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God as Rhetor: Reading Salvation History as a Primer in the Divine Rhetoric

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these days, he spoke to us through a son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe.... Hebrews 1:1-2

So we are ambassadors for Christ, as if God were appealing through us. We implore you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God. 2 Corinthians 5:20

Our Lord spoke to a certain person: "Give me all that is yours, and I will give you all that is mine."
Mechthild of Magdeburg

The notion of divine persuasion is central to Christian sensibility.¹ The biblical tradition presents God as seeking humans, knocking at the door of the soul, wooing and upbraiding as a wounded lover, and even acting as a plaintiff seeking redress in a court for a wrong inflicted by the defendant.² But is the image of God as persuader anything more than a vivid trope?³ To be more precise, how can one understand God as truly persuading humans without at the same time making God independent of the human response (as if God were only a dialogue partner—and not God)? The question of a divine rhetoric seems to lead directly to the thorny problem of grace and freedom. A robust defense of God as the First Cause of every good act seemingly ends up reducing the human creature into little more than a metaphysical puppet; a strong defense of the reality of the human capacity to act with goodness or malice seems to make God independent of human choice and therefore not all-knowing or all-powerful.

¹ The following paper is an outgrowth of a larger paper on the metaphysics of divine rhetoric delivered at the 2005 Annual Conference of the American Maritain Association. See <http://online.wju.edu/procom/mirifica/divineRhet.htm>.

² For examples of God as a lover wooing or complaining, see Isaiah 62:1-5, Ezekiel 16:1ff, or Hosea 1:1-3:5. For examples of God as a plaintiff pleading in court, see Isaiah 5:3 ff, 40:1b ff or 43:26. Additional examples of biblical tropes presenting God as persuader can be found in the Psalms or in Revelation. Psalm 23:5-6 offers an example of God in an implied epideictic role as a host seeking to honor us, while Revelation 3:20ff offers an example of God as guest seeking entrance into the door of our hearts.

³ A trope is a figure of thought (as opposed to a figure of speech). Examples of tropes include metaphor, conceits (extended metaphors), metonymy (letting something closely related to an object stand for that object as "crown" can be used instead of "ruler"), and synecdoche (letting a part stand for the whole as in "I see a sail" instead of "I see a ship")

Transposing the grace-freedom problem from the realm of metaphysics into the realm of divine rhetoric and human disposition, however, offers a number of advantages.

Looking at the problem from the vantage point of rhetoric amply verifies modernity's intuition about the reality and majesty of human freedom. At the same time, it explains how that intuition can be reconciled with the necessity of divine promotion for all human acts of willing.⁴ The transposition achieves this balance precisely by highlighting two complementary divine rhetorical strategies—the drama of emptying (creation and the order of natural grace) and the drama of filling (salvation history and the order of supernatural grace).

To understand the complementarity, it is first necessary to note the “catastrophe,” as it were, that marks the denouement in the drama of creation. This, of course, is humanity's fall from a state of communion with God into a state of alienation from God. What is significant in this first drama is not simply the contingent historical fact of the fall but also the metaphysical condition that, while not necessitating the fall, does in a certain way prefigure it. This metaphysical “emptiness” manifests itself in the extremity of the creature's ontological poverty vis-à-vis God.⁵ This indigence is not located exclusively in moral defectibility—although humanity's fall into sin and death is the poverty's most prominent and poignant existential verification. Rather, the poverty has its root in the human person's ontological dependence on the divine causality for being and action.⁶ It is true that when viewed from the perspective of the nothingness that humans would be apart from divine causality, even a participated act of existence is, to

⁴ Far from coercing the will from without, the divine causality supplies “from the inside,” as it were, the participated act of existence as a willing person which entails the consequent power necessary for the person's will to move itself freely. Thus, God's movement of the human will is not violent or restrictive but graced and enabling. Paradoxically, the human person's act of willing (like his act of existence) is at once truly his most intimate possession and also a complete gift made constantly to well up at the core of his being by the Creator/Conserver.

⁵ Pointing out the fact of man's ontological poverty should not be mistaken as an assertion that man by nature is inherently evil or morally falls of necessity. Though participated, man's being is still a great marvel, an inestimable good! The intent rather is to call attention to the fact of human ontological poverty and that man's operational poverty mirrors his ontological poverty.

