

## DIVINE IMPASSIBILITY AND CHRISTOLOGY IN THE CHRISTMAS HOMILIES OF LEO THE GREAT

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*[The author aims at complementing the article published in this journal by John J. O’Keefe on the notion of God’s impassibility as it appeared in Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius, and Theodoret of Cyrus. Since that study was limited to the theology of the Eastern Mediterranean, the present author supplements O’Keefe’s research with a witness from a Western Mediterranean theologian in the fifth century, namely Leo the Great, concentrating on his Christmas homilies rather than his letters. What emerges is a more global understanding of the emerging Christology.]*

JOHN O’KEEFE has argued in a recent article that the widespread view that christological arguments of fifth-century Antiochene theologians were motivated by their desire to defend the humanity of Jesus and by their appreciation of the historical, is one that needs to be modified. He finds instead that the notion of God’s impassibility and the question of how much God is present in the world lay at the heart of the debates between Alexandrians and Antiochenes.<sup>1</sup> In this he sees that the debates in the fifth century were a continuation of Nicaea—a response to the implications of Nicene theology.<sup>2</sup> His article examines the writings of three significant figures of the time: Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius, and Theodoret of Cyrus. The position advanced in his study is that all three accepted Nicaea and

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<sup>1</sup> John J. O’Keefe, “Impassible Suffering? Divine Passion and Fifth-Century Christology,” *Theological Studies* 58 (1997) 39–60. For a critique of limiting the christological debates to two competing models, see Rowan A. Greer, “The Antiochene Christology of Diodore of Tarsus,” *Journal of Theological Studies* 17 (1966) 327–41; Richard A. Norris, “Christological Models in Cyril of Alexandria,” *Studia Patristica* 13, ed. Elizabeth A. Livingstone (Berlin: Akademie, 1975) 255–68. I am grateful to Rev. Dr. Ormond Rush of the Brisbane College of Theology who read earlier drafts of this work for valuable suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> “The theologians of the fifth century did not suddenly discover an interest in the human Jesus. Rather, their attention shifted from the relationship of the Son to the Father to the relationship of the Son to the human” (John J. O’Keefe, “Impassible Suffering?” 43).

that Cyril wanted to defend the belief that God has fully participated with us in the Son (and, at the same time, accepting the impassibility of God) while the Antiochenes wanted to limit that participation to some extent because of the implications about the breach of God's impassibility.<sup>3</sup> O'Keefe's article is an important contribution to the growing chorus of scholars who argue that what we find in these schools of thought may be almost the opposite of the commonly held position, such that it was the Antiochenes who had most trouble with the humanity of Jesus, something Cyril of Alexandria championed.

While O'Keefe's insights are illuminating and his presentation, on the whole, cogent and convincing,<sup>4</sup> it is limited inasmuch as it is restricted to the theology of the Eastern Mediterranean.<sup>5</sup> While it has long been ac-

<sup>3</sup> "... [T]he conflict emerges when the scriptural narrative collides with certain philosophical presuppositions about what God can and cannot be like. In my view, Cyril wanted to say that when philosophy and the biblical narrative conflict, preference ought to be given to the biblical narrative. The Antiochenes tended to do the reverse. In practical terms, this means that Cyril's christological expression appeared dangerously 'theopaschite' to his Antiochene antagonists" (ibid. 41). For a different approach to Nestorius see Milton V. Anastos, "Nestorius was Orthodox," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 16 (1962) 117-40; H. E. W. Turner, "Nestorius Reconsidered," *Studia Patristica* 13.306-21.

<sup>4</sup> When he writes at the start of his conclusion "that the impassibility of God and not the humanity of Jesus was the driving force behind the christological debates of the fifth century" (57). O'Keefe gives the impression, too starkly perhaps, that these are separate issues. Of course, the debates were not a question of choice between the two but of their relationship: given the impassibility of God and the full divinity of Jesus, in what way can Jesus have a full humanity? O'Keefe is right to say that the humanity *per se* of Jesus was not the issue; instead, I would argue (as I believe he does) that it was the humanity of Jesus in relation to his divinity and impassibility that was. This is what I take him to mean when he writes: "Cyril pushed language as far as he could, underscoring the fullness of God's participation with us" (41); "Since the scriptural language seemed to stress the fullness of God's presence [in relationship to the Word's human presence], Cyril did not retreat from it. Although he maintained that God is impassible, the issue ranked second in his mind" (43). "As the Nestorian controversy progressed, Cyril realized that a new problem had emerged and that the primary question was not the divine status of the Son, but the fullness of the Son's human presence" (46); and, "... many modern scholars... have tended to view the debate as primarily a debate about the fullness of Jesus' humanity, rather than a debate about the fullness of God's presence" (49). I understand O'Keefe's references to "the fullness of God's presence" or God's "participation" to mean the relationship between impassible divinity and passible humanity. I agree with him that the starting point of these schools was not the humanity of Jesus, but this should not be misunderstood by anyone to mean that the question of Jesus' humanity was irrelevant. See also Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Suffer?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 2000) 202-3.

