



Atoned by faith? A new variation on an old question

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Framing the Question

The American Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles, in his study on faith entitled *The Assurance of Things Hoped For*, observed that nearly all the major branches of Christianity have consistently taught the necessity of divine faith for justification in this life and salvation in the next. The biblical texts concerning the relationship between faith and justification, or between faith and salvation, are so abundant, that no theory that seriously questions the necessity of faith for salvation could be accepted by mainstream Christianity¹. Yet, as Dulles aptly notes, “to show by theological reasoning why faith is necessary [for salvation] is a far more delicate task”². Is the relationship between faith and salvation merely an extrinsic connection established arbitrar-

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¹ Cf. A. DULLES, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Christian Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994, 1997), 256–57.

² *Ibid.*, 257.

ily by God's sovereign will, or are both faith and salvation constituted in such a way that there is an intrinsic connection between them?

The theology of atonement may hold the key for coming to a better understanding of the relationship between faith and salvation. While faith and atonement are seldom mentioned in the same breath, the close connection between atonement and related theological terms such as justification and salvation suggests that such an avenue is open to exploration.

Can it be said that the act of faith is a 'location' where atonement takes place?³ Although the question itself may sound novel, if we keep in mind the close relationship between atonement and justification, the framing of the question should be the most natural thing in the world. After all, most Christians share an underlying consensus on the relationship between faith and justification⁴. If we were to pose the question, 'are we justified by faith?' scarcely anyone would bat an eye at the question itself (though the answers to the question *how* we are justified by faith might spark furious debate!). The same holds true for the related question 'are we saved by faith?' Yet, if we were to pose the same question in different terms, saying 'are we atoned by faith?' many theologians might raise an eyebrow at the unusual framing of the question. Nevertheless, asking this question in terms of atonement might open new horizons for understanding the relationship between faith and salvation.

Yet, before asking whether we are atoned by faith, or whether atonement takes place in the act of faith, we must have some clarity about what atonement is and what it means.

³ This study was originally presented at the Los Angeles Theology Conference held at Biola University in January 2015 dedicated to the theme *Locating Atonement*. My thanks to Matthew Levering, Fred Sanders, Matt Jensen, and Mark McConnell for listening to this paper and for their supportive comments, as well as to Oliver Crisp for his role along with Fred Sanders in organizing the conference.

⁴ One can think of the important though still controversial *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2000), signed by representatives of the World Lutheran Federation and the Roman Catholic Church on October 31, 1999, as well as the statement of association to the Joint Declaration published by the World Methodist Council on July 23, 2006.

The Basic Notion of Atonement

The word ‘atonement’ was coined by William Tyndale early in the sixteenth century to express the biblical notions of redemption, reconciliation and expiation⁵. The etymology of the word is generally given as *at-one-ment* (i.e. bringing together, or ‘making one’); “theologically it includes the idea of expiation for sin and reconciliation of man with God”⁶. As William O. Carver notes:

It is a rare instance of an [Anglo Saxon] theological term; and, like all purely English terms employed in theology, takes its meaning, not from its origin, but from theological content of the thinking of the Continental and Latin-speaking Schoolmen who employed such English terms as seemed most nearly to convey to the hearers and readers their ideas. Not only was no effort made to convey the original Hebrew and Greek meanings by means of English words, but no effort was made toward uniformity in translating of Hebrew and Greek words by their English equivalents⁷.

One may therefore say that ‘atonement’ is a theological concept that successfully articulates in a single word a complex process that in Biblical language is expressed through a plurality of terms and metaphors. Images such as sacrifice, scapegoat, redemption, justification, reconciliation, and adoption provide the soil in which the theology of atonement sinks its roots⁸. Precisely because there is no single Greek or Hebrew referent for the English word “atonement”, the term has been applied to a wide range of ideas: “For some it means providing some kind of gift or apology in order to repair a damaged relationship.

⁵ Cf. J. L. GONZÁLEZ, *Essential Theological Terms*, 1st ed (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 20. Although Tyndale is normally attributed with coining the word in 1526, it seems that Thomas More had already employed it in 1513, though not in a theological context. cf. G. W. BROMILEY, “Atonement,” in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, 352–60 (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1995), I:352.

⁶ JOHN L. MCKENZIE, S.J., “Atonement”, in *Dictionary of the Bible*, 69 (Milwaukee: Bruce, 1965), 69.

⁷ W. O. CARVER, “Atonement”, in *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, ed. James Orr et al. (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1939), accessed March 12, 2014, <http://www.internationalstandardbible.com/A/atonement.html>.

⁸ Cf. S. FINLAN, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 2007), 1.

For others such repair (if it is to be called atonement) must mean making a costly payment or enduring a painful ordeal. In either view the goal of atonement is reconciliation between persons”⁹. Thus, in spite of many theological variations, the doctrine of atonement may best be defined and distinguished by two fundamental coordinates: (1) reparation for sin and (2) reconciliation with God. But is there anything specifically Christian about this doctrine?

