



Fra Angelico  
*Transfiguration* (ca. 1437)  
Convent of San Marco (Italy)

# "OUR NEIGHBOR AND OUR GOD":

CHRISTOLOGY IN AN AESTHETIC  
AND POETIC REGISTER

**BY JENNIFER NEWSOME MARTIN, PH.D.**



"Nothing is simpler than the word of God.  
He told us things that were quite ordinary.  
Very ordinary.  
The incarnation, salvation, redemption, the word of God.  
Three or four mysteries.  
Prayer, the seven sacraments.  
Nothing is as simple as God's glory."

**-Charles Péguy, *Portal of the Mystery of Hope***



*Jennifer Newsome Martin, Ph.D. is a visiting assistant professor of theology in the Program of Liberal Studies at the University of Notre Dame. Among her areas of specialization are: 20th-century Roman Catholic systematic theology, theological aesthetics, and religion and literature.*

## The Language of Creeds and Councils

In most important things, but particularly in Christological discourse, *language matters*. Theological language, however, is an essentially peculiar phenomenon, as it both strains against the impossible task of naming a mystery, but at the same time requires immense precision. The stakes, after all, are enormously high. Certainly studying the history of early Christological controversies demonstrates well the immense value the Church has placed on crisp, precise theological articulations. This rigor with respect to language is perhaps nowhere more striking than in the careful Christological statements that emerged from the Council of Nicaea in 325: spurred on by the claims of Arius, who had asserted a secondary, lesser status for the Son of God, this first ecumenical council was convened at Nicaea in order to clarify the status of the Son vis-à-vis the Father. That is, is the Son divine in the same way as the Father? In confronting Arianism head-on, the Council at Nicaea affirmed that the Son is “one in substance” (*homoousios*), or *consubstantial* with the Father rather than only of *like* or *similar* substance (*homoiousios*), the designation the Arians preferred since it allowed for a distinction in “degrees” of divinity between Father and Son. So much turned on a single letter!

Of course, the function of conciliar and creedal language is not so much to have the absolute last word as it is to erect the boundaries around that which is sayable and that which is not sayable theologically. For instance, the Christological formulations from Nicaea and, later, in 451 from the Council of Chalcedon, guard both against recurrences, on the one hand, to a refigured Arianism, which would diminish a robust assertion of Christ’s genuine divinity, or, on the other hand, docetic tendencies—where Christ only *seemed* to be a human being, diminishing a robust assertion of His genuine humanity. In the introductory theology courses I teach it is not altogether uncommon to hear inexperienced students describe Jesus as “God wearing a man suit.” I certainly sympathize with the impulse to simplify, to square the absolutely fundamental mystery of Christianity a bit with more readily available, more intuitive categories in an attempt to render the Incarnation somewhat more manageable. What tremendous boldness it seems to require, after all, to assert with the Council of Chalcedon that two natures, fully human and fully divine, are “inconfusedly, unchangeably, indivisibly, [and] inseparably” in the *one* person of Christ. And yet it is so:

the infinite Word of God *took flesh*. The Word came and dwelt among us, in all the exigencies of human being, save sin. The problem with the somewhat innocent docetic formulation of the student, however, is that it suggests that the humanity which Christ assumed at the Incarnation was something *merely* sartorial, a piece of clothing which might well be laid aside, something provisional, accidental, perfectly incidental to Christ's "real" divine nature. But no: as the Gospel of John tells us, "the Word *became flesh* and *lived among us*, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth" (1:14). A possible alternate translation of this verse that really gets at this unpretentious,

miraculous, absolutely improbable truth—in all its physicality—is that "God pitched his tent among us," taking up residence and making a home right along beside us as a Neighbor. As Athanasius and then, perhaps more pointedly, Gregory of Nazianzus remind us, "For that which Christ has not assumed, he has not healed..." (Gregory Nazianzus, Ep. 101, 32). A strong doctrine of the Incarnation, in which infinite *and* finite, fully God *and* fully human, are asserted with equal forcefulness, capacitates human salvation, participation in the divine life, and redeems the human being precisely in her particular, exact, finite human nature. So it is that we pronounce very simply in the Creed:

I believe in one Lord Jesus Christ,  
 the Only Begotten Son of God,  
 born of the Father before all ages.  
 God from God, Light from Light,  
 true God from true God,  
 begotten, not made, consubstantial with the Father;  
 through him all things were made.  
 For us men and for our salvation  
 he came down from heaven,  
 and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary,  
 and became man.

