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Lauren Smelser White
lbsmelser@gmail.com

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Cruciform Communication as Transformative Truth-Seeking

Lauren Smelser White

I am the way, and the truth, and the life,” Jesus tells his disciples in John 14.6–7. “No one comes to the Father except through me. If you know me, you will know my Father also.” Authentic knowledge of God, therefore, occurs in lived association with Christ. In other passages Christ explains what it means to associate with him: “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me” (Luke 9.23).¹ Also, John 13.14–15: “If I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you.” In sum, we cannot experience closeness with Christ without cruciform imitation of him, which means sacrificial relationship with others.

One of the tremendous challenges to this commitment in contemporary Western society stems from our media-saturated culture wherein political and religious affiliations are constantly punctuated, stirring up our senses of righteous indignation and pitting us against those with whom we disagree. In the face of relentless debate and political posturing, we are tempted either to throw our hands up and retreat from tense interactions with a “to each their own” mantra, or to become aggressive with our adversaries, working to bombard them with irrefutable reasons why we are in the right and they are in the wrong. The Luke and John passages cited above, however, urge sincere Christ followers to take up a costlier manner of communicating with those with whom they disagree: a manner oriented towards service. Essentially, Christian disciples cannot afford to communicate with their neighbors according to the urge to dissect and thwart the opponent. Neither can they afford to withdraw from dealings with those persons in order to avoid risk to themselves. They cannot afford to do this because, as the above passages inform us, if we refuse to interact humbly with each other, then we effectively cut ourselves off from knowledge of God.

For many of us (if we are honest), embracing this depiction of “knowledge of God”—that is, that it warrants a certain way of behaving in order to achieve it—requires us to reorient our sense of how we come to understand revealed truth in the first place. We generally assume that truth is out there, somewhere, existing independently of our personal experiences. We also tend to believe that we come to find truth by doing what we can to free our minds from our personal limitations. However, the passages cited above imply that these assumptions about the nature of truth are only partially right. “If you know me, you will know my Father also.” “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Scripture here implies that while ultimate truth *does* exist independently of us, we do not attain knowledge of it by shedding our limits so as to arrive at some rationally indomitable vantage point. Instead, we come to understand God by *embracing* limitation, in a cruciform posture ready to serve our neighbor and worship the divine rather than secure an advantage in relation to either of them. Consequently, as this pertains to our communication (with all persons, including our opponents), our motive *for* and manner *of* communicating are of utmost importance if we want to achieve fuller understanding of God’s truth.

1. Scripture texts in this essay are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.

If we are willing to accept this paradigm of truth-seeking—one that is, we might say, a sort of “knowing by doing” model—then we are likely left with some questions. Those who are mechanically minded may ask, “How does this process work?” Those of us who value philosophical inquiry may ask, “Well then, what *is* the place of intellectual discernment in this ‘knowing by doing’ model?” And, with attention to my opening topic, we all may wonder, “What scriptural insights would sustain us in the specific work of humble communication?” In the limited space of this essay, my answers to these questions can only be suggestive. But I hope that my suggestions will strengthen our conviction that Christian disciples are responsible not to nail down final meaning and hammer others with it, nor write them off as hopeless. Instead, we ought to employ language with the hope of deepened relationship with others and worship of God, guided by a fundamental awareness that we press toward increased understanding of God’s *truth* by way of transformative union with God’s self-offering *will*.

In what follows, I build a case for that conviction by looking to the works of two theologians of language: Renaissance poet Dante Alighieri and contemporary fundamental theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet. Dante may be understood as an incarnational theologian, writing his theological vision into his characters’ lived experiences before God. Along these lines, we may read Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as wisdom literature, namely as what David F. Ford calls “a performance of [a wisdom of love] in relation to the whole cosmos and the particularities of human existence.”² As a performance of a wisdom of love, Dante’s work possesses a powerful capacity to help us imagine the implications of our own communicative acts in the lived context of our search for divine truth. Meanwhile, Chauvet’s careful theological exploration of the nature of language harmonizes with Dante’s emphasis on how our understanding of God is impacted by who we are and what we do. Accordingly, Chauvet will aid our understanding of the wisdom of love attested in Dante’s narrative and offered to us most fully in the way, truth, and life of Jesus Christ.

I now turn to the imaginative landscape of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, with its theological center of the Word made flesh. There we find Dante’s sinners and saints embodying the spiritual risks and rewards of human interaction, highlighting the difficulty yet worthwhileness of maintaining a cruciform posture as we communicate. Beginning with his journey through hell, the *Inferno*, we discover with Dante-protagonist³ that communication can be a medium of idolatry. And while idolatrous attempts at communication may take countless forms, they are always driven by the lust for self-possession and/or control over others. The end result is spiritual stagnation, signaled by the breakdown of the speaker’s potential for meaningful interaction with the neighbor. Here I will look at two exemplary sinners who have allowed idolatrous desire to inform their engagement in communication.

