
Journal of Salesian Studies

Fall 2005

Volume XIII

**Institute of Salesian Spirituality
Berkeley, California, USA**

Jesus and Salesian Discipleship

Francis J. Moloney, SDB

I have been given the mandate to speak to you today³⁵⁶ on the theme: “How the Word of God shapes our community and our mission today.” I was not sure how to handle this very large question in a couple of talks and a discussion session. Biblical themes abound. But in the end, I thought that the best way to reflect on the way the word of God shapes our community and mission today was to reflect upon “the Word of God.” I want to talk to you about Jesus. One cannot say everything, and I wish to state simply that I recognize the wider context within which we live our response to what God has done for us in and through Jesus.

Jesus is “the Word of God,” but we are summoned to a radical obedience to the broader message of the biblical word of God, as it calls us to respond in faith. Similarly, the Bible is not the whole answer. We are summoned to live out our lives within the great Catholic tradition, recipients of two thousand years of rich lived experience and magisterial interpretation of our Christian way of responding to God. Finally, we are summoned to respond to the summons of the biblical Word according to the way of Don Bosco. But I still want to go back to Jesus, aware that what we are to share today is at one and the same time the bedrock of who we are and what we do, and yet only part of the shaping of the Salesian community and mission.

³⁵⁶ Talk given to San Francisco Province Leadership members at San Damiano Retreat House, Danville, Calif., October 13, 2004.

When Paul cries out: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me, and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20), what does he mean? Is he speaking of an experience that transports him from his lived, flesh and blood existence as a follower of Jesus Christ? Definitely not! To be crucified with Christ, or as he says elsewhere, to "put on" Christ (see, for example, Gal 3:27; Rom 13:14; Col 3:10) is the way he strives to live his every day life. Who is it that one "puts on"? This is not the place to examine the entire question. I am taking it for granted that Jesus of Nazareth claimed to be establishing a new way in which God related to humankind, and vice-versa, a new "space" that he called "the reigning presence of God."³⁵⁷ I am further taking it for granted that he preached and lived this presence of God, and that this was based in a unique sense of mutuality with the God of Israel that enabled him to relate to that God as a son to a father.³⁵⁸ However debated Jesus' preaching of God's reigning presence, driven by his filial mutuality with the God of Israel, I wish to reflect upon two further issues that I suggest you may find both challenging and helpful: Jesus as the Son of Man, and

³⁵⁷ Mostly known to us in our English Bible translations as "the kingdom of God." My expression, "the reigning presence of God," attempts to capture some of the more dynamic meaning of this concept in the teaching of Jesus. For more on this, see F. J. Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller, Interpreter, Evangelist* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004), 126-130.

³⁵⁸ This is a very serious and much disputed question. It looks to an understanding of Jesus by means of the expression "*abba*," pioneered by Joachim Jeremias. See especially, J. Jeremias, *The Prayers of Jesus* (Studies in Biblical Theology 5; London: SCM, 1967), 11-65. See the summary of the subsequent debate in Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, 2:359-69 n. 20. For a recent, more broadly based, return to this question, see M. M. Thompson, *The Promise of the Father. Jesus and God in the New Testament* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 20-86. See also Moloney, *Mark: Storyteller*, 136-38.

the significance of the figure of the historical Jesus for the shape of our community and mission.

Jesus: the Son of Man

The expression comes from Jesus, or from the very earliest Aramaic preaching of the Christian Church. It is a Semitic expression that has been translated directly into Greek, leaving clear traces of Semitic origins.³⁵⁹ An important philological and even theological consequence of this Semitic background is that the expression, although translated into English, via the Greek, as “son of man,” was not originally gender specific. It refers to the human condition as such.³⁶⁰ The expression “the Son of Man” is found upon the lips of Jesus, and never on the lips of anyone else, except in John 12:34, but there the crowd is merely repeating something Jesus has just said. No one else in the Gospels ever calls him- or herself “the Son of Man,” and no one ever points to Jesus as “the Son of Man.” It is only used by Jesus, and he only uses it to speak of himself. In places where one would expect him to say “I,” he uses the expression “the Son of Man.” He does not say, “I have no place to lay my head,” but “the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (see Luke 9:58; Matt 8:20). He does not say: “I must go up to Jerusalem,” but “the Son of Man must go up to Jerusalem” (see Mark 8:31). He

³⁵⁹ The most obvious indication of the Semitic background to the expression is that the Greek has two definite articles: “the son of the man.” This is legitimate in Hebrew or Aramaic, as the second article indicates the possessive: “the Son of Man,” but that is lost in the direct translation into Greek.

