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The Incarnational Sense of God's Mercy

Słowa kluczowe: Miłosierdzie; miłość; wcielenie; Słowo; uniżenie; dar; poznanie; spotkanie; Pascha.

Keywords: Mercy; love; Incarnation; the Word; self-abasement; gift; understanding; meeting; Passover.

It is our argument that only by looking from the perspective of the Incarnation of God's Son can one speak of the true meaning of God's mercy, and therefore those theological studies which fail to account for this fact remain incomplete. Narratives about God and his love for both humanity and the world must not fail to concentrate on the revelation of the Son of God. This paper undertakes to portray the incarnational sense of God's mercy. In order to complete this research task, relevant biblical content will be presented, and the idea of God's self-abasement will be discussed. This will make it possible to build a narrative on the motives of the Incarnation of God's Son and the consequences of that event. Next, the relationship between the Incarnation and the Passover will be explored, and a brief synthesis will be provided in the conclusion. The choice of sources and authors has been determined by their relevance to the theological and semantic problem space defined by the stated objective of this paper.

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1. The Holy Scripture

In our view, a foreshadowing of the story of the Incarnation can be found in the promise given by God to Adam and Eve after their transgression instigated by the serpent (Gen 3:13): *I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel* (Gen 3:15). Hans Urs von Balthasar notes that “the ancient prophecy of enmity pronounced at the gate of paradise (Gen 3:15) has come to fruition. This explains why the emblem of the incarnate Word is now the ‘sharp two-edged sword’ (Rev 1:16; 2:12) that proceeds from his mouth as an instrument for slaying his foes (Rev 19:15) and that is one with the deadly breath of his mouth (Is 11:4; Ps 33:6; 2 Thess 2:8)” (2004, p. 236). The sword of which von Balthasar writes is the prophecy of a Messiah who will come to the world to bring “division” (Lk 12:51) and cause one to rise against another (Lk 12:52-53) (2004, p. 236). It is a “sword” that will bring division by putting a final frontier between good and evil at the end of time. This frontier will, once and for all, make the differentiation whereby good will no longer be confused with evil and evil with good. And the answer to that differentiation between good and evil (and vice versa) is the Incarnation as an expression of God’s kindness towards the human condition.

A manifestation of God’s love in response to the downfall of the first parents—and towards the next generations—can be seen in the anthropomorphic account recorded by the author of the Book of Genesis, where God is seen to be searching for man who, out of fear, has hidden among the trees (Gen 3:8-9). Furthermore, as Georg Hentschel notes, it can be seen in the figures of the men who visited Abraham (Gen 18:1-22), in the image of the warrior who goes forth against his foes (Is 42:13) and cries out (Is 42:13-14), and in other parts of the Bible, where such expressions can be found as *thy arm* (Ex 15:16), God’s *face* (Ps 27:9) or *my eyes are upon* (Jer 16:17) (2001, p. 20). This “pro-incarnational character of the Old Testament can be seen in the revelation of the nature and name of God, in the central role of the Covenant in Israel and in all of God’s redemptive acts towards his people, in the idea of God’s fatherhood, in Judaistic anthropology, and in the fulfillment of God’s presence in Israel. The Word of God also heralds the orientation of the Old Testament revelation towards the truth about the Incarnation” (Sawa P., 2009, p. 43). Signs of God’s love—such as the descent to ordinary mortals or the concern for and service to “the God’s people”—can also be found in rabbinic texts. In this context, the rabbis attach particular importance to the image of the pillars of cloud and fire that accompany the Israelites as they wander in the desert (Ex 13:21)

(Schönborn Ch., 2010, p. 112). Christoph Schönborn portrays this “descent”³ of the Creator as an act through which God steps out of his transcendence so that he can be touched by men, so that he can save and heal them, and thus he dwells among them (2010, p. 113). And Peter Kuhn, based on his extensive rabbinic knowledge, notes that “an outstanding expression of the self-abasement of God is the Torah. With this, God has given himself; it is, as it were, the daughter of God, whom he has given away and yet from whom he cannot part; God has put himself, along with the Torah, at men’s disposal” (quoted in Schönborn Ch., 2010, p. 113). God’s act of giving himself away will be shown even more clearly and fully in the Word which takes on human flesh (Jn 1:14), in the Person in whom the Law given through Moses will be fulfilled (Jn 1:17; Ex 24:12; 31:18). And thus, the Old Testament becomes a “partial” going out of God to men, until he finally enters the world of men with all his radicalness and shows revelation in its entirety: from the beginning, through the prophets, all the way to the life of the Church (Sawa P., 2009, p. 41).

