

TAKING PART IN GOD'S RECONCILING WORK "ON EARTH AS IT IS IN HEAVEN"

This paper largely consists of a commentary on John Thiel's book, *Icons of Hope*. In it he proposes that "the outcome of the Last Judgment remains in a state of suspense even for the blessed dead... and... this suspense is generated by the hope that God's grace is universally efficacious, that all are saved."¹ This universal efficaciousness of God's grace demands an icon of God's Kingdom that is emotionally unimaginable for many, particularly those who have suffered the moral evil of others in history. Can they in their imaginations be forced to admit the criminals who have caused them such pain into the ranks of God's saints for eternity? Is this really what God wills, and why would God force such a communion on those who have suffered? How can those who have perpetrated such crimes in history seek forgiveness from or be granted forgiveness by those whom they have harmed across the boundary of the grave? But Thiel is not proposing a forced reconciliation by divine fiat, any more than he is dispensing with the seriousness of sin and its consequences in this world and the world to come. Indeed, he sees consequences for life in this world in closing one's imagination off too strongly from the hope that all will be reconciled with each other and with God in the resurrection of the dead. "The line," which Thiel says is too often drawn on earth by mere mortals, "that separates heaven from hell not only excludes the worst sinners from paradise but also falsely justifies the sinful ruptures that ever multiply in the communion of saints" (182). The risk of ignoring such a challenge is to turn away from the reconciling dynamic of the prayer given by Jesus himself, according to which we ask for God's forgiveness while simultaneously pledging ourselves to offer it to others. To accept both the challenge and the grace of the Our Father, Thiel says, is to participate here and now in the eschatological solidarity towards which all the saints strive, even among the blessed dead. His "thick" account of the eschaton includes a wrestling with the traditional Roman

¹ Thiel, *Icons of Hope*, 179. Subsequent citations of this book will be parenthetical in line with the text.

Catholic symbols of death, judgment, heaven, hell, and purgatory. What Thiel proposes is not just a propping up of old symbols, but rather an enlivened vision of a forgiving and reconciling community according to the form of God's own mercy.

My largely positive commentary on Thiel's book advances the thesis that he provides a helpful foundation for considering such questions as what it might mean for the blessed dead to be involved in working out this reconciliation in eschatological solidarity with the living. Interspersed with my running commentary on passages in the book that suggest rich areas for trying to imagine personal continuity after death in light of traditional Roman Catholic symbols will be reflections on some passages in the New Testament that bear the interpretation that Thiel suggests, as well as a brief expansion upon some notions borrowed from Hans Urs von Balthasar that require a more Christological and trinitarian analysis that Thiel immediately provides.

I begin by asking if this is this what blessedness means, namely, having an active role and an involvement in Jesus' divine reconciling activity? One question that I will only be able to gesture at in this paper is what the blessed dead's participation would mean in terms of a "disembodied" afterlife. In Thiel's vision, there is still something slightly "purgatorial" about heaven because things are still being "worked out" between the living and the dead. It is Jesus who does the reconciling, because he is risen, but the blessed dead if they are truly blessed cannot be completely isolated and walled off from this salvific activity on Jesus' part—for the very least because the blessed dead are still in fact the *object* of Jesus' reconciling, salvific activity until all things are reconciled. The blessed dead cannot participate fully, yet, in the reconciling of sinners because they themselves are not yet risen. But it would make their blessedness a completely formal category with no content if we were not allowed to imagine that

they took part in Jesus' salvific activity, even if this activity were reduced somehow to active prayer for the living. How one would do this without a body remains a question.

