

THE MYSTERY OF CHRIST: GOD'S ETERNAL GOSPEL TOWARDS HUMANKIND AND THE WORLD*

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The following paper seeks to demonstrate the way in which St Maximus the Confessor identifies the holy *Gospel*, as the eternal Word of God, with Christ himself, specifically with the *great mystery of the incarnate Christ*. By living a life according to the *Gospel*, every man recapitulates in himself this great incarnational mystery, and is thereby renewed by the grace of the Holy Spirit to participation in the life of the Holy Trinity, a life of eternal deification. It is Maximus' practical experience of the *Gospel* as personal participation in the Incarnation which underpins his entire theological outlook, in particular his defence of Chalcedonian Christology, and which made his own life a true continuation and 'completion' of the *Gospel* of Christ.

The *Gospel* is the eternal word of life (John 6:68; 1 John 1:1–2). This means that the *Gospel* is word, eternal, and life. It is word, because, as Saint Maximus demonstrates in his corpus, it is identified with the eternal Word of God, Christ the Word, the Son of God who made all things in the beginning and who is himself God's *Gospel* to creation, to the world, and to humankind. That it is eternal is apparent in Revelation, where Saint John the Apostle saw an angel bearing the *eternal Gospel* (Rev 14:6).¹ That the *Gospel* is life is self-evident because it is the eternally alive Word of God, who is eternally begotten by the Father. According to John, *life was in him*, and this life was manifested (1 John 1:2) in the world as the Word and Son of God, who is eternally with the Father and is the one through whom the Father created all things. And, of course, with the Father and the Son there is also the Holy Spirit, who is the eternal giver of Life. The Father is the *Intellect*, the Son is *Word*, and the Holy Spirit is *Life*, says Saint Maximus in his *Interpretation of the Lord's Prayer*, in the *Chapters on Love*, and in other works.²

Maximus often mentions the *Gospel*, refers to the *Gospel*, quotes the *Gospel*, begins with the *Gospel*, breathes and lives the *Gospel*, and thinks and theologizes through

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¹ 'The *Eternal Gospel*, [that is] the one foreordained by God from the ages' according to Andreas of Caesarea, *Commentarius in Apocalysin* 14.6 (PG 106:344D).

² See, for example, *Capita quinquies centana* 3.4 (PG 90:1177–1180).

the *Gospel*. He neither received it nor was taught it by other teachers, though he was conversant with Aristotle, Origen, and even the Areopagite.³ However, Maximus did receive his learning from two great teachers of the *Gospel* itself, the Apostles John and Paul. By John the Theologian, the faith and theology were revealed to him: the eternal Word and Son of God is he who is, was, and will be, and that he is the *eternal Gospel* and the eternal life of the world: 'And this is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent' (John 17:3). Of course, the Holy Spirit is also implied here, as Saint Gregory the Sinaite so beautifully adds to this verse of John's.⁴

In addition, Maximus was also taught the *Gospel* by Saint Paul, because this Apostle continuously emphasizes the *Gospel*, since he preaches Jesus Christ *crucified* and *risen* and says that the *Mystery of the Gospel* has been revealed to him, this mystery being the *Mystery of Christ*. He shows this particularly in his Epistles to the Ephesians and Colossians, as well as in other Epistles, frequently referring and returning to the theme of the *Mystery of Christ*. This is why Saint Maximus the Confessor, in his own *Gospel*, recorded, expressed, attested, and testified to it, in such a way that he united the *Gospel* of the two Evangelists, John and Paul. This union is the *Gospel*, which is identified with Christ himself. Throughout his life, Maximus strove to attest, bear witness to, live, and seal his *Gospel* with his confession. He stands before it very humbly, when he says 'as I deem', because of the enormous content and limitless dimensions of the *Mystery*.