The prophecy of salvation culminates and reaches its fullness (Gal 4:4; Eph 1:10)⁴ when God offers his Son to fulfill what the prophets and the Law had proclaimed (Mt 5:17) (Ratzinger J., 1986, p. 79; Ratzinger J., 2012, p. 121; Ratzinger J., 2013, p. 947; Schönborn Ch., 2010, p. 247). In this context, one cannot fail to mention the Virgin Mary and her faith, without whom and which this could not have been fulfilled. As René Laurentin writes, “the Word truly became flesh (Jn 1:14), but not according to the will of the flesh (Jn 1:13). Its Incarnation comes from God alone through Mary’s faith” (Laurentin R., 1999, p. 190). However, the first place to which we turn our eyes when we think of the mystery of the Incarnation are the words of the Prologue of John (Gałdecki S., 2001, p. 32), where “the subject matter of the Incarnation is the Word (*Logos*). In the context of the ancient Middle Eastern culture, it has a more dynamic character than in our understanding of it. *Dabar* is not only an utterance, but also an event.

³ Richard Swinburne explains the “coming down” by expanding on the Nicene Creed: “The Nicene Creed affirms that God the Son, the second person of the Trinity, ‘came down from the heavens, and was incarnate [...] and became human’. ‘Came down from the heavens’ must not be read in the literal sense of descending from the sky; for the Gospels (which those who formulated the Creed regarded as the source of their doctrine) record no such ‘descent’, and all Christians believed that God was omnipresent, present everywhere. Rather, ‘came down’ must be read metaphorically as ‘acquired a lower status’ (as a human, that is); and ‘from the heavens’ must be read as ‘than his status as divine’. He ‘became human’; and when he was born, he was given the name of Jesus. The fact of the birth of God the Son as a human (Jesus Christ) at a particular time is a quite different fact from the eternal dependence of God the Son on God the Father” (2008, p. 47).

⁴ See also Francis, 2016. In his homily, the Pope explained the true meaning of the “fullness of time”.

It effects what it denotes. This is particularly true of the word of God” (Gądecki S., 2001, p. 32). Thus, the words uttered by God to proclaim the coming of the Liberator are being fulfilled: *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us* (Jn 1:14). In a more literal sense, it pitched its tent, which means being among men “much more intimately than with the tent in the desert (Ex 25:8f.) or the ‘tent’ of the Mosaic law (Sir 24:7-22)” (Balthasar H., 2004, p. 279). The Word of God, the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, has entered into an even more intimate relationship with humanity than in past centuries or events. Now, “in the mystery of the Incarnation, God shocked our logic by assuming the human nature with its limitations and weaknesses” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 103). The Creator shocked us with his mercy in the Incarnation, which is a lifebelt that liberates the world and men from the sin that has controlled them (Zabielski J., 2007, p. 112). God enters with his love, and through that love, he “orders the chaos into the cosmos, gives consistency to history, adds meaning to existence and transforms human hope into hope eternal, one that prevails over death and rejuvenates all culture with its perpetual leaven” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 38). In addition, he gives human existence its originally intended dimension (John Paul II, 1979; Szymik J., 2004, p. 74)⁵ and becomes the source of “answers to all questions, to the entirety of the *quaestio hominis et mundi*” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 218). Thus, God becomes one who “opens himself up in order to communicate himself” (Balthasar H., 1979, p. 37).

The mystery of the Incarnation represents a “primal act that is binding on Christians, therefore it is and has to be an amazement at the

⁵ In his interview for Peter Seewald, Cardinal Ratzinger speaks about one of the motives that relate to the original state of affairs between man and God, about the unity between them: “The measure and prototype of human existence has been set in Jesus—precisely because he is not just a man, but the God-Man—man is called to share in the union with God” (Ratzinger J., 2002, p. 221). It is through Jesus and his Incarnation that the connection between men and God can be restored once again.

In his letter to Flavian, Pope Leo wrote the following: “With, therefore, the distinctive character of each nature being preserved and coming together into one person, lowliness was assumed by divinity, impotence by power, mortality by immortality; and for the payment of the debt owed by our nature the divine nature was united to the passible nature, so that—this fitting our cure—one and the same, being ‘the mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus,’ would be able to die in respect of the one and would not be able to expire in respect of the other. Therefore in the pure and perfect nature of true man true God was born, complete in what is his own and complete in what is ours. We call ours that which the Creator deposited in us from the beginning and which he received back again to restore; for that which the deceiver introduced in addition—and the man, being deceived, [admitted]—did not have any trace in the Saviour” (Price R. and Gaddis M., 2005, pp. 17–18).