Augustine gives some hint of how to imagine the connection between the blessed dead and the living through the risen and ascended Christ. In *The City of God* he sees the bodily healings that occur at the shrines of the martyrs where Eucharist is celebrated as symbols of the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus and our future resurrection with him as the whole Body of Christ. The City of God itself is built on the faith of the members of the Body of Christ. Augustine says in Chapter XXI that we are now enfleshed spirits subject to the flesh, but in the City of God we will be spiritual bodies with body subject to spirit. He speculates in Chapters XIV-XVI that these spiritual bodies will bear a resemblance to our ideal potentials. This is, I believe, an expression of belief in freedom as the goal for all creation, bodily creation included. Sin is seen as an illness in Chapter XXII. My point now is that, just as Jesus of Nazareth healed the sick and raised the dead, the risen Jesus is working out the healing of all life. Praying and celebrating Eucharist at the shrines of martyrs allows their bodies to play a role in the bringing about of this healing reconciliation of all with all.

In the rules for eschatological thought and in his resultant account of the eschaton Thiel tries not to go beyond "limits of worldly imagination," which is impossible anyway (as Kant would agree). The "emotional starting point in the life of faith is always tied to concrete circumstances in the world and in our shared lives with others" (26). Eschatological "subject matter" should always take as at least an *initial* guide this existential starting point in the life of faith, even if it concerns something other than what can be known in this life. What this starting point of personal faith does is anchor the existential importance of personal continuity in eschatology. Thiel does not want to subject a mystery to the conditions of our limited earthly

understanding, but he does insist that to refuse the search for intelligibility from within what he calls the "thick" version of the Catholic tradition of the eschaton—even with its traditional categories of death, judgment, heaven, hell, and some elements of purgatory—is to risk submitting to the existential, practical ramifications of the very idolatries and projections that we seek to avoid in theology. No, we do not want to decide what heaven is like without having seen it. But we constantly run the risk of surreptitiously deciding what it is like by our choices here on earth.

Two of the main historical characters in Thiel's history of eschatological speculation are Thomas Aquinas and Jonathan Edwards, who "imagine an eternity in which happiness and sadness stand in polar opposition, eschatologically at odds in a way that redounds to the greater happiness of the saints in heaven" (187). In neither of their accounts of eternity can the consciousness of sinful histories and of the need for reconciliation be admitted lest the joys of the blessed be diminished in any way. But what Thiel proposes is something much more realistic, something according to which our limited earthly experiences of reconciliation and renewed hope take on their full eternal significance. Here on earth, we do know something of the joy and peace of repentance, conversion, and reconciliation. Perhaps these are the keys to understanding the real hope of the eschaton, and what blessedness in the afterlife really entails, if blessedness is a meaningful notion at all. And as Paul demands, "if the cross of Christ is not to be emptied of its power" (1 Cor 1:17).

In what way is it meaningful to say that human persons have any continuity after bodily death? Aquinas settles into a basic *via negativa* position from which he only really defines what the life of the blessed dead in heaven is not; e.g., they will not die again, it is not merely a continuation of earthly life, and they will have a "different disposition" than the those who live

the earthly life now (31). The life of the beatific vision is essentially the cessation of activity, and bliss is rest. The resurrected life is the contemplative life, unhindered, but also unbusied (34). Interestingly he says there will be no eating and no sex (32). While this sounds pretty dull, his main point seems to be that there is no longer a need for nutrition and procreation. Thiel speculates that this position comes from his perspective as a celibate religious (33). Jonathan Edwards' position is more like that of Augustine, in which he speculates that in heaven "The saints all delight in the prosperity of each other, even though their stations are not equal" (36). Edwards is also more like Gregory of Nyssa, in that eternal rest and the eternal activity of praising and serving God do not preclude each other in the blessed life (38).² In contrast with Aquinas' metaphysical and monastic view of the afterlife, Edwards' stress on the activities of the blessed in service to God in heaven reflects his pragmatic, Protestant-Puritan work ethic.