First, in Canto XXXI, Dante-protagonist meets the giant Nimrod, the great “creature of confusion.”⁴ This behemoth of pride oversaw the construction of the Tower of Babel, consequently sowing nonsense amongst the world’s conversants by bringing upon them the punishment of divided language. “Let us leave him and not waste our speech,” Dante’s guide Virgil advises, “for every language is to him as his / to others, and his is understood by none.”⁵ As usual in Dante’s *Inferno*, the punishment fits the crime. Nimrod employed language to work with others, not toward enriched interrelationship or worship of God, but rather toward constructing an altar to himself; therefore his language has been emptied of its potential for facilitating meaningful encounter with others. With Nimrod, Dante demonstrates that

2. David F. Ford, “Dante as Inspiration for Twenty-First-Century Theology,” in *Dante’s Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, eds. Vittorio Montemaggi and Matthew Treherne (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2010), 318–328, at 320.

3. “Dante-protagonist” is commonly used to distinguish between Dante the poet (who is “Dante-author”) and Dante the fictional character within the poem. At specific points in this essay I employ this formula as a tool for clarification. Otherwise, I assume that the reader can easily distinguish between Dante as the character or author.

4. *Inferno* XXXI. 73. Excerpts from Dante’s *Divine Comedy* in this essay are taken from the translations by Robert and Jean Hollander (New York: Random House, 2000).

5. *Ibid.* 79–81.

when we attempt to transcend rather than embrace our human limitations, we may become trapped in our selfishness, no longer able to move toward God and neighbor in the self-offering movement of authentic relationship.

This instance of the isolating effects of idolatrous language use is similar to that of Canto XXXIII's Count Ugolino, our second example for consideration. When Dante-protagonist meets him, Ugolino endeavors to impose a meaning on his life's story as one wherein he is victimized. However, on closer examination we find that Ugolino is a man "so turned to stone inside"⁶ that he is unable to grieve his children's fate of starvation for anyone's sake other than his own. Furthermore, Ugolino completely overlooks the significance of his sons having offered their bodies as food to ease his suffering (nor did he do the same for them). He only recounts that, on the third day after his children's deaths, "fasting had more power than grief"⁷ and he dined on their corpses, symbolically completing his act of consuming his neighbor with his self-concerned actions. Ugolino's failure of vision, including this grotesque inversion of the communion meal, draws our attention to the fact that even the most supposedly meaningful communicative act (such as the sacrament) in itself lacks the power to alter our perception. We have the idolatrous capacity to consume everything for our own self-serving purposes, emptying it of its potential to facilitate relationship with God and neighbor.

Chauvet may help us further consider the human tendency toward idolatrous communication that Dante shows us with Nimrod and Ugolino. Chauvet notes that it is troubling for us when we recognize that our communicative gestures and their intended meanings are never something we can totally secure.⁸ We feel anxious in the face of our inability really to say what we mean, and so we want to secure our control by referring all attempts at communication back to our own agendas. However, for Chauvet and Dante alike, language's final inability to capture reality is not a signal of our living in a vacuum of meaning; instead, language comes up short precisely because it is *finite* and God is *infinite*. Chauvet thus argues that the act of communication always ought to be "*a transit toward something other than itself*,"⁹ pointing our vision beyond what we say to what we *cannot* say (i.e., the full account of God's truth), and to that which is arriving but has not yet arrived in full (i.e., the reign of God's will in all creation). Furthermore, without acknowledging God's withdrawal from our representations of divine reality, Christians may slip into the illusion that the church stands in for Christ rather than pointing beyond itself in its need for redemption.¹⁰ Accordingly, the theological viability of our communicative efforts ought to be tested first and last by how they affect us, that is, "in the *attitude*, idolatrous or not, they elicit from us."¹¹

Turning back to Dante, we find the significance of our "idolatrous or not" attitude in communication further incarnated in the earthly realm of *Purgatorio*. Here, we discover how it is that Dante does not find language fully capable of presenting revelation—for its finitude renders this impossible—while neither does he envision language as a medium of unavoidable subjectivity. Instead, his vision is like Chauvet's, utilizing

6. *Inferno* XXXIII. 49.

7. *Ibid.*, 75.