As Gregory of Nyssa said, “the fact that the all-powerful nature was capable of stooping down to the lowliness of the human condition is a greater proof of power than are the miracles, imposing and supernatural though these be [...] The greatness is glimpsed in the lowliness and its exaltation is not thereby reduced” (Balthasar H., 2000, p. 34).

factum brutum of God's Incarnation itself—and that is before one even asks the question: why, in what circumstances and for what purpose has God become a man? Faced with the fact that God has come into this world as a man, a Christian must simply be dumbfounded! God is being born as a man. There is nothing more amazing!” (Haas A., 2004, p. 4). A human's natural first reaction is bewilderment, and only then does one ask the question: *Cur Deus homo?* We will attempt to answer this question in a moment, but before that, we would like to briefly discuss the question of God's self-abasement or self-expropriation. By analyzing this subject, we will be better prepared to understand the above question.

2. God's "Self-Abasement"

In order to portray God's "self-abasement," one must first take note of the fact that a top-down trend has developed in theology that underlines first and foremost the divinity of Christ, treating his humanity as secondary. Hence, the Incarnation can be described as a "coming from," that is a descending movement from high to low. Being a spirit and yet wanting to meet his creation, God needs to "descend" to that creation from his abode and assume a material form, which means donning a human body (Gądecki S., 2001, p. 32). Therefore, apart from being a manifestation of his power, the process of God's descent can also be described as "self-emptying" (Schönborn Ch., 2010, p. 111)⁶. In this context, the self-emptying should not be perceived as a sign of God's weakness, but rather of his power.⁷ This is a self-abasement of God that extends all the way to complete "self-negation". God's omnipotence, limitlessness and greatness are only seemingly reduced to the human limit of littleness so that, in the Sacrifice of the Cross, they can accomplish an explosion of love which is not limited to the country in which Jesus was active or to our globe, but which instead encompasses the entire universe. Furthermore, one can argue that the Incarnation of the eternal *Logos* and its descent to the level of a passing being brings a new vision into the world, a new perspective through which this event can be read. Therefore, one must not be shocked by a God like

⁶ In his Christology, the Viennese cardinal quotes R. Johanan, who once said: "In every place [in the Scripture] where you find the might of the Holy One, may he be blessed, you will also find his self-emptying right next to it." Cardinal Schönborn has borrowed the quotation from Peter Kuhn's *Gottes Selbsterniedrigung in der Theologie der Rabbinen*, Munich, 1968, 13, text 1 (bMeg 31a).

⁷ Origen writes that "the Son, 'who was in the form of God, emptied himself,' desiring by this very self-emptying to show us the 'fulness of the deity'" (Balthasar H., 2001, p. 122).

that and must not take his self-emptying as a failure,⁸ but rather as a manifestation of love⁹.

A father of the Church, Origen, expressed Christ's kenosis as follows: "One must dare to say that the goodness of Christ appears greater, more divine, and truly in the image of the Father, when he humbles himself in obedience unto death-the death of the Cross-than had he clung onto his equality with the Father as an inalienable gift, and had refused to become a slave for the world's salvation" (quoted in Balthasar H., 2000, pp. 29–30; see also pp. 23–24). This means that we as humans are able to recognize the true face of God in his Son's self-abasement rather than in his declaring himself equal to God (Phil 2:6). The self-abasement of the Word can be understood as the "first kenosis" (*erste Kenose*) (Szymik J., 2004, p. 72; see also Pyc M., 2002, pp. 491–504), since "kenosis is the truth of God and the world. God's omnipotence is itself in abasement, expropriation, in vulnerable love. Man is himself in not having himself, in abasement, in vulnerable love" (Szymik J., 2004, p. 74; see also Jüngel E., 1992, p. 59). Therefore, God is "truly" himself when he abases himself and leaves himself vulnerable. Origen wrote that "indeed, it is more of a scandal that Jesus was born than that he died" (quoted in Balthasar H., 2001, p. 125). This idea has also been expressed in a similar manner by Louis of Granada and Cyril of Alexandria, and by Hans Urs von Balthasar, who wrote that for God, the Incarnation was "more humiliating than the Cross" (Balthasar H., 2000, p. 26; see also Szymik J., 2004, p. 72). The Incarnation as a kenotic act represents God's longing (Szymik J., 2004, p. 70) for the man who is distancing himself from him, and helps transform the way in which we think of God in the context of his love (O'Donnell J., 2005,

⁸ Cardinal Ratzinger encapsulates Christ's *kenosis* in the following words: "This Christ-centered drama of light and darkness, of God and the world as they encounter each other, begins on Christmas, when God knocks on the door of a world that rejects him even though it belongs to him (Jn 1:5-11). [...] His coming seems a defeat of the light, which becomes darkness, but at the same time it is the first, hidden victory of the light" (2011, pp. 295–296).

