

Vladimir Lossky

## “The Theological Notion of the Human Person”

Chapter 6 of *In the Image and Likeness of God*  
(St Vladimir's Seminary Press: New York, 1974)  
pp. 111-123

**I do not intend to discourse on the notion of the human person** either in the doctrines of the Church Fathers or in the works of other Christian theologians. Even if I had wanted to do so, I would have had to ask myself originally, to what degree this wish to find a doctrine of the human person among the Fathers of the first centuries is legitimate. Would this not be trying to attribute to them certain ideas which may have remained unknown to them and which we would nevertheless attribute to them, without realizing how much, in our way of conceiving of the human person, we depend upon a complex philosophical tradition— upon a line of thought which has followed paths very different from the one which could claim to be part of a properly theological tradition? To avoid such unconscious confusion, as well as conscious anachronisms— inserting Bergson into the work of St. Gregory of Nyssa or Hegel into the work of St. Maximus the Confessor— we will refrain for the moment from all attempts at finding in these texts the outlines of a developed

[112]

doctrine (or doctrines) of the human person such as might have arisen in the course of the history of Christian theology. For my part, I must admit that until now I have not found what one might call an elaborated doctrine of the human person in patristic theology, alongside its very precise teaching on divine persons or hypostases. However there is a Christian anthropology among the Fathers of the first eight centuries, as well as later on in Byzantium and in the West; and it is unnecessary to say that these doctrines of man are clearly personalist. It could not have been otherwise for a theological doctrine based upon the revelation of a living and personal God who created man “according to his own image and likeness.”

Thus I shall not put forward an historian's examination of Christian doctrines, but simply some theological reflections on the questions which must be answered by the notion of the human person in the context of Christian dogma. We shall have to say a few words about the divine Persons before posing the question: What is the human person according to theological thought? This brief triadological study will not divert us from our main subject.

In order better to express personal reality in God or, rather, the reality of a personal God— a reality which is not only an economic mode of expressing an impersonal monad in itself but the absolute and primordial condition of a Trinitarian God in His transcendence— the Greek Fathers preferred the term *hypostasis* to *prosopon* for designating the divine persons. The line of thought which distinguishes *ousia* and *hypostasis* in God uses metaphysical vocabulary; it expresses itself in terms of an ontology— in terms which here have the value of conventional signs rather than of concepts— in order to point out both absolute identity and absolute difference. It was a great terminological discovery to introduce a distinction between two synonyms, in order to express the irreducibility of the *hypostasis* to the *ousia* and of the person to the essence, without, however, opposing them as two different realities. This will enable St. Gregory of Nazianzus to say, “The Son is not the Father, because there is only one Father, but He is what the Father is; the

[113]

Holy Spirit, although he proceeds from God, is not the Son, because there is only one Only Begotten Son, but He is what the Son is” (Or. 31, 9). The *hypostasis* is the same as the *ousia*; it receives all the same attributes— or all the negations— which can be formulated on the subject of the “superessence”; but it nonetheless remains irreducible to the *ousia*. This irreducibility cannot be understood or expressed except in the relation of the Three Hypostases who, strictly speaking, are not “three” but “Tri-Unity.” In speaking of three hypostases, we are already making an improper abstraction: if we wanted to generalize and make a *concept* of the “divine hypostasis,” we would have to say that the only common definition possible would be the impossibility of any common definition of the three hypostases. They are alike in the fact that they are dissimilar; or, rather, to go beyond the relative idea of resemblance, which is out of place here, one must say that the absolute character of their difference implies an absolute identity. Beyond this one cannot speak of hypostases of the Tri-Unity. just as the Three here is not an arithmetic number but indicates in the Triad of pure difference— a Triad which remains equal to the Monad— an infinite passage beyond the dyad of opposition, so the hypostasis as such, inasmuch as it is irreducible to the *ousia*, is no longer a conceptual expression but a sign which is introduced into the domain of the non-generalizable, pointing out the radically personal character of the God of Christian revelation.