The central factor in Thiel's speculative rules for eschatological thought is the meaning of Christ's own resurrection, which must inform our current existential experience of life in some way in an "inaugurated eschatology" (27). The resurrection of Jesus is there as a hope for personal continuity for all, but it also stands as a critical reminder of the evils that must be overcome and the sins that must be forgiven. But neither can one simply project the historical experience of inaugurated eschatology here and now into the future in a reductive manner, as if it provided an exhaustive account. "Rather," he says, "the hermeneutical rule for eschatological speculation that I will follow finds empirical resources for imagining the eschata in our existential experiences of redemption, which is to say, in our present experience of already standing in a resurrected life gracefully secured by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ" (27). We can only see Jesus' own "afterlife" by virtue of the Gospel kerygma, the proclamation of his resurrection that has ushered in the experience of forgiveness and the hope of

² Thiel mentions Gregory of Nyssa's *Life of Moses* specifically in endnote 35 to p.40; *Icons of Hope*, 193-94.

reconciliation and peace for countless Christians and their communities for 2000 years. But in his afterlife Jesus is active in consoling, strengthening, empowering, and most importantly in Peter's case, forgiving. Jesus forgives Peter his sin of abandoning him when Peter himself was helpless to do anything about it after Jesus' death. If resurrection of the body is meaningful notion at all, this would seem to be central to its meaning: the hope for reconciliation, for reunion, for a renewed friendship that is free from fear even in spite of the wounds of the past on Jesus' hands and feet.

Thiel notes how the historical development of Christian belief in the afterlife gradually became more and more focused on the rewards of personal virtue. The deaths of the martyrs and the lives of the monastics loomed large in the popular imagination as perfections of the Christian life. Even though the hagiographies of these martyrs and ascetics are often replete with accounts of their deep love and longing for communion with Christ in companionship, friendship, or even marriage, it is their heroics that have more often stuck in the Christian imagination over the centuries.

The passivity of purgatory was a way in the tradition of holding on to personal continuity while simultaneously dealing with the psychological burden and the "eschatological anxiety" of not measuring up to the virtue and heroism of the martyrs and ascetics in one's time on earth. Purgatory was supposed to be something that "happens" to the dead in the afterlife, a purging of soul that gives them extra time eventually to measure up even in their passivity. But Thiel's book is a proposal for what to do "in the meantime" about the reality and finality of death; either our own deaths or the deaths of those from whom we need to seek forgiveness and to whom we need to offer it. The Gospel accounts of Jesus' resurrection and Paul's vision in Romans of the groaning of all creation awaiting the revelation of the children of God are visions of

embodiment, of the highest hopes of creatures located ultimately in the wholeness of their physical and spiritual beings. The New Testament visions proclaim that death and the dissolution of the body will be overcome, and that forgiveness is not just something that happens among souls in heaven.

Thiel's main point is that, in the doctrine and popular beliefs around purgatory, we see a Church filled with eschatological anxiety. The doctrine, and popular belief in, purgatory through the ages could be viewed, says Thiel, as an expression of hope for eternal rest for everyone, beyond one's state in life as a priest, religious, martyr, or layperson. If one cannot measure up to the martyrs and monastic hero saints before one's death in this life, there is still something like time in the afterlife to be readied for a "spot" in heaven—the "spots" apparently being limited and reserved for those who merit them. But, as we have seen at least in many Western Catholic cultures, the doctrine of purgatory has "disappeared." This is due, speculates Thiel, to the rejection of "competitive spirituality" in recent decades and especially after Vatican II. A kind of "Pauline" faith in a gracious God's obliteration of competitive standards based on following a religious law has replaced the formerly prominent "Matthean" faith in, and perhaps fear of, the God who will hold everyone responsible and "separate the sheep from the goats" in the Last Judgment. This is good in a lot of ways—an increased sense of gratitude to God being first and foremost—but it has led to banalizations and distortions of the Catholic Church's belief in the Last Judgment.

Post-Reformation biblical fundamentalism went on to adopt an overly-realized eschatology that would only be confirmed in the Last Judgment. On the other hand, post-Vatican II Catholics who believe, rightly, in a merciful God have ceased to take the idea of Judgment seriously, because it is too tied to the idea of punishment for not measuring up to some standard.

