

# The Prolongation of the Incarnation

## Toward a Biblical Understanding of the Church

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**Abstract:** *The author argues that the church is a prolongation of the Incarnation. He begins by explaining the issues involved in this position. Then he turns to Paul's Letter to the Colossians, where we read: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church" (Col 1:24). Then he turns to Caesarius of Arles, who speaks of the church as persons grafted into one body that enables them to be Christ to others. Christ acts through the members, using the material to bring about the spiritual. Next, the author examines John of Damascus's view that our unity with Christ as believers allows us to*

*speak of experiences of the church as being experiences of Christ and actions of the church as being actions of Christ. Finally, the author finds in the Letter to the Hebrews passages that indicate that it is "through Christ" in unity that the members of the church may participate in the unique priestly sacrificial activity of Christ. Therefore, the church—mystical body of Christ—is a type of Christ's earthly ministry and of his heavenly ministry of building the Kingdom that is yet to come.*

### Introduction: *Status Quaestionae*

At the previous meeting of the Catholic-Evangelical Conversation, Robert Barron challenged the group to aim for "Ecumenism 2.0." In using this term, he employed an analogy from the world of information technology, wherein the second generation of a software replaces outmoded code, ideally, with new and more effective forms. His call for an Ecumenism 2.0 was for a more effective form of ecumenism that promotes both Christian unity and active, common proclamation.

This challenge is consistent with the vision of the Lausanne Movement. To use the IT analogy, codes are routines. Barron's point, if I understand him correctly, is that while theology has significantly advanced in its understanding of the Reformation controversies, we still use the old codes. We still speak using outdated theological language, which is not able to "run" the more advanced "programs" of theology today.<sup>1</sup>

I have made a similar point in my work on grace and merit: that the old frames of thought trap us and prevent an advance toward

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1. Robert Barron, "Pope Francis and the Evangelicals," Catholic-Evangelical Conversation, Mundelein, (September 11, 2014).

reconciliation.<sup>2</sup> Speaking about law and gospel, I noted that this way of framing the question had “become a heuristic, a mental short-cut, an unconscious routine to cope with complexity.”<sup>3</sup> As such, to break out of the routine, we need to get back to the complexity, so we can discover the questions, the real questions, for us in the twenty-first century.<sup>4</sup> I went on to explain:

My purpose . . . is to restore the question of law and gospel [to the status of] a question. To do this, we need to disengage it from the heuristic it has become and come to understand its contemporary significance. The heuristic . . . I believe is at work is what management scientists call the “framing trap.” If we can break out of the frame, we can free ourselves from the mental short-cut and re-engage the complexity of the issues. In this way, law and gospel can again be among the *quaestiones disputatae* in the full sense of the term.<sup>5</sup>

Let me approach our issue in the proper way to describe the church in the same manner. Last year, when Robert Barron asserted that we might be better served by speaking of the church as the Fathers do, as the “prolongation of the Incarnation,”<sup>6</sup> his

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2. Thomas A. Baima, “Law and Gospel: A Catholic Reflection on the New Law of Grace” unpublished lecture, Emmanuel Presbyterian Church, Warrenville, IL (March 11–14, 2004).

3. John S. Hammond, Ralph L. Keeney, and Howard Raiffa, “The Hidden Traps of Decision Making,” *Harvard Business Review* (1998): 47.

4. Baima, “Law and Gospel,” 1.

5. Ibid.

6. This definition of the Church has been suggested today by Pope Francis in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (*Joy of the Gospel*), 179.

intention was to break out of the outdated notions of a sacred institution and to plunge us back into a more densely theological way of speaking by describing Christ’s presence and action in the *koinonia* of his body. Barron said: “According to Catholic ecclesiology, the Church is not primarily an institution, but rather the prolongation of the Incarnation across space and time, the mystical body of Jesus through which people come to an encounter with the Lord.”<sup>7</sup>

