The Blurring of Time Distinctions in Roman Catholicism

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A consideration of the question of time offers a useful perspective from which to view the contours of the Christian faith. In a recent book, John Stott put forward the idea that the message of the gospel can be summed up adequately by two biblical adverbs which are linked to time: hapax (once and for all) and mallon (for evermore). It is around these two adverbs that both the uniqueness and definitive character of the incarnation is asserted and the dynamic, progressive nature of the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit articulated. The two adverbs refer to two aspects of the work of the trinitarian God in the world, the one circumscribed by time and definitive in regards to the completion of the work of salvation, the other proceeding through time and developing the outworking of that salvation in history. The gospel is a message that is based on what God has done, hapax, and on what he is doing, mallon; it refers to unique facts and also to on-going developments. On the one hand, there is a series of finished events and, on the other, a continuing process which flows on through time.

To consider the essence of the Christian faith from this adverbial point of view is without doubt an approach that is biblically viable and helpful. It recognises that the work of God, both hapax and mallon, has significant temporal meaning in the history of salvation. Both of these elements can be seen in the divine plan, and as long as their boundaries are maintained, any unjustifiable blurring is avoided.

If we borrow from the language of the Chalcedonian definition regarding the two natures in the one person of Jesus Christ, we can say that the hapax and the mallon of the gospel must not be confused, but considered as unchangeable, indivisible and inseparable. Their co-existence in the divine plan does not diminish their differences; they need to be both affirmed and safeguarded. The demarcation which differentiates hapax from mallon may be subtle but it must be maintained in order to avoid any

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distortion of the fundamental structure of the Christian faith. If the two are confused, problems arise. If uniqueness is attributed to that which is progressive or, alternatively, if what is definitive becomes by nature continuous, this brings about a distortion in the constitution of the faith which alters its fundamental characteristics. Just as Chalcedon recognised the basic parameters for Christology, the important distinction between *hapax* and *mallon* with regard to the gospel reflects the contours of the Christian faith that are indicated by the Word of God. In both cases even a minimal violation would become devastating, producing effects of enormous consequence.

Since it provides such a clear insight to the different aspects of gospel truth, reference to *hapax* and *mallon* also provides a model by which to evaluate the degree to which Christian confessions adhere to the biblical message. In a particular way it provides a helpful interpretative perspective from which to examine Roman Catholicism’s understanding of how God works within time in the world. The way in which Catholicism perceives time, the sense of definitiveness as well as that of a progression, is a pointer to its basic theological framework. The argument which will be suggested here, in an introductory way, is that Roman Catholicism operated a crucial breach of the boundary between *hapax* and *mallon* in its understanding of the Church as a prolongation of the incarnation. This breach subsequently caused a series of further incursions, above all in the doctrines of the Eucharist and revelation.

**The prolongation of time with respect to the incarnation**

One of the defining aspects of the Roman Catholic Church is its self-understanding that reveals a great deal about the nature of Roman Catholicism.

Throughout the twentieth century there have been many images of the Church which have held a prominent position in Roman Catholic thinking. One only has to think of the insistence on the ‘mystical body’ found in the encyclical *Mystici Corporis* of Pius XII (1943) or the vigorous restatement of the conception of the Church as a ‘sacrament of salvation’ from Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*, 1), with their emphases that are still widely promoted. Even if the highlighting of certain interpretations can be attributed to changes in cultural factors and ecclesiastical dynamics, there exists, however, an underlying element of ecclesiological self-definition which these different emphases presuppose and reinforce. Although variations, they are simply modifications within a single wider picture whose perimeters are determined by the central hard core. In fact, Roman Catholic ecclesiology rests on the idea of the continuation of the incarnation of the Son of God in his mystical body, that is, the Church. In Adam Möhler’s classic definition:

The visible Church … is the Son of God himself, everlastingly manifesting himself among men in a human form, perpetually renovated, and eternally young – the permanent incarnation of the same.

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3 For a recent proposal for an evangelical theological analysis of Roman Catholicism, cf. the document issued by Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (Padova, Italy) and endorsed by the Italian Evangelical Alliance, ‘An Evangelical Approach Towards Understanding Roman Catholicism’, *Evangelicals Now* (Dec. 2000), 12–13.