In both cases, there is a lack of eschatological suspense. Thiel's theological case for a healthy sense of suspense in eschatology has nothing to do with any arbitrariness in the divine will, but rather with the narrative sense of Christian life as a whole, with how it unfolds. The dynamism, the unfolding itself is what is at stake. But if the Last Judgment is already a "done deal," there is no unfolding: for the fundamentalists, according to right belief about the Bible and God's wrath on unbelievers, there is no unfolding of the "plot"; but for those already convinced that God's grace will overwhelm everything in its path, there is also no unfolding of the plot and the idea of guilt becomes meaningless.

Similarly, there is no need for purgation or purgatory if everything is already decided either by right belief or by God's absolute grace. Thiel is also saying that with the demise of "competitive" modes of spirituality, there is no need for a "time" or a "place" for lay people to "catch up" in merit to the religious and for religious to "catch up" to the martyrs. His proposal for a renewed sense of eschatological suspense is his attempt to retrieve what was lost with the loss of eschatological anxiety. He believes that, hidden in the eschatological anxiety at the root of belief in purgatory, there lay a deep yearning for rest, hence the teaching on the passivity of the soul in purgatory. Freedom from anxiety does not, and did not, necessarily mean certainty in God's judgment, but tranquility in the face of God's judgment. The kind of tranquility that can only come from trust in God's goodness, justice, *and* mercy.

One can hold, as Hans Urs von Balthasar does, that God wills everyone's salvation alongside the belief that a Christian's free will matters to the overall arch of his or her life. God will judge that life, but God is also very merciful. Thiel adopts a strong distinction between God's judgment and mercy from Kathryn Tanner: God's judgment is not on me as compared with other people, e.g. with saints and martyrs, but on how my life has unfolded according to its

own moral and spiritual logic given my time and place in history. Have I been true to myself and to others? That is the substance of God's judgment, and I am the subject of God's mercy.

Medieval Christians saw the Last Judgment in terms of their own deaths, because this was the only way they *could* imagine it. Death by war and plague was ever present to them in reality, and so their imaginations naturally interpreted the coming of death as a cataclysmic unfolding of God's judgment on them (118). By contrast, in modern experiences of life and death as the result of natural processes, the Last Judgment disappears off in the distance and the Christian imaginary understanding and becomes understandably "anticlimactic" (119).

Thiel notes how purgatory disappears within a "strong" doctrine of grace that complicates the "hierarchy of discipleship," as does Martin Luther's (120). In Luther's logic of predestination, everything is already decided (123) and the Last Judgment is "not... the climactic revelation of God's judgment on the eternal destiny of a life lived in this way or that but... the anticlimactic manifestation of God's predestining will" (126). In an extreme version of this vision, there is no more eschatological suspense. For Thiel, "It is important to note that this Reformation construal of the saved and the damned does not take place in any liminal time between history and eternity. It takes place in the day-to-day passing of ordinary time in which, Lutheran theology assumes, God's judgment has already been rendered" (129). Contemporary fundamentalists Christianity has taken things quite far in this direction, as in the *Left Behind* novel series (131). In such an eschatological viewpoint, because everything is already decided, only an extremely literalistic interpretation of the Bible is trustworthy; but it is *absolutely* trustworthy because it provides proof of what God has already decided (134).

Thiel has the impression that in contemporary Catholic belief the Last Judgment is still "on the books," but in a tamed, sanitized version with very little at stake emotionally (135-36).

What he proposes is a sort of responsibility, and hence a kind of narrative suspense, that comes with the event of grace. This is the kind of responsibility that has a concrete here-now dimension as well as an eschatological one, which means, there are consequences to our choices that affect our earthly neighbors as well as our relationship with God (137). The narrative suspense he proposes is "a quality of unity that offers an index of just how much the immanent actions of characters narratively matter" (138). "The denial of such suspense" he writes, "which seems to be typical in much of contemporary Catholic belief, could reflect the assumption that God's judgment is a graciously foregone conclusion" (139). In the Pauline approach to the problem of judgment and grace, the power of divine grace far outstrips the power of human sin (145). God's judgment on human sin stands, but this judgment does not preclude God's offer of grace to all, particularly because this offer is God's will.