Christian atonement as a Christ-centered concept

Notions such as redemption, salvation, justification, and atonement belong to the common religious experience of humankind, but the Christian understanding of them is centered upon Jesus Christ. For Christian theology, atonement is not simply any possible expiation of sin and union with God, but precisely the one, unique and definitive act realized by Christ. Thus, atonement is principally identified with the work of Christ. He, as the one Mediator between God and men, is the only capable of expiating sin and bringing humanity back to communion with God. This work of Christ is often called ‘objective atonement’. Yet, since the effect of Christ’s work is realized in Christians—in us!—this effect (or ‘subjective atonement’) must also partake of the twin characteristics of expiation of sin and union with God.

This, of course, raises the perennial question of man’s cooperation with grace. To what extent does subjective atonement depend not only upon the “objective” work of Christ, but also—to a lesser but no less real degree—on the Christian’s active cooperation with grace in receiving the fruits of atonement? Throughout the history of theology and across confessional lines, responses to this question have varied. In general, Protestants tend to be suspect of any theory that would empty the cross of its meaning by converting justification into a merely human work; that fear is not unwarranted, as Pelagianism is not just a historical heresy but a very real temptation in every age. Catholics, on the other hand, tend to be more open to recognizing various forms in which Christians participate in the saving work of Christ for them-

⁹ S. FINLAN, *Options on Atonement in Christian Thought*, 1.

selves and for others¹⁰. Such generalizations rarely do justice to the complexity of the difficulties or to the many variations found in individual theologians, but they at least make certain that the major issues are clearly on the table.

With these issues in mind, we may return to the central question of this investigation: “Is the act of faith a ‘location’ where atonement takes place?” The question itself presupposes some kind of participation of the believer in Christ’s work, and thus concerns ‘subjective atonement’. For the answer to be affirmative, two criteria must be met. First, it must be seen whether faith expiates sin; second, it must be seen whether faith produces union with God. If the believer’s act of faith meets these two tests, then it can reasonably be affirmed that subjective atonement does indeed ‘take place’ in the act of faith.

I contend that the response to the question is indeed affirmative, and that the theological grounds for this affirmation can be gleaned from the thought of Pope John Paul II.

A response based on the thought of John Paul II

Two preliminary observations

Before considering a response to the question based on John Paul II’s thought, two preliminary observations are in order. The first concerns the relationship between theology and the Catholic understanding of the Magisterium; the second regards the way in which the response this paper proposes is *based upon* John Paul II’s thought, without pretending to *represent* his thought on the specific question.

¹⁰ Cf. PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY, “The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission, 1977-1984A Report,” Servizio Internet Vaticano, accessed December 3, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/chrstuni/evangelicals-docs/rc_pc_chrstuni_doc_20141007_report-1977-1984_en.html, 3.3. Although the report of the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue identified two different models in the theology of the Atonement, in which Evangelicals tend to emphasize Christ’s atoning work as ‘substitution’, while Catholics tend to see it in terms of ‘solidarity’, recent theological literature shows that the lines of confessional difference are nowhere nearly so neatly drawn. For a helpful survey of the different trajectories in the theology of atonement, see Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “Atonement,” in *Mapping modern theology: A thematic and historical introduction*, ed. Kelly M. Kapic and Bruce L. McCormack (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2012), 175–202.

For Catholics, the Magisterium—understood as the teaching authority of the pope and bishops—and theological activity are two different but complementary forms of service to the Word of God within the ecclesial community. The proper task of the Magisterium, according to Catholic teaching, is to safeguard the handing on of Divine Revelation: this task implies the ability to pronounce judgment on whether certain interpretations of Divine Revelation are consistent with the deposit of faith. Theology, on the other hand, seeks by way of ordered reflection to come to a deeper understanding of Revelation by explaining it in an organic, systematic way¹¹. Theology, as *fides quaerens intellectum* (faith seeking understanding), is an activity that is common to all thinking Christians, is refined by training, and in the case of the professional theologian, can even receive a canonical mandate. The exercise of the Magisterium, however, is bound only to the office of bishop (the pope being, of course, the Bishop of Rome). The thought of John Paul II, as it will be explored in this paper, is primarily that of Karol Wojtyła the theologian rather than that of John Paul II as authoritative teacher¹².

The second preliminary observation concerns the adaptation of John Paul II's thought. It would be a stretch to claim that John Paul II affirms explicitly that the act of faith is a 'location' where atonement takes place. The very phrasing of the question is foreign to his vocabulary and to his conceptual framework. Yet, it is no stretch to affirm that John Paul II's thinking clearly enunciates principles for affirming that faith both expiates sin and reconciles with God.

