

# Reflections on “Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics”

JAN MICHAEL JONCAS

**O**n 10 December 2020 the Chairman of the Committee on Doctrine of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops [hereafter USCCB], Kevin Rhoades, Bishop of the Diocese of Fort Wayne-South Bend (Indiana), issued a memorandum addressed to the bishops of the USCCB. The memorandum called their attention to a resource produced by the Committee on Doctrine, entitled “Catholic Hymnody at the Service of the Church: An Aid for Evaluating Hymn Lyrics” [hereafter CH]. While the memorandum is dated some months later, the actual document bears the date of September 2020. The document itself consists of a Preface, two general guidelines, six sets of examples of application of the guidelines, and a short conclusion. Four appendices follow the document: Archbishop Buechlein’s 1997 oral report to the General Assembly of Bishops on common deficiencies in catechetical materials, and three summaries of Catholic teaching on Eucharistic Presence, the Trinity, and the Jews and Christ’s Death, all consisting of selections from the Catechism of the Catholic Church [CCC].

In her role as editor of *The Hymn*, Robin Knowles Wallace invited me to comment on the document since its intent, content, and level of authority may be unclear to members of other denominations. I was happy to take up her invitation as a life-long Roman Catholic, one who has both created musical settings for congregational worship songs and written hymn texts, one who has taught theology and Catholic Studies at a variety of institutions, and one who holds a doctorate in liturgical studies from the Pontifical Liturgical Institute at the Ateneo S. Anselmo in Rome. To that end, I will limit my comments to the content of the document itself, although on occasion I may make reference to the accompanying documents. I strongly recommend that readers have a copy of the document at hand while reading this article.<sup>1</sup>

## General Contextual Comments: The Introductory Memorandum

The first thing to notice is that the document is not issued by the USCCB as a body (thus not something the entire territorial bishops’ conference has voted on and approved) but presented by one of the sub-committees of the USCCB, the Committee on Doctrine. One could wonder whether other appropriate committees, notably the Committee on Divine Worship, were consulted in the creation and evaluation of the document.

Second, it is not primarily addressed to the general public, but in first place to the bishops who lead dioceses to assist them in making judgments about hymnals proposed for use in their diocese. This is interesting in itself: Is the committee hoping to assist only the bishops who grant a *nihil obstat* (“nothing stands in the way”) and/or *imprimatur* (“let it be printed”) as official authorizations for hymnals that are distributed throughout the USA and the wider world under Catholic auspices, or is it hoping to assist bishops in judging whether or not particular hymnals may be used in their own dioceses? For that matter, is the committee hoping to assist bishops in deciding which individual hymns may or may not be sung in their own dioceses?

Third, it is also addressed to “composers and hymn publishers.” This is also interesting: Perhaps it suggests that the committee may not make a distinction between being a hymn textwriter and being a composer. Admittedly some hymn composers in the Catholic tradition write both their own lyrics and musical settings of those lyrics, but others restrict themselves to setting other authors’ texts. I think the committee means “hymnal publishers” when it talks about “hymn publishers,” although they may be thinking about those who hold copyright to particular hymn texts and publish them by means other than a traditional hymnal, whether in print, for projection, or electronically. A major question

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1. The document with the introductory memorandum may be found at [https://forum.musicasacra.com/forum/uploads/FileUpload/f3/6c7b64b491aa2de1caf861a101ee49.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3lWBwEDzumnf7HKL23ojlXlDryL5EIKhcPoX4NjXFqmSu\\_RIAw2akQIXl](https://forum.musicasacra.com/forum/uploads/FileUpload/f3/6c7b64b491aa2de1caf861a101ee49.pdf?fbclid=IwAR3lWBwEDzumnf7HKL23ojlXlDryL5EIKhcPoX4NjXFqmSu_RIAw2akQIXl).

is what the committee means by *hymn*. Liturgical music in the Roman Catholic tradition has over the centuries developed a multitude of categories for its sung prayer, from chanted presidential prayers (e.g., collects, prefaces, Eucharistic Prayers), through proclamations, psalmody, acclamations, dialogues, litanies, antiphons, responsories, and sequences, in addition to the category of *hymn*. Even the category of *hymn* is itself problematic since non-metrical texts like the *Gloria in excelsis* or the Infancy Canticles of Zechariah, Mary, and Simeon found in the Gospel of Luke are accounted as *hymns*, grouped with the metrical texts we more regularly categorize with that title.<sup>2</sup>

Fourth, the document notes that bishops may choose to share this document with their diocesan worship offices, pastors, and parish musicians, i.e., those who will be charged with pastoral oversight and execution of music programs at the local level.