<sup>5</sup> For another recent coverage of this same material see Joseph M. Hallman, "The Seed of Fire: Divine Suffering in the Christology of Cyril of Alexandria and Nesto-

knowledged that Eastern theology was the more creative and subtle,<sup>6</sup> a more complete picture emerges if we also consider the theology of the Western Mediterranean in the fifth century. My own study aims at complementing O’Keefe’s findings by examining the same issues in the writings of Leo the Great, bishop of Rome from 440 to 461, key Western player in the christological controversies that culminated with the Council of Chalcedon (451). What do Leo’s writings tell us about divine impassibility in the light of his Christology? What did Leo have to say about God’s participation with us? What were the key texts of Scripture through which Leo developed his own theological position? And finally, what are his lasting contributions to the resolution of this matter?

It would not be wrong to suggest that Leo’s “sense of rhythm and his love of antithetical formulas”<sup>7</sup> contributed greatly to his understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*, found not only in his letters, particularly the *Tomus ad Flavianum*, but in his homilies as well.<sup>8</sup> It is this “communication of properties” which enabled Leo both to protect the impassibility of the divine nature in Jesus and to assert the complete human nature (including passibility) as well. For Leo, believers could not go wrong if they held to a true understanding of the fact that Jesus was a single person who possessed two natures.<sup>9</sup> Here I examine Leo’s homilies rather than his letters as a

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rius of Constantinople,” *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 5 (1997) 369–91; and his “Theodoret’s *Eranistes* and its Aftermath: The Demise of Christology of Antioch,” in *Prayer and Spirituality in the Early Church* 2, ed. Pauline Allen, Wendy Mayer and Lawrence Cross (Brisbane: Centre for Early Christian Studies, Australian Catholic University, 1999) 343–57. In the latter work, he writes: “God does not suffer and change, nor have human imperfection. Both schools agree. But according to the New Testament, Jesus does suffer and change. . . . How can we ascribe these imperfections truly to Jesus while at the same time holding that, indeed, Jesus is God? Antioch emphasizes that Jesus was fully human, had a human soul, and all imperfection must be assigned to the human nature, either to the body or the soul. Alexandria seems to agree, but nevertheless subjectifies Jesus ultimately as the divine Word made flesh, so that in some way these imperfections must be assigned to the divine Word without compromising divine perfection. . . . The Antiochene view tends to separate the two natures. But the Alexandrian view which emphasizes single divine subjectivity has difficulty specifying exactly how the divine Logos can suffer and change while remaining impassible and immutable” (345).

<sup>6</sup> J. N. D. Kelly notes that Leo’s Christology may not have probed the issues as deeply as did Eastern Christology (*Early Christian Doctrines*, 5th ed. [London: A. & C. Black, 1977] 337–38). He does agree though that Leo set out the issues fairly and squarely.

<sup>7</sup> Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition 1: From the Apostolic Age to Chalcedon (AD 451)*, 2nd ed., trans. John Bowden (London: Mowbrays, 1975) 537. For the rhetorical *figura* see *Rhet. Her.* 4.18.25–26; 4.45.58; *Quint. Inst.* 9.3.81–86.

<sup>8</sup> A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* 1.530.

<sup>9</sup> “We realize that practically no one has gone astray who did not disbelieve the reality of two natures in Christ while at the same time acknowledging a single

source for his Christology, partly because his homilies are a less frequently examined source of his theology. I believe they are no less valuable as a source than the letters. They are not to be considered as some kind of popularized, non-theological version for the nonexpert, worshiping Roman community, particularly given the now accepted fact that Leo's earlier homilies were used directly as a source by Prosper of Aquitaine in the composition of the *Tomus*.<sup>10</sup> Nor are they to be considered as specialized and refined theological treatises.<sup>11</sup> A fuller picture of Leo's Christology emerges when we read more widely than just the *Tomus* or the letters. I wish to begin that wider reading with an analysis of Leo's Christmas homilies. These homilies on the feast of the Incarnation provided Leo with an excellent opportunity to dwell on the theme of the divine and human in Jesus. They form a discrete block of material within the homiletic corpus and can reveal to us chronological changes to Leo's thinking or at least provide insight into his particular concerns about this mystery on a year-by-year basis.