This ancient language has a poetic rhythm which—especially embodied when recited aloud—unites the community in one statement of faith about the Incarnation of Jesus Christ: God is God with us, God for us, God among us.

## The Language of the Aesthetic

At bottom, of course, the language of the Creed does not name exhaustively the inscrutable mystery of God: even as we pronounce together “true God from true God,” it persists to be a great mystery how God the infinite could, so to speak, “dwindle” to infancy such that the Word could become visible and legible to human beings, with both divinity and humanity kept intact. Christ, as Swiss Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905-1988) puts it succinctly, is “God’s greatest work of art” (“Revelation and the Beautiful,” *Exp. I*, 117). This fundamentally aesthetic language is apt, especially if we consider that a central tenet of Balthasar’s rich Christologically-specified theological aesthetic is the inseparability of form and content, and the actual, complete expression of the former in the latter. For Balthasar, Christ is the archetypal *Ur*-form, the full coincidence of infinite and finite, and the perfect self-expression of God, whose glory appears definitively in the Incarnation and particularly in the paschal mystery. Jesus Christ is the form *because* he is the content; His human nature is not an avatar or a mask of the divine. The incarnate Christ, in Balthasar’s aesthetic language adapted from St. Bonaventure, is “*God as expression*” (Balthasar, *GL II*, 290), the very “becoming visible and experienceable of the God who is...triune” (Balthasar, *GL I*, 432). Here is the tremendous self-giving love of God, the *agape* which in Christ “clothes itself *in the language of the body*” (Balthasar, *GL I*, 673; italics added).

For Balthasar, this luminous content—the very light and the glory of the fullness of the infinite God—shines forth from within the unique form of Jesus, which mediates concretely between finite and infinite by really, truly and visibly manifesting the invisible. The visible form of Christ not only indicates or points toward the mystery of God, but reveals this mystery from within. According to Balthasar, the fact that this luminosity springs from within the form itself and not from elsewhere gives the figure of Christ a kind of objective and internal credibility, “an interior rightness and evidential power such as we find—in another, wholly worldly realm—in the work of art or in a mathematical principle” (Balthasar, *GL I*, 465-6). Furthermore, for the perceiving observer to be presented with **the thing itself** and not, say, with the glory of God attenuated and disguised by a duplicitous “man suit,” is to be captivated, attracted, and moved to wonder by the beauty of Christ as true expression of God. This encounter and recognition of true Beauty is a brand of knowledge that is non-discursive, non-mediated: the heart responds to this encounter in an originary, primal, and absolutely simple way. Similarly, in his address to the Rimini Meeting in August 2002, titled “The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty,” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI likens it to the immediacy of effect which encounters with great works of art—hearing a Bach concert, beholding Rublev’s famous icon of the Trinity—can have on the human soul, in those instances where intimations of God’s glory and splendor are felt with an insistence and actuality that cannot be denied.

## The Language of the Poetic

There is a tremendous excess in the doctrine of the Incarnation, beyond the credal formulations which cordon off boundaries beyond which we may not trespass. The immensity of this great mystery, how finitude is taken up with infinitude while both are preserved, allows and perhaps invites another kind of language: namely, the paradoxical language of the poet. Edward T. Oakes, S.J.'s lovely and learned compendium *Infinity Dwindled to Infancy: A Catholic and Evangelical Christology* (2011), which traces the history of Christological reflection beginning with the Gospels through patristic, medieval, Reformation, Idealism and more recent Protestant and Catholic developments, takes the inspiration for its title not from a theologian but rather, from a poet. The line is from the poem "The Blessed Virgin compared to the air we breathe," from Catholic poet Gerard Manley Hopkins. Oakes begins his treatment of Christology with explicit attention to the natural link between poetry and Christology, noting that it is the poets—he mentions George Herbert, John Donne, Lord Tennyson, and Christopher Smart, among others—who are perhaps best equipped to regard the language of paradox as a means for getting at that which is fundamentally true (Oakes, 9). Indeed, the poets nurture the theological imagination with respect to Christology particularly in the rich, paradoxical language they employ.