In speaking this way, Barron was quoting Pope Francis from *Evangelii Gaudium*, when he says that “our brothers and sisters are the prolongation of the Incarnation for each of us.”<sup>8</sup> In speaking this way, Francis was reaching back to Marie-Dominique Chenu O.P., the great professor of the history of dogma at Le Saulchoir, for whom this was the preferred term for understanding the theology of the mystical body.<sup>9</sup>

Barron’s suggestion was met with opposition by Suzanne McDonald, who noted that such a formulation, when heard by Evangelical ears, would suggest idolatry. The group backed off and proposed some other images that might be mutually acceptable. In talking to John Armstrong as we planned this year’s session, I proposed that we return to the controversy between Barron and

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7. Barron.

8. Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: Apostolic Exhortation on the Joy of the Gospel* (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), 179. See also Matthew 25:40, which Francis cites in the text.

9. Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 147n181. See also Emile Mersch, S.J., *Morality and the Mystical Body* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1939), 61–91. Jurgen Moltman also uses this term in his work on ecclesiology in *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 73. See also *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Minneapolis: Augsburg/Fortress, 2015).

McDonald. I argued that the space occupied by the controversy is precisely where we will discover Ecumenism 2.0 on this particular doctrine. I did not know that circumstances would prevent both from joining us this year. But their exchange still sets the agenda of our conversation and deserves to be honored with responses from us. I am grateful, therefore, that Craig Higgins will offer a response to this paper.

To do so, some preliminary issues of methodology need attention. I subtitled this presentation “Toward a Biblical Understanding of Church.” To reach that goal, I need to say something about the Bible as an authority. I believe that I will find agreement in this group that we approach the Bible through the lens neither of theological relativism nor of rigid literalism. My approach strives to be consistent with contemporary Catholic dogmatic theologians. It was Joseph Ratzinger who commended the approach of canonical criticism in his book *Jesus of Nazareth*.<sup>10</sup> Allow me to share a somewhat long quotation from the founder of that approach, the late Professor Brevard Childs, that explains his method:

To briefly outline some of the main lines by which the church sought to establish a faithful reading of its Scriptures: First, the Old and New Testaments together constitute the Christian Bible. The voice of Israel and the voice of the evangelists compose a single narrative of God’s redemptive action spanning prophecy and fulfillment. The two testaments are neither to be fused nor separated. Furthermore, the Bible is to be read according to its literal or plain sense. Its salvific meaning is not esoteric or hidden, but plain and

forthright. Careful attention must be paid to its syntax and style. Yet the literal sense is to be balanced by a ruled reading—a reading informed by its subject matter and its confessional content. Augustine’s appeal for a reading to engender God’s love and love of neighbor is a classic form of ruled reading. Thirdly, the Bible contains different levels of meaning, not to be separated, that point to different dimensions of truth and that perform different functions for faith. The form of typology especially extends the meaning of an original event beyond its initial occurrence and finds in it an adumbration [sketch] of the one consistent purpose of God within history. It provides the Church in each generation with the ability to establish its position in God’s plan between salvation already experienced and salvation yet to be consummated. Finally, the revelation of God in Scripture is the source of the Church’s private devotions, communal liturgy, and homiletical instruction. Grounded in the promise that the Holy Spirit will continue to guide each generation of Christians to the final *eschaton*, the people of God await with eager expectation and fervent prayer its fulfillment.<sup>11</sup>

With Ratzinger, I believe that Childs has given a good articulation of an approach to Scripture that is neither relativistic nor literalistic. I also believe that this is a common ground for us in the Mundelein conversation. It is an approach to Scripture that would have been sympathetic to the early reformers who held creed and

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10. Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2007).