³⁶⁰ The best indication of this is found in the numerous encounters between God and his prophet Ezekiel. Stressing the human condition of the prophet, over against the divinity of YHWH, Ezekiel is called “son of man” 93 times. This form of address “expresses...the weakness of the creature to whom the mighty Lord shows such condescension” (W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* [trans. C. Quin; London: SCM Press, 1970], 61).

does not say, "I must be lifted up," but "the Son of Man must be lifted up" (John 3:14).³⁶¹ At least for Mark, Matthew and John, Jesus was "the Son of Man." Equally interesting is the pervasive presence of the expression. It is used in the Gospels, in words of Jesus, 81 times.³⁶²

These three factors, the Semitic origins of the expression, that Jesus is the only person who uses it, and its widespread occurrence across the stories of the life of Jesus, have led to an intense focus on the background and meaning of the expression "the Son of Man." There are two reasons for this interest. In the first place, this looks like the key to an understanding of Jesus' self-consciousness. The Gospels continually present Jesus as speaking of himself as "the Son of Man," but he never explains what this might mean to his audience. It was taken for granted that they knew what he meant. Thus, the first and fundamental reason for interest in Jesus as the Son of Man is to be found in the long-held conviction that once we come to understand this expression, used so often by Jesus to speak of himself, then we would be closer to understanding Jesus.

Some would say that the expression meant nothing more than "I" on the lips of Jesus. The expression "the Son of Man" is really only a Semitic circumlocution for "I," and thus the expression contains no hidden meaning. Others would claim that it does have a Christological meaning, but that it was developed

³⁶¹ The fact that the Gospel of John, written perhaps at the end of the first Christian century for a largely Greek-speaking world, still uses the strange Semitic idiom "the Son of Man" thirteen times is further indication of the powerful memory of the use of this expression within the early Christian story-telling tradition.

³⁶² The numbers may not be exact, as there are several places where the Greek textual tradition is not certain (e.g. John 9:35). One must also be aware that this figure does not single out the many uses of "the Son of Man" that one finds in Matthew and Luke that come from their source, Mark, or those times it appears in Matthew and Luke where they have most likely received it from their source, Q. It is a simple count of every appearance of the expression across all four Gospels.

in the early Church, as it looked for exalted language to speak of Jesus as its understanding of his role and person became more sophisticated. These scholars look to the use of the expression in Dan 7:13-14 as the origin of the Gospel sayings: "And behold with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days. And to him was given dominion and glory and kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed." Others, also looking to Dan 7:13-14 as its place of origin, suggest that Jesus used the term, but spoke of a figure, other than himself, who would come as judge at the end of time. In time, the early Church identified the eschatological Son of Man with the person of Jesus.³⁶³

Those who look to Dan 7:13-14 are surely correct. This famous passage must have provided Jesus the background for his use of the expression. I am convinced, however, that the transformation of the expression "one like a son of man" in Daniel to "the Son of Man" in the Gospels had its origins in the life and teaching of Jesus, and not in the increasing theological and Christological sophistication of the earliest Church. Indeed, side by side with Jesus' use of *abba* and all that is involved in that expression, I would like to reflect upon Jesus' understanding of himself as "the Son of Man" as the final pointer in our unfolding appreciation of Jesus' acceptance of all that the Father asked him, *no matter what the cost*. As Dan 7:13-14 provided Jesus with the expression, allow me to contextualize and offer a brief analysis of that famous chapter.

³⁶³ For a summary of this discussion, with references to the scholars who have argued these various positions, see F. J. Moloney, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2002), 212-13.

“One like a son of man” in Daniel 7:13-14

One must not move immediately to the words of Dan 7:13-14. As well as analyzing that text, it is equally important to place the passage within its literary and theological context. The Book of Daniel was written about 165 BC, during the persecutions inflicted upon the faithful ones in Israel by the Hellenistic king, Antiochus IV of Syria. In the fashion of Alexander the Great of Macedonia (died in 323 BC), whose agenda had been to bring the Greek language and culture to the known world, the great Hellenistic kings who followed him attempted to impose their religion and culture upon all their subjects.³⁶⁴ Antiochus IV, who ruled in Syria from 175 until 163 BC, pursued this policy with great vigor. The gruesome stories of suffering and martyrdom found in the Books of the Maccabees (see, for example, 1 Macc 1:10-61; 2 Macc 5:21-26; 6:1-7:42) come from the same period.