At the same time, one must acknowledge that these principles operate in a different discursive context. Whereas the concept of atonement ordinarily has a binary structure (reparation for sin—reconciliation with God), John Paul II's theology is most at home with

¹¹ Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, "Donum Veritatis: Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian," accessed December 22, 2014, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html, 21. See also Avery Dulles, *The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System*, New expanded ed (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 107.

¹² In fact, of the writings examined in this study, only two properly belong to John Paul II's papal magisterium, namely, the encyclicals *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986) and *Fides et Ratio* (1998); the others belong to his personal writings, both prior to and after his papal election: *Faith According to St. John of the Cross* (1948), *Sources of Renewal* (1972), and *Memory and Identity* (2005).

the language of redemption, which for him has the ternary structure of the ways or stages of the spiritual life: the purgative, the illuminative, and the unitive. Translating John Paul II's theology of redemption into terms of atonement necessarily omits the middle, or illuminative stage¹³. Thus, the purpose of this paper is not to explore all possible implications of John Paul II's thought, but only those that are most relevant to the two-fold question of expiation and union.

Furthermore, the adaptation of Wojtyła's thought must address a problem of semantics. The word 'atonement' is rarely used in the translation of Wojtyła's thought into English, nor is it an easy matter to identify an exact correlative in his theological lexicon. Both in his private writings and as pope, Wojtyła tended to privilege the word 'redemption', though 'salvation' is also a key term. The two are not exactly synonymous, as can be seen from his 1972 work *Sources of Renewal*. In that book, 'salvation' is generally identified with man's supernatural destiny to share in the divine life, and thus it seems to be identified with the unitive dimension of atonement¹⁴. Redemption, on the other hand, may be defined as the concrete manner in which salvation is effected in human history after original sin¹⁵. It is identified with the both the work of Christ and the effects of his work in us. "The work of redemption," he writes in *Sources of Renewal*, "is the work of the Mediator: it is the concrete form of mediation between God and man, linked with the mission of Jesus Christ. [...] As Mediator, Christ is the redeemer of the world"¹⁶.

What remains to be seen is how faith functions in the economy of redemption by removing sin and uniting the believer with God. This two-fold function of faith is present in Wojtyła's thought from his very first theological writings in 1948 up to his final published book in 2005.

¹³ For the importance of the illuminative stage in Wojtyła's thought, see: John Paul II, *Memory and Identity: Conversations at the Dawn of a Millennium* (Princeton, N.J., 2005), 29

¹⁴ Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal: The Implementation of the Second Vatican Council* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1980), 53–65.

¹⁵ Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal*, 67.

¹⁶ K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal*, 67.

The question of faith in Wojtyła's early writings

The first theological publications of Karol Wojtyła were on St. John of the Cross, beginning with his doctoral thesis which was successfully defended and published in 1948 (*Doctrina de fide apud S. Joannem a Cruce*), followed by two articles in Polish published in 1950 and 1951¹⁷. Wojtyła's thesis examines the virtue of faith in the writings of John of the Cross under the one aspect that the Mystical Doctor considers almost exclusively, namely, faith's power to unite the believer with God¹⁸. "Against the false theories concerning union with God, the Mystical Doctor [John of the Cross] calmly maintained that *faith* is the proper means to that union—faith with all its consequences: in nakedness, austerity, and obedience of the intellect"¹⁹.

The central topic of Wojtyła's thesis concerns the notion of faith as the 'proportionate means' of union with God. Faith is apt to unite the intellect to God because only faith contains an 'essential likeness' to God, whereas that 'essential likeness' is denied of every other creature. Although this thesis is stated and restated throughout the dissertation, and is shown to be firmly grounded in the writings of John of the Cross, the reader may still come away with the impression that this affirmation is not fully explanatory. Even Wojtyła seems to be respectfully dissatisfied with the answers that John of the Cross gives to the problem²⁰.

Leaving aside the answers that Wojtyła finds in John of the Cross, it is the question itself that is worth pondering: what is it about faith that makes it a means of union with God? How does faith create in man the 'proportion' or 'likeness' to God that makes union with Him possible? It will be worth returning to that question once more elements of the answer are in hand.

Throughout his thesis, Wojtyła distinguishes carefully between what John of the Cross actually says, and the conclusions that can be drawn from those principles; yet, towards the end of his investigation

¹⁷ Cf. J. AUMANN, "Translator's Preface," in *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, 13–14 (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 13.

¹⁸ Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), 26.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 16. Emphasis in the original.

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 16; 239.

the future pontiff seems to depart from the Mystical Doctor's teaching to set forth his own formulation: "All things considered, it seems that rather than the virtue that causes union, faith, by reason of its intimate nature as a participation in the divine, functions as an infused power from which union with God and contemplation derive"²¹. With this observation, Wojtyła restates the issue in new terms, but the central question remains: what is it about faith that makes it a participation in the divine from which union with God derives?