However, *ousia* and *hypostasis* remain synonyms, and each time one wants to establish a distinction between the two terms, by attributing to them a different content, one inevitably falls back into the domain of conceptual knowledge: one opposes the general to the particular, the “second *ousia*” to the individual substance, the genus or species to the individual. This is what we find, for example, in a passage of Theodoret:<sup>1</sup> “According to secular philosophy, there is no difference between *ousia* and *hypostasis*. For *ousia* signifies that which is (*to on* [i.e., the neuter participle]), and *hypostasis*

[114]

signifies that which subsists (*to hyphestos*). But, according to the doctrine of the Fathers, there is between *ousia* and *hypostasis* the same difference as between the common and the particular, that is to say, the same difference as between the genus or the species and the individual.” The same surprise awaits us in the writings of St. John of Damascus. In the “Dialectic,” which is a type of philosophical prelude to his account of Christian dogma, he says:<sup>2</sup> “The word *hypostasis* has two meanings. Sometimes it simply means existence (*hyparxis*). Following this meaning, *ousia* and *hypostasis* are the same thing. This is why certain Fathers have said ‘natures (*physeis*) or hypostases’. Other times it designates what exists by itself and according to the subsistence constituted by itself (*ten kath’ auto kai idiasyston hyparxin*). Following this meaning, it designates the individual (*to atomon*) numerically different from all others, e.g.: Peter, Paul, a particular horse.”

It is clear that such a definition of the hypostasis could only serve as a preamble to Trinitarian theology— as a conceptual starting-point leading towards a deconceptualized notion which is no longer that of an individual of a species. If certain critics have wanted to see in St. Basil’s Trinitarian doctrine a distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* which should correspond to the Aristotelian distinction between *prote* and *deutera ousia*, this is because they have not been able to distinguish either the point of arrival from the point of departure or the theological construct, which is beyond concepts, from its conceptual scaffolding.

In Trinitarian theology (which is theology *par excellence*, *Theologia* in the true sense of the word for the Fathers of the first centuries) the notion of hypostasis is neither that of an individual of the species “Divinity” nor that of an individual substance of divine nature. Thus the distinction between two synonyms which Theodoret attributes to the Church Fathers is, in its conceptual form, nothing but an approximation of that which cannot be conceptualized. On the whole, Theodoret was wrong when he opposed the

[115]

conceptual distinction introduced by the Fathers to the identity of the two terms in “secular philosophy.” More in keeping with the historian which he was than with the theologian, he was able to see in the original identical meaning of the two terms chosen to designate the “common” and the “particular” in God, only an historical curiosity. But why choose this identical meaning except to maintain in what is common the sense of the concrete *ousia* and to eliminate from the particular all limitations proper to the individual, so that the *hypostasis* might apply itself to the whole of the common nature instead of dividing it? If this is so, the theological truth of the distinction between *ousia* and *hypostasis* established by the Fathers is not to be sought in the letter of its conceptual expression but rather between that expression and the identity of the two concepts which would have been proper to “secular philosophy.” That is to say, one must situate this theological truth beyond concepts: concepts here divest themselves of regular meaning to become signs of the personal reality of a God who is not the God of philosophers nor (very often) the God of theologians.

Let us now look in Christian anthropology for the same non-conceptual meaning of the distinction between *hypostasis* and *ousia* or *physis*. (These two notions coincide without being completely identical.) We will ask ourselves whether this irreducibility of hypostasis to essence or nature— an irreducibility which forced us to give up equating the hypostasis with the individual in the Trinity by revealing the non-conceptual character of the notion of hypostasis— must take place in the realm of created being as well, especially when one is dealing with human hypostases or persons. By asking this question, we will be asking at the same time whether Trinitarian theology has had any repercussion on Christian anthropology— whether it has opened up a new dimension of the “personal” by discovering a notion of the human hypostasis not reducible to the level of natures or individual substances, which fall under the hold of concepts and which can be classed so comfortably in the logical tree of Porphyry.