Fifth, the document doesn't claim to be a balanced survey of all Catholic liturgical music, indicating musical settings of sacred texts conspicuous for their beauty, congregational singability, and doctrinal precision, as well as compositions that are less than successful in these areas. Rather the document focuses on "common deficiencies in the lyrics of hymns and songs."<sup>3</sup> I suspect that the reason the document operates in this rather negative manner is that it is "modeled on the 1997 Report by Archbishop Daniel Buechlein on 'Ten Common Deficiencies in Catechetical Materials'" (found as Appendix One).

To put it most clearly, the document is *not* prescriptive or legislative, but advisory and admonitory. What Roman Rite Catholics call *Ordinaries* (e.g., bishop-heads of dioceses, vicars general and episcopal vicars) are the primary addressees for the document and they may react as they wish to it: ignoring it, implementing (sections of) it, or delegating its implementation to various diocesan and parochial entities.

## Foundational Insights: The Preface

The Preface of the actual document is extraordinarily positive in its discussion of the beauty of Catholic hymnody. It grounds its assertions about the evaluation of hymn texts according to: 1) a theory of transcendentals; 2) use of hymns in the Church's liturgy; and 3) the catechetical effects singing hymns has on worshipers.

Arising from both Platonic and Aristotelian reflection, Catholic philosophical and theological tradition usually enumerates three transcendentals as the properties of being: truth, goodness, and beauty.<sup>4</sup> Each of these properties, rooted in being itself, "transcends" the limitations of place and time, and thus would be unaffected by cultural diversity, religious doctrine, or personal ideologies; a transcendental is an objective property of that which exists. The claim here is that the transcendentals are ontologically one and thus are convertible: where there is truth, goodness and beauty are necessarily present as well. Together, the transcendentals reveal God to humans: as truth in the mind or intellect, as beauty through the perceiving senses, and as goodness in the spirit and through virtue. Basing itself on this framework, the document asserts that "Catholic hymn-writers and composers necessarily inhabit a realm of creative interplay [between the truth of the mystery of faith and the beauty of the mystery of faith]; they have the privilege and vocation of honoring and communicating the mystery of faith in word and music, and this requires genuine artistry, industry and fidelity" (2).

The document further specifies that a proper milieu for the singing of hymns is the Church's liturgical and devotional worship. Just as the proclamation and preaching of God's Word is proper to (but not limited to) liturgical worship, so the singing of hymns is proper to (but not limited to) liturgical worship. To the teaching of the Second Vatican Council that "texts sung must always be in conformity with Catholic doctrine," the document adds that "the sacred texts, and the liturgical sources which draw on the living Word, provide something of a 'norm' for expression when communicating the mystery of faith in liturgical poetics, or hymnody" (2).

Finally, the document acknowledges that "Christian tradition . . . has from antiquity been acutely aware that hymns and other songs are among the most significant forces in shaping—or misshaping—the religious and theological sensibility of the faithful" (7). One could argue that some of the richest Christology and soteriology the New Testament has to offer is found in New Testament hymns (e.g., Philippians 2: 6–11; John 1–18 (*passim*); Ephesians 1:3–10; Colossians 1:12–20; 1 Peter 2:21–24), and that over the centuries an imposing collection of theologically inspired hymn texts have been created to place on the lips of the faithful the central tenets of Christian faith, albeit in poetic rather than discursive forms. At the same time, we have evidence of hymnody

2. CH attempts to clarify the scope of the guidelines in a footnote on p. 2: "The guidelines offered in this document apply to lyrics composed for any music intended for use in the Sacred Liturgy or in public devotions...."

3. Although in one instance in the "Examples of Applications of the Guidelines" (1.d.5) the document lists a set of hymn texts that it judges "without deficiencies."

4. For more information on transcendentals, see Wouter Goris and Jan Aertsen, "Medieval Theories of Transcendentals," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/transcendentals-medieval/>.

used to propagate heretical ideas against which self-consciously orthodox hymnody developed.<sup>5</sup>

## Fundamental Criteria for Evaluation of Hymn Texts: Two General Guidelines

The core of the document appears in the next section. From the fundamental principles just enumerated, the document draws two general guidelines “for determining whether a hymn is doctrinally suitable for liturgical use:

1. Is the hymn in conformity with Catholic doctrine?
2. Is the hymn expressed in image and vocabulary reflective of the usage of Scripture and the public liturgical prayer of the Church?”