Although Wojtyła concentrates on the unitive function of faith both in the lengthy analysis of John of the Cross's works and in the doctrinal resumé which pulls together the threads of the discourse, when he comes to the appendix of his dissertation, which compares John of the Cross with Thomas Aquinas, Wojtyła sets faith as a purgative virtue on equal footing with faith as a unitive power²². Both of these points are related to the doctrine of the atonement. How is faith a purgative virtue? According to Wojtyła, "usually the purifying role attributed to the virtue of faith by St. Thomas consists in cleansing the intellect from error by adhering to the truth"²³. This basic insight of faith as an adherence to truth is present throughout Wojtyła's later writings; it is truth that frees man from the slavery to sin, and it is truth that unites man to God, who is Truth itself²⁴.

Hence, it seems that there are sufficient grounds to argue that Wojtyła's doctoral thesis opened the question of faith as both a purgative virtue and a means of union with God, though Wojtyła never seemed entirely satisfied with the explanation of that union as found in John of the Cross. Nevertheless, the way the question is posed, namely, 'in what way is faith a proportional means of union with God' is highly suggestive for exploring alternative answers. Indeed, it seems that Wojtyła's later writings provide just such an alternative. While the two aspects of faith here considered are closely intertwined, it will be necessary to separate them into two threads, examining faith first as a means of union with God and then as a purgative virtue²⁵.

²¹ K. WOJTYŁA, *Faith According to Saint John of the Cross*, 267–68.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, 269–72.

²³ *Ibid.*, 271.

²⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*

²⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 271.

Faith as a means of union with God

Although Wojtyła's early doctoral research was capable of framing the issue of faith as both a purgative virtue and a means of union with God, the conceptual resources he found in John of the Cross were unable to provide a satisfactory answer. Faith was conceived as a *thing* that possessed an essential likeness to God, a likeness that was denied to every other *thing*. Union with God was described as the union of the intellect through knowledge of the 'divine essence'; here, too, God himself seems to be presented as a *thing*, a divine essence. The distance between this early 'impersonal' language and Wojtyła's later personalist approach is striking. Anyone familiar with the personalist approach present throughout the writings of John Paul II will be surprised at the nearly complete absence of personalism in his doctoral thesis. The contrast is illuminating, since it shows to what extent Wojtyła's early training in neoscholasticism, with its concentration upon the 'divine essence' as the 'object' of union, was both enriched and surpassed in his later works. For Wojtyła, however, this change in his thought was not so much the repudiation of neo-Scholasticism as its full flowering²⁶.

While Wojtyła's adoption of personalism was the outcome of his own philosophical development, it also corresponded to a wider movement in Catholic thought which found expression in the Second Vatican Council, particularly in the Council's Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*. The personalist description of both Revelation and faith contained in this conciliar document encouraged Wojtyła's reflections in the same direction. Hence, when in 1972 Wojtyła, now Cardinal Archbishop of Cracow, published a commentary on Vatican II entitled *Sources of Renewal*, the theme of

²⁶ That John Paul II never abandoned Scholastic principles, even if he rarely used Scholastic terminology, is clear in his last book, published shortly before his death in 2005. "If we wish to speak rationally of good and evil, we have to return to Saint Thomas Aquinas, that is, to the philosophy of being. With the phenomenological method, for example, we can study experiences of morality, religion, or simply what it is to be human, and draw from them a significant enrichment of our knowledge. Yet, we must not forget that all these analyses implicitly presuppose the reality of the Absolute Being and also the reality of being human, that is, being a creature. If we do not set out from such 'realist' presuppositions, we end up in a vacuum." John Paul II, *Memory and Identity*, 12.

faith as a means of union with God is still present in his thought, but is expressed in a new way.

At this stage in his thinking, Wojtyła holds that faith has two aspects or expressions, which he designates as the 'faith of profession' and the 'faith of vocation'. In the first place, faith, as man's response to God's self-revelation, consists in the profession of revealed truth: this is faith's most basic act. Yet, God's revelation of himself is not simply a verbal declaration, but a particular action on God's part, with the objective of bringing man to share in the divine nature and the divine life. Since God's revelation of himself is not simply the handing on of information but an invitation to discipleship and communion, it follows that the human response of faith includes a second expression, that of vocation²⁷. "In accepting this revelation men are not only confronted with a reality which is God in himself, but at the same time find that they have been led into the depths of this mysterious, supernatural reality and thus that their vocation is to be united with God"²⁸.

If man's vocation is to be united with God, in what does this union consist? Is it still the union of the intellect through knowledge of the divine essence, as it was framed in his doctoral thesis on John of the Cross?²⁹ It seems that Wojtyła's thought has taken a different turn.