[116]

We will answer this question, *more scholastico*, first by negation, cautiously saying: it seems not, *videtur quod non*. It seems that the human person is nothing other than an individual numerically different from all other men. In fact, even if thus far it has been necessary to give up the notion of individuals— a notion which has no place in the Trinity to rise to the unencumbered idea of the divine hypostasis, it is quite another matter in created reality, where there are individual human beings whom we call persons. We can also call them “hypostases,” but then this term will apply to each individual of a given species, as was the case in the example given by St. John of Damascus: “Peter, Paul, a particular horse.” Others (St. Gregory of Nazianzus, for example) reserve the term “hypostasis” for individuals of a reasonable nature, exactly as Boethius does in his definition of person: *substantia individua rationalis naturae* (and let us note that *substantia* here is a literal translation of *hypostasis*). Thomas Aquinas received intact this concept formulated by Boethius for designating created being. Like the Greek Fathers, he sought to transform it in order to apply it to the persons of the Trinity; but in the context of a Trinitarian doctrine different from that of the East, the philosopher’s persona becomes the theologian’s *relatio*.<sup>3</sup> It is curious to note that Richard of Saint-Victor, who refused to accept Boethius’ definition of person, ended by conceiving of the divine hypostasis as *divinae naturae incommunicabilis existentia*, which, according to Fr. Bergeron, would bring him close to the concept of the Greek theologians. However (and this is the one point which should interest us at this moment) it seems that neither the Church Fathers nor Thomas Aquinas not even Richard of Saint-Victor, who criticized Boethius, abandoned the notion of human person = individual substance in his anthropology, after having transformed it for use in Trinitarian theology.

Thus in theological language, in the East as in the West,

[117]

the term “human person” coincides with that of “human individual.” But we cannot stop at this declaration. Since it seems that Christian anthropology has not given a new sense to the *term*

“human hypostasis” or “person,” let us try to disclose the presence of a different notion, which is no longer identical to that of “individual” and yet remains unfixed by any term, as a basis implied but most often not expressed in all theological or ascetic teaching which deals with man.

Before all else, let us see (and this will be our task here) whether the notion of the human person reduced to that of a *physis* or individual nature can be maintained in the context of Christian dogma. The dogma of Chalcedon, whose fifteenth centenary the Christian world celebrated in 1951, shows us Christ “consubstantial with the Father in divinity, consubstantial with us in humanity.” We can conceive of the reality of God’s incarnation without admitting any transmutation of the Divinity into humanity, without confusion or mixture of the uncreated and the created, precisely because we distinguish the person or hypostasis of the Son from His nature or essence: a person who is not formed from two natures, *ek dyo physeon* but who is in two natures, *en dyo physessin*. The expression “hypostatic union” (despite its convenience and general use) is improper because it makes us think of a human nature or substance existing before the incarnation which would enter into the hypostasis of the Word, while in fact the human nature or substance assumed by the Word in the Virgin Mary only began to exist as this particular nature or substance at the moment of the incarnation, i.e. in the unity of the Person or Hypostasis of the Son of God become Man. Thus the humanity of Christ, by which He is “consubstantial with us,” never had any other hypostasis than that of the Son of God; however no one would deny that His human nature has the character of an “individual substance,” and the Chalcedonian dogma insists on the fact that Christ is “perfect in his humanity,” “truly man,” *ek psyches logikes kai somatos*— “with a reasonable soul and a body.” In these conditions, the human subject of Christ has the same character as other particular substances or natures of humanity that one calls “hypostases”

[118]

or “persons.” Nevertheless, if one were to apply this understanding of “hypostasis” to Him, one would fall into the Nestorian error of dissecting the hypostatic unity of Christ into two distinct “personal” beings. Since, according to Chalcedon, a divine Person made himself consubstantial with, created beings, this is because He has become an Hypostasis of human nature without transforming Himself into the hypostasis of a human person. Thus, if Christ is a divine Person, all the while being totally man by his “enhypostasized” nature, one has to admit (at least in Christ’s case) that here the hypostasis of the assumed humanity cannot be reduced to the human substance, to that human individual who was registered with the other subjects of the Roman Empire under Augustus. But at the same time, one can say that it is God who was registered according to His humanity precisely because that individual human, that “atom” of human nature counted with the others, was not a human person.