So, for Maximus, the *Mystery of Christ is Christ* as the *Gospel*, equal to 'the good news' (*εὐ-αγγελία*), which God planned, foreordained, and brought to fruition in Christ, for our sake, as salvation and eternal life, eternal glorification for us and the whole of creation. Here, in his own words, Maximus expresses himself when he identifies the *Gospel* with Christ: 'For this, I believe, is perhaps God's *Gospel*: intercession from God and encouragement to us through the Incarnate Son, who, as a reward for our reconciliation with the Father, gives unbegotten deification to those who believe in him.'⁵ This is repeated by Saint Gregory Palamas in the Synodal Tome of 1351.⁶

³ Maximus read and understood the writings of many philosophers and Church Fathers, as is apparent from his *oeuvre*. We mention this because there are important scholars and experts on Maximus, such as Polycarp Sherwood—author of *The Earlier Ambigua of St Maximus the Confessor and His Refutation of Origenism* (Rome: Orbis Catholicus, 1955)—who, although he rejects Balthasar's position that Maximus experienced some sort of crisis of Origenism and thinks that Maximus was never actually an Origenist, nevertheless accepts that the problematics of Origenism imposed themselves on the themes and expressions with which Maximus concerned himself. We believe, however, that, in his theology, Maximus starts from the internal experience and contemplation of the *Mystery of Christ* as God and Man, and that this living experience within the Church led him to 'clearing the paths of the Lord and putting aside the stones from the way', as he himself says, quoting the Prophet Isaiah in *Letter 2: On Love*, in *Maximus the Confessor*, trans. Andrew Louth (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996), 91.

⁴ *On Commandments and Doctrines* 32, in *The Philokalia*, trans. and ed. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherard, and Kallistos Ware, vol. 4 (London: Faber and Faber, 1995).

⁵ *Ad Thalassium* 61 (PG 90:637D).

⁶ (PG 151:745).

We might add another, rather more extensive passage here from Maximus on the *Gospel*, drawn from *Ad Thalassium* 65: 'Therefore the Holy Gospel is a product of God's handiwork (Eph 2:9–10), that is the energy of God [Christ] through the flesh, which has the Kingdom throughout infinite ages, in which we know unbounded joy and delight, as in a never-ending day without night. For he says: "This is the day that the Lord has made; let us rejoice and be glad in it (Ps 117:24)"'.⁷ 'Day' is what he calls the *Gospel* grace, or the mystery of him who made this grace (*i.e.* Christ), in which mystery, in which grace, according to Saint Paul, he (God) wishes us to walk properly as in the day of knowledge and truth (Rom 13:13). For Christ is eternal light, in whom those who believe in him should live in the propriety of the virtues. For he alone became flesh by God without seed (*i.e.* Christ from the Virgin), adopting new laws in the place of the laws of nature. He was prepared as the revelation before all the gentiles and to be the light of his people, Israel (Luke 2:30–32). For our Lord is truly the *light of the Gentiles*.⁸

So this second passage, from *Ad Thalassium* 65, is a new expression of the same fact: that Christ and the *Gospel* are one and the same. It is extremely important to say that the *Gospel* is a product of God's handiwork, of the energy of Christ which contains the Kingdom through infinite ages. In this way, Maximus returns to the identification of the *Gospel* with Christ, and the *Gospel* has the original meaning of 'gladsome tidings'. It is joy, truth, knowledge, union, and glorification. It is the grace of God. It is in this mystery, according to Saint Paul, that God wishes all of us who believe in Christ to walk with propriety, as in the day, living well, joyfully, with the virtues of decency. When they live like this, people become a new creation, made by Christ as God/Man, made by God, just as Christ became incarnate of the Virgin and who, in this way, made new the laws of nature. This renewed law, which had been prepared before the ages, was revealed in Christ before all peoples, as light for all the gentiles and light for Israel, as light for the nations.

All the expressions in this passage concerning the *Gospel* indicate that it is identical with the great *Mystery of the Incarnate Christ*. Because this Mystery, this *Gospel*, was, indeed, brought about in Christ and, indeed, was realized as *Christ*. Saint Paul and Saint Maximus preach precisely this in their personal *Gospel*: Christ incarnate in the world and for the world, in us people and for us people, in creation and for the whole of creation. This is why both Saint Paul and Saint Maximus struggled for Christ throughout their lives in the way they did, for the mystery of Christ, who as God was made manifest to the world (1 Tim 3:16), in life, in thought,

⁷ (PG 90:768BC).