Beyond this particular feature of poetry, it is also true that the language of theological poets can open up Christological reflection further especially insofar as it suffuses simple, specific images with a staggering theological significance, analogously enacting what it means to demonstrate: that is, the infinite made legible in finite form. This feature of poetry is especially evident in the works of another Catholic poet Charles Péguy (1873-1914), esteemed and brought to a greater prominence not only by his distinguished placement as the culminating representative of Balthasar's own theological aesthetics, but also by the British poet Geoffrey Hill's 1983 poem *The Mystery of the Charity of Charles Péguy*. What is most apropos to our purposes, however, is Péguy's own masterful narrative poem, *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, translated very capably from French into English by David L. Schindler, Jr.

The poem is not only formally beautiful, but also theologically dense especially insofar as the Incarnation of Christ is its font and root. While perhaps the poem's most profound achievement and stated intention is in its accent on the primacy of the theological virtue of hope, the unselfconscious portrait of a God whose self-evacuating love emerges perfectly in the visible form of the human figure of Christ—Christ who is a particular *someone*, and not just an abstracted "compendium of all virtues," (Balthasar, *GL III*, 512) is just stunning. In this true flesh-taking, which Péguy insists upon at every turn, the temporal, physical, earthly, finite are redeemed, even celebrated; the spiritual is in the bodily, the eternal in the temporal, for this world, this reality is the very place where God has pitched his tent, effectively transforming the created order as such into, in Balthasar's words, "a monstrosity of God's real presence" (Balthasar, *GL I*, 420). For both poet and theologian it is possible, then, with the eyes of faith, to

discern the “resplendence” of the divine in the created order. Indeed, early in Péguy’s poem *God* says, rather like as to the beleaguered Job from out of the whirlwind:

Yes, I am so resplendent in my creation.  
 Upon the face of the mountains and on the face of the plains.  
 In bread and in wine and in the man who tills and in the man who sows  
     and in the harvest of grain and in the harvest of grapes.  
 In the light and in the darkness.  
 And in the heart of man, which is what is most profound in the world.  
 The created world . . .  
 . . . In the sands of the sea and in the stars that are grains of sand in the sky.  
 In the stone of the threshold and in the stone of the hearth and in the stone  
     Of the altar.  
 In prayer and in sacraments (2).

There is more. The Word of God became a human being while yet God, finite while yet infinite, and further, as Balthasar observes, “because he is Word, and, as Word, took flesh, he took on, at the same time, a body consisting of syllables, scripture, ideas, images, verbal utterance and preaching, since otherwise [human beings] would not have understood either that the Word really was made *flesh*, or that the divine Person who was made flesh was really the *Word*” (Balthasar, “The Place of Theology,” *Exp. I*, 149). That the eternal Word was pronounced in time and in history sanctifies not only the human world but also the human *word*, in the capacity of language to express the depth of an interior reality truly and concretely. Péguy’s poem—and, it must be said, art and poetry in general—performs this privilege which is accorded to finitude. Throughout *The Portal of the Mystery of Hope*, Péguy employs the humblest, most ordinary images with no apology either for their

unpretentiousness or their physicality, their fragility or their vulnerability: there is a wood-cutter father cutting trees in the winter, with his good tools, his axe and saw, handles worn smooth by the years of work, thinking of his children and of his own death, with tears and icicles frozen in his beard. He recalls his own desperate worry over his sons and daughter when they were very sick, and how he had taken them to the church and given them over to the Blessed Virgin Mother in hope, where he had placed them “very peacefully within the arms of she who bears all the world’s sufferings/And whose arms are already so full” (27). There is also, of course, the “little girl Hope,” a child, “nothing at all” (5), an impish creature who dances between her more stolid older sisters Faith and Love, who represents Péguy’s refreshingly un-precious theology of childhood, marked by newness, bravery, confidence, and, of course, an improbable hope.