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11. Brevard S. Childs, “Jesus Christ the Lord and the Scriptures of the Church,” *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 1998), 11–12.

canon as monuments of the faith of the ancient church.<sup>12</sup> It is an approach that Catholics also find sympathetic to our position that Scripture is the supreme authority and that tradition, here represented by canon and creed, is indispensable for interpretation.<sup>13</sup>

## The Nature of the Church

I want to start my reflections on how we discuss the nature of the church with two approaches. To do so, let us look at the elements of Barron's statement. According to Catholic ecclesiology, the mission is to bring people in contact with Jesus as Lord. For this to happen, Jesus must be present to them not as an idea but as a person. During his earthly ministry, he did this in human form, providing the bridge to the divine nature of the Trinity. Barron (and the Fathers) assert that the same experience continues after the resurrection. After Easter, during his postresurrection ministry, Jesus in his glorified body extended his ministry to his disciples. At the Ascension, Jesus said:

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12. For an extended treatment of the notion of monuments, see Yves Congar, *The Meaning of Tradition*, with a forward by Avery Cardinal Dulles (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004).

13. John Paul II, *Ut Unum Sint*, The Encyclical Letter on Commitment to Ecumenism (Rome: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994), no. 79: "It is already possible to identify the areas in need of fuller study before a true consensus of faith can be achieved: 1) the relationship between Sacred Scripture, as the highest authority in matters of faith, and Sacred Tradition, as indispensable to the interpretation of the Word of God; 2) the Eucharist, as the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ, an offering of praise to the Father, the sacrificial memorial and Real Presence of Christ and the sanctifying outpouring of the Holy Spirit; 3) Ordination, as a Sacrament, to the threefold ministry of the episcopate, presbyterate and diaconate; 4) the Magisterium of the Church, entrusted to the Pope and the Bishops in communion with him, understood as a responsibility and an authority exercised in the name of Christ for teaching and safeguarding the faith; 5) the Virgin Mary, as Mother of God and Icon of the Church, the spiritual Mother who intercedes for Christ's disciples and for all humanity."

Full authority has been given to me both in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations. Baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teach them to observe all that I have commanded you. And lo, I am with you until the end of the age. (Mt 28)

So, the question is whether this experience continues to bring people into a saving relationship with the person of Jesus as the Divine *Logos* in a human body. But what does the Bible say about the location of Jesus's body? Matthew's Gospel says he is "with us until the end of the age" (Mt 28). And we know that after the resurrection, Jesus appears with body, blood, soul, and divinity undivided.<sup>14</sup> And we know from the Bible that he is sitting at the right hand of the Father, and he will come again, and, at the same time, he is with us always.<sup>15</sup>

The number of doctrines tied up in Barron's short statement are many. But, before I get into that, I want to set some agreements about method. First, I believe I am on firm ground saying that at our last meeting we established that everyone in the room recognizes everyone else in the room as Christians. We recognize

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14. This phrase, "body, blood, soul, and divinity," is based on Luke 24:39, "touch me and see that I am not a ghost." It is used in Catholic theology to describe the glorified body of the Lord in the postresurrection appearances and to describe the Eucharist.

15. To describe Christ's Eucharistic presence, Catholic theologians of the fourteenth century developed the term *adduco* from the *ad + duco* (I lead) to create a technical term, adduction, in English meaning "I bring to myself." In other words, Christ is brought into the sacrament without leaving heaven. This presence can be effected in myriad places. See, Thomas A. Baima, "Christ's True, Real and Substantial Presence," in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper*, ed. John H. Armstrong (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 129.

evangelism is an essential duty.<sup>16</sup> We also recognize that the church is being used by the Lord to effectively make the saving work of Jesus Christ available to us.<sup>17</sup> It was through the churches, and