It is important, for a correct understanding of the term “son of man” in Daniel 7:13-14, to appreciate that the Book of Daniel was written to a suffering people who really had little or no hope of ever finding a human solution to the agonies which their faith in YHWH was creating for them. The response of the Maccabees to such suffering was military, while the response of the author of the Book of Daniel was religious. He uses a difficult form of literature (called “apocalyptic”) in which strange language and images are used to convey his basic belief: in the end, over against all evil and suffering, God will eventually have the final word. This sort of message is widely found in Jewish literature of that period. It was written to exhort a suffering people in a seemingly hopeless human situation to remain faithful to their God. The social, political and military situation of Israel was such that they were totally at the mercy of

³⁶⁴ The remarkable success of Alexander the Great did, in fact, lead to the acceptance of the Greek language, and the incorporation of Greek religion and practices across the Mediterranean basin and beyond. This cultural phenomenon is generally called “Hellenism.”

their wicked persecutors. Apocalyptic writings express the conviction that, in the end, God would overcome the wicked. He would ultimately be victorious over the wicked oppressors of his faithful ones (Daniel calls them his “holy ones.” See Daniel 7:18, 22, 25, 27). The author of the book of Daniel argues his case with particular force in Daniel 7. Antiochus IV may appear, at the time Daniel was being written, to be in an invincible situation. Israel was doomed. However, the God of Israel will see to it that this situation would be reversed.

The reader is told of a vision in the night (7:1-2) in which Daniel sees four great beasts, each one more terrible than the other, leading to the fourth, most horrific of all. These beasts represent the persecutors of Israel.

- Babylon: “like a lion and had eagles’ wings” (v. 4).
- The Medes: “like a bear ... raised up on one side; it had three ribs in its mouth ... and it was told ‘Devour much flesh’ ” (v. 5).
- Persia: “like a leopard with four wings of a bird on its back; and the beast had four heads; and dominion was given to it” (v. 6).
- Last, and most terrible of all, the Hellenistic empire, the present persecution: “a fourth beast, terrible and dreadful and exceedingly strong; and it had great iron teeth; it devoured and broke in pieces, and stamped the residue with its feet” (v. 7).

Antiochus IV himself is identified (see v. 8; a small, arrogant horn which plucked out three of the original horns to take their place: a reference to the three violent deaths necessary for Antiochus to take control of Syria).

The scene is dark indeed. Animal violence gathers, and this was the lived experience of Israel in 165 BC. However, the solution to the problem is at hand; found in the ultimate authority of God. The vision changes:

As I looked
 thrones were placed
 and one that was ancient of days
 took his seat...
 the court sat in judgment,
 and the books were opened (vv. 9-10).

The three former persecutors are not destroyed, but they lose all their power (v. 12) and the fourth “beast was slain, and its body destroyed and given over to be burned with fire” (v. 11).

And behold with the clouds of heaven
 there came *one like a son of man*
 and he came to the Ancient of Days
 and was presented before him.
 And to him was given dominion
 and glory and kingdom...
 His dominion is an everlasting dominion,
 which shall not pass away
 and his kingdom one
 that shall not be destroyed (vv. 13-14).

An explaining angel enters the story after Daniel’s vision. The rest of the chapter (vv. 15-28) is devoted to the angel’s explanation of the dream, and there the term “son of man” does not appear. It is replaced by the expression “the saints (the holy ones) of the Most High” (vv. 18, 22, 25, 27) as the interpretation of the dream tells the story of a persecuted people who place their trust and hope in the ultimate victory of God. The first words of the explanation make that clear: “These four great beasts are four kings who shall arise out of the earth, but the saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom, and shall possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever (vv. 17-18). The saints of the most high are the suffering people of Israel: “This horn made war with the saints, and prevailed over them” (v. 21). However, despite the impossibility of human victory in this hopeless situation, God will enter the scene, and reverse the

situation. The suffering will be vindicated, and the powerful rendered powerless. The explaining angel returns to the language of vv. 13-14, where “one like a son of man” was used, but replaces that expression with “the saints of the most high.”

And the kingdom and the dominion
and the greatness of the kingdoms
under the whole heaven
shall be given to the people of
the saints of the Most High;
their kingdom shall be an everlasting kingdom,
and all dominions shall serve and obey them
(v. 27; see vv. 13-14).

Clearly the “one like a son of man” who appears in v. 13, is used to speak of faithful Israel, loyal to the designs of God, over against all the “animal-like” figures of those who are opposed to God and his people. Thus, the “one like a son of man” is an individualization and personification of a suffering people, sometimes called a “corporate personality.”³⁶⁵ In the second half of the chapter, the explaining angel describes them as “the saints of the Most High.” They are promised, in the midst of their suffering, that in the end they will have the last word through the saving action of their God.