4 Johann Adam Möhler, *Symbolism or Exposition of the Doctrinal Differences Between Catholics and Protestants as Evidenced by their Symbolic Writings* (London: Gibbings & Co. 1906), 259.
This ‘incarnational’ understanding of the Church, rooted in the Counter-Reformation tradition and renewed in recent authoritative teaching and theological reflection, is the key to understanding the basic framework of Roman Catholic ecclesiology. Recent developments (e.g. the insistence of the Church as a sacrament or as communion) have further enlarged its scope without changing its premise based on the idea of the Church as the prolongation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The incarnation is the period of the Son which goes from his virgin conception to his ascension into heaven, and includes the teaching, miracles, passion, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Just as the conception marks the beginning, the ascension delineates the conclusion of the incarnation within the scheme of salvation. If this were not convincing enough, the fact that Christ is seated at the right hand of the Father is the supreme culmination of his earthly mission. It marks the beginning of the intercession of the Son and anticipates the submission of the whole world to him. The incarnation of Christ is a hapax in the work of God which is so uniquely related to the person and mission of the Son that it does not require any supplement or continuation, integration or representation.

In Roman Catholic thought, however, while the virgin birth is rightly considered to be the beginning of the incarnation (even though the perpetual virginity of Mary is also a doctrine which enters into conflict with the same principle that breaks the hapax of the Christ event) the ascension does not represent a definitive end of Christ's work in salvation which confirms its uniqueness and completeness. It is considered as part of a process which, although changing the mode of Christ's presence (from a physical to a mystical presence), carries out the continuation of his incarnation in the nature and mission of the Church. In other words, the uniqueness of the incarnation, while being mainly understood as centred in Jesus Christ, also has an ecclesiological appendix that ensures its continuity throughout history. It is obvious that Roman Catholicism maintains a series of distinctions between Christ and the Church that prevent an indiscriminate and wooden identification. Nevertheless, despite all the subtle distinctions that are introduced, a substantial continuity remains between the incarnation of the Son and the work of the Church and that has serious consequences.

The act of having destroyed the unique and definitive nature of the incarnation with its glorious conclusion at the ascension implies the transferral of the mission of the Son from Christ to the Church. By overthrowing the hapax of the incarnation in favour of its continuation through the Church, Christ’s prerogatives are aligned with those of the Church. The unique mediation of Christ yields to the mediation of the Church. The regal authority of Christ is absorbed into the jurisdictional power of the Church. The final revelation of Christ is subsequently administered by the magisterial office of the Church and, given that it also embraces oral tradition, this could result in the emergence of other truths that are not attested in biblical revelation. The choice of the apostles by Christ, instead of being a once and for all event, evolves into the succession of bishops.

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5 E.g. Lumen Gentium 8; 10–12; Catechism of the Catholic Church 737; 766; 787–88; 795.
6 E.g. Romano Guardini, Henri De Lubac, Yves Congar, Karl Rahner.
7 For a brief presentation of these aspects of the incarnation, cf. Gerald Bray, Steps of Understanding: Key Events in Jesus’ Life (Fearn: Christian Focus 1998).
which is established by the ecclesiastical institution. The prerogatives of salvation that belong solely to Christ are indirectly, but nevertheless really, attributed to Mary, who shares with the Son an assumption into heaven. The worship that is attributed exclusively to God is also deflected to other figures, even if this is only in the form of veneration. In short, the hapax of the time of Christ continues in the mallon of the time of the Church. Once the concept of the unique time of the incarnation is broken, the idea of the prolonged time period of the Church, in which the incarnation of the Son of God continues, and establishes itself. The time period of Christ becomes identified with, and actualised in, the time of the Church, just as the time of the Church is always thought of as a direct continuation of the time of Christ.

Nobody can deny the organic relationship between Christ and the church which is presented in the fascinating Pauline metaphor of the body (e.g. 1 Cor. 12:22–27). Such a metaphor like this, however, does not warrant the undue expansion of the time of the incarnation which breaks its hapax nature and creates considerable space for the church to operate as an ‘alter Christus’ (another Christ). Within the one body, the head is head and the members are members, without confusion or exchange of prerogatives. The Roman Catholic self-understanding of the church in terms of the prolongation of the incarnation allows the invasion of the church in a christological area which is inviolably hapax, exclusive, closed. In this sense, the Protestant ‘solus Christus’ (Christ alone) is really the vindication of the integrity of the hapax of the incarnation against any attempt to infringe on its time delimitation and to extend its unique nature and mission to another agent. The incarnation of the Son of God is christologically hapax, not ecclesiologically mallon as Roman Catholicism argues.