⁸ (PG 90:768–769). See also, in Maximus' *Opusculum* 4 (PG 91:57AB): 'His (Christ's) merciful condescension towards us through his manifestation [Incarnation], deifies by grace those who ascend (to him) by their will and who accept his fullness through his emptying, in the completion of the virtues'. This is the interweaving of Maximus' ideas: emptying brings riches. Although emptying implies evacuation, here it gives fullness, the fullness of Christ.

and in action. They devoted their life to the defence, witness, and realization of the true faith in Christ, the incarnate Word, the true God-man.

Maximus studied Christology in the Apostles and, beyond doubt, the Holy Fathers who followed them, principally the Cappadocians. In particular, he received Christological faith and theology from Saint Gregory the Theologian. At the same time, however, he was taught this theology/Christology by the Synod of Chalcedon, which is why he often repeats words and expressions from the Council. He affirms that Christ is *two natures* but *one hypostasis*; he is two natures truly united in one Christ, with all their natural characteristics/capacities, with their wills and energies, with everything that the divine and human natures have, but ‘unconfused, unchanging, indivisible, inseparable’, as the fourfold definition in the Chalcedonian Creed puts it.

We know that Maximus, in his defence of the true and complete Christology, waged a struggle initially against the heresy of the Monophysites, especially against their leader, Severus of Antioch. After the Justinian era, the Monophysites emerged into the open, having been encouraged in this somewhat by Justinian himself, but they then went too far. The next great Emperor after Justinian, Heraclius, tried to win them over, as his predecessor had done, because the eastern part of the empire was in a difficult situation: the Orthodox in the East, the Chalcedonian Christians, were suffering and, indeed, in danger of extinction. For this reason, Heraclius and Patriarch Sergius, supported by a group of bishops, attempted to promote unity with the Monophysites, through compromise ‘formulae’ designed to emphasize the person of Christ. These were designed to remove any suggestion of separation in Christ as proposed by Nestorius, by indicating and affirming the one energy and one action of Christ, and then the one will. So it was that, in the time of Maximus, the twin heresies of Monoenergism and Monothelitism arose, as milder versions of Monophysitism.

Initially with Saint Sophronius, and later by himself, Saint Maximus very energetically opposed this theology of compromise of the faith, that is the alteration of the Church’s faith for the sake of political gain. To put this into the language of today, this was the ecumenism of the time: to achieve *unity*, by sacrificing the truth. Since Maximus was a confidant of the emperor—a relative, in fact—and was a person of high standing, he knew many prominent people in the empire and was able to influence a good number of these contacts. He began to write extensively. He spoke, acted as intermediary, travelled, and encouraged the convocation of Synods. He even went as far as Rome, where he urged Pope Martin to call the Lateran Council in 649 to condemn those compromises which imperial edicts attempted to impose: the *Ekthesis* by Heraclius and the *Typos* by Constans. As a result of this he was persecuted, as was Pope Martin. Maximus was hounded for longer, but more circumspectly, because he was so well regarded. His adversaries repeatedly questioned him with great persistence, since it was important to them to win him over to their side and

make him a supporter of the policy of compromise. In the end, they cut off his right hand and removed his tongue. Thus maimed, he was exiled to Lazica, or Georgia as it is today, where he died in the Lord's peace on 13 August, 662.

Eighteen years after Maximus' repose, the Sixth Ecumenical Council was held, at which the theology and Christology of Saint Maximus triumphed completely, even though it is not directly mentioned in the proceedings of the Synod.⁹ It is indicative, however, that the *Horos* of the Sixth Ecumenical is expressed in language which is word for word the same as that of the Synod of Chalcedon: like Chalcedon, it speaks of the *two natures in one Christ*, while now adding: and two energies, two wills, but again one Christ, who, as one activates his divine and human energy, just as he activates his divine and human will.