## The Language of the Body

By means of repetitions both fugal and frugal, Péguy, far from a florid poet, recurs to and deepens the same set of simple images drawn from all quarters: familial life, prayers of the liturgy, passages from the Gospels, particularly Luke's parable of the prodigal son, participation in the sacraments, flesh and blood, bread, wine, water, and always in the same stark, rather blunt, deliberately plain language. In the repetitions, the returns to a word or a phrase or an image, stunning in their simplicity, Péguy is able to present concepts—for instance, body and soul, time and eternity, finite and infinite, love of God and love of neighbor, even, in a Johannine aspect which Balthasar undoubtedly approves, transfigured suffering and glory—in an organic unity. And, importantly, for Péguy, it is the Church which is distinctively placed to unify “heaven and earth, time and eternity, flesh and spirit, contemplation and action, grace and achievement” (Balthasar, *GL III*, 427).

In keeping with Péguy's dogged assertions of the goodness of finitude in light of Christ's assumption of human nature, the human body itself is presented not as a piteous or burdensome impediment to spirituality, especially vis-à-vis the incorporeality of the angels, but rather as the means by which human beings can uniquely imitate Jesus. His presentation of the angels as experiencing a lack reverses a commonly held view that might unduly privilege the spiritual apart from the corporeal. He writes:

The angels are certainly pure, but they aren't the least bit carnal.

They have no idea what it is to have a body, *to be* a body.

They have no idea what it is to be a poor creature.

A carnal creature.

A body kneaded from the clay of the earth.

The carnal earth.

They don't understand this mysterious bond, this created bond,

Infinitely mysterious,

Between the soul and the body.

Because God not only created the soul and the body.

The immortal soul and the body that is mortal but will be resurrected.

But he also created, as a third creation he created

This mysterious tie, this created tie,

This attachment, this bond between the body and the soul,

Between spirit and matter,

Between that which is immortal and that which is mortal but will be resurrected

And the soul is tied to mud and to ash... (45-6)

And further on,

...To have this bond with the earth, with this earth, to be this earth, clay

and dust, ash and the mud of the

earth

*The very body of Jesus* (48).

For Péguy, the body and the soul are of a piece, coming always together to salvation or to judgment, like two hands bound together either in prayer or in sin (47-48). He further avails himself of the modest language of agriculture: the soul is a "good work horse" pulling behind it the body-plow (46), for "thus the Lord God has hitched the body to the soul" (47).

Elsewhere Péguy recurs again and again to the symbol of "bread" on a number of different levels: the wood-cutter thinks of his own death, euphemistically referred to as that time when he will "have lost the taste for

bread" (17). He thinks of the fact that there shall be other generations behind him, "who already know the taste for bread and who will know how to bite into a good crust of bread./Who will eat heartily./Their daily bread./Who will eat heartily their daily bread and their eternal bread" (17-8), here already drawing together the basic staff of life and the Eucharist. Later on he recognizes the fundamental fragility of human being, in a passage which without a doubt recalls Eucharistic imagery:

"... we simple travelers, poor travelers, fragile travelers,  
precarious travelers,  
eternal vagabonds,  
who enter this life and who immediately exit,  
as vagabonds would enter a farm only for a meal,  
for a crust of bread and for a glass of wine..." (57)