The document counsels recourse to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC) for assistance in determining Catholic doctrine.<sup>6</sup> (It should be noted that the CCC itself designates its intended readership as “first of all the bishops . . . Through the bishops, it is addressed to redactors of catechisms, to priests, and to catechists. It will also be useful reading for all other Christian faithful” [CCC #12]). It might have been helpful here if the committee had called attention to the distinction between dogma and doctrine in the Catholic tradition, with *dogma* understood as a divinely revealed truth, proclaimed as such by the infallible teaching authority of the Church, and *doctrine* understood as a proposition (or set of propositions) proposed by the teaching authority of the Church. I think it is safe to say that most of the material found in the CCC is doctrine, although instances appear of explicitly articulated dogma.

It would appear that guideline 1 addresses the transcendental *truth* with its concern for the conformity of

the mind to reality, while guideline 2 addresses the transcendental *beauty* with its concern for clarity, integrity, and composition. Conspicuously absent is the transcendental *goodness* with its concern for virtue, although the committee may have felt that exploring *goodness* in hymn texts might take the document too far afield. (The concern for goodness would explore how hymn texts promote or subvert particular patterns of behavior in those who employ them. Imagine the difficulty of determining if singing about justice elicits and reinforces acting justly, let alone the question of whether it should.)

Positively, the document states that hymn texts “do not have to be composed of doctrinal formulae . . . [and that] (t)he poet [read: hymn textwriter] always has a certain ‘license’ for language chosen to serve an aesthetic purpose.” In this context, the document cites approvingly the final verse of Thomas Aquinas’s “Pange lingua gloriosi corporis mysterium” as an example of doctrinal formulae used to good poetic effect.<sup>7</sup> Negatively, the document states that it is important “to avoid language that could easily be misconstrued in a way that is contrary to Catholic doctrine,” as well as “assessing whether a paraphrase or restatement is an appropriate use of poetic license or an inappropriate distortion.”

Most interestingly, the document recognizes that no single hymn text could ever completely express a particular dogma or doctrine. Therefore it is important not to judge a single hymn text without knowing the contexts over time in which it will be used in a given worshipping community. As the document itself notes: “Different hymns may legitimately express or reflect different aspects of one doctrine, but if all of the hymns relevant to a particular doctrine express only one dimension of the doctrine to the exclusion of others, then the catechesis offered by the hymnody would, as a whole, not be in conformity with Catholic doctrine.” I suspect that the concern here expressed applies not only to a given worshipping community over time, but to the variety of hymns chosen in a particular fixed repertoire (e.g.,

5. An early example of such doctrinally opposed hymn texts appears in the works of Bardaisan and Ephrem the Syrian: “The first Syriac author whose name has been preserved, Bardaisan composed his one hundred and fifty hymns [in Edessa] in the second century. His work consists of a unique blend of ideas and imagery drawn from Christianity, Aramaean paganism, astrology and later Platonism. Bardaisan was the originator of the *madrāsa*, a hymn composed in isosyllabic verse, which uses parallelism, rhyme, alliteration and a variety of word play to achieve its effects. Composing hymns in the same form to combat the heretic’s views, Ephrem became the unquestioned master of the genre.” *Ephrem the Syrian: Hymns*, trans. and intro by Kathleen E. McVey, Classics of Western Spirituality (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1989), 26.

6. John Paul II in his Apostolic Constitution “*Fidei Depositum*” on the publication of the CCC notes that it “is a statement of the Church’s faith and of catholic doctrine, attested to or illumined by Sacred Scripture, the Apostolic Tradition, and the Church’s Magisterium. I declare it to be a sure norm for teaching the faith and thus a valid and legitimate instrument for ecclesial communion.”

7. This approbation seems to conflict with applications made below on deficiencies in Trinitarian doctrine. Thomas Aquinas’s doxological concluding stanza reads: “Genitori, Genitoque / laus et iubilatio, / salus, honor, virtus quoque / sit et benedictio: / Procedenti ab utroque / Compar sit laudatio.” (To the One Begetting and to the One Begotten / may there be praise, jubilation, / health (welfare), honor, virtue (strength) / and blessing: / to the One Proceeding from both / may there be equal praise.) While the stanza is doctrinally correct according to standard Western [Catholic] Trinitarian theology, it doesn’t acknowledge the Eastern [Orthodox] formulation in which the Third Divine Person proceeds from the First Divine Person through the Second. While *One Begetting*, *One Begotten*, and *One Proceeding* substituted for *Father*, *Son*, and *Holy Spirit* may satisfy the theological mind, it doesn’t express the “personal” character of the standard terms.

hymns intended to express the meaning of baptism) in a single collection.