8. Chauvet describes this troubling quality by appealing to Martin Heidegger's stance that any presence we encounter within the system of signification always operates in tandem with its withdrawal from us, or what we might call otherness. For another interpretation of Chauvet's thought in terms of otherness, see Bruce T. Morrill, *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Integral Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009), 116–118.

9. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995), 218. Italics in original.

10. To assume that we have approximated who God is to forget the scandal of the cross, which reveals that God self-reveals "in what is most different from God." Chauvet quoted in Patrick Prétot, "The Sacraments as 'Celebrations of the Church': Liturgy's Impact on Sacramental Theology" in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God*, eds. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), 32.

11. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 42–43. Italics in original.

rational discernment and expression for the very sake of going beyond it, in pursuit of transformed desire and God's way of seeing.¹² Accordingly, rather than endeavoring to take us *out* of language, Dante draws his audience further into it, pressing communication to its limits so as to open us to a transformative encounter with divine mystery—an encounter that only occurs in a not-yet-perfected manner.

At *Purgatorio*'s opening we find Dante-protagonist and Virgil having escaped the nightmares of hell and arrived at the base of the mountain of Purgatory. Dante here proclaims: "Now I shall sing the second kingdom, / there where the soul of man is cleansed, / made worthy to ascend to Heaven."¹³ Throughout this canticle we find Dante-protagonist highlighting his precarious position as this conveyer of things about which he is unworthy yet obliged to speak. He acknowledges this right away, in Canto II, when Virgil urges him to kneel before an angel of God: "bend your knees!" Virgil cries; "Behold/ the angel of the Lord. . . / Look how he scorns all human instruments."¹⁴ Of course, these "instruments" include human means of communication, which are ultimately inadequate containers for God's truth which underpins and transcends the created realm. Dante-protagonist nevertheless relies on the pagan poet Virgil for appropriate words and signs¹⁵ to guide him towards heightened union with God, and he unabashedly acknowledges that Virgil leads him with intellect and skill.¹⁶ Dante thus highlights the real potential of human skill and intellect for drawing us closer to God's will, as he himself must employ these tools in constructing his tale. However, he also exposes the inevitable inadequacy (and, thereby, the margin of error) interwoven with his words' very utterance.

In connection with Chauvet's understanding of language as properly pointing beyond itself, we might read the above passages from *Purgatorio* as indicating Dante's similar sense of divine scorn for rationalistic schemes whereby we imagine they arrived at some objectively final representation of ultimate truth. For all of his wisdom, Virgil can proceed no further once Dante-protagonist reaches the entrance to the Garden of Eden, the threshold of paradise. Here we again find Dante demonstrating what he takes to be the proper place of human intellection (which, notably, includes non-Christian sapience, such as Virgil's): human intelligence properly works towards the transformative end of graced relational encounter with God. This deployment of rationality makes sense in light of the posture necessary for Dante-protagonist's heavenward progress throughout this canticle. It is his enslaved, fallen, and ailing *will*, not his intellect, which must ultimately become "free, upright, and sound"¹⁷ in the costly process of transformation.

Dante continues to be unapologetic about his attempts to account logically for the truth of biblical revelation, which we see in his doctrinal passages. But again, the real subject of his epic poem is not rational decryption of the mysteries undergirding reality; rather, as evidenced in Dante's heaven, *Paradiso*, the goal of human existence turns out to be seeing the world the way the Trinitarian God sees it. Acquiring that vision can only occur through emptying oneself of all that does not accord with God's will until one is able to become a perfect reflection of it. Dante experiences a moment of this in *Paradiso*'s final canto, wherein he momentarily sees the entire scope of history in light of the full illumination emanating from God's Trinitarian life: "Here my exalted vision lost its power," he confesses; "But now my will and my desire, like wheels revolving / with an even motion, were turning with / the Love that moves the sun and all the other stars."¹⁸

12. I treat this overlap of themes in Chauvet and Dante's works more extensively in "For Comparative Theology's Christian Sceptics: An Invitation to Kenotic Generosity in the Religiously Pluralistic Situation," *Harvard Theological Review* 109, no. 2 (2016) 159–177. See especially pages 164–170.

13. *Purgatorio* I. 4–6.

14. *Purgatorio* II. 27–31.

15. *Ibid.*, XXVII. 139.

16. *Ibid.*, 130.

17. *Purgatorio* XXVII. 140.

18. *Paradiso* XXXIII. 142–45.