⁶ The assertion of human ontological poverty should not be understood as denying the incorruptibility of what God wills to be incorrupt. The point is rather that all things exist moment to moment only because God wills them to exist. For what is outside of the divine causality is outside of existence.

put it mildly, a metaphysical marvel. But the human person's act of existence is most properly grasped not through comparison with what is least intelligible but what is most intelligible. In other words, the act of existence is best seen not in the dim twilight of the mere logical being of nothingness but rather in the bright noon of real being in all its plenitude (even if its intelligibility infinitely exceeds the capacity of the human creature's limited intellect). As the moon seems bright against the emptiness of space, so participated being seems bright against the emptiness of non-existence. But seen against the blazing corona of God's unparticipated act of existence, participated being is infinitely darker than the darkness of that same moon in full lunar eclipse.

The ontological poverty of the human person's participated being is not a privation in the sense that something due is missing. (Much less is the lack a consequence of some kind of stinginess on the part of God.) Rather it is a consequence of the creative act's inherent metaphysical structure. Not only is the creature always circumscribed by its total and constant need for participation in the divine act of existence for every aspect of its being, the creature is even more fundamentally circumscribed by the ontological requirement that, in order to be distinct from the Creator, it must necessarily be limited. This limitation, while a not moral evil, involves a true ontological negation. Therefore, one striking consequence of this first drama is that the human person's moral corruption, while not caused by the poverty of ontological finitude, is made possible by that finitude. Thus, the classic mystery of why God permits moral evils gives way to the even deeper mystery of why God chooses to permit the existence of ontological negations, even if they are for the sake of communicating in multiple and diverse ways the inexhaustible plenitude of the divine goodness.

The necessity of having to limit in the creature the perfection that exists without limit in the Creator, to multiply and diversify in creation what is united and simple in God is the precondition for the possibility of the catastrophe realized in humanity's fall

from grace.⁷ However, the drama of emptiness is not the end of the matter. It is a breathtaking manifestation of God's astonishing ingenuity that God has built into the drama of emptiness a second drama.⁸ God finds a way to "fill up" the ontological emptiness of delimited creation with an unexpected drama of filling.⁹ It is a matter not of metaphysical necessity but of contingent historical fact that God has chosen to overlay the natural asymmetry between the divine ontological fullness and the relative creaturely ontological emptiness with the complementary asymmetry of divine "emptiness" (exemplified by the incarnation, passion, and death of Christ) and creaturely "fullness" foreshadowed in the Eucharistic transformation of the communicant, the divine indwelling, and mystical union of the spiritual marriage and fully manifested in heavenly Beatitude) to achieve the even more radical quasi-symmetry of incarnated divinity and participated divinity.¹⁰

God humbly takes on the form of a suffering and dying servant¹¹ so that the human creature in turn might be filled (entirely through particular grace) with an analogical

⁷ An excellent expression of the drama of emptiness can be found in the famous "Kenosis" Hymn in Philippians (2:6-11) and refers to the incarnation. "[Jesus] emptied himself..." (ἐκένωσε *ekénōse*, using the verb form κενόω *kenōō* "to empty") "...and took the form of a slave..." meaning he took on human form. Phil 2:7 NAB.

⁸ Built into the human person is a capacity to receive God's self-communication of a sharing in the divine life—what the theologian Karl Rahner calls a supernatural existential. For Rahner, it is an existential because the possibility of communion with God is offered to everyone. At the same time, it is supernatural because communion with God would be impossible had God not given humanity the capacity for it and activated it through the divine self-communication known as salvation history. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith* (New York, N.Y.: Herder and Herder, 1982) p. 126. See also, <http://users.adelphia.net/~markfischer/Rahner400.htm>. Accessed May 1, 2006.

⁹ The analogous Greek word would be πληρόσις, *plerōsis* which means a "filling up," from πληρόω "to fill up." The word appears many times in the New Testament. See Ephesians 1:22-23 "...the church which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way." The word has entered theological terminology—as for example, in the expression "the divine pleroma," meaning the divine fullness.

¹⁰ It would seem that the Eucharist is the manifestation *par excellence* of the interpenetration of emptying and filling. For in the Eucharist we behold the divine act of existence emptying itself through Christ's sacrificial suffering and death actually present to us as lowly human food. In consuming this food in faith, believing that God is present in us and transforming us, we literally become filled bit by bit (in an analogical and participated way) with the fullness of the inner life of the Trinity! "...the Church lives through the Eucharist, in that she receives from the Eucharist as from a font the divine life which comes from above..." See the Lineamenta for the 11th Ordinary Assembly of the Roman Catholic Synod of Bishops, #73. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20040528_lineamenta-xi-assembly_en.html Accessed 10/12/2005.