The work of salvation signifies a particular union with God, or rather a communion which is mysterious and at the same time profoundly real. This is the realism of grace in which God, in his superabundant love, adopts man as his son and lives with him as a friend. Thus revelation is not only the manifestation of the mystery of God, but also an invitation, by accepting which man participates in the work of salvation³⁰.

Thus, in *Sources of Renewal*, Wojtyła clearly redefines union with God in terms of communion with God; no longer is such union described in terms of knowledge of the divine essence (*something*) but as relationship with *someone* who is Father and friend. Here, the same question that Wojtyła posed in his doctoral thesis could be raised:

²⁷ Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal*, 57–58.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 55.

²⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 54–55.

what is it about faith that makes it apt to produce friendship or communion with God? The answer to that question must await Wojtyła's pontificate for a more fully developed response³¹.

In 1998, Wojtyła, now as Pope John Paul II, returned to the theme of faith in his encyclical letter *Fides et Ratio*. The encyclical does not intend to provide an exhaustive treatment of faith; rather, it considers faith primarily in relations to other forms of knowledge collectively grouped under the heading 'reason'. Thus, at first glance, it seems as though this encyclical has little to say on a topic such as faith and salvation, justification, or atonement. Yet, one of the most important reflections of the encyclical is indeed pertinent to the theme. Before speaking of divine faith, John Paul II examined the phenomenon of 'belief', which characterizes man's relationship with other human beings. By believing, human beings entrust themselves to the knowledge acquired by other people, but even more importantly, they open themselves to interpersonal relationships which are humanly richer than the knowledge of mere evidence. Summarizing his own reflections, John Paul II defines man as a being who *searches for the truth and who searches for someone in whom he can put his trust* (cf. *Fides et Ratio* 33).

Human perfection, then, consists not simply in acquiring an abstract knowledge of the truth, but in a dynamic relationship of faithful self-giving with others. It is in this faithful self-giving that a person finds a fullness of certainty and security. At the same time, however, knowledge through belief, grounded as it is on trust between persons, is linked to truth: in the act of believing, men and women entrust themselves to the truth which the other declares to them³².

If this thought holds true on the level of human interpersonal relationships, then it is all the more valid when applied to man's relationship to God³³. The human vocation to communion with God requires this same dynamism of belief, in which human beings entrust themselves to God and in doing so affirm that God is trustworthy. Christi-

³¹ Cf. K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal*, 54–55.

³² JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 32.

³³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio*, 32.

anity, by presenting Jesus as “the way, the truth and the life” (cf. Jn 14:6) offers human beings the concrete possibility of attaining this innate and God-given aspiration³⁴. Thus, once more, the act of faith is of its very nature a means of communion with God.

Wojtyła’s final word on faith as a means of union with God comes in his last book, *Memory and Identity*, published in 2005 shortly before his death. When describing the unitive way, John Paul II quotes *Lumen Gentium* 36: “Christ, made obedient unto death and because of this exalted by the Father (cf. Phil 2:8–9), has entered into the glory of his kingdom. All things are subjected to him until he subjects himself and all created things to the Father, so that God may be all in all (cf. 1 Cor 15:27–28).” Although in this text the Second Vatican Council is thinking on a cosmic scale, John Paul II sees in it an illustration of what union with God means³⁵.

If the kingly way, indicated by Christ, leads definitively to the state in which “God will be all in all,” the union with God that can be experienced on earth is attained in just the same way. We can find God in everything, we can commune with him in and through all created things. Created things cease to be a danger for us as once they were, particularly while we were still at the purgative stage of our journey. Creation, and other people in particular, not only regain their true light, given to them by God the Creator, but, so to speak, they lead us to God himself, in the way that he willed to reveal himself: as Father, Redeemer and Spouse³⁶.

What does John Paul II mean by the ‘kingly way’? It is a reference to three offices or ‘munera’ of Christ in which all Christians share by virtue of their baptism: priest, prophet, and king. Wojtyła dedicated ample pages to the Christian’s participation in these offices both in his 1972 book *Sources of Renewal* and in his first papal encyclical *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), though allusions to these three ‘munera’ seem to become less frequent as his pontificate advanced. For Wojtyła, the ‘kingly office’ is expressed in Christian self-mastery, in the dominion of oneself which is always ordered to the giving of

³⁴ Cf. *Ibid.*, 31–33.

³⁵ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Memory and Identity*, 30.

³⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Memory and Identity*, 30.

oneself. Thus, the life of faith as communion with God has moral implications, and the unitive function of faith stands in a close relationship with its purgative function.

Faith as means of expiating sin

Up to this point, the course of these reflections has followed Wojtyła's thinking concerning faith as a means of union, but it must not be forgotten that for him, faith is also a purgative virtue. Just as there was a progressive enrichment of his notion of union through personalist categories, so too was there a transformation of his understanding of sin and its expiation through a personalist understanding of the act of faith. This development of Wojtyła's thought is found in a rather unexpected place: his 1986 papal encyclical on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem* (Lord and Giver of Life).

