

The Feast of the Nativity and the Christology of Yves Congar

In an interview published in 1975, the French Dominican theologian Yves Congar testified to the importance of the liturgy in his theological work: “I owe to the liturgy, to the celebration of the Christian mysteries, half of what I have perceived in theology.”¹ With this comment, Congar echoed a sentiment he had expressed earlier in the context of his treatise *Tradition and Traditions*:

If we seek precision in the use of concepts, the liturgy can be relatively misleading. Such is my own oft repeated experience: having so many times been overwhelmed with an understanding of the mysteries, through an attentive celebration of the liturgy, to which I must admit that I owe at least half of what I have understood in theology, I have many times made (either directly, or by means of some publication) a study of the doctrine contained in the liturgical texts. I have noticed that their marvellously rich content, so continually and inexhaustibly nourishing, does not when studied yield up the expected precise data for theology.²

In a seminal essay first published in 1959, Congar devoted his attention to the theological themes found in the liturgical celebration of the Nativity of

¹ Jean Puyo, *Jean Puyo interroge le Père Congar: une vie pour la vérité* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1975), 30. For a detailed account of Congar’s liturgical context and the role of liturgy in his conception of the task of theology, see Innocent Smith, “Vagaggini and Congar on the Liturgy and Theology,” *Questions Liturgiques* 96 (2015): 191–221. For further reflections of Congar on the liturgy, see Yves Congar, *At the Heart of Christian Worship: Liturgical Essays of Yves Congar*, trans. Paul Philibert (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010).

² Yves Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1967 [first published 1960/1963]), 358.

Christ.³ Taking its title from the preface of the Nativity, “Dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus: Méditation théologique” explores the relationship between Christ’s nativity and his saving mission by exploring the testimony of the early liturgy and the Church Fathers. In this essay, I will examine Congar’s appeal to liturgical texts, contextualizing this use within his broader project in the essay. Through this analysis, I hope to assess the significance of Congar’s appeal to the liturgy and to call attention to the importance of Congar’s Dominican context for understanding his use of the liturgy to illuminate the mystery of the Nativity by the liturgy.

THE INCARNATION AND THE REVELATION OF GOD

Yves Congar’s essay is divided into three parts: first, Congar considers Christ as the revealer of God,⁴ then discusses the relationship between the Incarnation and the redemption effected by Christ,⁵ and concludes by considering how God is revealed in his humanity.⁶ As an appendix, Congar provides a brief anthology of patristic texts on Christ as revealer of God.

In the opening section, Congar emphasizes the biblical, patristic, and liturgical roots of the significance of the Incarnation for divine revelation. Congar begins with a quotation from the preface of the Mass for Christmas, which he suggests (relying on the scholarship of Bernard Capelle) may have been composed by St. Gregory the Great: “Through the mystery of the Word incarnate a new light from your brightness has shone into our hearts, so that now that we know God visibly we may be caught up through this into the invisible

³ Yves Congar, “Dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus: Méditation théologique,” *La Maison-Dieu*, no. 59 (1959): 132–61; subsequently republished as Yves Congar, “Dum visibiliter Deum cognoscimus: Méditation théologique,” in *Les voies du Dieu vivant: Théologie et vie spirituelle* (Paris: Cerf, 1962), 79–107. English translation in Yves Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus: A Theological Meditation,” in *The Revelation of God* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1968), 67–96. The following citations refer to the English translation.

⁴ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 67–71.

⁵ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 72–79.

⁶ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 80–94.

realities.”⁷ Congar suggests that although the preface emphasizes Christ’s role as a moral exemplar, it may also serve as the foil for reflections “on the function of the incarnate Word as the revealer of God, or, more exactly, on the significance of the actual *fact* of the incarnation with regard to this revelation.”⁸ Congar does not attempt to give an exegesis of the text in its specifically liturgical context, but instead shows how a broader vision of the Bible and the Church Fathers can illuminate the fundamental realities that the liturgical text conveys.