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16. See “Lausanne Covenant,” no. 1: “We affirm our belief in the one-eternal God, Creator and Lord of the world, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who governs all things according to the purpose of his will. He has been calling out from the world a people for himself, and sending his people back into the world to be his servants and his witnesses, for the extension of his kingdom, the building up of Christ’s body, and the glory of his name.” <http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>. See also *Dominus Jesus* no. 5: “Faithful to God’s word, the Second Vatican Council teaches: ‘By this revelation then, the deepest truth about God and the salvation of man shines forth in Christ, who is at the same time the mediator and the fullness of all revelation.’ Furthermore, ‘Jesus Christ, therefore, the Word made flesh, sent “as a man to men,” “speaks the words of God” (Jn 3:34), and completes the work of salvation which his Father gave him to do (cf. Jn 5:36; 17:4). To see Jesus is to see his Father (cf. Jn 14:9). For this reason, Jesus perfected revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making himself present and manifesting himself: through his words and deeds, his signs and wonders, but especially through his death and glorious resurrection from the dead and finally with the sending of the Spirit of truth, he completed and perfected revelation and confirmed it with divine testimony. . . . The Christian dispensation, therefore, as the new and definitive covenant, will never pass away, and we now await no further new public revelation before the glorious manifestation of our Lord Jesus Christ (cf. 1 Tim 6:14 and Tit 2:13).’

“Thus, the Encyclical *Redemptoris missio* no.5 calls the Church once again to the task of announcing the Gospel as the fullness of truth: ‘In this definitive Word of his revelation, God has made himself known in the fullest possible way. He has revealed to mankind who he is. This definitive self-revelation of God is the fundamental reason why the church is missionary by her very nature. She cannot do other than proclaim the Gospel, that is, the fullness of the truth which God has enabled us to know about himself.’ Only the revelation of Jesus Christ, therefore, ‘introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs the human mind to ceaseless effort.’”

17. There is an important technical issue in Catholic doctrine as to what constitutes a church, properly so called. For this reason, in technical theology we distinguish between churches and ecclesial communities. While recognizing these important distinctions, I will use the term “church” in lower case to refer to the communities we each belong to for ease of phrasing in this paper. The next footnote contains the technical distinction. For the fundamental point about the Church (here meaning

not in spite of them, that the Gospel came to us with its power.<sup>18</sup> We believe in the authority of Scripture. And we believe that the Apostles’ Creed is both completely derived from Scripture and also is an expression of the Rule of Faith for interpreting Scripture.<sup>19</sup> There is likely more that we share in common, but these few points illustrate the state of our fellowship established last year.

Now, with the acknowledgment of this common ground between our theological traditions, I want to move into that space of disagreement. Struggling with disagreement is the only way to get to Ecumenism 2.0. I would claim that we are in a four-way conversation between the scriptures, creed, the Catholic theological traditions, and the Evangelical theological traditions (and note that I used the plural form). Each of us here at the conversation is already in agreement with three of the four elements.

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that intended by the Lord Jesus) see *Dominus Jesus* no. 16: “The Lord Jesus, the only Saviour, did not only establish a simple community of disciples, but constituted the Church as a salvific mystery: he himself is in the Church and the Church is in him (cf. Jn 15:1ff.; Gal 3:28; Eph 4:15–16; Acts 9:5). Therefore, the fullness of Christ’s salvific mystery belongs also to the Church, inseparably united to her Lord. Indeed, Jesus Christ continues his presence and his work of salvation in the Church and by means of the Church (cf. Col 1:24–27), which is his body (cf. 1 Cor 12:12–13, 27; Col 1:18). And thus, just as the head and members of a living body, though not identical, are inseparable, so too Christ and the Church can neither be confused nor separated, and constitute a single ‘whole Christ.’ This same inseparability is also expressed in the New Testament by the analogy of the Church as the Bride of Christ (cf. 2 Cor 11:2; Eph 5:25–29; Rev 21:2,9).”

18. See *Dominus Jesus*, no. 17. “Therefore, these separated Churches and communities as such, though we believe they suffer from defects, have by no means been deprived of significance and importance in the mystery of salvation. For the spirit of Christ has not refrained from using them as means of salvation which derive their efficacy from the very fullness of grace and truth entrusted to the Catholic Church.”

19. See *The Rule of Faith: Scripture, Canon and Creed in a Critical Age*, ed. Ephraim Radner and George Sumner (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Morehouse, 1998).