The central chapter of the encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem* is a prolonged meditation on the words of John 16:8: "And when he [the Counselor] comes he will convince the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgement"³⁷.

John Paul II's reflection on this passage from John's Gospel is marked by an attentive reading of the text³⁸. "In the mind of Jesus," he writes, "sin, righteousness and judgment have a very precise meaning, different from the meaning that one might be inclined to attribute to these words independently of the speaker's explanation"³⁹.

What precisely do these terms mean in this context? John Paul answers by quoting from John's text: "concerning sin, because they do not believe in me; concerning righteousness, because I go to the Father, and you will see me no more; concerning judgment, because the ruler of this world is judged"(John 16:9–11). In this passage, 'sin' is equated with incredulity, the rejection of Jesus by 'his own', begin-

³⁷ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 27.1. English text in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. M. Miller, 268–339 (Huntington, Ind.: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996). Numbered references to the encyclical follow the system of Miller's edition, in which the first part of the number follows standard usage, whereas the number following the decimal indicates the specific paragraph within longer numbers.

³⁸ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 27.3.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

ning with the people of his hometown of Nazareth, and culminating in his condemnation⁴⁰.

For John Paul II, Jesus' words in the Upper Room on sin as incredulity or disbelief break open new horizons for understanding sin, and consequently, for understanding atonement. This breakthrough necessarily requires a rereading of the whole history of salvation, starting with the witness regarding the origins of sin in human history against the backdrop of creation.

Indeed, John Paul II's theology is drawn to the mystery of creation like a magnet. Man's place in the world and in the history of salvation cannot be understood without taking into account God's original plan for humanity; therefore, the witness regarding the "beginning" is indispensable. This witness, however, is not confined to the Book of Genesis, but is present in the whole of Revelation, which testifies that when God creates, he calls into existence out of nothing. In other words, he gives existence, and therefore existence itself belongs to the order of gift. It follows that if the visible world is created for man, then it, too, is given to man as a gift. Yet man himself is a creature who, in addition to the gift of existence, receives in his own humanity the 'image and likeness' to God as a special gift. For John Paul II, this 'image and likeness' means not only rationality and freedom, but also the capacity of having a personal 'I-Thou' relationship with God; this in turn implies the possibility of entering into a covenant with God⁴¹.

According to the witness of the beginning, God ... has revealed to man that, as the "image and likeness" of his Creator, he is called to participate in truth and love. This participation means a life in union with God, who is "eternal life." But man, under the influence of the "father of lies," has separated himself from this participation⁴².

While on the one hand, human disobedience means a turning away from God, on the other hand, it implies an opening of the mind and will to the 'father of lies'. The act of disobedience involves a con-

⁴⁰ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 27.4.

⁴¹ Cf. *Ibid.*, 34.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 37.1.

sent to the motivation which is contained in the first temptation and in every temptation since: distrust and suspicion of God. The words of the serpent place the Creator in a state of suspicion in the mind of the creature. The one who is the Creator and giver of every good is now seen as a limit to human freedom and happiness⁴³.

The traditional interpretation of sin—and in this case, the first sin—as ‘disobedience’ acquires new depth. Here it is not simply a matter of a mere violation of ‘clubhouse rules’, or of Adam and Eve being caught with their hands in the proverbial cookie jar. What are at stake are the deeply personal values upon which communion with God depends: trust in God, and belief in his Word. Sin, on the other hand, contains in itself the direct antithesis of these values. As John Paul II states succinctly, “at the root of human sin is the lie which is a radical rejection of the truth contained in the Word of the Father, through whom is expressed the loving omnipotence of the Creator”⁴⁴. The ‘un-truth’ of sin and its inner motivations also has anthropological ramifications⁴⁵.

Here we find ourselves at the very center of what could be called the “anti-Word,” that is to say the “anti-truth:” For the truth about man becomes falsified: who man is and what are the impassable limits of his being and freedom. This “anti-truth” is possible because at the same time there is a complete falsification of the truth about who God is⁴⁶.

Because distrust in the goodness of God as Creator leads to disbelief in his Word, the theological dimension of sin has an immediately Christological implication⁴⁷.

According to the witness concerning the beginning, sin in its original reality takes place in man’s will—and conscience—first of all as “disobedience,” that is, as opposition of the will of man to the will of God. This original disobedience presupposes a rejection, or at

⁴³ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 37.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.2.

⁴⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 37.3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Cf. *Ibid.*, 33.2.

least a turning away from the truth contained in the Word of God, who creates the world. This Word is the same Word who was “in the beginning with God,” who “was God,” and without whom “nothing has been made of all that is,” since “the world was made through him.”(Cf. Jn 1:1, 2, 3, 10). He is the Word who is also the eternal law, the source of every law which regulates the world and especially human acts⁴⁸.