It is clear that Saint Maximus' *Gospel* of Christ, which is also that of John and Paul, is, at the same time, that of the Fathers of the Church. It is the Ecclesiastical and Synodal *Gospel*, because the *Gospel* and the Christological Synods of Chalcedon and Constantinople (Sixth Ecumenical) agree with the whole of Orthodox Patristic Christology. Let us then return to and repeat Maximus' words regarding the *Gospel*: 'For this, I believe, is perhaps God's *Gospel*: intercession from God and encouragement to us through the incarnate Son, who, as a reward for our reconciliation with the Father, gives unbegotten deification to those who believe in him'.¹⁰ These words

⁹ This is precisely why, at the time of the Sixth Ecumenical Council, a start was made on the first full *Life* of Saint Maximus, while, a little later, the infamous Syriac-Monophysite *Ψόγος* (*Censure*) made its appearance and sought to defame Saint Maximus. This was a kind of 'counter-*Life*', an attack on the Church against the true Father of the Church, the *Third Theologian*, as the Fathers called him. Of course, it has long been proved that this leaflet, the *Censure*, is a forgery, though some still quote it as genuine. Maximus never went to, nor lived in the Holy Land and did not know the Near East/Palestine at all, even though he is reported as having been born and brought up there, in a village on the Golan Heights. Nor did he become acquainted with Sophronius in the Holy Land; they met later in Alexandria. We have found at least two passages in his work which indicate that Maximus was never there at all. Had he been born there, he would have known that the source of the Jordan was some 10–15 kilometres away, close to ancient Paniada, in Caesarea Philippi. Instead, he says in *Quaestiones et dubia* 2.8: 'They say that the River Jordan has its source in Aermón' (CCSG 10:166). No one from that part of the world would have said that, even if he had gone to the monasteries there as a young man. And in his interpretation of the miracle of the paralyzed man who was let down through the roof he says: 'People who have actually seen these places say that the roofs of the houses in Palestine are made of pumice stone and, as such, are very light' (*Quaestiones et dubia* 162 (1.65) CCSG 10:113). No Palestinian would say this. These proofs, however, have not been mentioned by anyone until today. Even the Russian Epifanovich (end of the nineteenth to the beginning twentieth century), an otherwise excellent student of Maximus, is unaware of them. So around the time of the Sixth Ecumenical, a genuine *Life* was put together, initially brief, for the *Synaxarion*, then later expanded and supplemented. Anastasios the Sinaite was aware of this, as were later historians, such as Theophanes. Later, the *Ψόγος* was published, attacking the 'Maximian heresy' (*i.e.* the Orthodox doctrine of two natures and two wills). Indeed, the Monothelite patriarch Makarios of Antioch, in his address to the Sixth Ecumenical Council, requested that the 'heresy of Maximus' be condemned. This is the only mention of the name of Maximus in the Proceedings of the Synod (Mansi 11:357A). Why he was not directly mentioned is readily understandable, however, since Emperor Constantine IV Pogonatos, son of Constans II and great-grandson of Heraclius, was present at the Synod of Trullo. Thus, although Sophronius and Pope Martin are mentioned, there is silence as regards Maximus. Be that as it may, the theology and confession of the Sixth Ecumenical are fundamentally Maximian.

¹⁰ On the meaning of the expression 'unbegotten deification', see the study by Panagiotis Christou: *Ἄνθρωπος ἀναρχος καὶ ἀτελεύτητος, Κληρονομία*, vol. 12B (Thessaloniki, 1980), 251–81.

reveal that the pre-eternal will of God, his *good pleasure* (Luke 2:14), the bedrock of his goodness, as Maximus says, the whole depth of the will of God regarding the world and the people in it was that the Son of God should become also the Son of Man. The *only-begotten* was to become the *first-born among many siblings*. And so, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, which is activated and realized by the Comforter, the Holy Spirit, we and the world are granted eternal life, eternal salvation, *eternal deification*, though only in the closest *union with Christ*, with whom, and through whom and in whom our glorification will eternally be worked: ‘*we shall not expire, being eternally deified*’, says Maximus in *Ad Thalassium* 22.¹¹