A key element of eschatological suspense is the *hope* that God's love and mercy will ultimately effectively be extended to all (151). This is also the theme in Balthasar's book, *Dare We Hope?* It is a profoundly *non-competitive* hope. What Thiel tries to preserve in his own idea of purgatory is similar to that of Catherine of Genoa, who believed in a purgatory that would eventually, or at least *could* eventually, effectively redeem any and every soul (146). In such a view, the sinner would accept God's judgment out of reverence for God's beauty and goodness, and thereby become able to accept grace. This is, as he notes at the beginning of Chapter Five, "Forgiveness in the Communion of the Saints," his attempt at recovering the orthodox intent in the minority tradition of universal salvation (155). Elizabeth Johnson calls the communal context of such a hope the "companionship of friends" across the heaven-earth boundary and within each world (154). Forgiveness, in this view, is an eschatological project shared by all.

Forgiveness involves reciprocity, something which is often frustrated in this lifetime by the sheer magnitude of the hurt inflicted and by the death of one of the involved parties. How is true forgiveness possible beyond death? How is forgiveness possible when the those who have been wronged cannot face the ones who wronged them? Even if he might disagree with Jacques Derrida's claim that real forgiveness is conditioned by its very impossibility, he agrees that, at the very least, forgiveness is "moral partnership" that is truly "difficult to achieve" (168). The rifts that occur in life often continue into the afterlife unresolved. One party can let go of the hurt and cease negative feelings towards the offender without their knowledge or even their repentance, or the offender can become truly contrite and regret what he or she has done without any contact with the victim, and death seals this arrangement (165-67).

The fullness of forgiveness among all God's creatures can only be an eschatological reality. For the time being, to accept God's grace, which is a gift, nevertheless implies a pledge of oneself to "the eschatological project of offering and accepting forgiveness, and thus to the saints even in its heavenly dimensions" (169). Continuing to pray for the dead and supplicating the saints in heaven, or even supplicating those whom one has harmed, until "God will be all in all" keeps eschatological suspense alive in a hopeful and healthy way.

Thiel provides a four-point key to what the life of the saints might be like via the features of Jesus' very active resurrected life in the Gospel. The first point of hermeneutical departure for speculation on the after-lives of the saints is that Jesus keeps his promises. His resurrection is the making good of his promise to make things new and renew the hope of his disciples (44). The analog to Jesus' resurrected activity in the pre-resurrection afterlife of the dead is hard to imagine, but it has something to do with their continued relationship with the living on earth in the communion of the saints (50). The analog is perhaps enriched by the second feature of Jesus'

risen life, according to which he "bears the pain of his life without reproach," that is, without blaming or condemning others. He bears the marks of the nails but he bears no anger for his betrayers and murderers (44-45). If the dead can be said to participate in this activity by virtue of communion with Christ, perhaps the participation could be understood in terms of prayer for the living as an opening to a future forgiveness—which, of course, must still be accepted when the living and the dead face each other in the resurrection (51-52). Thirdly, Jesus "reconciles [the] failure" of those who abandoned him, especially of Peter, by charging them with the sacred task with drawing others to Jesus and nourishing their faith (46). Fourthly and lastly, Jesus "shows himself to be who he is"; which is to say: "What the accounts are saying, in effect, is that the being and identity of Jesus in the resurrection are such that his nonresurrection becomes inconceivable": the resurrection of Jesus unifies and vindicates all he has said and done up to then (47). Thiel imagines the activity of the blessed dead in terms of these features of Jesus' risen life, even if "The personal continuity of the blessed dead thankfully is not beholden to the standard set by Jesus. Their salvation, becoming who they most are, to some degree entails becoming who they were not: persons broken by their sin and the sin of others. This miraculous continuity, one that yet abides in spite of personal burdens of sin, is largely the work of God's grace" (53).