⁹ As Joseph Ratzinger writes, "it is the very essence of the Christian faith to accept God as he is, to bear the scandalousness of the incarnate God, to accept God who has come into the world and adapted to human structures and forms, and thus to human limitedness and weakness" (Ratzinger J., 2013, p. 761). See also René Laurentin, who writes that "God can adapt himself splendidly, as he did in the Incarnation" (Laurentin R., 1999, p. 56). When it comes to faith, we as believers should adopt an attitude of humility, accepting the form of God's work that he himself deems appropriate and correct rather than that which we would expect of him (Ratzinger J., 2013, p. 760). God knows what is right for our minds so that we can gain a better understanding of himself, and what we-with our minds-are capable of comprehending. Thus, God adapts to us instead of us adapting to him, even though it should normally be the opposite. God's adaptation to us is revealed in the mystery of the Incarnation, which "cannot be considered other than in terms of kenosis, which is a theological explanation of the possibility of God's real, material and physical presence in the world of men" (Sawa P., 2009, p. 71). This is one of the answers to the question of why God became human and assumed a visible form.

p. 76): "And by letting itself be struck, love proves what had to be proven: that it is indeed love" (Balthasar H., 1979, p. 44). For if it had not been love, it would not have allowed itself to be wounded, emptied or abased, and would not have been capable of accepting the nothingness of a created and passing being.

Up to this point, we have discussed one issue, namely self-abasement. However, a different question also arises: *What about Jesus's glory?* It might seem that the incarnating Son deprives himself of this attribute, but the answer is in fact entirely different: the divine *Logos* does not deprive himself of glory, for "it is not the subject that changes, but rather the conditions of that subject. The subject remains the eternal Word" (O'Donnell J., 2005, p. 76), with all its power and might. Commenting on a passage from the Epistle to the Philippians (2:6–11), John Paul II notes that due to the covert influence of rationalism on the contemporary culture, it has become difficult to believe in the divinity of Christ and in the fact that, through becoming flesh, the *Logos* took upon himself all aspects of humanity except sin. And hence arises the conviction that the self-abasement of the Word is tantamount to it being emptied of the glory it holds. However, as Pope John Paul II goes on to say, this self-abasement is the glorification of the humanity of Jesus Christ (2001, section 22) as expressed in Philippians 2:9–11: *Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.* This is why "the Incarnation is the concealing of the glory of the Word, the covering of beauty, the abandonment of divine gracefulness" (Szymik J., 2010, p. 101; see also Ratzinger J., 1999, pp. 42–43)¹⁰ by entering a world of pain and indignity, suffering and death, loneliness (Sawa P., 2009, p. 72), self-abnegation, self-depriving (Szymik J., 2004, p. 73) and self-emptying (Schönborn Ch., 2010, p. 116) – all this due to the Lord's "condescension of compassion" (Price R. and Gaddis M., 2005, p. 18).

Through this attitude of Jesus, an embodiment of his mercy, man is given a new life thanks to the Spirit (cf. John 7:37–38), who helps rebuild in man his ontic image. Such rebuilding is made possible by the understanding of the intimate mystery of God who is and gives life: the mystery of the unity, intimate communion and intimate life of the Father, the Son

¹⁰ As regards the "concealing" referred to in this passage, Karl Rahner argues that "[...] because God utters himself [*sich äußert*] when he expropriates himself, he makes himself known as love when he conceals his majesty and shows himself as the ordinariness of man. [...] The 'what' is the same in us and in him; we call it human nature. But the fact that this is what is said as his self-declaration in him, and not in us, constitutes the abyss of the difference" (quoted in Balthasar H., 2004, p. 283).

and the Holy Spirit into which man is grafted by the power of the sacrament of baptism. The formula uttered by the resurrected Jesus, *go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matthew 28:19-20), carries with it the promise of man's participation in God's intimate life by virtue of being given the sanctifying grace as a supernatural gift of God to man (John Paul II, 1986, section 9). Thus, man is elevated to the heights of creation by the grace that empowers him to live in truth and love. This elevation makes man capable of living in the close presence of God, who—through the events of the Passover—has drawn man to himself again and granted him not a semblance of life, but rather a true life that lasts forever.