Methodologically, such a “quadralogue” offers something other approaches do not. It allows us to bring the distinctive theologies of our traditions into conversation with the common theologies. I would argue that the distinctions often contain the singular and creative insights that vivify a particular school of thought. If we do not grapple with them, we miss perhaps not the best but certainly the most energetic ideas that a school of thought may offer. Barron and MacDonald expressed their positions last year with the passion you find when something vitally important is at stake. That is where our conversation needs to be if we are to discover Ecumenism 2.0.

Finally, my approach. I want to start with the New Testament for the grounding of the fundamental idea. Next, I will jump to 542 CE and explore how Caesarius of Arles continued to speak of the prolongation of the Incarnation in much the same way as Francis does. Thirdly, I will examine John of Damascus to bring an Eastern Christian perspective on the iconoclast controversy. Last, I will return to the New Testament, to the Letter to the Hebrews, and try to relate its teaching to the sacramental principle. As a conclusion, I will touch on eschatology.

### Paul of Tarsus

As I begin with Saint Paul, I want to turn to the question of action and effects. At its root, the issue relates to whether the church is an actor in the process of salvation. I am referring to the doctrine of participatory mediation, according to which the Christian is united to the Redeemer and participates in a real, though subordinate, way in the mediation of grace to the world. To examine this point I want to look at Paul’s letter to the Colossians, where we read: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my

flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the church” (Col 1:24).<sup>20</sup>

I remember the first time I studied this passage. Perplexing is the fact that the sufficiency of Christ’s suffering and death is confronted with a text that plainly says those suffering were, in some way, incomplete. Paul’s sufferings complete Christ’s sufferings, which are applied to the church, Christ’s body. The law of contradiction will take over, unless “church” means the mystical body of Christ, in which the baptized person is united with the divine Person through the bridge of the humanity He assumed. If Paul is part of Christ, then Paul’s sufferings are Christ’s sufferings. Here is the scriptural warrant for one use of the phrase “prolongation of the Incarnation.” If Paul’s sufferings are Christ’s sufferings, then somehow Christ’s unique sufferings are *prolonged* to include his suffering through Paul. They are, in the end, the same sufferings of Christ, for the sake of our salvation.

### Caesarius of Arles<sup>21</sup>

I am going to follow this line of thought through history. It will be the “red thread,” as my former colleague Edward Oakes liked to say, which leads us through the argument. I am going to look next

20. See also I Corinthians 12:26. “If one part suffers, every part suffers with it. If one part is honored, every part rejoices with it.”

21. Caesarius of Arles, “Sermon 25” (I:CCL, 103, 111–12) in *The Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. III* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), 547–48. See also the Council of Orange, canon 25: “This also do we believe, in accordance with the Catholic faith, that after grace received through baptism, all the baptized are able and ought, with the aid and co-operation of Christ, to fulfil all duties needful for salvation, provided they are willing to labour faithfully. But that some men have been predestinated to evil by divine power, we not only do not believe, but if there be those who are willing to believe so evil a thing, we say to them with all abhorrence anathema. This also do we profess and believe to our soul’s health, that in every good work, it is not we

at Caesarius of Arles (sometimes called “of Chalon”). Caesarius is important because he was a bishop in Gaul in the early 500s and was a father of the Council of Orange.<sup>22</sup> Caesarius taught that God in heaven (and here he likely means Christ) feels the sufferings of those on earth. Listen for a moment to a text:

There is, therefore, an earthly as well as heavenly mercy, that is to say, a human and a divine mercy. Human mercy has compassion on the miseries of the poor. Divine mercy grants forgiveness of sins. Whatever human mercy bestows here on earth, divine mercy will return to us in our homeland. In this life God feels cold and hunger in all who are stricken with poverty; for, remember, he once said: “What you have done to the least of my brothers you have done to me” (Mt 25:40). Yes, God who sees fit to give his mercy in heaven wishes it to be a reality here on earth.<sup>23</sup>

What I think is important here is his application of Matthew 25 as bridging the distance between God and humanity in this time before the Second Coming. This text is another dimension of the same scriptural warrant found in Paul. Surely, there is no sense in which an individual Christian has anything other than a human nature, unless you really believe that in baptism a person is united with Christ and grafted into one body. That body, the church, is

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who begin, and are afterwards assisted by Divine mercy, but that God Himself, with no preceding merits on our part, first inspires within us faith and love.”