³⁶⁵ The practice of incorporating the qualities (or defects) of the nation into one symbolic figure is found elsewhere in antiquity, and also in the Old Testament. The figure is called a “corporate personality.” See, on this, the important study of H. Wheeler Robinson, *Corporate Personality in Israel* (Facet Books Biblical Series 11; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964). The booklet is a collection of two earlier articles (1935 and 1937 respectively) by Wheeler Robinson.

Jesus as the Son of Man

Jesus of Nazareth looked back to this moment from Israel's recent past, and found this description of suffering Israel, promised ultimate vindication, as "one like a son of man." However, when he took over this expression, originally used to speak of the people as a whole, he no longer spoke of "one like a son of man." He applied it to himself as "the Son of Man." This may appear to be a bold move, but the "one like a son of man" unifies the entire believing yet suffering nation into one "corporate personality." Applying this expression used to describe the holy ones in Israel in Daniel 7, Jesus saw that his life-style was leading him into suffering, persecution and death. The "one like a son of man" becomes "the Son of Man" in the person of Jesus. The corporate personality of the nation of holy ones, prepared to love and obey the God of Israel, in the conviction that in the end—despite all apparent human wisdom and appearances—God would have the last word, is assumed by Jesus as an individual, "the Son of Man."³⁶⁶

But why would Jesus look back to the figure of the "one like a son of man" and apply it to himself as "the Son of Man"? Jesus preached a radical and disturbing notion of the reigning presence of God as King that questioned the established "kingdoms" of both Jewish and Roman authority. Relating to God as a son would relate to a father, his life and teaching reflected a unique immediacy with God and gave unquestionable authority to what he said and did. Neither establishment, Jewish or Roman, could allow such a figure to go unchecked. Words

³⁶⁶ The shift from the "corporate" to the "individual" application of the expression, from the faithful ones of Israel in the time of Antiochus IV, to Jesus of Nazareth, is part of the explanation of the strange Greek behind our English "the Son of Man." On this, see C. F. D. Moule, "Neglected Features in the Problem of 'the Son of Man,'" in *Neues Testament und Kirche: Festschrift für Rudolf Schnackenburg* (ed. J. Gnllka; Freiburg: Herder, 1977), 11-22.

from the Gospel of John that anticipate Jesus' death reflect that situation. The Chief Priests and the Pharisees lament: "If we let him go on thus, everyone will believe him, and the Romans will come and destroy our holy place and our nation" (John 11:48). At the Roman trial, an arrogant Pilate tells Jesus: "Do you not know that I have power to release you, and power to crucify you?" (19:10). Jesus' person and message were dangerous, and he was no doubt aware of the threat to his life. But the situation became even more problematic as he gathered followers. The Gospels, and other non-canonical documents, make it clear that he was gathering a group of people prepared to abandon the established ways of approaching God, to follow the way of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' disciples' response to his call to accept the urgent presence of the Kingdom of God would have also created unease among both Jewish and Roman authorities. As we again find in the Gospel of John, the Pharisees cry out in panic: "Look, the whole world is going after him" (John 12:19).

As Jesus' ministry developed, and his followers became more numerous, the authorities would have become aware that he had to be stopped. The Synoptic Gospels report Jesus as coming to Jerusalem and the Temple only once, at the end of his life. He goes there to meet his death. The Gospel of John, more historically reliable in this case, reports that he goes back and forth from Galilee to Jerusalem continually to enter into conflict with Jewish leadership. Jesus' predictions of his forthcoming passion and death (see, for example, Mark 8:31; 9:31; 10:33-35) certainly developed in the tradition until they reached the form in which we have them in the Gospel texts, reporting in detail the events of his arrest, insult, death and resurrection (see Mark 10:33-35). But we can trace, behind them, a Semitic play on words that goes back to Jesus, and the play is even apparent in English: "The Son of Man will be given into the hands of men and they will kill him" (see Mark 9:31; Luke 9:44b). Notice his use of "the Son of Man" in this passage. It is found in all the passages in the Gospels when Jesus looks forward to his future suffering, but he also claims that he will be vindicated by God.