By opening himself to grace and accepting the gift of sharing in the life of the Triune God, man also opens himself to transcendency, and through that, to a spiritual understanding that exceeds his nature. At the same time, one needs to bear in mind that despite opening himself to transcendency, man cannot penetrate the entire “subject” being cognized, namely God and God's intimate life. Therefore, the ontic reconstruction of man through the event of the Passover makes it possible “to justify man, to restore justice in the sense of that salvific order which God willed from the beginning in man and, through man, in the world” (John Paul II, 1980, section 7), and thus to give man the sense of true freedom with which he is being vested.

3. The Motives of the Incarnation

The above discussion of God's self-abasement leads us into a reflection on the reasons for his “coming” into the world of men. In this section, we would like to investigate why the Word of the Father chose to become incarnate and come into the world, and what the motives of God's Incarnation were.

The most important motive behind the Incarnation of the Word of God the Father is love, which is one of God's attributes: *God is love*, writes St. John (1 Jn 4:16). In fact, the purpose of the Incarnation “can only and exclusively be love, which, being the nature of God, is also the motive of his going out to the world” (Sawa P., 2009, p. 113). In Jesus's Incarnation and death, there occurs what Pope Benedict XVI describes as a “turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form” (2005, section 12). God turns against himself to show how capable he is of “humiliating himself,” of crossing that border and going out to meet man who could not rise up on

his own and go towards God (Buxakowski J., 2000, p. 92). Therefore, one can say that “God is omnipotent not despite his weakness, not outside of it [...], but in it, through humility and kenosis. The source of the divine omnipotence is God’s very nature (*ousia, physis*)—his love, purest and completely devoid of itself” (Szymik J., 2010, p. 198). What is more, as Pope Francis argues, “it is proper to God to exercise mercy, and he manifests his omnipotence particularly in this way.’ Saint Thomas Aquinas’ words show that God’s mercy, rather than a sign of weakness, is the mark of his omnipotence” (2015b, section 6). And Fr. Jacek Woroniecki notes that the *principium*, the “first and principal reason for the Incarnation of the Word of God is God’s mercy, which is nothing else than God’s love descending to created beings in order to free them from their ailments and infirmities” (quoted in Wejman H., 1999, p. 44). In his interview for Peter Seewald, Joseph Ratzinger notes that “God sets against human pride a universal measure, namely, love. Pride is at the heart, and is the content, of every form of sin, in the sense of wanting to be God oneself. Love, on the contrary, does not exalt itself, but stoops down. Love shows that stooping down in that way is the truly exalted thing. That we are sublime when we bend down to the poor and the lowly. God makes himself little in order to bring puffed-up man back into the proper measure. Thus we see that becoming small is the rule, the model of how God acts” (Ratzinger J., 2002, p. 213; see also Benedict XVI, 2011). This power of God has “enclosed itself” in the powerlessness of matter as a defenseless being, so that, in this very powerlessness, it can reveal God’s true might: his love that descends to the lowness of human futility and makes it a true instrument of action. God’s act of “making himself little” to which the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith at the time is referring forces one to understand that this is the “certainty of God’s love” (Sawa P., 2009, p. 40), the certainty that God does not leave man to himself, but rather goes out to meet him with the most precious gift that God can give man out of love and through love. The mercy that is shown to the world also comes with the assurance that “his creation is dear to him, for it was willed by him and ‘made’ by him. The second important element now emerges: this God loves man” (Benedict XVI, 2005, section 9). In fact, God loves man as much as he loves his Son, and in some cases, one could even argue that he loves man more, since he gives his Son as a sacrifice—because the love that “directs” the Father is much greater and stronger. God wishes good upon the one whom he created in his image and likeness (Gen 1:26). Therefore, one can say that “both the motive and the manner of the Incarnation of God’s Son are a testimony to the limitless mercy of God, who not only does not reject man for his breach of the law, but in fact frees him from guilt

and punishment and restores to him the dignity of divine filiation” (Wejman H., 1999, p. 44).

Writing about a truth that is central to theology, namely the truth of the Holy Trinity, Cezary Smuniewski introduces the subject of God’s mercy by referring to the manner in which Christ reveals the Father’s openness. Here is what the theologian has to say: “In the internal life of the triune God, the Son turns towards the Father. The only-begotten Son knows the Father’s primordial and ultimate openness. In his earthly mission, he reveals the Father’s openness in which, through communion with Christ, man is accepted. Thus, the Son reveals the Father not only as the birth-giver, but also as the acceptor. In the light of Christ as the one who reveals the accepting Father, the trinitarian and redemptive work of the incarnate Son is also manifested. The revelation of the accepting Father takes place in the Son when he assumes the human nature with all its consequences. He also accepts the effects of sin, even rejection and death. The Son’s openness knows no limits, and neither does the acceptance that is inherent in the Father, who, as Saint John Paul II said, is ‘rich in mercy’ (cf. Eph 2:4)” (Smuniewski C., 2013, p. 232). When reflecting on the incarnational sense of mercy, it is important to note that after his disquisition on the Father’s openness expressed in Christ, which is synonymous to the Father’s mercy, Cezary Smuniewski proceeds to discuss man’s openness revealed in Christ (2013, pp. 232–233). This understanding of mercy in the context of a reflection on God’s incarnational openness significantly enriches the narratives of both divine and human mercy, and thus warrants a rethinking of the Church’s openness to man and all contemporariness.