22. The Council of Orange was a provincial response to a radical reading of Augustine. Its teaching clarified Augustinian thought especially on free will and predestination. See Canon 25.

23. *Ibid.*, 548.

capable of being Christ to others. Christ acts through the members, using the material to bring about the spiritual. Christ’s presence is an action.

### John of Damascus

I have posed the argument that the scriptures describe several instances wherein the believer’s unity with Christ allows us to speak of experiences of the church as being experiences of Christ and of actions of the church as being actions of Christ. This is the “salvific mystery” that Catholics understand to be the essence of the church and Christ’s intention for the church. If we can establish this point, then Pope Francis’s description of the church as the prolongation of the Incarnation, can, with proper qualifications, be used by both Catholics and Evangelicals. Christ’s presence and action give us a way to speaking of the church as a complex reality.<sup>24</sup>

The problem for most Western Christians is that they never understood that the Second Council of Nicaea was a Christological council. It was not about the veneration of images per se but fundamentally about the sacramental principle that God uses the

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24. See *Lumen Gentium* and Francis Sullivan, *The Church We Believe In: One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), 5, 18. Sullivan makes two points worth noting. First is that the church is a creature. It is not God. So we do not believe in the church as we believe in God. To believe in God means to put our faith in God. We cannot do that with the church. Instead, we mean that the church is analogous to the Incarnation as an event in the economy of salvation, by which God accomplishes our salvation and reveals it to us. In other words, it is “a work of God, part of God’s plan for the salvation of the world.” The church is not, therefore, a mere human institution. Sullivan later asserts that there are divine and human elements in the church. The divine elements, however, are not God (it is not the hypostatic union) but rather elements of created grace. He is speaking of both the gifts that the Spirit gives to individual members and the graces that structure the Church for her role in salvation history. All this is a work of the Holy Spirit.

material to bring about the spiritual. It would be the monk Yuhanna (Yanah) ibn Mansur ibn Sarjun, commonly known as John of Damascus, who provided the source material used by the Fathers of the Second Council of Nicaea to settle the Christological controversy.

Let us look briefly at the controversy. Theologically, the iconoclasts argued that icons were depictions of one or another of the Christological heresies.<sup>25</sup> Either the icon depicted the Lord Jesus in a purely physical way, therefore separating the two natures, as in Nestorianism. Or, the icon depicted the Lord as both human and divine, therefore mixing the natures, as in monophysitism. To avoid such heretical effects, the iconoclasts advocated a strict opposition to images. They quoted texts from the Old Testament law as justification. The iconoclasts argued that the substance of wood and paint were not capable of conveying the divine reality. Hold on to this criticism, as it will be that “red thread” that leads us through the theological maze. The sole “icon” was the Eucharist, for it was “of the same substance” as the Lord Jesus, and, therefore, it alone could adequately image the divine/human reality without separation or mixture.

The iconodules (proponents of icons) argued differently.<sup>26</sup> They argued that the prohibition of depicting Almighty God was set aside when God himself gave the depiction in the Incarnation. Jesus is “the image of the invisible God.” Central to the argument of the iconodules was the distinction between pagan gods, who had no substance, and Jesus, Mary, and the saints, all of whom are historical persons. Their historical reality warranted the depiction.

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25. Iconoclast means, literally, “destroyer of icons.”

26. Iconodule means, literally, “servant of icons.”

The iconodules also quoted Old Testament texts (the ones about images in the tent of meeting and the tabernacle) as a warrant for the use of images in worship. It was John of Damascus who made the critical distinction between worship and veneration. Worship (*latría*) was reserved for the Creator alone. Veneration (*dulia*) could be given to creatures (the emperor, religious images), as they were prototypic. The emperor was an image of God’s governing authority. The religious icon was an image of the virtues of the one depicted.