I believe Dante's *Divine Comedy* helps us envision what it looks like to take up our crosses in the realm of communication and follow Christ through death toward resurrection. If our language ultimately fails because the infinite God is real, then, as Dante scholar Denys Turner suggests, Dante's instructive point is that we ought to ensure that our "theological language in some way [participates] . . . in the event of its own failure."¹⁹ Chauvet likewise emphasizes that, by inviting and enabling us to participate in cruciform living, the Holy Spirit renders our communicative failures an opportunity for transfiguration, grafting us into the self-opening dynamic internal to God's very life. Hence, our motive *for* and manner *of* communicating merges with truth's unfolding for us. As for legitimate worries over becoming relativistic through shallow appeals to "loving" action, we may take comfort in the fact that the above approach to truth-seeking is not permission to give up on searching for answers to our questions. This approach actually aims to *magnify* our objectivity by way of disciplined commitment to specific practices in relation to God and neighbor, the proposal being that if we consistently engage in these practices we will find ways of knowing that are otherwise inaccessible.²⁰ Under the acknowledgment that cruciform living affords states of knowledge wherein our rational capacities are supplemented and shaped by the wisdom of the Holy Spirit, we might better understand Chauvet's claim that cruciformity is "the ever-open place where the true nature of what we are in our relations with others and with God may become reality."²¹

The decision to seek truth through transformation compels us continually to seek ways to submit our communicative acts to God, which warrants ongoing evaluation of our communication for its community-building effects. For instance, we should work to make our theological convictions understandable to the wider believing community rather than just to certain individuals in isolated sectarian groups. Also, as much as possible, we should work to make our theological claims sensible to non-believers as well; that is, we should work to articulate why it is not necessarily *nonsensical* to believe as we do.²² Additionally, if we begin by agenda-emptying listening—as does Dante-protagonist in the process of purgation—we should expect to learn from persons with whom we disagree. After all, they very well may have discovered something of the truth that we have not, and they may (like Dante's Virgil) teach us of that truth with intellect and skill. Fundamentally, our communicative practices should open up enriched interaction with any *stranger*, who in Christ is to be instead considered *neighbor*.

Dante and Chauvet leave us with a Scripture-echoing reminder that authentic knowledge of God occurs in sacrificial imitation of Christ, and that Christians lose this identity when we fail to be future-oriented, fueled by the biblical conviction that we "now see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now [we] know only in part; then [we] will know fully." (1 Cor 13.12).²³ They also remind us that Christians should hold this precept in concert with another central tenet of our faith: confidence in the One in "whom [we] have put [our] trust," asserting "that he is able to guard until [the end] what [we] have entrusted to him" (2 Tim 1.12). In short, as we pursue union with God's will, we are called to retain the eschatological tensions of the

19. Denys Turner, "How to do Things with Words: Poetry as Sacrament in Dante's *Commedia*" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, 293. This essay is helpful in illuminating the cataphatic and apophatic tensions Dante preserves by poeticizing the theological act. Turner's work would also prove a fruitful conversation partner for the project of comparing and contrasting Dante's cataphatic/apophatic impulses with Thomas Aquinas's.

20. In making this proposal, I am both inspired by and indebted to Sarah Coakley. In *God, Sexuality, and the Self* (New York: Cambridge, 2013), she attends to the ascetic practice of contemplative prayer as a resource for systematic theology, explaining: "What distinguishes this position . . . from an array of other 'post-foundationalist' options that currently present themselves in theology, is the commitment of the discipline of particular graced bodily practices which, over the long haul, afford certain distinctive ways of knowing" (19). She later expounds upon this point, noting that, given this aim to examine "a much wider range of evidences than is normally employed in contemporary theology . . . one might therefore claim that this contributes to an expanded objectivity of standpoint, rather than an intensified subjectivity" (26).

21. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 41.

22. Granted, this is always a work in progress that merits prayerful discernment.

23. Significantly, this verse is situated in the Corinthian epistle's love chapter, wherein faith, hope, and love—the "greatest of which is love"—are lauded as prevailing over the more transitory gifts of prophecy, ecstatic experience, and knowledge.

already and the *not yet* of God's righteous reign over all. Maintaining that tension is a way of declaring that our thinking must continually return to the message of the cross.²⁴ That message is, finally, not a message of death but of resurrection. It means we are continually offered the grace to live like Dante-protagonist, who in "ardent expectation of the sun, / watches intently for the dawn to break," and who "filled with longing, / finds satisfaction in his hope."²⁵

LAUREN SMELSER WHITE IS NEARING COMPLETION OF THE PHD PROGRAM IN THEOLOGICAL STUDIES AT VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY, WHERE SHE IS A FELLOW IN THE THEOLOGY AND PRACTICE PROGRAM. SHE HAS ALSO WORKED AS A VISITING THEOLOGY LECTURER AT LIPSCOMB UNIVERSITY.



24. Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 73.

25. *Paradiso* XXIII. 8–9, 14–15.