¹¹ The language is that of Scripture. See Phil 2:7. Nevertheless, "ἐκένωσε" must not be understood as implying any potency in God who is absolutely unchangeable. See ST I.9.1.

plenitude that participates in a new and radically fuller way the Creator's divine *act of existence*.¹² It is as though each of the poles of the original asymmetry—the human person's ontological poverty and God's ontological plenitude—are revealed to be not only fundamental differences but also potencies for seemingly impossible commonalities—commonalities that while necessarily analogical are nonetheless true commonalities.¹³

The point here is that the shift from emptying to filling is precisely what happens when one shifts from focusing on the mechanism of divine causality to the drama of divine rhetoric. The two explanatory frameworks—causality and rhetoric—illuminate the same metaphysical stage. But in moving from causality to rhetoric, the focus of the spotlight is shifted from natural metaphysical distance to supernatural metaphysical proximity. Furthermore, it seems evident that God wills to shift the spotlight from knowing about God as a metaphysical object to knowing God as a personal subject so that God can, as the Apostle Paul puts it, “prove His love for us.”¹⁴ It is a matter of revealed historical truth that God chooses not only to love us but to prove that love to us. Since God can do nothing in vain, it necessarily follows that God truly seeks to persuade us, for one does not offer a demonstration where there is no capacity to be moved to assent or denial by the sufficiency or want of the demonstration.

The question remains of how to reconcile the implications of the “filling” insight without falsifying the truth of the “emptying” insight. Here is where rhetoric proves its hermeneutical value precisely by introducing the language of inter-subjectivity. First, it must be recognized that the one who truly chooses the way of persuasion at the same

¹² In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Vatican II Fathers put it thus: “For God has called man and still calls him so that with his entire being he might be joined to Him in an endless sharing of a divine life beyond all corruption.” GS 18.

¹³ The issues raised here are admittedly theological. But theology can be taken in a broad as well as a narrow sense. To seek truth is theological in the broad sense. To seek the Incarnate Word is theological in the narrow sense. Man knows what has been supernaturally revealed only by faith. But knowing through the grace of faith does not make what is known supernaturally to be something other than knowledge. Therefore, it is possible to reflect philosophically on the metaphysical implications of what is affirmed first through the grace of faith. For an elegant argument that revealed truths can and should be the proper object of philosophical inquiry, see Peter Simpson, “The Christianity of Philosophy,” *First Things* 113 (May 2001), pp. 32-36. The question Simpson raises is not whether there is a philosophy that is properly Christian but whether there is a true philosophy that is NOT Christian.

¹⁴ Romans 5:8.

time necessarily foregoes the way of coercion—at least so long as he wills to persuade. The two modes of inter-subjective intentionality are not only psychologically but metaphysically mutually exclusive. Persuasion necessarily engages the full personality of the participants and puts them on a trajectory towards analogical identification. Therefore, for someone with greater power and higher dignity (someone who is in a position to coerce but voluntarily foregoes that option) to assume the role of persuader involves an act of condescension. At the same time however, it must also be recognized that the one being persuaded is always dependent on the initiative of the persuader since the rhetor constitutes the interlocutor as audience. Therefore, for someone with less power and lower dignity to accept the role of audience involves a moral dignification that comes from the persuader. At the same time the audience confirms its dignification and dependence by assuming a disposition to be persuaded. If each party is to be true to his respective role, then the persuader must bring all his persuasive power to bear within this newly opened inter-subjective channel. The audience in turn verifies its commitment to the drama of inter-subjectivity by intentionally tracing the path of the persuasion, repeating and internalizing it in order to make possible the culminating decision to be persuaded or not. Hence the inner logic of rhetoric is the exact opposite of classical drama which is founded on the struggle between protagonist and antagonist. The logic of persuasion is necessarily founded on the dynamic of identification (although that identification can be true or false, sincere or insincere—it can also be fostered through mutual struggle against the one outside the act of persuasion who constitutes the antagonist). Rhetoric's natural mode of operation is to narrow differences—at least between rhetor and audience—so that the common ground needed to persuade and accomplish some mutual purpose is established.

Even more importantly, the inter-subjective nature of rhetoric suggests why the human person is paradoxically most free when recognizing and affirming an utter

ontological dependence on God through the obedience of faith in Christ.¹⁵ For the obedience of faith is not merely the commitment of individual human faculties (namely the intellect and will) but rather a total commitment of the entire person to God.