In his address to members of the Roman Curia, Pope Francis recalled the words of St. Augustine, who spoke of God’s mercy in the context of the Nativity: “Could there have been any greater mercy shown to us unhappy men than that which led the Creator of the heavens to come down among us, and the Creator of the earth to take on our mortal body? That same mercy led the Lord of the world to assume the nature of a servant, so that, being himself bread, he would suffer hunger; being himself satiety, he would thirst; being himself power, he would know weakness; being himself salvation, he would experience our woundedness, and being himself life, he would die. All this he did to assuage our hunger, alleviate our longing, strengthen our weaknesses, wipe out our sins and enkindle our charity” (Francis 2015a).

4. The Effects of the Incarnation

Following our brief analysis of the motives of the Incarnation, we now need to examine the effects of that event. The most prominent of these effects is the “mending” of the love that had become infected by sin: “God takes the destiny of love destroyed upon himself; he takes the place of the sinner and offers the Son’s place to men once more, not only to Israel, but to all nations” (Ratzinger J., 1986, p. 64). In the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, God took upon himself the destroyed love because the “radical Christocentrism of the Christian understanding and experience of love has its source in the Incarnation, and specifically in the fact that ‘Jesus Christ is the incarnate love of God’” (Szymik J., 2016, p. 260; see also Smuniewski C., 2013, pp. 197–213) – a love that takes on a specific “shape,” a specific attitude and a specific, concrete form of action. This is a love that fears nothing and does not shy away from undertaking to rebuild the relationship between God and creation, thus becoming a true bridge between the two. It is not afraid to act in the defense of the aggrieved, it does not hesitate to comfort the sad and the lonely, and finally, it does not fear to sacrifice itself on the altar of the story of human fate. Through this multifacetedness, “the Son communicates love and makes it effective in the world” (Sawa P., 2009, p. 113), thus giving us an impulse to follow him towards the world, carrying the soothing balm of the love thorough which God reveals the truth about the mutual relationship between one person and another, demonstrating that “the mystery of the incarnation has brought with itself the revelation that we are ‘capable’ of being loved” (Vanier J., 2002, p. 93). Therefore, one could say that as a result of the incarnation and resurrection of the Son, “suffering and death lost their meaninglessness and hopelessness” (Sawa P., 2009, p. 72), becoming fully meaningful in the manifestation of Love that caused a truly Copernican revolution in the universe of human imperfection by bringing in the light that it had carried from up high, and by bringing in hope.

The above redefinition of our perception of love also bears on the relationship between God and humankind. This relationship has been restored to the right track of communication between the two entities: “The infinite chasm between God and man has been crossed” (Gądecki S., 2001, p. 36). When he was the Prefect of the Congregation of the Doctrine of Faith, Joseph Ratzinger noted that “the Incarnation of the Son creates communion between God and man and thus also makes possible a new communion among human beings” (Ratzinger J., 1986, pp. 92–93). Thus, the unity is re-established from the ground up (Laurentin R., 1999, p. 362). By mending the relationship between God and man, the relation-

ship “channel” between individual human beings is also restored. A correct relationship between the Supreme Being and his creation translates into good relationships between individual members of the community: if one can relate properly to God, then one can also form proper bonds with others based on mutual rapport and assistance. In this environment, a true *communio* begins to prevail between those closest to one another, and then within their local community. These good relations between people inhabiting their “little homelands” translate into relations within a given national community, and eventually into relations between different countries. And if these mutual relations in the international arena are good and proper, there is no ground for mutual accusations and conflicts, but only for the furtherance of peace in the world. Therefore, it seems very reasonable to say that the incarnation is the “place where All meets all” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 54). It is there that man becomes absorbed into the divine sphere, according to what St. Augustine said in one of his sermons: “God became man so that man might become God” (quoted in St. Augustine, 1959, p. 27; see also Benedict XVI, 2012, p. 27); and this is why in the Son, we have been adopted by the Father (Sawa P., 2009, pp. 133 and 136). “At any rate, thanks to the Incarnation, every cry of man (creation) out of pain (i.e. under the influence of pain) becomes a cry of Jesus to the Father—these two voices interpenetrate, embrace each other and become one” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 149). Humans no longer exist here, as it were, individually. Instead, Jesus Christ acts on their behalf as their sole Mediator (Heb 12:24; 8:6; 9:15). He is the voice of the pain-stricken humanity: the one who fully knows its condition and, as the true Mediator, intercedes on its behalf with the Father. It is thanks to the Word of God that we rise “[to the Father] so that we might see him there in his perfection after he has returned from the emptiness into which he had ‘emptied himself’ (Phil 2:7) to his own ‘fullness’ (cf. Col 1:9; 2:9; Eph 1:23) where we also will, with him as our guide, be fulfilled and freed from all emptiness” (Balthasar H., 2001, p. 123).