John Paul then draws out the consequences of this Christological reading of Genesis for his interpretation of John 16, to shed further light on sin as ‘unbelief’ in the messianic mission of Jesus⁴⁹.

When therefore on the eve of his Passion Jesus Christ speaks of the sin of those who “do not believe in him,” in these words of his, full of sorrow, there is as it were a distant echo of that sin which in its original form is obscurely inscribed in the mystery of creation. For the one who is speaking is not only the Son of Man but the one who is also “the first-born of all creation,” “for in him all things were created ...through him and for him” (Cf. Col 1:15–18)⁵⁰.

There is consequently a structural similarity between the account of original sin and the Paschal Mystery⁵¹. “In the light of this truth we can understand that the ‘disobedience’ in the mystery of the beginning presupposes in a certain sense the same ‘non-faith,’ that same ‘they have not believed’ which will be repeated in the Paschal Mystery”⁵².

If indeed the root of all sin is ‘unbelief’, then it is self-evident that the contrary movement to sin is nothing other than ‘belief’, that is, faith. By its very nature as ‘belief’—trusting in God and accepting his Word—faith strikes at the roots of sin and effects communion with God. Thus, the act of faith can rightly be seen as a ‘location’ where atonement takes place. The implications of this insight for both subjective and objective atonement are compelling, though not without meeting some objections and difficulties.

⁴⁸ JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 33.2.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ Cf. *Ibid.*

⁵² *Ibid.*

Possible difficulties

After showing how faith achieves both expiation from sin and union with God, and thus constitutes a ‘location’ where subjective atonement takes place, some difficulties must be examined and possible objections overcome. The principle difficulty concerns the connection between subjective and objective atonement, for it might seem as though the believer’s faith in God would be sufficient to achieve subjective atonement, without any reference to the objective atonement realized by Christ’s unique mediation. Would not such a view of faith and atonement effectively “empty the Cross of its power” (cf 1 Cor 1:17)? Closely related to this critique is the possible accusation that faith thus conceived has been transformed into a merely human work. Since it seems to be within man’s power to believe God, thus repudiating sin and reentering communion with God, has not the approach simply re-proposed a Pelagian understanding of atonement?

Regarding this second objection, it must be recalled that although faith is a human act, it is not a *merely* human act. With Wojtyła, one must recognize that faith is a “supernatural reality, which is in man but does not originate from him. It rises up in him, takes shape and develops as the fruit of a unique encounter, the origin of which is God’s revelation of himself”⁵³. Neither the act of faith itself nor the conversion that accompanies it can take place in man without the action of the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, no one but the Holy Spirit, who searches the depths of God, can “convince the world”, of the mystery of sin. An analysis of human conscience is insufficient to understand the mystery of iniquity. The gravity of sin can only be seen against the backdrop of God’s response to human sin in the Cross of Christ⁵⁴.

Concerning the first objection, far from emptying the Cross of Christ of its power, John Paul II’s reflection on the relationship between faith and sin as ‘unbelief’ sheds light on the intrinsic connection between the Cross of Christ and every single human sin. Surely it is not uncommon for the sincere but searching believer to ask: ‘Does Jesus *really* bear my sins on the Cross? How can my sins, two thousand years later, be in any way connected to the events of Calvary?’ Is this

⁵³ K. WOJTYŁA, *Sources of Renewal*, 19.

⁵⁴ Cf. JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 32.1.

not one of the most difficult doctrines to explain and defend? Yet, John Paul II's thinking shows how it can be done:

When on the eve of the Passover Jesus speaks of the Holy Spirit as the one who “will convince the world concerning sin,” on the one hand this statement must be given the widest possible meaning, insofar as it includes all the sin in the history of humanity. But on the other hand, when Jesus explains that this sin consists in the fact that “they do not believe in him,” this meaning seems to apply only to those who rejected the messianic mission of the Son of Man and condemned him to death on the Cross. But one can hardly fail to notice that this more “limited” and historically specified meaning of sin expands, until it assumes a universal dimension by reason of the universality of the Redemption, accomplished through the Cross. The revelation of the mystery of the Redemption opens the way to an understanding in which every sin wherever and whenever committed has a reference to the Cross of Christ—and therefore indirectly also to the sin of those who “have not believed in him,” and who condemned Jesus Christ to death on the Cross⁵⁵.

By establishing the premise that the structure of sin consists in disobedience motivated by *disbelief in God's Word*, John Paul II lays the groundwork for accepting the logical conclusion that every sin whatsoever implies a rejection of that same Word, who was made flesh and died on Calvary. This ‘logic’, however, is only apparent to those who have been ‘convinced of sin’ by the Holy Spirit.