The re-presentation of time in the Eucharist

One of the inevitable results of the Roman Catholic understanding of the church as a continuation of the incarnation is the expansion of the categories through which Roman Catholicism understands the work of redemption, in particular the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross. Both the theme of the ephapax in the letter to the Hebrews (7:27; 9:12, 26, 28; 10:10) and the work of the Son of God in its accomplishment are read in the light of the hermeneutic of the ‘church time’ which breaks into that of Christ. Since the church is involved in the time of the incarnation of the Son, she is also active in his redemption which is accomplished on the cross. Both the incarnation and redemption are seen in the light of mallon, instead of hapax. This transition is most clearly seen in the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Eucharist, another Gordian knot in the theological exploration of Roman Catholicism. The Roman Catholic Eucharist is based on a twofold, co-existing assumption: on the one hand, the acceptance of the unique, historical event of the cross and, on the other, the necessity of the re-presentation of the same sacrifice by the church. The dynamic that operates between uniqueness and re-presentation opens the field to another typically dialectic move: there is both the recognition of the exclusive role of Christ in his sacrifice and the simultaneous insistence on the role of the church in the act of re-presenting that same sacrifice.9

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, time and again, uses the ephapax language of the letter to the Hebrews, to refer to the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and, compared

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9 I have further explored the issue in ‘The Cross and the Eucharist: the Doctrine of the Attonement according to the Catechism of the Catholic Church’, European Journal of Theology 8:1 (1999), 49–59.
to every other sacrifice, to underline its uniqueness (614, 618) and its perfection (529). The uniqueness of salvation-history intersects, however, with the eucharistic developments in such a way that what is affirmed about the sacrifice of Christ becomes integrated with the language of re-presentation (1366), perpetuation (611, 1323) and making present (1362). The Eucharist is the sacrifice of Christ re-enacted, perpetuated and made present. Among other things, this means that as the cross is a sacrifice, so too the Eucharist is a sacrifice (1330, 1365) – to the point that together they are ‘one single sacrifice’ (1367). The uniqueness of the cross is thought out in loose terms in order to include the Eucharist so that the hapax of Calvary is dissolved in the mallon of the Mass. The event of the cross of Jesus Christ is extended, becoming part of the event of the Eucharist of the Church. In this respect, the retelseal language of John 19:30 assumes open borders in the sense that the work of the cross is considered definitive but not final and, above all, is unable to actualise its own efficacy without the active participation of the church in making it present. Given that the enactment of the Eucharist is a supplement necessary to make the cross effective, it is in the Mass that the real work of redemption is carried out (1364).

It must also be noted that the fluid nature of the time periods of redemption also has repercussions for the doctrine of justification. In fact Roman Catholicism sees it as a gradual and progressive process through which the righteousness of Christ is increasingly infused into man and not as a declarative act of God through which the righteousness of Christ is imputed to the sinner. As far as justification is concerned, in Roman Catholicism the category of mallon has displaced that of hapax and ecumenical engagement on this issue needs to be aware of it.10

Inseparably connected to these crucial elements of the doctrine of the Eucharist is the centrality and agency of the church. If the Eucharist is the re-presentation of the sacrifice of Christ, the subject (the church) which offers it assumes a decisive role in the workings of the sacrifice: it not only receives its benefits, it actualises it and carries out its memorial. In the Eucharist the sacrifice that is re-presented is also the sacrifice of the church (1368) which also includes the offering of the church itself (1330). What is vitally important here is being aware of the theological framework which is at the basis of it. In this case, once again, the Roman Catholic eucharistic theology can be traced back to the subversion of time periods, from the hapax of the cross of Christ to the mallon of the Mass of the church via the understanding of the church as the prolongation of the incarnation. The theology of re-presentation can be explained in terms of violation of the uniqueness of the soteriological completeness of the sacrifice of Christ by an enlarged view of the sacrifice which includes both the unique event of the cross and the on-going events of the Mass. The Roman Catholic theology of the Eucharist, ‘the fount and apex of the whole Christian life’ (Lumen Gentium 11), is a consequence of a prior intrusion of ‘church time’ into the time of Christ which establishes a continuity between

them in terms of the prolongation of the incarnation of the Son within the mission of the church.