It seems that, in order to be logical, it should be necessary to give up designating the individual substance of reasonable nature by the term “person” or “hypostasis.” Otherwise the Nestorian controversy risks seeming like a dispute over words: One or two hypostases in Christ? Two, if in

the first case (that of the divine hypostasis) “hypostasis” means irreducibility to nature, while in the second case “hypostasis” only signifies the individual human substance. But if in both cases one finds the same irreducibility of person to nature, one will say one hypostasis or person of Christ. And this refusal to admit two distinct personal beings in Christ means at the same time that one must also distinguish in human beings the person or hypostasis from the nature or individual substance. Thus, in the light of Christological dogma, Boethius’ definition, *substantia individua rationalis naturae*, appears insufficient for establishing the concept of human person. It can only be applied to the “enhypostasized nature” (to use the expression created by Leontius of Byzantium) and not to the human hypostasis or person itself. We understand why Richard of Saint-Victor rejected Boethius’ definition, remarking with finesse that substance

[119]

answers the question *quid*, person answers the question *quis*. Now, to the question *quis* one answers with a proper noun which alone can designate the person.<sup>4</sup> Hence the new definition (for the divine persons): *persona est divinae naturae incommunicabilis existentia*.

However, let us leave Richard to ask ourselves how one ought to distinguish between the human person or hypostasis and man taken as an individual or particular nature. What should “person” mean in relation to the individual human? Is it a superior quality of the individual— a quality which would be his perfection, inasmuch as he is a being created in the image of God, and, at the same time, a principle of his individuality? This might appear likely, especially if one considers that attempts to show in the human being the distinctive marks of what is “in the image of God” almost always aim at the superior (“spiritual”) faculties of man. (Let us recall, however, that St. Irenaeus extended the “image” to the corporeal nature of man.) The superior faculties of man which usually serve to bring out the distinctive marks of the image receive, in a tripartite anthropology, the name of *nous*— a term which is difficult to translate and which we are forced to render as “human mind.” In this case, man, as a person, would be an incarnate *nous*— an incarnate mind, linked to an animal nature which it “enhypostasizes” or, rather, to which it remains juxtaposed while dominating it. In fact one can find, especially among the Fathers of the fourth century and in particular in St. Gregory of Nyssa, development of such ideas concerning the *nous*— the seat of liberty (*autexousia*), the faculty of self-determination which lends to man his character of being created in the image of God or what we could call his dignity of personhood.

But let us try to submit this new schema, which seems based on the authority of the Fathers, to the judgment of Christological dogma. We see immediately that we must abandon it. In fact, if the *nous* in a human being did represent the “hypostatic” element which makes him a per-

[120]

son, it would be necessary, in order to safeguard the unity of the hypostasis of the God-Man, to take away the human mind from the nature of Christ and to replace the created *nous* by the divine Logos, i.e. we ought to accept the Christological formula of Apollinarius of Laodicea. It is

important to notice that it was precisely Gregory of Nyssa who criticized most pertinently Apollinarius' error. This leads us to think that, despite the intellectualist accent of Gregory's doctrine of the image of God, the human *nous*, in his thinking cannot be interpreted in the sense of the hypostatic element which confers on man his personal being.

If this is so, there will be no place for the idea of the hypostasis or person of man as one element in the composite of his individual nature. Now this corresponds exactly to that irreducibility of the human hypostasis to the human individual which we had to admit in speaking of Chalcedon. But on the other hand, in distinguishing the human hypostasis from that which constitutes its complex nature— body, soul, spirit (if one wants to accept this trichotomy)— we will not find any definable property or any attributes which would be foreign to the *physis*, and would belong exclusively to the person taken in itself. Under these conditions, it will be impossible for us to form a concept of the human person, and we will have to content ourselves with saying: "person" signifies the irreducibility of man to his nature— "irreducibility" and not "something irreducible" or "something which makes man irreducible to his nature" precisely because it cannot be a question here of "something" distinct from "another nature" but of someone who is distinct from his own nature, of someone who goes beyond his nature while still containing it, who makes it exist as human nature by this overstepping and yet does not exist in himself beyond the nature which he "enhypostasizes" and which he constantly exceeds. I would have said "which he ecstaticizes," if I did not fear being reproached for introducing an expression too reminiscent of "the ecstatic character" of the *Dasein* of Heidegger, after having criticized others who allowed themselves to make such comparisons.