By convincing the “world” concerning the sin of Golgotha, concerning the death of the innocent Lamb, as happens on the day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit also convinces of every sin, committed in any place and at any moment in human history: for he demonstrates its relationship with the Cross of Christ. The “convincing” is the demonstration of the evil of sin, of every sin, in relation to the Cross of Christ. Sin, shown in this relationship, is recognized in the entire dimension of evil proper to it, through the “*mysterium iniquitatis*” (cf 2 Thess 2:7) which is hidden within it. Man does not know this dimension—he is absolutely ignorant of it apart from

⁵⁵ JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 29.3.

the Cross of Christ. So he cannot be “convinced” of it except by the Holy Spirit⁵⁶.

Conclusion

The primary question that has occupied the attention of this study has been whether the act of faith is a ‘location’ where atonement takes place. Having clarified that the question concerns subjective atonement as the Christian’s participation in the work of Christ, an affirmative answer has been given, showing how the act of faith displays the two distinguishing characteristics of atonement: (1) reparation of sin and (2) communion with God.

A secondary question has cropped up at different times along the way in several different forms. (1) What is it about faith that makes it necessary for salvation? (2) Conversely, what is it about salvation that it requires faith? (3) How is faith ‘proportionate’ to the reparation of sins and union with God? Atonement theology, with its focus on the expiation of sins to achieve reconciliation between persons, sheds light on the intrinsic relationship between faith and salvation.

As adherence to God’s Word, faith is the necessary condition for a personal relationship of communion with God, that is, salvation. Any notion of salvation that sees the final human condition as merely a ‘state of bliss’ or an absence of punishment is an impoverished notion. Christian salvation is only properly grasped as entry into the loving communion with God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Such loving communion requires a kind of knowledge distinct from the apprehension of a mere ‘object’; communion requires interpersonal knowledge, which comes in only one form: belief. Thus, both faith and salvation are so constituted that the two realities stand in a mutual relation.

Sin, on the other hand “is the greatest evil from which man has to be delivered”⁵⁷ precisely because it erodes the very foundations for a personal relationship with God. Man’s personal cooperation in atonement necessarily involves repentance as sorrow for sins committed and turning away from sin. Repentance means ‘re-thinking’, a change of mind and heart (*metanoia*) which brings human thinking in accord-

⁵⁶ JOHN PAUL II, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, 32.2.

⁵⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Memory and Identity*, 24.

ance with divine thought under the influence of the Holy Spirit. This is exactly in what faith consists: accepting and adhering to the Word of God. Through this acceptance and adherence, human beings turn away from sin and turn towards God. Since the refusal to believe is the root of all sin, it follows that the ‘obedience of faith’ is both a direct remedy for the disobedience of sin and the beginning of a renewed friendship with God. Thus, by examining faith according to the two coordinates of atonement, the proportion between faith and salvation is seen more clearly, and the ‘delicate task’ of showing by theological reasoning the relation between the two finds new avenues for its fulfillment.

Summary: The doctrine of atonement may best be defined and distinguished by two fundamental coordinates: (1) reparation for sin and (2) reconciliation with God. This paper will examine possible ways in which the act of faith is a “place” in which the believer effectively makes reparation for sin and is reconciled with God. This insight will be developed from Pope John Paul II’s meditation on the Holy Spirit’s mission to “convince the world concerning sin” (Jn 16:8), as found in the second chapter of his 1986 encyclical *Dominum et Vivificantem*. John Paul points out that “convincing concerning sin” has a precise referent, namely, the refusal to believe in Jesus (cf John 16:8). Since the refusal to believe is the root of all sin, it follows that the “obedience of faith” is both a direct remedy for the disobedience of sin and the beginning of a renewed friendship with God, that is, atonement.

Keywords: Atonement (doctrine of); faith; John Paul II; *Dominum et Vivificantem*; Holy Spirit; personalism

Sommario: La dottrina della soddisfazione può essere definita e distinta da due coordinate fondamentali: (1) la riparazione del peccato e (2) la riconciliazione con Dio. Questo studio esamina il ruolo della fede nella soddisfazione come “luogo” in cui il credente effettivamente fa riparazione per il peccato ed è riconciliato con Dio. Questa intuizione sarà sviluppata a partire dalla meditazione sulla missione dello Spirito Santo di «convincere il mondo rispetto al peccato» (Gv 16,8), nell’enciclica *Dominum et Vivificantem* (1986) di papa S. Giovanni Paolo II, il quale rileva che questa «convincione rispetto al peccato» ha un referente ben preciso: il rifiuto di credere in Gesù. Se dunque è vero che il rifiuto della fede e la radice di ogni peccato, ne consegue che la «obbedienza della fede» è un rimedio diretto per la disobbedienza del peccato e l’inizio di una rinnovata amicizia con Dio.

Parole chiave: Soddifazione (dottrina); fede; Giovanni Paolo II; *Dominum et Vivificantem*; Spirito Santo; personalismo.