The guarantor of the proper relationship between God and man and of the communion discussed above is the Church, which, as Fr. Jerzy Szymik puts it, is “a gift from God, a gift from the Father, both as the fruit of the Incarnation and the Passover and as the work of the Spirit [...] a place where humans are united in a space given by God [...] a space which more deeply and effectively ‘leads into a sphere of understanding’” (2010, p. 91). Furthermore, as he argues, “the Church provides the assurance that I am not following a phantasm of my own devising, but rather that ‘it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me’” (2010, p. 87).

5. The Connection between the Incarnation and the Passover

While the Incarnation and the Passover may appear as two rather distant events, they both combine joy and suffering, cheerfulness and sorrow, and tears of joy and tears of pain. The emotions invoked in these seemingly opposing events are so closely tied together that one is dependent on the other. More specifically, one becomes the beginning of the other.

The Incarnation is the *archè* of the Passover (Szymik J., 2004, p. 36), its origination in the redemptive designs of the Lord and the personification of the prophecy that heralds the coming of the One who is to deliver the liberation. The Incarnation and Nativity are starting points in the work of redemption, which appears “in its germ” (Augé M., 2013, p. 188; see also p. 18) in the Nativity.¹¹ The Incarnation becomes a prologue to the Passover, “the first stage in the fulfillment of the redemptive mystery rather than the mere assumption of the human nature by the eternal Word” (Dąbrowska E., 2004, p. 64).

In von Balthasar's view, the relationship between the Incarnation and the Passover is a path towards death, a path thanks to which we have access to Heaven (O'Donnell J., 2005, p. 75). Christoph Schönborn emphasizes that “[Jesus's] path to death was not the natural consequence of his birth in the way that our birth sends us toward death. He went to his death because his life was [never centered on himself]. As he was open for everyone, everyone's guilt struck him [...]”, and notes how Matthew explained Jesus's complete openness in the context of Isaiah's vision of the Servant of Yahweh: *He took our infirmities and bore our diseases* (Mt 8:17; see also Is 53:4) (2010, p. 131). Hence, as a result of his openness to everyone rather than himself (as is human nature), Jesus was able to take our infirmities and carry them to the Cross, carry them up the path of love and humiliation, only to triumph over them at the time of his death and seal that triumph with his Resurrection. Joseph Ratzinger underlines that “the Incarnation, certainly, does not exist for its own sake; of its very nature it is ordered to transcendence and hence to the dynamism of the Easter mystery. Its whole basis is the fact that, in his paradoxical love, God transcends himself and enters the realm of flesh, the realm of the passion

¹¹ On the same page, the author also quotes the words of Pope Leo the Great: “Let us exult in the Lord, dearly beloved, and let us be gladdened with spiritual delight, for a day of new redemption has dawned for us, a day prepared from antiquity, a day of eternal blessedness. Made present to us on its anniversary is the mystery of salvation, promised from the beginning, fulfilled in the end, to remain without end (*Reparatur enim nobis salutis nostrae annua revolutione sacramentum*)” (English translation according to St. Leo the Great, 1996, p. 80).

of the human being” (Ratzinger J., 1986, p. 54). The Incarnation is an act of reaching out to others, an attitude which shows us that, just like Jesus’s life was directed towards our good, so should we, in the spirit of the Christ, reach out to others, stop enclosing ourselves in the cramped world of our egoism, and offer something to the fellow man so that the events of the Incarnation and Passion manifest the attitude shown to us by the Lord.