The dynamic time of revelation

A third area of vital theological importance in which it is possible to clearly discern the Roman Catholic understanding of hapax and mallon is that of revelation. While the doctrinal subject changes, the generating mechanism of violating time periods is the same in that it is indelibly rooted in the Roman Catholic system. Here, the yardstick of biblical data sees the faith as being given to the saints once for all time (Jude 3). The divine revelation has been made known in Christ hapax in the sense of its completeness (Heb. 1:1-2). It has certainly undergone an historical progression in the unfolding of salvation history, but in the fullness of time has reached its final apex in the mission of the Son of God (Gal. 4:4). After Christ, the culmination of revelation, no further revelation must be expected until his return. As definitive revelation, the canonical Scriptures are the divinely inspired testimony by which, through the Holy Spirit, the mission of the church is made possible together with the transmission of the gospel from generation to generation (2 Tim. 3:16). If Jesus Christ is the definitive divine revelation, then the canonical, inspired Scriptures are the complete revelation of the Son in the books of the Bible. The closure of the canon is the attestation that the revelation of Jesus Christ is complete until he comes. Both events, the revelation of the Son of God and the final acceptance of the canonical Scriptures, are organically linked and are deeply permeated with a sense of hapax: revelation is complete and definitive. After the revelation of the Christ of the Bible, there can no longer be revelations but only interpretations of the already given revelation. The work of interpretation of the revelation is a mallon-type of divine intervention. It is the Holy Spirit who continually guides into all truth (John 16:13). While revelation belongs to hapax time, the hermeneutic of revelation belongs to the mallon time. From the evangelical perspective, the Bible is the canonical authority revealing the hapax event of Christ and it needs to be known mallon through the Spirit.

The Roman Catholic perspective, however, while attributing a conclusive character to the revelation of Christ and to the Bible, has a wider understanding of the Word of God than simply the canonical Scriptures. Revelation is one ‘divine wellspring’ (Dei Verbum 9) from which the Bible and tradition flow. The two means of transmission refer to the unique revelation that is interpreted authentically and authoritatively by the Magisterium.\(^{11}\) What needs to be stressed here is that the stream of revelation by tradition is neither independent nor necessarily anti-biblical, but it can certainly be extra-biblical in the sense that it is now given the status of a fully legitimate stream of revelation in itself. In the words of the encyclical Fides et Ratio (1998), the Scriptures are not ‘the only point of reference of truth’ for the Roman Catholic Church. Scripture and tradition together bring revelation. The hapax sense of biblical revelation is opened up to being integrated with tradition that is mediated by the Magisterium, thus creating a dialectic between the Biblical message and the process of tradition. On the contrary, the Protestant ‘Sola Scriptura’ based on the hapax of the revelation of Christ in the Bible, questions the idea of tradition as either a parallel or an intersecting channel of

\(^{11}\) Cf. Dei Verbum 7-10, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 50-141.
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12 Without doubt the way the Roman Catholic doctrine of revelation is conceived demands that revelation is open since tradition is still an active stream of revelation even if it is subject to numerous restrictions and precautionary measures. The example of the promulgation of the dogma of the Assumption of Mary (1950), explicitly lacking any biblical warrant but well attested in tradition, indicates that such an idea is not just hypothetical. For Roman Catholicism, revelation can be seen as a mallon action of God that is administered by the church.

To this should be added the observation that the violation of the time periods of revelation also gives enormous scope for the exercise of normative authority by the ecclesiastical hierarchy. Given that both the interpretation of Scripture and the discernment of tradition are the roles of the Magisterium, it finds itself invested with enormous powers. The inevitable result is that if the hapax of revelation is broken, the role of the church mushrooms out of all proportion since the church administers the mallon of revelation.

Roman Catholicism is not intentionally driven by the desire to confuse the time periods of God. It would be uncharitable and prejudiced to think so. All the same, the unfolding of its powerful dialectical capacities which introduce subtle distinctions leading to the amplification of the synthesis (‘both-and’ instead of the Reformation ‘sola’, ‘solus’) brings about a substantial rearrangement of the time periods. Here is the Roman Catholic genius of ‘complexio oppositorum’ (convergence of opposites), an epistemological art which is at the same time both fascinating and disconcerting. The removing of boundaries between hapax and mallon means the removal of demarcation lines between event and process, between definitive and progressive aspects of Divine action, between Christ and the church. To undermine the configuration of time is a dangerous game. A hapax that is violated gives rise to disruptive rifts in the very fabric of the Christian faith. An extended mallon produces ‘add-ons’ that are Scripturally unsustainable in the economy of faith.

The Protestant Reformation identified the core of the problem with Roman Catholicism in its mingling of what needs to be distinct. ‘Solus Christus’ and ‘Sola Scriptura’ are none other than an urgent call to rigorously respect the hapax of the gospel in order to benefit from it more and more. In fact, enjoying the mallon of the gospel is possible only after respecting its hapax. Looking at Roman Catholicism today, it is hard to believe that that call has been superseded.

12 A brilliant treatment of the significance of ‘Sola Scriptura’ against the background of the controversy with Roman Catholicism is Keith A. Mathison, The Shape of Sola Scriptura (Moscow: Canon Press 2001).