Divine impassibility, as Thomas Weinandy reminds us, is the notion that God not only does not experience suffering and pain but also that God does not "experience changing intellectual, psychological, and emotional states" as do people.<sup>12</sup> Joseph Hallman has traced the ideas of divine immutability and impassibility in Greek philosophy and in Philo.<sup>13</sup> This

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Person" (Leo, *Tract.* 28.4 [CCSL 138.141]). Translations of Leo's homilies are from St. Leo the Great, *Sermons*, trans. Jane Patricia Freeland and Agnes Josephine Conway, *Fathers of the Church* 93 (Washington: Catholic University of America, 1996). "In der Weihnachtspredigt von 452 erinnert er zuerst daran, dass die meisten Irrtümer, die sich im Laufe der Zeiten gegen den katholischen Glauben erhoben, in irgendeiner Weise das Bekenntnis *duarum in Christo naturarum veritatem sub unius personae* in Frage stellten. Nach diesem häresiologischen Überblick kommt er auf die aktuellsten Irrlehren, jene des Nestorius und des Eutyches zu sprechen" (Basil Studer, "Una Persona in Christo: Ein augustinisches Thema bei Leo dem Grossen," *Augustinianum* 25 [1985] 464).

<sup>10</sup> J. Gaidioz, "Saint Prosper d'Aquitaine et le Tome à Flavien," *Revue de sciences religieuses* 23 (1949) 270–301; N. W. James argues that Prosper was responsible for drafting many of Leo's homilies as well ("Leo the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine: A Fifth Century Pope and His Adviser," *Journal of Theological Studies* 44 [1993] 554–84).

<sup>11</sup> "Leo half darin mit, die weittragenden Entscheidungen von Chalzedon vorzubereiten und gegen die Opposition zu verteidigen. Dennoch darf man in keiner Weise die liturgische Verkündigung des römischen Bischofs übergehen. In seinen Predigten spiegelt sich seine pastorale Sorge um den rechten Glauben wider" (B. Studer, "Una Persona in Christo" 462).

<sup>12</sup> Thomas G. Weinandy, *Does God Change?* *Studies in Historical Theology* 4 (Still Rivers, Mass.: St. Bede's, 1985) xviii.

<sup>13</sup> Joseph M. Hallman, *The Descent of God: Divine Suffering in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991) 1–29.

notion that change involved imperfection and that imperfection was inconsistent with the idea of God was one unquestioningly accepted into Christian thinking, even though this seemed to involve some contradiction with Scripture's affirmations about God.<sup>14</sup>

In his first homily for the Christmas feast, Leo mentioned how in the one person the two natures are preserved intact. If the condition of human nature is lowliness and the condition of divine nature is majesty, then, for Leo, Jesus can be both lowly and majestic at the same time; his lowliness does not diminish his majesty and his majesty does not exalt his lowliness.<sup>15</sup> Hence Jesus can be both humble and majestic, strong and weak, eternal and mortal, inviolable and capable of suffering.<sup>16</sup> In the next year's Christmas homily (A.D. 441, a decade before Chalcedon) there is another mention of impassibility and passibility:

He was brought forth in an unusual manner because, though invisible in his own nature, he has been made visible in ours; because, though incomprehensible, he willed to be comprehended; because, though already existing before time, he came into being at a certain point in time; because the Lord of the universe, drawing a cloud over the dignity of his majesty, took on 'the form of a servant'; and because God, though incapable of suffering, did not think it beneath himself to suffer as man and to subject himself to the laws of death as a mortal.<sup>17</sup>

What is different this time is the lack of clarification that Leo had provided in the previous homily about how the divine qualities remained and were preserved even when, through his birth, the Son added human nature to his divine. Simply reading the extract from the homily just cited could lead one to the impression that what Leo was suggesting was that the divine nature (and the divine properties like impassibility) had changed and turned into a human one. This is certainly not what he believed, for as he had stated the year earlier, lowliness did not diminish majesty. Antiochene theologians, if they had read only this passage, would have accused Leo of the same thing

<sup>14</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1971) 229. See also Robert M. Grant, *Gods and the One God, Library of Early Christianity 1* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 75–94.

<sup>15</sup> "He condescended to take up our lowliness without diminishing his majesty. Remaining what he was and taking on what he was not, he united the true 'form of a servant' with the 'form' in which he is equal to God the Father. He grafted together both natures in such a union that glorification should not overwhelm the lower nor humbling diminish the higher" (Leo, *Tract.* 21.2 [CCSL 138.86–87]).

<sup>16</sup> "When, therefore, the identity of each substance is preserved and they join in a single Person, majesty takes up humility, strength takes up weakness, eternity takes up mortality. To pay the debt of our condition, his inviolable nature pours forth into a vulnerable one. True God and true man are combined into the unity of the Lord" (*ibid.* [CCSL 138.87]).