Thiel laments the lack of saints who serve as exemplaries of forgiveness and seeking forgiveness and reconciliation, but I believe they can be found in the persons of Stephen and Paul as protagonists in the New Testament and in the liturgical calendar. Stephen and Paul are precisely *the* examples of saints whose greatness can be conceived of in terms of forgiveness and reconciliation. St. Fulgentius of Ruspe's homily for the Feast of St. Stephen on December 26,

taken from the Roman Catholic Office of Readings, supplies the text for conceiving of this saintly activity of reconciliation beyond the boundaries of death:

Yesterday we celebrated the birth in time of our eternal King. Today we celebrate the triumphant suffering of his soldier. Yesterday our king, clothed in his robe of flesh, left his place in the virgin's womb and graciously visited the world. Today his soldier leaves the tabernacle of his body and goes triumphantly to heaven.

Our king, despite his exalted majesty, came in humility for our sake; yet he did not come empty-handed. He brought his soldiers a great gift that not only enriched them but also made them unconquerable in battle, for it was the gift of love, which was to bring men to share in his divinity. He gave of his bounty, yet without any loss to himself. In a marvelous way he changed into wealth the poverty of his faithful followers while remaining in full possession of his own inexhaustible riches.

And so the love that brought Christ from heaven to earth raised Stephen from earth to heaven; shown first in the king, it later shone forth in his soldier. Love was Stephen's weapon by which he gained every battle, and so won the crown signified by his name. His love of God kept him from yielding to the ferocious mob; his love for his neighbor made him pray for those who were stoning him. Love inspired him to reprove those who erred, to make them amend; love led him to pray for those who stoned him, to save them from punishment. Strengthened by the power of his love, he overcame the raging cruelty of Saul and won his persecutor on earth as his companion in heaven. In his holy and tireless love he longed to gain by prayer those whom he could not convert by admonition.

Now at last, Paul rejoices with Stephen, with Stephen he delights in the glory of Christ, with Stephen he exalts, with Stephen he reigns. Stephen went first, slain by the stones thrown by Paul, but Paul followed after, helped by the prayer of Stephen. This, surely, is the true life, my brothers, a life in which Paul feels no shame because of Stephen's death, and Stephen delights in Paul's companionship, for love fills them both with joy. It was Stephen's love that prevailed over the cruelty of the mob, and it was Paul's love that covered the multitude of his sins; it was love that won for both of them the kingdom of heaven.

Love, indeed, is the source of all good things; it is an impregnable defense, and the way that leads to heaven. He who walks in love can neither go astray nor be afraid: love guides him, protects him, and brings him to his journey's end.

My brothers, Christ made love the stairway that would enable all Christians to climb to heaven. Hold fast to it, therefore, in all sincerity, give one another practical proof of it, and by your progress in it, make your ascent together.³

What is interesting about this passage in Thiel's terms is how the saintly heroics of the first martyr in the tradition, St. Stephen, are conceived of overwhelmingly in terms of love, generosity, and the sharing of joy. All of the language of victory is joyfully undermined in its

³ Saint Fulgentius of Ruspe, Office of Readings for December 26, the Feast of Stephen, First Martyr (*Sermo* 3, 1-3. 5-6: CCL 91A, 905-900), *Liturgy of the Hours, Vol. III* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Corp., 1975), 1256-57.

purely earthly sense by love and inclusion. Stephen is, in this brief glimpse into the patristic tradition of St. Fulgentius, the icon of non-competitive sanctity. The gift that Stephen receives from God comes in the incarnation of Christ as a human being, because it is Christmas in the liturgical calendar. This gift of Christ's love for Stephen both implicates him and empowers him to share love with others, including even Stephen's own enemies. The immediate effect on Stephen was his ability to pray for those who were persecuting him, which he does in his process of dying. The mediate effect of God's love in Christ for Stephen is the companionship "in heaven" with Paul that is achieved, the realization of which happened only beyond the boundaries of Stephen's death. In no New Testament account did Stephen and Paul meet each other face to face, but in the collective person of Christ, Head and Body, who appeared to Paul ("Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?"; Acts 9:4, 22:6, 26:14), they *have* met each other. The risen Christ is active, even if the souls of the blessed and imperfect dead have not yet met their embodied reconciled destiny. But in St. Fulgentius' vision of the eschaton, there is no shame in the guilt for Stephen's death but only Stephen's and Paul's communal rejoicing in each others' and Christ's love.