Fr. Urs von Balthasar in his book on St. Maximus the

[121]

Confessor, in speaking of Post-Chalcedonian theology, makes a remark which seems to be both correct and erroneous at the same time. He says:<sup>5</sup> "Besides the tree of Porphyry, which tries to place all existing being into categories of essence (*ousia*), class, type, specific difference, and finally individual (*atomon eidos*), there appear new ontological categories. These new categories, irreducible to the categories of essence, refer at the same time to the domain of existence and to the domain of person. These two domains are still linked in the new expressions (*hyparxis*, *hypostasis*)... to contours still vague which are looking for a precise quality. It will take a long time before the Middle Ages is able to formulate the distinction between essence and existence and to make of it the framework for the mode of being of the creature.... However, we are most assuredly going in that direction when we see this new order of existence and person arise next to the old Aristotelian order of essences."

Fr. von Balthasar touches here on a group of extremely important questions; but, having made this comparison, instead of pursuing his investigation further, he digresses and remains at the surface. He compared, as we have seen, the "new ontological categories" of hypostasis or person and the existential *esse* which Thomas Aquinas discovered beyond the Aristotelian

order of substantiality— the presence of existence which, as Gilson says, “transcends the concept because it transcends essence.”<sup>6</sup> We believe Gilson is right in saying that only a Christian metaphysician could go so far in the analysis of the concrete structure of created beings. But faced with Fr. von Balthasar’s comparison one asks: Did the real distinction between essence and existence though it finds at the root of each individual being the act of existing, which places him in his own existence— attain at the same time the root of personal being? Is the nonconceptualizable character of existence of the same order as that of the person, or does this new ontological order, discovered by Thomas Aquinas, still fail to reach the personal?

[122]

It is certain that there is a close link between the two, at least in Thomas’ thought. Answering the question *Utrum in Christo sit tantum unum esse* (*Sent.* 111, d. 6, q. 2, a. 2; 111, q. 17, a. 2), Thomas affirms the unity of the existence of the God-Man in speaking of the unicity of His hypostasis. But will he push this comparison between the existential and the personal any further, so as to affirm three existences in God? Richard of Saint-Victor did this by speaking of three divine hypostases; but he did not reform the notion of human person. Thomas Aquinas reconstructed the notion of individual substances, finding in them the multiple creative energy which actualizes all that exists; but this new ontological category applies to all created beings and not only to human or angelic persons. At the same time, the God of Thomas Aquinas is one sole existence, identical to its essence: pure Act or *Ipsum Esse subsistens*. This forces us to correct one of Fr. von Balthasar’s remarks. In the notion of the created hypostasis, Maximus the Confessor may have reached the new domain of that which cannot be conceptualized because it cannot be reduced to its essence; but one will not find in the Thomistic distinction between essence and existence— a distinction which penetrates to the existential depths of *individual* beings— the ontological solution of the mystery of the human person.

Thomas Aquinas’ natural theology does not reach this solution; and he cannot be reproached for this fact, because such was not his task. If I am permitted to speak in the language of the “Palamite” theology which is natural to me, I will say that Thomas Aquinas, as a metaphysician, attained God and created beings at the level of energy and not at the level of the “superessence” in Three Hypostases and of the polyhypostasy of the created cosmos. The creature, who is both “physical” and “hypostatic” at the same time, is called to realize his unity of nature as well as his true personal diversity by going in grace beyond the individual limits which divide nature and tend to reduce persons to the level of the closed being of particular substances.

Thus the level on which the problem of the human person is posed goes beyond that of ontology as we normally under-

[123]



stand it; and if it is a question of metaontology, only God can know— that God whom the story of Genesis shows stopping His work to say in the Council of the Three Hypostases: “Let us create man in our image and likeness.”

## Notes

1 *Eranistes* 1; P.G. 83, col. 33.

2 Cap. 42; P.G. 94, col. 612.

3 The path of this transformation, from Boethius to William of Auxerre and Thomas Aquinas, has been traced in the excellent study of Fr. Bergeron, *La structure du concept latin de personne*, (= *Etudes d'histoire littéraire et doctrinale du XI<sup>e</sup> siècle*, 2nd series, Paris, Ottawa, 1932).

4 *De Trinitate* IV, 7; P.L. 196, cols. 934-935.

5 H. Urs von Balthasar, *Liturgie cosmique* (Paris, 1947) p. 21.

6 *L'Être et l'essence* (Paris, 1948) p. 111.