Congar links the Pauline language of Christ as the “image of the invisible God” (Col 1:15) with the gospel witnesses to Christ as the chosen Son to whom the Father tells us to listen (cf. Luke 9:35).⁹ In Christ, the Word of God is not only heard, but also seen, fulfilling Moses’ longing for the vision of God (cf. Exod 33:11: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a person speaks to a friend.”).¹⁰ Rather than confining himself to speaking through prophets, in Jesus Christ “*God himself* speaks about himself,” giving us the ability to know God directly.¹¹ In this context, Congar draws on Isaiah 52:6: “Therefore my people shall know my name on that day, that it is I who speaks: Here I am!” Hearing this first-person oracle of the Lord recorded by the prophet Isaiah in the Christmas liturgy reminds us that the Lord who becomes incarnate in Jesus Christ is the same Lord who revealed himself to Isaiah. Congar suggests that the liturgical use of this verse in the Mass of Christmas Day helps us to see the relationship between the Old Testament prophecy and Christ’s fulfillment.¹² Congar links Isaiah 52:6 with the opening words of

⁷ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 67. This text serves as the basis for the title of Congar’s essay.

⁸ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 67.

⁹ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 67–68.

¹⁰ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 68.

¹¹ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 69.

¹² Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 69. Although he does not explicitly state it, Congar is relying here on the Dominican Missal, which assigned Isa 52:6-10 as the *Lectio* for the Mass of the Day for Christmas, in addition to the Epistle Heb 1:1-12, which was provided by the mid-20th-century *Missale Romanum*. The revised lectionary for the Roman rite provides Isa 52:7-10 as the first reading for the Mass of the Day, thus omitting the line considered here by Congar, in addition to Heb 1:1-6 as the

the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 1:1-2a): “In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son.” Although Congar does not emphasize the liturgical character of these verses from the Letter to the Hebrews, the Dominican Missal provides them immediately after the passage of Isaiah 52 for the Mass at the Day of the Nativity.¹³

Congar emphasizes that although we may have grown accustomed to these ideas, it is necessary to rekindle our sense of awe at the very fact of God revealing himself to us in this way.¹⁴ Because of the nature of the Incarnation, Jesus does not reveal God by words alone, but also by actions. Christ’s revelation is not mere knowledge, but is simultaneously instruction and holiness.¹⁵ This has consequences for our mode of response to Christ’s revelation: we do not merely conceptually assent to the knowledge of the truth proclaimed by Christ, but also receive the liturgical action of baptism which completes this internal assent with an action of return to him.¹⁶

For Congar, the liturgical practice of the church illuminates the scriptural witnesses concerning Christ’s revelation: “In the New Testament and more explicitly in the Fathers and the early liturgies the knowledge of God which Christ brought is not mere knowledge.”¹⁷ In this opening section, Congar draws together the witness of the Christmas preface and the liturgical proclamation (in the Dominican liturgy) of Isaiah 52:6 and Hebrews 1:1-2 in the Christmas Mass of the Day, demonstrating the importance of the liturgy for fully grasping the precise meaning of Christ’s mode of revealing God.

Second Reading. For the texts and translations of the Dominican Missal, see Urban P. Intondi, ed., *The Saint Dominic Missal* (New York: Saint Dominic Missal, 1959), 39–40.

¹³ Later in the essay, Congar returns to the passage from Heb 1:1-2, now emphasizing that “this passage is read as the epistle for the third Mass on Christmas Day.” See Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 80.

¹⁴ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 69.

¹⁵ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 70–71.

¹⁶ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 71.

¹⁷ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 71.