As he returns to the image throughout the poem, the reader is confronted with the adamant and altogether intuitive sense that the eternal bread of the Eucharist simply cannot be had without taking responsibility for the daily bread of others. If we hear or read the poem rightly, it turns out that merely being a spectator to a pretty turn of phrase is just not an option. There is an indisputable summons to act: as Christ as the full expression of the great love of God having put on “the language of the body,” so too must we put on Christ, must in our worship and our practice nurture and tend the living Word. For Péguy, we are inextricably connected to our bodies, our community, our Church, our earth, and must, simply *must*, work on behalf of and in solidarity with those who have no bread. Here is the Gospel in seed, the love of God and the love of neighbor both together. This altogether vivifying feature of Péguy’s thought, what Balthasar has lauded as the unification of aesthetics and the ethical (*GL III*, 402), which had in modernity come undone, is

rooted firmly in Christ’s Incarnation and has its fullest expression in the worship and life of the Church in the world. Because, as Péguy intimates poetically and St. Bonaventure tells us outright, the love of God and the love of neighbor are united in the person of Christ, “Who is at one and the same time our Neighbor and our God, our Brother and our Lord, our King and our Friend, the Word incarnate and the uncreated Word, our Maker and our Re-maker, the *Alpha* and the *Omega*” (Bonaventure, *The Journey of the Mind to God*, 25).

For Péguy, it is therefore the human task to continue the work of the Incarnation, the Word of God made visible in the world, in the holy repetitions of the sacraments, as holy water is shared from hand to hand, as prayers and creeds are repeated in common, in our ongoing work on behalf of the poor, in the weekly proclamation of the Gospel, in our own continuing sanctification and participation in the Church:

Miracle of miracles, my child, mystery of mysteries.  
 Because Jesus Christ has become our carnal brother  
 Because he has pronounced, carnally and in time, eternal words,  
*In monte*, upon the mountain,  
 It is to us, the weak, that he was given,  
 He depends on us, weak and carnal,  
 To bring to life and to nourish and to keep alive in time  
 These words pronounced alive in time.  
 Mystery of mysteries, this privilege that was given to us,  
 This incredible, exorbitant privilege,  
 To keep alive the words of life... (55)

## The Language of Holy Repetition

What slowly begins to dawn on the reader of Péguy's poem is that there are repetitions, and then there are repetitions. Certainly human beings are no strangers to the sometimes suffocating reality that can be the routine passage of days, as daily we attend to the quotidian but no less demanding tasks of domestic, familial, professional, and frankly, sometimes even spiritual life, as daily we tread the same path between home and work, work and home. These ordinary repetitions, however, are revealed in the course of this poem to make all the difference in (and beyond) the world. Péguy revisits the theme of the constitutively open, exuberant child Hope in an image of a procession for the feast of Corpus Christi. The little girl runs back and forth with a kind of irreverent joy, covering the same ground again and again, with no thought to spare her steps or to preserve her energy for another day. No,

Péguy rightly observes that "children walk exactly like little puppies" (108), coming and going, back and forth, needlessly making the trip twenty times, always starting over. The procession of ordinary days, however, is in fact a procession toward our own salvation. Though it may appear only as if we are "departing from the same mornings and being conveyed toward the same evenings" (116), it turns out that, in heaven, "all these days count" (116).

On earth it may seem as if we are always starting over, covering only the same ground, but the repetition of human life with all the exigencies of finitude, made sacred now, is not a doomed Sisyphean repetition in which we must labor to push a boulder up the hill just so that it can roll down again, but rather, a bridge which, traversed already by the simple love and humility of Christ, can lead us, soul *and* body, to heaven:

...Because on earth we erase our own tracks twenty times  
 And we tread twenty paths on top of each other.  
 But in heaven, they don't fall on top of each other. They are placed end-  
 to-end. And they make a bridge  
 That brings us to the other side (116).

The mystery of the Incarnation is that the eternal Word of God came into the world as an infant, newborn, and in so doing, has made us all new. Any parent who has read the same bedtime book several times in a row can attest to the peculiar feature of childhood that makes children delight (“read it again!”) in the routine of unvaried repetitions. The poetic register reveals, however, that this delight in the repeated, in the monotonous, has, perhaps, an originarily divine character. G.K. Chesterton, in his *Orthodoxy*, depicts God, who “is younger than we,” in just this way, saying, “Do it again,” each morning to the sun, and “Do it again” each evening to the moon. Attending to the poetic word suggests that when the Word becomes flesh, human beings receive not only the Christ-child, but also a measure of this divine childlikeness, the acceptance of which contributes in no small part to our own salvation.



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