When I use the term “prototype,” I am invoking the form of biblical interpretation known as typology. Hence, the notion of an image pointing toward a more complete reality was already embedded in Christian theology. While more prominent in the Alexandrian school as one of the elements of their allegorical method, it was, nevertheless, also recognized by the Antiochian school. As the texts of the Bible themselves employ typology, the grammatical method of exegesis must recognize it.<sup>27</sup> Nowhere do we find typology so clearly in the New Testament as in the Letter to the Hebrews. If there is a scriptural warrant for the prolongation of Christ’s suffering, is it also true for priestly worship?

## Hebrews

Russell Moore writes:

The very nature of the sacramental system, in which the believer is repeatedly infused with the grace of Christ through the sacraments, seems to [Baptists] to be precisely the problem the writer of Hebrews identifies in the

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27. See Romans 5:15.

shadowy, temporal animal sacrifices of the old covenant. (Heb 10:11–14) It seems that, contrary to the Catholic sacramental economy, the new covenant calls together a church that is founded on belief, a looking away from self and toward an already crucified, already resurrected Messiah. In this case, the Supper builds up the church through proclamation—a proclamation of an already accomplished salvation received through looking toward and resting in Christ. (See John 3:13–15)<sup>28</sup>

The author of Hebrews writes:

In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear. Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered; and being made perfect he became the source of eternal salvation to all who obey him, being designated by God a high priest after the order of Melchiz'edek. (Heb. 5:7–10)

In this text from the Letter to the Hebrews, we step into a sustained Christological treatise about the uniqueness of Christ.<sup>29</sup> It

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28. Russell Moore, “A Baptist Response,” in *Understanding Four Views on the Lord's Supper* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2007), 140.

29. See “Lausanne Covenant,” no. 3, “The Uniqueness and Universality of Christ”: “We affirm that there is only one Saviour and only one gospel, although there is a wide diversity of evangelistic approaches. We recognise that everyone has some knowledge of God through his general revelation in nature. But we deny that this can save, for people suppress the truth by their unrighteousness. We also reject as derogatory to Christ and the gospel every kind of syncretism and dialogue which implies that Christ

is the text that distinguishes the Old Testament priesthood from that of the New Testament. In summary, they are two different priesthoods. One is the hereditary priesthood of Aaron. The other is the mysterious priesthood of Melchisedek. Jesus of Nazareth, according to the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, is not an Aaronic priest.<sup>30</sup> But consider how the idea of priestly worship is developed in Hebrews. One text of critical importance is Hebrews 13:15–16: “Through *him* then let *us* continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such *sacrifices* are pleasing to God” (Heb. 13:15–16).<sup>31</sup>

After spending pages explaining that there is only one priest of the New Covenant, the author of Hebrews attributes priestly

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speaks equally through all religions and ideologies. Jesus Christ, being himself the only God-man, who gave himself as the only ransom for sinners, is the only mediator between God and people. There is no other name by which we must be saved. All men and women are perishing because of sin, but God loves everyone, not wishing that any should perish but that all should repent. Yet those who reject Christ repudiate the joy of salvation and condemn themselves to eternal separation from God. To proclaim Jesus as ‘the Saviour of the world’ is not to affirm that all people are either automatically or ultimately saved, still less to affirm that all religions offer salvation in Christ. Rather it is to proclaim God’s love for a world of sinners and to invite everyone to respond to him as Saviour and Lord in the wholehearted personal commitment of repentance and faith. Jesus Christ has been exalted above every other name; we long for the day when every knee shall bow to him and every tongue shall confess him Lord (Gal. 1:6–9; Rom. 1:18–32; I Tim. 2:5,6; Acts 4:12; John 3:16–19; II Pet. 3:9; II Thess. 1:7–9; John 4:42; Matt. 11:28; Eph. 1:20, 21; Phil. 2:9–11).”