What Jesus himself said is lost to us, as the Gospels report exactly how God vindicated the suffering and death of his loving and obedient son: resurrection. Jesus did not know *exactly how* his life would end, nor did he know *exactly how* God would enter his story, to vindicate his suffering and death. However, he lived his life convinced *that* such would be the case ... and to indicate that conviction he went back to a term that his listeners understood: "the Son of Man."³⁶⁷

Other pretenders had appeared, only to be quickly eliminated and soon forgotten.³⁶⁸ Given the volatility of the socio-political situation, and the recent history of those who had dared oppose Roman authority, Jesus would have had to be very obtuse not to realize that his person and message rested uneasily with the establishment. Then why did he continue to live his lifestyle, and preach the message he preached? Why did he not

³⁶⁷ The above understanding of Jesus' use of "the Son of Man" depends upon and develops the work of C. F. D. Moule and M. D. Hooker. See, among several publications, C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 11-22; M. D. Hooker, *The Gospel according to St. Mark* (Black's New Testament Commentaries; London: A. & C. Black, 1991), 88-93. See also F. J. Moloney, "The End of the Son of Man?" *The Downside Review* 98 (1980), 280-90.

³⁶⁸ See, for example, the reference to the revolt and elimination of Theudas in Acts 5:36, and the violent response of Pilate who slaughtered Samaritans as he was suspicious of their gatherings in Acts 13:1. These, and other violent acts against pretenders, are widely reported in the works of the first century Jewish historian, Josephus. For fuller details, see R. Horsley, "'Messianic' Figures and Movements in First Century Palestine," in *The Messiah: Developments in Earliest Judaism and Christianity* (ed. J. H. Charlesworth; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 276-95; Idem, "Popular Messianic Movements around the Time of Jesus," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 46 (1984): 471-95, R. A. Horsley and J. S. Hanson, *Bandits, Prophets and Messiahs: Popular Movements in the Time of Jesus* (Valley Forge, PA; Trinity International, 1985).

choose a more politically correct approach to his task of proclaiming the reigning presence of God? As a son, whose obedient relationship with the God of Israel whom he dared to call "*abba*/father," he could do no other. This decision, and the conflict and suffering that it would necessarily produce, led him to look back to the suffering yet vindicated "saints of the most high," and speak of himself as "the Son of Man." His use of this expression, familiar to his audience, explained for himself and to his listeners that he was unconditionally committed to the design of God, aware that such commitment might lead him into suffering, trial and even death. However, the same expression also communicated his unshakable belief that in the end, God would have the last word. The very quality of his life, therefore, led him into conflict, suffering and ultimately death at the hands of the powers of this world. Yet, as "the Son of Man" he announced that his way of suffering, persecution and loss of self in love and service was not senseless. Jesus showed and taught that he was not pursuing human success, and was prepared to move beyond what *he* might desire (see Mark 14:36 again).

He walked into a mysterious future which he could not determine, full of trust, hope, love and obedience to the God of Israel, whom he called *abba*. How was such an attitude of loss of self in love and service possible? It was precisely because of his relationship of obedience as "Son" that his experience as "the Son of Man" made sense. He went on, not *knowing* all the details of what might lie ahead of him, but in his obedience, *trusting* that, no matter what came his way, God his Father would have the last word. Paul asks the Philippians to have the same mind in themselves, as they found in Jesus Christ, and then goes on to tell them of the way of Jesus in his famous hymn in Phil 2:5-11. Here we find the biblical, Christological basis of a Salesian Spirituality. Why have we been asked repeatedly to overcome our superficiality—busy "doing" but not thinking? Why have we been directed, especially by the last General Chapter, and repeatedly by Pascual Chávez to a deeper holiness, based upon the Word of God and the practice of *Lectio Divina*?

The Salesians of the third millennium as being asked to be “hearers and doers of the word.”

To Be a Disciple of Jesus

Is this the way of all Christians who “walk behind Jesus of Nazareth” or, as Paul would put it, “to put on Christ”? Jesus has done it, and he has thus become the first-born from the death and slavery that sin and the desire to control the world have brought (see Gal 5:1). Christian tradition has always looked to the person of Jesus as the yard-stick of the Christian life. However, we have developed our own traditions that perhaps focused too heavily upon action, reaching out, physically exhausting ourselves in the service of youth. It has led the Congregation, in some parts of the world, to be exhausted in all sorts of ways—most obviously in the ageing of the confrere and the gradual drying up of young confrere, as vocations fail to emerge. It is this phenomenon that the recent and present leadership of the Congregation is trying to turn around. Starting with the post-Conciliar adoption of the image of the Good Shepherd as central to a Christological understanding of the Salesian Charism, moving to the serious concern over our superficiality, to the current concern over *Lectio Divina* that we might be “hearers and doers of the word.” You may recall from the session that I was due to give you last year, these new emphases in the Salesian way rest upon what I regard as the permanent elements of Salesian life and spirituality: God, community and young people. It is the blending of these elements, in my opinion, that can generate a Salesian spirituality that follows the way of Jesus, as I outlined above.