## From Theory to Practice: Application of the Guidelines

Having set out a theoretical foundation for the evaluation of hymn lyrics, the document next proffers six areas in which the Committee on Doctrine has found deficiencies in particular hymn texts. It is interesting that the document refers to “a consistent trend of incompleteness and imprecision” in catechetical materials that had already been flagged by Archbishop Buechlein’s 1997 document mentioned above. We have already noted that no single hymn text can express the fullness of Catholic teaching, so it would not be surprising that the committee found certain hymn texts “incomplete.” However “imprecision” in a catechetical document is not quite the same as “deficiency” in a hymn text.

### Deficiencies in the Presentation of Eucharistic Doctrine

Not surprisingly, since doctrine concerning the Eucharist is of signal importance in Catholic theology, the committee examines hymn texts espousing Eucharistic doctrine and finds some wanting:

Catholics nurtured on a steady diet of certain hymns will learn from them that at Mass we come together to share bread and wine, which remain bread and wine, a common meal, even if under special circumstances. They will learn that the bread and wine signify in some vague way the presence of Jesus, but they will not be given a basis to understand the Catholic belief that the Eucharistic elements can be worshipped because under their appearance is a wholly unique, substantial presence of Christ. These hymns correspondingly also downplay or eliminate entirely reference to the sacrifice of Christ, his priesthood, and his status as both priest and victim, as well as to the role of the ministerial priesthood in the Church. A steady diet of these hymns would erode Catholic sensibility regarding the fullness of Eucharistic teaching, on the Mass as sacrifice, and eventually on the Church, as formed by this sacrifice.<sup>8</sup>

I think the committee might want to distinguish between a doctrine of the Real Presence and the theological

language and theories to express that Real Presence. As I understand Catholic teaching, the presence of Christ in the Eucharist is true (excluding any understanding of that presence as just a sign or figure), real (objective and independent of the thoughts and feelings of the participants, whether they have faith or not), substantial (involving the underlying substance, not the appearances of bread and wine), entire (the whole Christ, “body and blood, soul and divinity”), and sacramental (the persisting outward appearances of bread and wine and their properties such as weight, nutritional value, taste, etc., objectively exist as unchanged). The change from the presence of bread and wine to the presence of Christ that is true, real, substantial, entire, and sacramental is termed *transubstantiation*, but not as an explanation of the change, since the signs of bread and wine become the body and blood of Christ “in a way that surpasses understanding.”

It seems to me that difficulties in applying the guidelines to Eucharistic hymn texts appear in at least two areas. First, the technical language in which Catholic doctrine about the Eucharist is expressed is difficult to communicate to those untrained in medieval metaphysics. For example, *presence*, *substantial*, and *sacramental* have all experienced shifts in conceptualization since Catholic teaching on the Eucharist was formulated at the Council of Trent. If *symbol* is conceptualized as a substitute for a reality (an absence of that reality but pointing to it), Catholic teaching about Christ’s Eucharistic presence could not hold that it is *symbolic*. But if *symbol* is conceptualized as hyper-real, as participating in the reality to which it points rather than marking an absence, Christ’s Eucharistic presence might be re-conceptualized as *symbolic*.

Second, contemporary theological explorations of the mystery of the Eucharist such as *transignification* or *transfinalization* are not taken into account. *Transignification*, especially as it developed in the thought of Edward Schillebeeckx exploring the signifier/signified distinction in semiotics and various streams in existentialist philosophy, posited a distinction between “local presence” and “personal presence,” asserting that Christ is personally but not locally present in the Eucharist. *Transfinalization* teaches that the purpose or finality of bread and wine (and therefore its reality/being) is changed to serve a new purpose and finality, i.e., bestowing and evoking in people faith in the mystery of Christ’s redemptive love. Although Paul VI’s 1965 encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* #11 seems to reject these

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8. CH, 4.

theories, one could argue that they are only dangerous if taught to the exclusion of *transubstantiation*.<sup>9</sup>

These reflections lead me to question the three assertions the committee makes about precision of language in presenting Eucharistic doctrine:

- i. Language that implies that the elements are still bread and wine after consecration should be avoided;
- ii. Language that implies bread and wine, still bread and wine, are merely symbols of another reality or person, should be avoided;
- iii. Poetic license should conform to customary usage of Scripture and liturgical Tradition. “Bread,” “Bread of life,” etc., are scriptural synecdoches for the Eucharist itself, and so are permitted; however, “wine” is not used in the same way, and to call the consecrated element “wine” gives the impression that it is still wine. This, in turn, has an impact on the way the word “bread” is heard, so that legitimate uses of the word “bread” are heard differently, not as a synecdoche for the Eucharist as a whole, but as a reference to the element which remains bread. Scripture speaks of the “cup,” not of “wine” (see 1 Cor: 10:16–17).<sup>10</sup>

If one were to take assertion (i) seriously, one would have to chastise the Apostle Paul since, after giving an account of the Lord’s Supper that he had received and handed on to the Corinthian community, he instructed them: “For as often as you eat the bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (1 Cor 11:26), a reference to Eucharistic bread previously identified in 1 Cor 11:24 as “my body given for you.”

Responding to assertion (ii) that using the language of “merely symbols of another reality or person” discloses a worldview in which symbols are “real absences,” pointing to another non-present reality, rather than a worldview in which symbols as participants in the reality to which they point disclose the “real presence” of that reality. (See below on the presentation of Trinitarian doctrine for further discussion of this topic.)

If one were to engage assertion (iii), it would be important to point out that the scriptural text cited does not make a simple equation between “bread/wine” and “body/blood” of Christ. Rather the reference is to the

“cup of blessing which we bless” as a “sharing in the blood of Christ” and the “bread that we break” as a “sharing in the body of Christ.” In both cases, there is a reference to *activity*: the cup “which we bless” = “sharing in the blood of Christ”; the bread “that we break” = “sharing in the body of Christ.” If, presumably, “bread that we break”/“bread of life” functions as a synecdoche for Eucharist as a whole, “cup that we bless”/“blessing cup” could likewise function as a synecdoche for Eucharist as a whole, let alone connect the Eucharistic cup to its roots in Jewish practice.

All this is not to say that the concrete critiques the committee makes of five particular eucharistic hymns are false or misguided, simply that the committee’s desire for precision of language needs to be tempered by an awareness of the limits of language to express the mystery being sung.

### Deficiencies in the Presentation of Trinitarian Doctrine

With reference to hymn texts presenting Trinitarian doctrine, the committee calls attention to five applications of the guidelines articulated above:

- i. Avoiding language that God has “parts” (since the substance of God is undivided);
- ii. Avoiding doxologies or Trinitarian invocations that mix words that designate relations (i.e., that designate the Persons, who are distinct in relation and relation only) with other kinds of predication that can apply to all three persons equally. . . .
- iii. Adherence to the language of the Baptismal Formula as the “default” mode, since departing from it frequently implies that the formula is arbitrary and optional, whereas this language is essential for the valid administration of Baptism.
- iv. Use of masculine pronouns for God and for each Person of the Trinity, in accordance with *Liturgiam Authenticam*, no. 31.

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9. “24. . . [I]t cannot be tolerated that any individual should on his own authority take something away from the formulas which were used by the Council of Trent to propose the Eucharistic Mystery for our belief. These formulas—like the others that the Church used to propose the dogmas of faith—express concepts that are not tied to a certain specific form of human culture, or to a certain level of scientific progress, or to one or another theological school. Instead they set forth what the human mind grasps of reality through necessary and universal experience and what it expresses in apt and exact words, whether it be in ordinary or more refined language. For this reason, these formulas are adapted to all men of all times and all places.

“25. They can, it is true, be made clearer and more obvious; and doing this is of great benefit. But it must always be done in such a way that they retain the meaning in which they have been used, so that with the advance of an understanding of the faith, the truth of faith will remain unchanged. For it is the teaching of the First Vatican Council that ‘the meaning that Holy Mother the Church has once declared, is to be retained forever, and no pretext of deeper understanding ever justifies any deviation from that meaning.’” One notes the theory of language as immediately grasping and expressing reality that seems to underlie the Pope’s assertions.”