Thiel's citation of Balthasar from his eschatological volume, *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act* bears some expansion in this context, as the eschatology Thiel advocates implies a robust Christology and therefore also a robust trinitarianism that together yield more theological content. The Son's and Spirit's perfect personal distinctions from the Father are the ground of trinitarian love that in turn grounds the incarnate Son's gift of love to Stephen in the festal reading from St. Fulgentius:

In the community that comes into being through the Son's eternal *communio*, everyone is utterly open and available to each other, but this openness is not like the total perspicuity of states or situations: instead we have free persons freely available to each other on the basis of the unfathomable distinctness of each. What is offered to the other is thus always

an unexpected and surprising gift. Again we see that the perfection of the creature corresponds to the element of surprise in the eternal life of God himself, which we discussed earlier. Every personal act in which, within the all-encompassing light of the divine will, the individual person purposes to do something contains a creative element; the coincidence of this element with the equally creative freedom of the other corresponds, not to an analytic unity, but to a synthetic unity, and this resultant coincidence is doubtless an aspect of eternal blessedness itself.⁴

Balthasar's idea of "surprise" in the Trinity, briefly mentioned here, is itself surprising and not without controversy, but for now let it stand for a moment in his speculation on the meaning of personhood in mutuality in the context of the infinity of the Godhead: persons are such by virtue of their distinction from each other, which Balthasar poetically imagines in terms of the spontaneity of self-offering as gift to another distinct self. The Christological and soteriological ramifications of the Trinity's life as mutual personal self-offering comes in the next passage:

God's will, embracing the entire, infinitely diversified heaven, is so generous that it draws into itself all the fullness of redeemed human freedoms, pride of place being given to that of the incarnate Son; and even though it is the originating will, providing the (analytic) norm for all freedom, it nonetheless desires to be simultaneously the (synthetic) will that is the resultant of all the others.⁵

God's will, in this view, has a necessarily synthetic and participatory dynamic. Balthasar calls it a "risky" dynamic, even a suspenseful one. This suspense is the theme of his shorter volume, *Dare We Hope "That All Men Be Saved"?*, which he writes in response to critics that he is not taking seriously enough the eternal validity of God's judgment on sin. But my point here is that the communion of saints itself is both analytically measured by the communion that is God's very Self and ontologically constituted ("synthesized" even) by the saints' free responses to God's presence to them and their presences to each other. The fullness of this mutual self-presence of all the dead is not yet realized across the boundaries of death; but if the risen Christ is somehow mysteriously present to all, and if the dead are said to be present to him in any way

⁴ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V: The Last Act*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 485-86; the "earlier" trinitarian discussion comes on page 89 in *Theo-Drama V*.

⁵ Balthasar, *Theo-Drama V*, 486.

that is meaningful, then he must be able to facilitate their hopes and intentions for each other and for the living in ways that we cannot fully imagine. We must partially and imperfectly imagine these ways through the ways of the risen Christ in the New Testament and in the cult of the saints, as we see in St. Fulgentius' festal sermon for St. Stephen.

In the trajectory of Paul's life after his conversion, Christ gives him the same work to do that Stephen himself was engaged in before Paul's (Saul's) persecution of the Church took its final lethal turn for Stephen. If Paul was forgiven by the risen Christ for persecuting the Christian church (identified by Christ *with* himself), then perhaps we can say that Paul also received in his lifetime the forgiveness that Stephen himself offered through Christ and in the name of Christ at Stephen's own death. And the living out of receiving this forgiveness can be seen in the work that Paul receives from Christ.