The major issues I must face here are profoundly associated with the tradition we have all received concerning the person of Jesus. For almost five centuries, the early Church struggled with the issue of the balance between the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. Already the Council of Nicea (325 AD), an Ecumenical Council, had formulated the doctrine of the Trinity, in which Jesus, the Son of God, was understood as the

second person of the Divine Trinity. If such was the case, the debate raged, how could he possibly be human? Yet, the evidence of the New Testament speaks for his profound human experience and sentiment: "Although he was son, he learned obedience through what he suffered" (Heb 5:8). This debate divided Christians in both the Eastern and the Western Churches, until the Council of Chalcedon (451 AD), where another major Ecumenical Council defined that Jesus was both divine and human. Indeed, the major thrust of the Council of Chalcedon was to defend the humanity of Jesus. The Fathers of the Council, however, went further than simply affirming that Jesus was both human and divine. Equally important in their definition of faith was the insistence that the divinity of Jesus did not impinge upon the human experience of Jesus, and that the human experience of Jesus did not alter his divine status. This is the faith and teaching of the Christian and Catholic Tradition, in which we stand as proud heirs, and a Christologically based spirituality *must* be based upon this tradition. However, what the Council of Chalcedon did *not* define, was *how this is possible*. Chalcedon insists upon the *fact* of the humanity and divinity of Jesus, but does not tell us *how* Jesus could be both human and divine. Theological debate over the person of Jesus since the Council of Chalcedon has always circled around this question: how can Jesus of Nazareth be—at one and the same time—both human and divine? Chalcedon did not bring debate over the person of Jesus to an end ... it opened the door to centuries of further debate.

What I am about to suggest is the result of a lifetime of involvement with the New Testament, where the human Jesus emerges so powerfully, and an acceptance of the Christology of one of the greatest Catholic theologians of the Twentieth century, Karl Rahner.³⁶⁹ I am about to query a long-held

³⁶⁹ Rahner's theological writings were voluminous and extremely difficult to read. His seminal work on Christology can be hard to trace, as it was scattered through a number of volumes with the title

explanation of the *way in which* we have traditionally explained the humanity and divinity of Jesus. Chalcedon told us *that* Jesus was both human and divine, but did not tell us *how* he was both human and divine. What follows is my attempt to articulate some of the implications of the Mystery of the Incarnation and how this can help us, as Salesians, to open ourselves more and more to the presence of the Word in the world, that we may become “hearers and doers of the Word.” There is no formal “teaching of the Church” on *how* Jesus is both human and divine. That has long been left to theological speculation. Be certain, however, that what I wish to share with you starts and ends with the teaching of the Christian belief: *that* Jesus of Nazareth is both human and divine.

Let me sketch the way this mystery has been explained over recent centuries. Starting from the Johannine presentation of Jesus as the entry into the world of someone who comes *from above*, destined eventually to ascend again to *where he was before* (see John 1:1-18; 3:13; 6:62; 20:17), the Incarnation has been taught in Theology classes, and thus used in the communication of the Faith as the inbreak of the divine into the human sphere. Graphically, the matter to be resolved is the manner in which the divine and the human can exist at one and the same time in the same person. The classical presentation of this mystery can be presented with the following figure.

The divine The immensity of the Godhead



The human Jesus of Nazareth (the presence of all that can be said of the divine, but in the human story)

Theological Investigations, some of which continued to appear after his death in 1984 (Volume 21 appeared in 1988). The best synthesis of his thought can be found in K. Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith. An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1978), 176-321.

The difficulty with this classical position has always been to explain how Jesus of Nazareth had genuine human experiences: faith, hope, love, trust, fear, sexual desire, pain, laughter, tears, and a myriad of other experiences that are fundamental to the human condition. We know them well, as we all have them and, as I trust you will accept, the joyful embracing of these sublime human experiences lies at the heart of a Salesian spirituality. We mouth “Good Shepherd,” “loving kindness,” “the boys must not only be loved, they must know that they are loved.” But what does all this rhetoric really mean? That we Salesians smile a little bit more than others? NO! We are committed by our Salesian Spirituality to a profound acceptance of the joys (and sufferings) of being fully alive human beings. If Jesus did not have such experiences, and spend his life holding them all in proper balance, as we all try to do, during the course of his years among us, then he cannot be regarded as truly human.