10. CH, 5.

v. Substituting “Lord” for the name “Yahweh” (the sacred Tetragramaton), in accordance with *Liturgiam Authenticam*, no. 41.<sup>11</sup>

I think the key to understanding these assertions actually appears in the next section where the document asserts:

a. Catholic doctrine regarding God is that “He transcends the world and history” (CCC, no. 212), and yet has revealed his name in an act of self-emptying love, “handing himself over” by making his name known, though it is a name as mysterious as God is (see CCC, nos. 203, 205). **Although God transcends all creatures, nevertheless language drawn from the perfections of creatures, while always falling short of the reality, “really does attain to God himself”** (CCC, nos. 43, see no. 42).<sup>12</sup>

At its core this assertion stakes out a particular claim about religious language. Attempting to treat the problem of religious language (considering whether it is possible to verbalize anything meaningful about God, if God is conceived as incorporeal, infinite, eternal, all-powerful, etc.) would take us far beyond the limits of this article. Here I would simply state according to my understanding there are basically four modes of language that have responded to the problem of religious language: the *via negativa* (referring to God by identifying what God is not); analogy (using human qualities as imperfect but truthful descriptors of divine qualities); symbolism (using non-literal language to describe otherwise indescribable realities); and myth (using narratives to reveal religious truths). The committee, following the lead of Thomas Aquinas, adopts an analogical understanding of human language about God and identifies that as *the* Catholic understanding of religious language.

I would argue that there are examples of at least three of the above-named approaches to religious language within the Catholic ambit. The *via negativa* seems especially associated with the writing of mystics (e.g., Dionysius the pseudo-Areopagite, John Scottus Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa), with echoes in post-modern Catholic theology (e.g., Jean-Luc Marion<sup>13</sup>).

In addition to Thomas Aquinas, the *analogical* use of religious language (using analogies of attribution and analogies of proportion for God and supernatural realities) has been explored recently by David Tracy. In Tracy’s *The Analogical Imagination*,<sup>14</sup> while recognizing the need for dialectical theology’s perspective espousing a fundamental difference between God and the created order, he nevertheless posits an analogical language that is capable of recognizing and articulating similarity-in-difference, claiming that God and supernatural realities are more like than unlike the created order. The *symbolic* use of religious language seems especially associated with Catholic theologians such as Odo Casel,<sup>15</sup> Edward Schillebeeckx,<sup>16</sup> and Karl Rahner,<sup>17</sup> and more recently Louis-Marie Chauvet.<sup>18</sup>

In the light of these reflections on approaches to religious language, I would now like to address the five concerns re: deficiencies of Trinitarian doctrine in particular hymn-texts. The first concern seems well-grounded in an analogical understanding of God as simple and one; however one could raise the appropriateness of using the philosophical category of *substance* to refer to the Being of God (if indeed, with those who, like Jean-Luc Marion, challenge onto-theology, Being is an appropriate characteristic of God). The second concern likewise seems well-grounded in an analogical understanding of God as Triune; but one could raise the appropriateness of using the term *person* since in present-day usage it tends to mean a distinct locus of intellect and will rather than a subsistent individual of a rational nature applied to God in a way more excellent than applied to created persons.<sup>19</sup> In addition the second concern seems not to take into account the theological category of *appropriation* in which one attributes to a single Divine Person “those characteristics or activities of God which are in fact not proper to an individual Person but rather common to the three Persons of the Trinity.”<sup>20</sup> The third concern also seems well-grounded in an analogical understanding of God as simultaneously One and Triune, since the formula speaks of baptism “in the name” (singular) “of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (triune). While it is clear that “Father” and “Son” articulate a relationship

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11. CH, 7.

12. CH, 8–9, emphasis added.

13. Jean-Luc Marion, *God without Being*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991, 2012).

14. David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981).

15. Odo Casel, *The Mystery of Christian Worship* (Westminster, MD: The Newman Press, 1962).

16. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963).

17. Karl Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” in *Theological Investigations 4* (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 221–52.

18. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995).

19. “Person” in Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, *Dictionary of Theology*, 2nd ed. (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 378–381.