In Thiel's methodology, the reconciling activity of the risen Christ must serve as the interpretive standard for the reconciling activity of the saints. In the Gospel of John's account of Jesus and Peter on the beach after Jesus' resurrection, there is great intimacy and mutual love, and—at least, as many a Jesuit has felt when contemplating this scene in the *Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius of Loyola*—most importantly for Peter there is *forgiveness* and newness of life. Peter experiences a renewed command and an accompanying strength to follow Jesus *actively* by loving Jesus and loving those whom Jesus is giving him to love. This strength given by Jesus himself in his renewed relationship with Peter.

Lest one romanticize this idyllic vision of life with the risen Jesus in the community of disciples, even at this supreme moment of intimacy in the Gospel account, there is a competitive edge to Peter's initial response to grace:

Peter turned and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following them; he was the one who had reclined next to Jesus at the supper and had said, "Lord, who is it that is going to

betray you?" When Peter saw him, he said to Jesus, "Lord, what about him?" Jesus said to him, "If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? Follow me!" (John 21:20-22 NRSV)

Jesus' rebuke of Peter in his competitive anxiety suggests just how deeply lodged within the Christian tradition from its earliest beginnings this anxiety is.

But Thiel points to the renewed Catholic sense of God's grace after Vatican II, a sensibility that devalues the traditional competitive anxiety concerning a place at God's table in the end times. This renewed sense of grace came at the expense of some traditional forms of discipleship, practice, and belief; but as Thiel says, "Yet, with this noncompetitive style of faith comes a host of possible gains to the tradition" (103). These gains include "a new appreciation for the baptismal responsibilities of all believers..., [an] increased... devotion to the Eucharist and its reception..., [and] a new awareness of the social dimension of Catholic ethics in an increasingly globalized world" (103).

If Christian faith is too competitive in the way Thiel critiques, then responsibility for one's "place" in the afterlife *must* end with bodily life on earth, after which it is too late (170-71). In an overly strictly Matthean faith, it is too late when death has set in because the sheep and goats have already been separated when we are separated from our bodies, and we can do nothing. But in the more Pauline and grace-based style of faith, salvation depends on reconciled and renewed relationships. It is this that all creation groans for, the living and the dead, according to Paul in Romans 8. The living hope that they will be forgiven by the dead that they have harmed, or they take steps towards forgiving the dead whom they have harmed. The dead are "busy" in the work of interceding for the living, sometimes as a proleptic "act" of forgiveness of those who have harmed them. Thiel is not saying that this dynamic of mutuality, which is still split in two by the wall of death, *is yet* the full act of forgiveness. But it is a dynamic of hope that

there *will* be forgiveness in the resurrection of the body on "the last day." Reconciliation and mutual forgiveness can only *fully* be experienced bodily in the New Testament, Christian imaginary. Otherwise the resurrection of Jesus means nothing (176-77).

At the end of this essay I realize that I have perhaps said more about the risen Jesus that I have about how we are involved with him after death. St. Fulgentius' sermon for the Feast of St. Stephen can, perhaps only at best, be interpreted as a theopoetic exercise of reflection on the meaning of the two Paschas of Easter and Christmas; but at least this exercise takes as its symbols two saints reconciled to each other across the insurmountable barriers of murderous persecution and physical death. Perhaps the suggestion in my essay here is one that is also more passive than what Thiel is really suggesting himself: to let the risen Christ do what we wish him to do, which we can no longer physically do after our deaths; to orient our lives now towards him in prayer and action in such a way that ensures that relying completely on prayer after all other abilities to act have been taken away is not hopeless; and lastly, perhaps most importantly in a way, to hand our lives over to the saints who seem to be mysteriously accomplishing this reconciliation through their prayers to the risen Christ, who unites Stephen and Paul in the Kingdom of God.