The crucial experience that must be questioned is the cross. Did he really suffer as any other human being would suffer, or all through that experience was he able to call upon his divine nature to both overcome human pain, and simply go through the motions, knowing that he would be raised from the dead and established at the right hand of his Father? If he did, then the suffering and death of Jesus lose something of their salvific significance. It was not, as the Christian tradition has always taught, an unconditional acceptance of the basest of human experiences, in order to embrace humanity in its totality. The task of a human being attempting an unconditional response to God is to “hold all one’s loves together.” There are many loves in our lives: I love—my family, my close friends, my Catholic Church, my Parish community, my Salesian Congregation, my community, the kids confided to my care...and some more than others. There are times when one or other of these loves “takes over.” That is when we lose our way. Jesus had exactly the same experience: he also had to “hold all his loves together,” and as we know from his prayer in

Gethsemane, there were times when he begged his Father's help in this struggle (see Mark 14:36).

The great theologians who have held to this classical view over the centuries have been, of course, aware of these difficulties. They have generally explained the tension created between the contemporaneous presence of the human and the divine in the figure of Jesus of Nazareth by speculating that Jesus had several levels of self-awareness. Generally using the stories of the Gospels as factual descriptions of what actually happened, they were able to suggest that Jesus switched in and out of his levels of self-awareness at various moments in his life and ministry. His suffering and death was lived entirely at the level of his human self-awareness.

Let me turn now to another theological speculation beginning, not with the inbreak of the divine into the human, but with a closer look at the depths and richness of all that is human. Those aspects of "being human" that I mentioned above may be listed again: faith, hope, love, trust, fear, sexual desire, pain, laughter, tears. Why is it so important to love and to be loved, to feel pain at the loss, through death or physical separation, of a loved one? What makes people rise every day and face hopeless situations, yet struggle and suffer to bring about good for others? What is perhaps the more important truth is that our capacity to live, to love and to die in this fashion is what makes each one of us the unique being that we are. Only once in the history of humankind have I, or you, existed. There is only one history of Frank Moloney, Dave Purdy, Harry Rasmussen, and every one of us around this table ... and we bear ultimate responsibility for it. We also bear responsibility for the way we have allowed others to shape it in love or hatred, and for the way we have shaped other histories in love or hatred, and the many other possible relational possibilities between those two extremes. And we do this within the context of charismatic experience of the Salesian life and mission. None of this is theological speculation. This is the way things are! A moment's reflection proclaims deep inside each one of us here: what

matters is loving and being loved, and the only unconditionally free action that I will ever perform is the gift of myself in the mystery of death. *What we do* is not the final measure of *who we are*. We all know that to be true. Yet, we often live as if it were not true.

After a long and profound look at the human condition, which he calls “spirit in the world,” Rahner takes a theological step. He points to those things deepest in us, and which make or break us as human beings, and suggests that *they transcend us*. They are bigger than us, and they both overwhelm us, and determine us as human beings. In short, they are the experienced signs of the presence of the divine within every human being. Thus, to be human means to recognize the reality of the divine within us, to be hearers and doers of the Word, followers of Jesus, the Son of Man. To be Christian (the bedrock of our being Salesian), is to respond to the divine that makes or breaks us, in the light of Jesus Christ and the Gospel. We are all divine, and we yearn for the divine home, for which we were created. Our humanity is not something negative, but the best thing about us: it reflects our divinity. We sin when we do not respond properly to the presence of the divine within us, and we act selfishly, arrogantly, jealously, proudly, satisfying the hungers of our basic urges. These responses are not “human.” They belong to the instinctual response world of the animal kingdom. Do you recall that in Daniel 7 the imagery used to speak of those who opposed God’s design was animal? The “saints of the most high” who responded courageously to the strangeness of God’s way are personified in “one like a son of man.”

This was *never the case* with Jesus of Nazareth. As the Letter to the Hebrews says: “We have not a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who *in every respect* has been tempted as we are, *yet without sin*” (Heb 4:15). With this in mind, let us return to our diagram again, and suggest another possibility.

The divine The only human being who unconditionally responded fully to the divine potential of the human being: The exalted Jesus.