This is why the Church has always considered the act of entrusting oneself to God to be a moment of fundamental decision which engages the whole person. In that act, the intellect and will display their spiritual nature, enabling the subject to act in a way which realizes personal freedom to the full. It is not just that freedom is part of the act of faith; it is absolutely required. Indeed it is faith that allows individuals to give consummate expression to their own freedom.¹⁶

Through the obedience of faith, Christ reenacts in the believer the drama of His own complete surrender in love to the Father. Thus the obedience of faith is not only truly free but *constitutive of freedom* precisely because it is thoroughly and radically self-less yet personal. The “I-Thou” dynamic of the divine rhetoric opens man’s self to himself by enabling man to maintain his status as an active subject where man’s entire “I” remains internal, as it were, to the act of faith.¹⁷ In this way, it can be seen that the divine rhetoric makes supernaturally possible a kind of analogical proportion between man’s freedom and God’s freedom.

This rhetorical dynamic of identification is exactly the pattern that unfolds when God overlays the original drama of emptying with the new drama of filling. The Old Testament serves as a vast preparation for the divine condescension accomplished in the Incarnation and Passion of Christ. The human response to God’s saving initiative in history marks the constitution of man as no longer just God’s creature but in addition, now God’s audience. Mary’s becoming the Mother of God (with all that marvelous act of identification involves) marks the culmination of the divinely-enabled dignification of humanity. At the same time, Christ’s Institution of the Eucharist and the Church initiate the dynamic of identification that will ultimately reach its fulfillment in the complete healing of the rupture of sin and entrance to the Beatific Vision, whose defining characteristic is to know God in a way that exceeds the natural capacity of man as creature.

¹⁵ See *Dei Verbum*, #5.

¹⁶ *Fides et Ratio*, #13.

¹⁷ See *Fides et Ratio*, #13.

Salvation history unfolds not simply as a matter of metaphysical necessity but rather according to a counterpoint of metaphysics and rhetoric. As both Augustine and Aquinas observe, to deny that God had other means to save humanity than by the Passion of Christ is to impugn God's power.¹⁸ Since Christ's dignity was infinite, He could have redeemed man with the least conceivable amount of suffering, had God willed it.¹⁹ The fact that God willed Christ to redeem humanity through an amount of suffering far in excess to what was metaphysically required, not only shows that God made a choice from a variety of available means but that God did so to better "prove" His love for us. As Aquinas points out, Christ's passion was designed to accomplish much more than man's deliverance from sin:

In the first place, man knows thereby how much God loves him, and is thereby stirred to love Him in return, and herein lies the perfection of human salvation; hence the Apostle says (Rm. 5:8): "God commendeth His charity toward us; for when as yet we were sinners...Christ died for us." Secondly, because thereby He set us an example of obedience, humility, constancy, justice, and the other virtues displayed in the Passion, which are requisite for man's salvation. Hence it is written (1 Pt. 2:21): "Christ also suffered for us, leaving you an example that you should follow in His steps."²⁰

According to Aquinas, the reason why, from among the many ways available to save humanity, Christ's Passion was the most suitable is that it best suited God's rhetorical purpose. The content and thrust of the Passion is intentionally structured to be persuasive and manifests the totality of God's commitment to the way of persuasion.

God doesn't impose salvation and beatitude on creatures. God offers them to humanity and undertakes an elaborate and sustained rhetorical effort through salvation history to persuade at least some to accept the divine offer. Hence, appropriating the gift of salvation is impossible unless one is first persuaded by the divine rhetoric. The traditional exposition of the grace-freedom problem in causal terms, while offering the great advantage of a precise metaphysical terminology, can be misunderstood as suggesting a mechanistic—or even hydraulic—image of grace where God and humans are metaphysical particles whose vectors and magnitudes need only

¹⁸ ST I.46.2 resp.

¹⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Quodlibet* 2 q1, a2.

²⁰ ST I.46.2. resp.

be measured with sufficient precision to yield the sought-after clarity. At best this approach leaves the essential reality of man's freedom dancing elusively beyond the intellect's grasp. At worst it seems to imply that the human person is most free when opposed to and alienated from God—a conclusion metaphysical sensibility immediately and rightly rejects as false. What is missing is precisely the identifying inter-subjective dimension supplied by the very nature of the rhetorical act.

In this way, the transposition of the problem of the human person's freedom into the problem of the divine rhetoric sheds fresh light precisely in the area that seemed most obscure in the traditional exposition—the positive case where the human person, enabled by the divine premotion, responds freely to the gift of grace and thereby comes to have not only the partial creaturely freedom of indetermination but a mysterious analogical participation in the absolute divine freedom. The believer's redemption from sin and death and sharing in the life of the Trinity are theological evidence of this.

