divine life*. In other words, we may say that a sacrament is something (a sign) that incorporates its makers or interpreters into the life of God. And since the makers of the sacramental sign are also its (primary) interpreters, these two aspects (making and interpreting the sacramental sign) tend to converge.

3 The first definition is a paraphrase of something Augustine says in *On the Catechising of the Uninstructed* (26.50). The second is articulated by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologiae* (III.62.3 and Suppl. III.30.1).

Let us see how this works in the case of the sacrament of the Eucharist. The Eucharist signifies the Kingdom of God. It represents the kind of unconditional, grace-dependent fellowship that Jesus modelled and inaugurated in his ministry as a whole. But it not only represents that transformative table fellowship, it also creates that fellowship: it creates the community of the Kingdom. In that respect the Eucharist is, in a sense, no different from any meal shared by family or friends. An everyday meal is often a sign of the bonds of kinship, friendship and love. But an ordinary meal can also be a means by which such bonds are formed. Gathering around a table and eating together is a sign of friendship, trust, and forgiveness, but the sign constituted by such an act of table fellowship is also one of the ways in which these things grow and become real.

The Eucharist is no different to an everyday meal in the way that it actualizes what it signifies. The difference lies in what exactly is actualized. The function of the Eucharist beyond the significance of an ordinary meal is to shape the participants into the community of the Kingdom. That which is signified and actualized is the Kingdom of God.⁴

This difference between the Eucharist and an ordinary meal arises because the eucharistic meal is an interpretative response to the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. It is the response that Jesus asked his followers to continue to make in memory of him. In other words, the Eucharist is an interpretative response to the Word. This means that the eucharistic sign is itself an interpretative response to another sign, the Word. That is why in our liturgies the ministry of the Word precedes the ministry of the sacrament. Furthermore, our eucharistic response to the Word engages the fullness of our being: thoughts, feelings and actions. We have already seen that when we properly interpret the Word as a sign of the Father with the fullness of our being we are adopting (or being adopted into) the place of the Spirit within the Trinity. Therefore, we may say that our eucharistic response to the Word actualizes the Kingdom of God by incorporating us into God's very being. The Eucharist is a collective interpretative response to the Word that makes us "partakers of the divine nature."

We have also seen that when we fully and properly respond to the Word as the perfect representation of the Father, we are

4 Of course, as well as recalling Jesus' table fellowship it recalls his self-sacrifice on the Cross, to which I will turn in Chapter 8.

transformed into a likeness of the Word. It follows that the eucharistic interpretative act results in a transformation of the participants into a likeness of Christ. And since the eucharistic action is a collective action, it follows that this likeness is a collective likeness.

To reiterate why this is so: by making an interpretative response to the Word we are collectively transformed into a further sign. Any interpretative response changes the interpreter in some way, and thereby potentially makes the interpreter into a new sign of some kind or another. But when the Spirit interprets the Word as a sign of the Father there is only one new sign that can arise: an echo, a re-presentation, of the Word. In the Eucharist the participants are adopting the role of the Spirit by making an interpretative response to the Word. By making the eucharistic sign we are incorporated into the triune divine life – first by taking the place of the Spirit as interpreters of the Word, and then by being transformed as a result into a collective re-presentation of the Word, a likeness of Christ.

“Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it,” says Paul (1 Corinthians 12: 27). Just as the quality of God was embodied in the human person of Jesus, so a properly directed response to this quali-sign of the Father cannot fail to result in the transformation of the participants into a collective embodiment of that same quality. The church is called to be the embodiment of the transforming presence of God that Jesus himself embodied. “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden” (Matthew 5: 14); cf. “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life” (John 8: 12). By responding to the one Word we are incorporated into God’s own life and become, collectively, an expression of that same Word.



The Eucharist is the mould in which our collective embodiment as the quality of God’s transforming love takes shape. Is that all there is to the actualization of the Kingdom of God?

Clearly not. The Eucharist has a particular role in actualizing the Kingdom, but it is not the sum-total of the Kingdom’s actualization. So what is the Eucharist’s particular role within the wider perspective of the coming Kingdom?