The human Jesus: bringer of the Kingdom in word and person, Son and Son of Man (unconditionally open to the realization of the divine potential present in all human beings)

Rather than understanding the union of the human and the divine as a divine invasion of the human, that took place only in Jesus, this model works in the opposite direction. As Son of Man Jesus realizes humanity's divine potential. In and through Jesus of Nazareth, the human invaded the divine. Problems remain, as with the traditional model. How can the divine be caught up in the human? We must also accept that we are dealing with the mystery of the design and action of God. However, this suggestion places "mystery" where it belongs: in the Godhead, and not in the humanity of Jesus. Salesians of Don Bosco, Disciples of Jesus share in the humanity of Jesus. We yearn for its realization, to join "the first born from among the dead." To use the language of Rahner, which you might need to ponder, we live out our lives marked by "potential obedienciality." Jesus, and only Jesus, has lived a life of "realized obedienciality." But why was Don Bosco so concerned with—Sacramental life, friendship, such things as playing together, praying together, music in the community and in the apostolic work? These are all manifestations (although Don Bosco was no Rahnerian!) of the human yearning to resolve the tension between our struggling selves and transcendent elements that make us who we are—as human beings, followers of the human Jesus of Nazareth.

Conclusion

Two brief theological points must be made in conclusion. In the first place, in the light of the suggestion I have just made, we must be careful not to claim that Jesus is no more than a human being who did not sin, who always said “yes” to God, and thus became divine. That is a false understanding of the Christian tradition. Jesus brought in the reigning presence of God, and as Son responded unconditionally to God, costing the Son of Man no less than everything. But he did not do this simply because he was a good human being. While there is truth in claiming: “One of us made it!” ... it is not the whole truth. Jesus realized the fullness of the divinity possible for all human beings because he was Son. It is his being the Son of God that engenders his response to God. Here is where the Catholic theological tradition, based upon Nicea and Chalcedon, kicks in. Does this mean that we can never hope to do the same? On the contrary. We are all capable of repeating the life-style of Jesus and, in our own time, realizing our divinity in its fullness. However, we do this not because we are sons and daughters, but because we are made sons and daughters by means of our Baptism. We are rendered divine by the unbelievable superabundance of God’s overwhelming love for us. The words of Jesus in the Gospel of John cry out this truth: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, not to judge the world, but to save the world” (John 3:16-17). Living with the Redemptorists for 5 years, before the arrival of the Salesians at Nativity, each day I looked up at the altar to see the words: “Copiosa apud eum redemptio.” How true that is.

This is why I have so much difficulty with Mel Gibson’s movie, “The Passion of the Christ.” That portrait is based upon the belief: more blood, more redemption. The Christian tradition sees it differently: more love, more redemption. To say it in somewhat technical language that you can all, nevertheless, understand: Jesus was son of God *by nature*; we are sons and daughters of God *by grace*. This was what Paul was trying to tell

the Galatians and the Romans when he told them how blessed they were to be able to cry out, in the Spirit, *Abba* Father! (Gal 4:4-7; Rom 8:14-15). As we all so sadly know, the reality of sin is powerfully present in our lives, and we all too often fall short of our full potential. We could all be “another Christ,” but this, for a variety of reasons, sometimes lies beyond us. Again, however, we can look back to the Letter to the Hebrews: “We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin” (Heb 4:15).³⁷⁰ That matter, however, is the subject of another day’s reflection.

Finally, these reflections on Jesus have been provided so that we may all recognize our vocation to Christian Discipleship. We are to “put on Christ” so that we might recognize our dignity. All that is noble in us: our loving, our laughter, our play, our mission in life, our dancing, our eating and drinking, our praying, alone or with others, our search for justice and peace, and the many other things that we do in response to that which is deepest within us, is part of our journey to be as Jesus Christ was (see Phil 4:8-9). Like Jesus, we reach beyond ourselves into the mystery of the divinity which is, at one and the same time, constitutive of my being, yet the object of my search. Or, as Rahner puts it:

I encounter myself when I find myself in the world and when I ask about God; and when I ask about my essence, I always find myself already in the world and on the way to God. I am both of these at once, and cannot be one without the other.³⁷¹

³⁷⁰ This is also involved in Rahner’s use of “realized obedienciality,” to speak of Jesus, leading to oneness between the human and the divine, and of our “potential obedienciality,” leaving us “on the journey,” as disciples of Jesus, toward the divine.

³⁷¹ K. Rahner, *Spirit in the World* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1968), 406.

In Salesian fashion, I would have liked to close this day with a final reflection on the way Mary of Nazareth embodied this truth, especially in the light of her portrait across the Lucan Infancy narrative: her struggle to accept the word of God, until she finally accepted: “Be it done unto me according to your word” (Luke 1:26-38), the ominous words of Simeon: “And a sword will pierce through your own soul also” (2:35), and her inability to understand all that was said and done, but her “treasuring in the heart” (2:33, 50-51). But that reflection, also, must wait for another day.