20. “Appropriation” in Rahner and Vorgrimler, 26. An example of a hymn text employing appropriation appears in the third stanza of John Rothensteiner’s translation of an anonymous German hymn known to English speakers as “God Father, praise and glory”: “O Holy Ghost, Creator, / The Gift of God most high, / Life, love, and holy wisdom / Our weakness now supply.” Clearly “creating” and “supplying life, love and holy wisdom” properly belong to the Triune God, yet are here ascribed by appropriation to the Third Divine Person.

analogous to human generation as an expression of the relation of these Divine Persons,<sup>21</sup> it is harder to see how “Holy Spirit” articulates a humanly analogous relationship with the other Divine “Persons.”<sup>22</sup> The fourth concern does not engage the lively contemporary debate about the use of masculine pronouns for God and the Divine Persons, but simply refers to a 28 March 2001 “Instruction” from the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments that states: “In referring to almighty God or the individual persons of the Most Holy Trinity, the truth of tradition as well as the established gender usage of each respective language are to be maintained.”<sup>23</sup> The final concern likewise cites *Liturgiam authenticam* as justification for using “Lord” (in print “LORD”) as a translation for the personal name of God, YHWH, revealed in Exodus 3:13–15. It is interesting that the reason given for this usage is not to refrain from offending those Jews whose linguistic custom out of respect for the divine name is to substitute “Adonai” or “ha-Shem” when they see YHWH, but “in accordance with immemorial tradition . . . the name of almighty God expressed by the Hebrew *tetragrammaton* (YHWH) and rendered in Latin by the word *Dominus*, is to be rendered into any given vernacular by a word equivalent in meaning.”<sup>24</sup>

### Deficiencies in the Doctrine of God and His Relation to Humans

The committee then turns its attention from a consideration of hymn texts using language to express the “internal” characteristics of the Triune God to hymn texts expressing the relationship of the Triune God to “external” reality. Following the understanding of religious language concerning God articulated in the preceding section of this article, the committee declares:

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21. “By calling God ‘Father,’ the language of faith indicates two main things: that God is the first origin of everything and transcendent authority; and that he [*sic*] is at the same time goodness and loving care for all his [*sic*] children. God’s parental tenderness can also be expressed by the image of motherhood, which emphasizes God’s immanence, the intimacy between Creator and creature. The language of faith thus draws on the human experience of parents who are in a way the first representatives of God for man [*sic*] . . . We ought to recall that God transcends the human distinction between the sexes. He [*sic*] is neither man nor woman: he [*sic*] is God. He [*sic*] . . . transcends human fatherhood and motherhood, although he is their origin and standard.” CCC, #239.

22. The CCC’s discussion of the difference between the Catholic (Western) and Orthodox (Eastern) expression of the relations of the Divine Persons highlight how difficult it is to apply language to the relation(s) of the Holy Spirit to Father and Son. “[T]he Eastern tradition expresses the Father’s character as first origin of the Spirit. By confessing the Spirit as he ‘who proceeds from the Father,’ it affirms that he *comes from* the Father *through* the Son. The Western tradition expresses first the consubstantial communion between Father and Son, by saying that the Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son (*filioque*). It says this . . . for the eternal order of the divine persons in their consubstantial communion implies that the Father, as ‘the principle without principle,’ is the first origin of the Spirit, but also that as Father of the only Son, he is, with the Son, the single principle from which the Holy Spirit proceeds.” CCC, #248

23. *Liturgiam authenticam*, #31.a.

24. *Liturgiam authenticam*, #41.c.

25. CH, 9.

26. Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works* (New York: The Paulist Press, 1987) 141. I believe the first verse of Huub Oosterhuis’ “Song at the Foot of the Mountain” (translated by Tony Barr) may serve as an example of a hymn text expressing the *via negativa*: “You for whom no name can be found, / no path to reach your distant ground, / no word exists to praise you. / Nowhere enthroned in splendor bright, / your light remains in cloud and night, / as though one dead we find you. / You come, we know not day nor hour, / you pass us by, a dwindling fire, / no voice through forest streaming, / call from afar or voice so near, / you are not everywhere, not here, / no god born of our dreaming.”

[L]anguage which makes it seem that God is “beyond all names” is misleading, and language that makes God seem in any way dependent upon human beings or any creature is incorrect.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly traditional Catholic teaching would hold that God is not dependent on any reality that is not God, but if the *via negativa* is a legitimate option for Catholics using language about God, then hymn texts influenced by, e.g., Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite in his *Mystical Theology* might assert something akin to this:

[The supreme Cause] is neither one nor oneness, divinity nor goodness. Nor is it a spirit, in the sense in which we understand that term. It is not sonship or fatherhood and it is nothing known to us or to any other being. It falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing or of being. Existing beings do not know it as it actually is and it does not know them as they are. There is no speaking of it, nor name nor knowledge of it.<sup>26</sup>