The Cross as the purpose of the Incarnation is not an addition, but a destination towards which Jesus is heading (Szymik J., 2004, p. 116), a destination in which the Divine Love triumphs despite having been humiliated by humanity. It is on Good Friday that the mystery of the Incarnation “reaches its staggering acuity. And its goal” (Szymik J., 2004, p. 149). It was on Good Friday that God’s mercy triumphed over the miserable fate of humanity and ushered in a new era: an era of love revealed in the incarnate and, at the same time, martyred Son of the Father. We are also witnesses to this love every day when “in the Eucharist, there occurs a special personification of the Incarnation, Life and the Paschal Redemptive Drama” (Bartnik S., 1987, p. 74) of our Savior. Faced with the great mystery of Jesus’s life, all voices are silenced because “no word can explain” that mystery (quoted in Buxakowski J., 2000, p. 149). It is a mystery which man can only fathom as far as he is permitted.

In the mystery of Jesus Christ, which has its beginning in his incarnation and culminates in his death and resurrection, yet another aspect is also revealed: the sense of human suffering. As John Paul II notes, “the cross is the most profound condescension of God to man and to what man—especially in difficult and painful moments—looks on as his unhappy destiny. The cross is like a touch of eternal love upon the most painful wounds of man’s earthly existence” (John Paul II, 1980, section 8). In the mystery of God’s condescension to man, the suffering man in particular, the suffering is elevated to the level of a gift and, at the same time, a goal. A gift when it comes to offering the suffering for a specific purpose that serves the good of the community, and a goal when it comes to the hope of the life to come. Through his act of sacrifice for man, Christ also “drew close above all to the world of human suffering through the fact of having taken this suffering upon his very self. [...] Precisely by means of this suffering he must bring it about ‘that man should not perish, but have eternal life’” (John Paul II, 1984, section 16). Therefore, the mystery of Jesus’s suffering is also the mystery of the suffering of man, a mystery which becomes transformed by the event of the Cross. In that event, the suffering of man is also the suffering of Christ, who comes to man with love that is greater than the suffering and more powerful than death.

Conclusion

In the light of the above narrative on the incarnational sense of God's mercy, one can conclude that it is indeed this mercy that represents the fullest revelation of God to man. The themes that emerge in studies on the incarnational sense of God's mercy support the view that in his relationship to man, God does not limit himself to justice, and that his justice is inseparably connected with his love of humanity. In this way, the truth is revealed about a merciful God who sacrifices his own Son to save the erring man. This aspect of theological reflection on God's mercy becomes particularly apparent in the context of the contemporary processes through which the boundary between good and evil is being blurred and the notions of good, evil, grace and sin are becoming relativized. In God's attribute of mercy, which is revealed to its fullest extent in the incarnate Son of God, man receives the help, encouragement and empowerment needed to turn towards grace. This fact justifies the argument that there is a consonance between God's love in his immanent life and the economy of the Holy Trinity, the Paschal gifts of the Incarnate Son of God, and the new life of man. In this way, the narrative on the incarnational sense of God's mercy is deepened and reinforced through a pneumatological perspective. This is because in the Paschal gift of the Holy Spirit, the mission of the Church in the world—the Body of God's Son—is revealed. And thus, the incarnational sense of God's mercy becomes the true sense of the Church's mission in the world.

INKARNACYJNY SENS BOŻEGO MIŁOSIERDZIA

(STRESZCZENIE)

Miłosierdzie Boga, który wychodzi naprzeciw człowiekowi, zazwyczaj utożsamiamy z wydarzeniem Paschy: męką i śmiercią, gdzie przejaw Jego miłości do człowieka osiąga swoją pełnię. Często zdaje się nam zapomnieć o początku obecności Boga wśród ludzi. O początku, który sprawia, że Jego obecność staje się namacalna. Inkarnacja jest przejawem miłości, miłosierdzia Boga do nas. Jest wychodzeniem Innego naprzeciw człowiekowi, naprzeciw jego grzechowi. W artykule ukazano sens i potrzebę wcielenia, omówiono znaczenie słowa „inkarnacja”, zarysowano biblijne podstawy, wyjaśniono sens „uniżenia się Boga”, motywy i skutki wcielenia oraz związek, jaki istnieje między wcieleniem i Paschą.

THE INCARNATIONAL SENSE OF GOD'S MERCY

(SUMMARY)

The mercy of God who comes towards man is often equated with the event of the Passover, of Jesus's suffering and death, where his love of man reaches its fullness. As a result, we often seem to forget about the beginning of God's presence amongst men, the beginning which makes this presence tangible. His Incarnation is a manifestation of God's love and mercy for us, a coming forward of the Other towards man, towards his sin. This paper undertakes to portray the sense and the need of the Incarnation. It discusses the terminological meaning of the word "incarnation" and outlines its Biblical references. Furthermore, it explores the meaning of God's "self-abasement," the motives and effects of the Incarnation and the connection between the Incarnation and the Passover.

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