This is the greatest *good news*, joy, and conviction which God had to proclaim and grant to us and the world. The Creator/Instigator and *Evangelist viz. Messenger* of this truth, of this mystery, of this event (Luke 2:15), which transcends all human reason and is what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived (1 Cor 2:9), is the personal incarnate God, Christ the God/Man. This is revealed by God the Father, witnessed by the Holy Spirit, and is given to us in the Church by the Mystery of Christ. The preacher of this event, the messenger and evangelist, or ‘fifth Evangelist’—to use the words of Father Justin Popovitch—is none other than Saint Maximus the Confessor.

Saint Maximus wrote a continuation to Christ’s *Gospel* with his life, his works, and his struggles. I remember what Saint Justin said: ‘What does Saint John’s Gospel end with? It is a little strange: But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, “I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written” (John 21:25). Is this an exaggeration? Father Justin says not, because every person is called by God and endowed by him to extend the *Gospel*, which, for this reason, is our own *Gospel*. Father Justin says that we have a unique opportunity to repeat the *Gospel* in our life, our deeds, words, and thoughts, and, in so doing, we can add to it. Therefore, there are not only four Evangelists; every Christian person is an Evangelist. Saint Justin bases this view on the bold position of Saint John Chrysostom, who, interpreting Saint Paul, says that the Church ‘completes’ Christ, it is *the fullness of him who fills all in all* (Eph 1:23). It is the saints, the members of the Church, who complete Christ. Therefore, we dare to say of Saint Maximus that he completes the *Gospel* of Christ, that is, that he engaged with it by expressing the unique and all-encompassing truth: that the great mystery of God and the wonderful counsellor of the Holy Trinity is *Christ as God-man*. For he is the *eternal Gospel* of God, the everlasting *Annunciation* for the world and for humankind.

Let us also add here what Saint Maximus says—in *Ad Thalassium* 60¹² and elsewhere—which he repeats often and emphasizes: that Christ, the Incarnate Word and Son of God and Son of Man, includes in himself and contains in his *Body* the

¹¹ See also the whole of the *Ad Thalassium* 22 (PG 90:317–324).

¹² (PG 90:620B–625D).

whole *Church*, and that we, as Christians, are members of the Church, members of Christ. Not merely as bodily organs, but something much more: we are persons; we are not impersonal. This is the pre-eternal idea/concept and providence of God, which is focused on Christ the God-man and is realized and embodied in him: that we, as God-like and Christ-like persons, exist in the theanthropic *communion* of the holy, tri-hypostatic Godhead. Because, in reality, the Church is the communion of the Holy Trinity, *the grace of our Lord, Jesus Christ*, which is realized as the goodwill of God the Father, as the pre-eternal *love of God* for us, and as *the communion of the Holy Spirit* (2 Cor 13:13). Behold, this is the great mystery of godliness, as Saint Paul says about Christ: *Christ appeared in the flesh* (1 Tim 3:16) and brings about this mystery in the Church and as the Church, which, for precisely this reason, is the *pillar and buttress of the truth*. This is the dual, but unified, theanthropic *Mystery of Christ, the eternal Gospel*, as Saint John beheld it on Patmos. The angel bore the eternal Gospel, and Saint Maximus the Confessor conveyed it to the Church, through his life and theology. This is why Maximus, as one of the '*Godly-wise, mystical guides of the Church*,¹³ frequently repeated the central truth of the whole faith and theology of the Church: 'Of all the divine mysteries, the most mysterious is the mystery of Christ.'¹⁴ This is Saint Maximus' 'song for the Beloved' (Ps 44:1).

¹³ (PG 91:296B).

¹⁴ *Ambiguum* 42 (PG 91:1332C).