### Doctrinally Incorrect Views of the Church

The committee’s next concern is that hymn texts not present the mystery of the Church as essentially a human construction. It is interesting that the background for this concern cites two metaphors for the mystery of the Christ/Church relationship: “new Adam/new Eve” and “Bridegroom/Bride,” since neither metaphor suggests that the Church is constructed by Christ. Though the scriptural narrative has Eve being drawn by God from the side of Adam, Adam does not create Eve; nor does a bridegroom create a bride, except in the sense that by establishing a nuptial covenant both assume a new social status. (Note that I am not denying that the Church arises from God the Father’s will and action in

Christ and the Holy Spirit, just that the biblical images cited do not particularly support the committee's assertions.) While it is certainly possible to explore the ramifications of a particular image for theological insights, it may be more helpful to explore the variety of images for the Church found especially in *Lumen Gentium* 6 when judging hymn texts on their expression of the mystery of the Church.<sup>27</sup>

### Doctrinally Incorrect Views of the Jewish People

The committee then offers examples of hymn texts that assign collective blame for the death of Christ to the Jewish people. Very helpfully they cite the Second Vatican Council's "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions" where Catholic doctrine on the topic is expressly articulated:

Even though the Jewish authorities and those who followed their lead pressed for the death of Christ . . . , neither all Jews indiscriminately at that time, nor Jews today, can be charged with the crimes committed during his passion. It is true that the Church is the new people of God, yet the Jews should not be spoken of as rejected or accursed as if this followed from holy Scripture . . . The Church always held and continues to hold that Christ out of infinite love freely underwent suffering and death because of the sins of all . . . , so that all might attain salvation.<sup>28</sup>

### Doctrinally Incorrect Christian Anthropology

Finally, the committee offers an example of a hymn text that it judges deficient because of its treatment of death. It seems that in its concern to uphold the scriptural insight that "God created us for incorruption . . . but through the devil's envy death entered the world" (Wisdom 2:23), they may have neglected theological reflection on the meaning of death as "dying in the Lord":

According as a man either attempts to understand and master by his own powers this (life-long) death which flows from original sin and lies beyond his control, or holds himself in faith at the free disposal of the incomprehensible God, the death of a human being will either be the personal repetition and confirmation of the first man's sinful emancipation from God and thus the acme of sin, the definitive mortal sin, or else it will be the repetition and personal appropriation of the obedient death of Jesus . . . (by which he imparted his divine life to

the world itself), the acme of his human salutary activity, because his lifelong configuration with Christ's death through the sacramental life of faith . . . now finds its personal completion in a blessed "dying in the Lord" . . . , in which the experience of the end becomes the dawn of fulfillment.<sup>29</sup>

While it is true that "[d]eath is not a necessary part of human nature," the hymn text cited may have been attempting to express Rahner's modification of Heidegger's *Dasein* that moves the self toward nothing ("Being-toward-death") by *Vorgriff* ("pre-apprehension") that attains to a "more" rather than a "nothing."

### Conclusion

As one who works in the Catholic theological tradition, I offer these reflections for the glory of God and the good of the People of God. Since so much of what I have written in this article is about the difficulty of communicating divine realities in human language, I would be remiss if I did not admit that I may have erred, either in my understanding of theological positions and reasoning or in my expression of them. I do not believe that I have deliberately misrepresented the assertions of CH, but if I have (or, even worse, mis-represented Catholic dogma or doctrine), I welcome the correction of those who understand these topics better than I. 

Father Jan Michael Joncas is currently Artist in Residence and Research Fellow in Catholic Studies at the University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, Minnesota. Ordained in 1980 as a priest of the Archdiocese of St. Paul-Minneapolis, MN, he holds degrees in in liturgical studies from the University of Notre Dame and the Pontificio Istituto Liturgico of the Ateneo S. Anselmo in Rome. Author of six books and numerous articles, Joncas has composed and arranged more than 300 pieces of liturgical music, and currently serves on the Editorial Advisory Board of *The Hymn*.



27. While the committee asserts that Sr. Delores Dufner's (FHS) hymn text "Sing a new Church into being, one in faith and love and praise" "implies or even states outright that the Church is essentially our creation," it is also possible to read the text to mean, not that humans create the Church *per se* but, recognizing that the Church has not always been "one in faith and love and praise" through its history, humans pledge themselves to contribute to the Church's growth in unity, faith, love and praise.

28. *Nostra Aetate*, #4.

29. "Death," in Rahner and Vorgrimler, 114–115.