One of my first chemistry practicals at secondary school involved growing an alum crystal. We were instructed on how to make a saturated solution of potassium aluminium sulphate into which

we dangled a short piece of string. Over a period of a few days, a perfectly formed crystal began to grow. An initially microscopic precipitation of crystalline structure at the end of the piece of string had gone on to provide the template for further growth according to the same pattern.

The formation of a crystal offers an analogy for the role of the Eucharist: the Eucharist is a template around which certain forms of relationship can be shaped in such a way as to actualize the Kingdom of God. A difference is that crystal growth simply involves adding more of the same, whereas the growth of the Kingdom may take many different forms. The Eucharist can seed and shape the growth of those forms of participation in the divine life, just as the initial crystallization around the string seeds and shapes the subsequent growth of the crystal.

A key concept to consider here is the formation of habits. We tend to regard habits as blind propensities to repeat certain behaviours. Going to church merely out of habit may sound like a bad thing, which indeed it may be. But habits can also be the ultimate form of interpretation. We have seen that interpretations can be feelings or actions as well as thoughts. It is not surprising, then, that we can develop habits of thought, habits of feeling and habits of action. Such interpretative habits can be honed and refined by monitoring their adequacy as ways of making sense of the world. They are tried and tested patterns of behaviour that help us to navigate the sea of signs.

The fact that interpretative responses can be habitual doesn't mean they are dead or mindless. Habits can be living and dynamic. Complex dynamic systems in the physical world show an analogous kind of habit-formation. Think of the patterns of currents and eddies in a fast-flowing stream. The movement of the water is entrained into certain kinds of recurring pattern by meeting the shapes and obstructions of the river bed. In physics the relatively stable patterns that arise in complex systems are called 'attractors'. Attractors are not immutable. If the shape of the river bed changes or the flow of water increases or decreases, different kinds of flow patterns will arise. Likewise, some habits of interpretation that have been stable and effective for a long time may need to be revised and reshaped in response to changing circumstances. A certain kind of interpretative habit may cease to be appropriate in the light, for example, of a new scientific discovery or a fresh moral insight.

The important point here is that interpretative habits can be tested for their continuing capacity to help us make our way in the world.

Habits must be responsive to the way that the world really is. If they don't conform to the bedrock of reality, they won't ultimately turn out to be stable. The pace of change may be slower than the changes of habit of water-flow in a stream, but interpretative habits can nevertheless evolve to track reality.

Habits, then, are very ordinary, practical propensities of behaviour, but they are also important modes of interpretation. It is no accident that C.S. Peirce, the founder of the school of semiotic theory on which this book draws, was also the founder of the philosophical school of 'pragmatism'. Pragmatism holds that the meaning of a concept is ultimately given by the sum of its practical effects. The practical consequences of concepts are reflected in the habits of interpretation to which they give rise. When interpretations regularly match the way things actually are, they become habitual. According to Peirce, the 'ultimate interpretants' of signs – the kinds of interpretation that can bring a sequence of interpretations to an end – are habits. So the ultimate forms of interpretation are not mystical flights of fancy or highly abstract forms of conceptualization. Interpretation terminates in ordinary, concrete, embodied habits of action.

Part of the purpose of the Eucharist, I believe, is to entrain certain kinds of 'ultimate' interpretative habit. The Eucharist is the seed, the initial disturbance of symmetry (to echo the language of chaos theory's account of the origins of pattern formation) around which the interpretative habits of Christian discipleship begin to form. John's Gospel surely reflects this when the story of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper is replaced by the account of Jesus washing the disciples' feet. After doing so, Jesus says to them:

So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. (John 13: 14-15)

To summarize, we become partakers of the divine nature by responding to the Word with the fullness of our being, and thereby being adopted into the place of the Spirit. In making such interpretative responses to the Word we are transformed, by virtue of the logic of the divine perfection, into the image of the one to whom we are responding. The interpretative habits that are entrained by participation in the sacraments, especially the sacrament of the Eucharist, are what give some degree of stability and continuity (though not absolute imperviousness to change) to the church which is thereby constituted as the body of Christ.