NATIVITY AND REDEMPTION

In the next section, Congar proceeds to elucidate the inherent connection between Christ's nativity and our redemption, starting from the affirmation of Nicaea and Chalcedon that the Incarnation occurs in relation *to us* and for our salvation (*propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem*), an affirmation that the church's liturgy proclaims on a weekly basis.¹⁸ In this section, Congar draws on the testimony of the Western and Eastern liturgies, the insights of twentieth-century liturgical scholarship, and Thomas Aquinas's commentary on the three Masses for Christmas day in the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*.¹⁹ Congar points to various Roman liturgical texts of Christmas, the Ascension, and Pentecost that suggest an intrinsic connection between these mysteries and testify that the redemption is a present reality. In addition to the Western or Roman liturgical texts that suggest these ideas, Congar quotes a series of texts from the Eastern liturgy that offer similar testimony.²⁰ Drawing on the insights of J. Pinsk²¹ and E. Filcoteaux,²² Congar argues that "the Roman liturgy for Christmas does not separate the historical fact or the memory of that fact, which is such a distinctive feature of this feast, from the whole mystery of redemption, the whole plan of redemption, envisaging man's deification and ultimately the mystery of God himself."²³ Finally, Congar offers a brief commentary on Thomas's exegesis of the entrance chants for the three Masses of Christmas presented in q. 83 of the *Tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*. Congar argues that Thomas's suggestion that the three Masses correlate to Christ's eternal birth as begotten by the Father, his earthly birth in a human nature, and his moral birth in our hearts, seems somewhat artificial,

¹⁸ Congar, "Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus," 72.

¹⁹ Congar, "Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus," 74.

²⁰ Congar, "Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus," 75–77.

²¹ J. Pinsk, "La venue du Seigneur dans la liturgie de Noël," *Questions liturgiques et paroissiales*, 1933, 259–72. The English translation of Congar's article misprints "du Seigneur" as "de Seigneur."

²² E. Filcoteaux, "Le mystère de Noël," *La Vie Spirituelle* 7 (1922): 282–304.

²³ Congar, "Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus," 74.

but Congar suggests that Thomas himself “was not deceived by it” due to his nuanced articulation of this idea.²⁴

GOD REVEALED IN HIS HUMANITY

In the final section of the essay, Congar offers further commentary on his understanding of how God is revealed in his humanity in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Congar begins by returning to the testimony of the verses of the Letter to the Hebrews, which he emphasizes are “read as the epistle for the third Mass on Christmas day.”²⁵

In times past, God spoke in partial and various ways to our ancestors through the prophets; in these last days, he has spoken to us through the Son, whom he made heir of all things and through whom he created the universe. (Heb 1:1-2)

Congar suggests that this passage puts forward “two stages of God’s manifestation” (the prophets and the Son), between which there is both “continuity and opposition.”²⁶ Congar begins his analysis by offering a consideration of both the personalities and the message of the prophets. His consideration of the personalities of the prophets draws on the iconographic traditions of depicting the prophets in Christian art while at the same time insisting that the scriptural evidence concerning these individuals must be given pride of place.²⁷ Congar’s account of the message of the prophets relies primarily on the scriptural texts themselves, although in this context Congar draws explicit attention to the liturgical use of some of the scriptural passages, for instance, by emphasizing the use of Titus 3:4 within the epistle pericope for the Mass at

²⁴ The clearly intended reference is to ST III, q. 83, a. 2, ad 2, although in both French versions and the English translation “q. 88” appears in place of “q. 83.” See Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 74n20.

²⁵ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 80.

²⁶ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 80.

²⁷ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 80. For Congar’s understanding of the possibility of appealing to Christian art as a monument of Tradition or source for theology, see Yves Congar, *La foi et la théologie, Le mystère chrétien 1* (Tournai: Desclée, 1962), 147.

Dawn on Christmas day.²⁸ Congar recalls the importance of Isaiah 52:6, which he considers in relation to its use as the *lectio* for the Dominican Christmas Mass of the Day.²⁹

Congar makes two further references to the liturgical proclamation of Scripture and its significance for the subject at hand. First, in the context of discussing the significance of the patriarch Jacob, Congar draws attention to the liturgical use of Genesis 28:17 within the liturgy for the dedication of a church, suggesting that the liturgical proclamation of this verse helps us to properly understand that “God’s presence produces that religious fear which springs from the sense of his absolute holiness.”³⁰ Second, in the midst of a discussion of the heavenly vision of the prophet Isaiah (Isa 6:1-5), Congar argues that the liturgy has not only incorporated the text of Isaiah in the *Sanctus* but has added to its interpretation by pairing it with the *Benedictus qui venit*:

The liturgy has made the hymn of the angels in Isaiah its own, and with its instinct for the fulfilment of prophecy, it has added the words: “Blessed is he who is coming in the name of the Lord.” It realises that the Most High has come and will come again. It also realises that when Isaiah saw Yahweh in the temple, he had a vision of Christ in glory (Jn 12:41). For since the incarnation, since Calvary and the resurrection, God’s glory dwells in Christ’s now glorious body, and Christians participate in it when the Eucharist is celebrated and received.³¹

Congar recapitulates his original starting point with a further quotation from the Christmas preface, drawing together the iconographic witness of the Christian church erected on Mount Sinai with the liturgical text:

²⁸ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 81n38 (NB: in the English translation the footnote numbering is incorrect, with note 39 in the main body linking with note 38 in the footnotes). In the New American Bible Revised Edition, Titus 3:4 reads “But when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared.” Congar cites the text according to the Vulgate version: “Apparuit benignitas et humanitas salvatoris nostri Dei.”

²⁹ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 81.

³⁰ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 85.

³¹ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 86–87.

On Mount Sinai, in the apse of the little church erected on the top of Djebel Musa where Moses encountered God and received the Law, there is depicted, between Moses and Elijah, the burning bush in the form of a circle emitting flames surrounded and interspersed with green foliage. Within the flaming circle we see the Virgin and her Child upon her breast. This is the way that He-who-is appeared, in the place, at the moment when “visibiliter Deum cognoscimus.”³²

CONCLUSION

Throughout his theological meditation on the relationship between the Nativity, Divine Revelation, and Christ’s plan of salvation, Congar makes frequent allusion to the liturgy’s presentation of the themes of the nativity and its presentation and re-contextualization of Scripture. Congar does not appeal to the liturgy as an exclusive source isolated from Scripture and tradition or the Fathers and the magisterium, but instead incorporates liturgical testimony within his wider synthesis of the Catholic tradition. In this way, Congar’s practical appeal to the liturgy in the context of discussing questions related to Christology and revelation fulfills his own theoretical suggestions for the incorporation of liturgy into theological reflection offered in various texts composed around the same time as this essay of the Nativity of Christ.³³

Congar implicitly shows that the liturgy provides a vital witness to the genius of the Christian tradition, especially in its practice of linking various scriptural texts with each other and suggesting unanticipated connections between different mysteries of the faith. Nevertheless, Congar’s practice also points to the necessity of viewing liturgy within the wider context of Scripture and theology. Congar’s frequent use of Isaiah 52:6, included in the Dominican Missal but not in the mid-twentieth century form of the Roman Missal, shows the significance of his Dominican formation and liturgical experience. Congar’s liturgical testimony is not limited to the Dominican tradition, however, but draws widely on texts and rites of the Roman tradition as well as the Eastern rites. The insights of twentieth-century liturgical scholarship aid Congar’s use

³² Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 89.

³³ See especially Congar, *Tradition and Traditions: An Historical and a Theological Essay*, 349–75, 427–45; Congar, *La foi et la théologie*, 145–48.

of these sources, showing his connection to the scholarly trends of his day as well as his discerning use of medieval and modern sources.

In paragraph 24 of the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, the Second Vatican Council famously taught that “the study of the sacred page should be the very soul of sacred theology.”³⁴ In the preceding paragraph, however, the Council also teaches that study of the liturgy and the Fathers of the Church contributes fruitfully to “an increasingly more profound understanding of the sacred scriptures.”³⁵ In the writings of Yves Congar, we find an example of the fruitful interplay between study of Scripture, the Fathers of the Church, and the liturgy. This study is not aimed at the acquisition of historical erudition as a final end, but rather at entering into a deeper knowledge of and relationship with Jesus Christ, the Son of God who reveals God to us for our salvation, for, as Congar concludes, “there is nothing more urgent than to strive to know and make known the *true* God, the God whose last word is Jesus Christ.”³⁶

³⁴ *Dei Verbum* 24, in Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

³⁵ *Dei Verbum* 23.

³⁶ Congar, “Dum Visibiliter Deum Cognoscimus,” 95.

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