30. This requires some more detailed exegesis than this essay will allow. Mary of Nazareth is the cousin of Elizabeth, who is married to Zechariah, of the priestly tribe. Since it would be rare for someone to marry outside of their tribe, Catholic exegesis attributes priestly lineage to Jesus through Mary. Of course, the gospel genealogies all track through Joseph’s line, who was of the house of David. But, of course, Joseph is not the father of Jesus.

31. Emphasis added.

activity to the church.<sup>32</sup> The only way this makes sense and does not violate the law of contradiction is to see the sacrifice of praise to God as an action of the one priest of the New Covenant. “Through him” indicates that the unity that the members of the church have with Jesus allows us to participate in his unique priestly activity of offering sacrifice. Clearly, the author does not imagine this participation taking anything away from the unique priesthood of Christ, for, above all other men, there is no one so firm in his assertion of the uniqueness of Christ in this regard as the author of Hebrews. The only conclusion I can reach is that the uniqueness is not compromised by the participation that the church has through her union with Christ.

### Eschatology

To draw the argument to a close, let me propose that if there can be a *prefiguration* there might also be a *postfiguration*. As the Old Testament priesthood points toward Christ, the New Testament priesthood of the church is the anamnesis of Christ. So, too, the church—mystical body of Christ—is a type of Christ’s earthly ministry and of his heavenly ministry. The church is also a type of the kingdom of the new heavens and the new earth.

The key notion, I propose, is that of a semirealized eschatology, much like Brevard Childs offered in the long quotation I read. Joseph Ratzinger puts it this way:

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32. Understood as participation in the priestly activity of Christ. This line of thought is not developed in Hebrews but returns in the First Letter of Peter with its theology of the priestly people. See Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priest: According to the New Testament*, trans. J. Bernard Orchard, OSB (Petersham, Mass.: St. Bede’s Publications, 1986).

Jesus proclaimed the good news of the Kingdom of God as a reality which is both present and still to come. . . . Christianity knew that a most significant coming had already taken place. It no longer proclaimed a pure theology of hope, living from the mere expectation of the future, but pointed to a “now” in which the promise had already become present. . . . Transposed into spiritual terms, this means that believers . . . knew the Lord’s closeness, but also that he has his own time. . . . They lived in the time of the Gentiles, which is simultaneously an age when God is afflicted in the world and an age of world-wide fruitfulness for the grain of wheat which fell to the ground in Jesus. And all this means, finally, that the tension between *shema* and reality is what marks out the confines where Christian existence takes place—then as much as now.<sup>33</sup>

This semirealized eschatology offers a theological warrant for the notion behind the phrase “prolongation of the Incarnation,” in the sense that all the works of God are continuing to move the cosmos toward the second and glorious coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, after which the church will cede its role in the world to the Kingdom with the descent of the New Jerusalem, the new heaven and the new earth.

### Conclusion

To summarize, Pope Francis’s statement of the church as the prolongation of the Incarnation is biblically warranted by Paul’s

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33. Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, trans. Michael Waldstein, ed. Aidan Nichols, O.P. Vol. 9 of *Dogmatic Theology*, ed. Johann Auer and Joseph Ratzinger (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America Press, 1988), 44–45.

teaching that “we make up in our flesh what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ” and by Matthew’s report of Jesus saying, “Whatever you do to the least of these, you do to me.” It is warranted by the high Christology of the Second Council of Nicaea, which merely applies the orthodox formulas on the two natures and the biblical assertion that Jesus is the “image of the invisible God” to the controversy over icons. The council makes it clear that while worship belongs to God alone, veneration is appropriate for creatures if they are prototypic. Finally, the Letter to the Hebrews offers a warrant to extend the claim about suffering and mercy to priestly worship. A semirealized eschatology provides the theological basis for speaking about the church as participation in Christ’s presence and action in the world just as she participates in the Kingdom that is here but not yet fully realized.

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