From the metaphysical perspective, God bestows on the creature a participated act of existence by limiting the creature's act of existence. From the rhetorical perspective, God communicates to the human person's already delimited act of existence something of the inner life of the Trinity, drawing the sanctified person into this inner life such that Paul can say, "It is Christ in you the hope for glory."²¹ With the giving of the Holy Spirit and the constitution of the Church, a threshold has been crossed where one no longer speaks about man's freedom merely in terms of divine and human causality but also in terms of the dynamics of inter-subjective relationship. For when one contemplates the inner life of the Trinity, one enters a realm that is beyond causality. The human person still retains a total dependence on divine causality. But at the same time, he acquires something new and transcendent—a relationship to the Trinity that is no longer defined exclusively by ontological distance but also by supernatural affinity.

²¹ Col. 1:27. The Pauline salutations typically express in succinct fashion the life of the Trinity in the work of the believer.

Given the contingent historical fact of particular grace, the rhetorical perspective is necessary in order to properly account for the reality of humanity's freedom—despite the continuing truth of the need for divine premotion. For the human person's capacity for free will, rooted in his nature as a specifically rational creature, bore from the beginning the imprint of the inner life of the Trinity in that it constitutes an essential part—along with man's intellect—of man's identity as *Imago Dei*.²² With the advent of divine persuasion, one is now at a vantage point to see that the human person's capacity for free will is the result of a double activation. First the human person's potency for freedom is actualized negatively by the human will's indeterminability with respect to finite goods. Since the human will is not ordered to particular goods but rather to Universal Good, the will requires a motion on the part of the individual to will a particular act (in addition to the divine premotion that bestows on that willing act its act of existence). But the human person's freedom is also actualized positively by God's decision to activate in each human person a capacity to respond to the divine rhetoric and therefore enter into supernatural communication—and therefore communion—with God, participating analogically in God's own freedom. In Augustine's famous distinction between operative and cooperative grace is found a succinct expression of the creative synthesis manifested in God's shift to the drama of rhetoric: “[God] operates that we may will; and when we will, [God] cooperates that we may perfect.”²³

In summary, salvation history can be seen as a rhetorical primer in God's persuasive “style.”²⁴ Seeing salvation history in a rhetorical light has many implications

²² Augustine saw creation as stamped with imprints of the Trinity, for example speaker, word, and breath as an image of Creator, creative Word, and accomplishing Spirit hovering over the waters. See Augustine, “The Trinity.” In “The Works of Saint Augustine,” translated by Edmund Hill, Brooklyn: New City Press, 2002.

²³ Augustine “On Grace and Free Will.” Quoted in ST I-II.111.2. Augustine also expressed the same insight in another way: “God does not justify the sinner without the sinner[’s cooperation]. But God does not justify the sinner because of the sinner[’s cooperation].”

²⁴ It might be argued that pondering the meaning of God's rhetorical choices in this way is nonsense since humans have no data on any rhetorical alternatives that God considered and rejected. In response, one might simply point out that, for millennia, mystics have pondered the meaning of God's activity in creation by considering what God might have done instead. For example, see Psalm 124, or Genesis 2 which entertains what human life might have been like without the complementarity of sexuality.

both theoretical and practical—particularly if one understands vocation—the divine call—as a rhetorical act. It underscores the importance of becoming familiar with God’s persuasive style.²⁵ It also points to the corresponding importance of audience disposition to the divine rhetoric. The key exigency here is the nurturing of a contemplative *habitus* that “keeps and ponders”²⁶ not only God’s saving action but also God’s rhetorical “style” as manifested in these saving actions.²⁷ The cultivation this *habitus* through regular prayer, spiritual direction, ecclesial worship, and apostolic action is essential to achieving a proper disposition to God’s persuasion.

²⁵ John 10:27. “My sheep hear my voice; I know them, and they follow me.”

²⁶ See Luke 2:19 and 2:51b.

²⁷ Pope Benedict XVI provides a good example of this in his first encyclical where he explores the rich implications for human charity of the fact that God “comes towards us, **he seeks to win our hearts**, all the way to the Last Supper, to the piercing of his heart on the Cross, to his appearances after the Resurrection and to the great deeds by which, through the activity of the Apostles, he guided the nascent Church along its path.” *Deus Caritas Est* #17.