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 22.2 (CCSL 138.91–92).

of which they believed Cyril to have been guilty, namely, of admitting alteration in the godhead.

Instead, drawing upon a wider sampling of Leo's words, we see him affirming that Jesus has the full range of divine *as well as* human attributes (including passibility),<sup>18</sup> while "each nature holds on to its own properties without any deficiency."<sup>19</sup> The impassibility of God (and the impassibility of the divine nature in Jesus) and the passibility of Jesus (in his human nature), even though not mentioned frequently, are important issues for Leo and thus must be understood in the context of Leo's christological thinking, particularly his defence of the fact that in assuming a full and complete (though sinless) human nature there is no change or threat to the divine nature of Jesus or divinity itself and, conversely, a full and complete divinity means no change or threat to the human nature.<sup>20</sup> This belief in the fullness of divine participation with humankind in Jesus without diminution of his divine nature, particularly its impassibility, is a constant theme in these homilies, which may be reinforced by offering another example of it, this time from the Christmas homily of A.D. 444:

Yet his glory, the one which he shares with the Father and the Holy Spirit, in no way decreases, for his nature cannot admit of diminution or change with respect to the supreme and eternal essence. . . . Nothing was lacking to him in this condescen-

<sup>18</sup> "In the whole and perfect nature of true man, therefore, true God was born, complete in divine attributes, complete in human ones" (ibid. 23.2 [CCSL 138.104]). "God's Son . . . willed to become a partaker in our lowliness, to become one of those capable of suffering, one of those capable of dying . . ." (ibid. 25.1 [CCSL 138.117]). "In him were both the true divinity (for working miracles) and true humanity (for enduring sufferings)" (ibid. 28.3 [CCSL 138.141]). See Novatian, *de Trin.* 11.5 (CCSL 4.29) for an earlier, almost identical statement; 28.6 (CCSL 138.144).

<sup>19</sup> "Each nature holds on to its own properties without any deficiency. Even as the form of God does not delete the form of a servant, so the form of a servant does not diminish the form of God" (Leo, *Tract.* 23.2 [CCSL 138.104]) 25.3 (CCSL 138.120); 28.1 (CCSL 138.139); 29.3 (CCSL 138.151). We have mentioned already how this is in the first Christmas homily in the clause "the identity of each substance is preserved" (21.2 [CCSL 138.87]).

<sup>20</sup> For a discussion of Leo's position that Jesus is consubstantial with the Father and consubstantial with his mother, see B. Studer, "Consubstantialis patri—consubstantialis matri, une antithèse christologique chez Léon le Grand," *Studia Patristica* 13.286–94. Studer notes that Leo's position is in defence of divine immutability: "Cette manière de repenser une argumentation anti-arienne, pour l'opposer à Eutychés, nous fait attendre que la polémique anti-eutychienne ne fût pour Léon qu'une occasion de développer un thème qui lui était déjà familier. De fait, la problématique de l'immutabilité divine apparemment compromise par l'incarnation, aussi bien que la solution de la double consubstantialité se rencontrent dans des sermons qui tous risquent d'être antérieurs à cette controverse-là" (288–89).

sion, to him who has an “essence” in common with the Father and the Holy Spirit. We understand it to be an aspect of omnipotence that he who becomes less with respect to our characteristics does not become less with respect to his own. Light became concerned with the blind, strength with the weak, mercy with the miserable.<sup>21</sup>

Perhaps a critic of Leo could have suggested here that, like the Antiochenes, he was maintaining too much of a separation of the natures, as the Illyrian and Palestinian bishops at Chalcedon suggested with regard to several passages in his *Tomus*.<sup>22</sup> In response, it must be noted that, at the same time as emphasizing that the two natures in Christ were present entirely and truly, Leo acknowledged, although not repeatedly, that this in no way resulted in there being two persons; the two natures were “connected” or “united” with each other in the one person.<sup>23</sup> There is not just

<sup>21</sup> “He who took up a body also remains incorporeal. He who can suffer in our weakness cannot be harmed in his strength” (Leo, *Tract.* 25.2 [CCSL 138.118–19]. See also 27.1 [CCSL 138.133] and 30.5 [CCSL 138.156–57]).

<sup>22</sup> T. Herbert Bindley, ed., *The Oecumenical Documents of the Faith*, 4th ed. (London: Methuen, 1950) 163–64; Robert Victor Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon: A Historical and Doctrinal Survey* (London: SPCK, 1953) 249; J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* 340; A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition* 1.534–36; John A. McGuckin, *St. Cyril of Alexandria, The Christological Controversy: Its History, Theology, and Texts*, Supplements to *Vigiliae Christianae* 23 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994) 234.

<sup>23</sup> “. . . Virginis partus uere humanam uereque diuinam una edidit prole naturam, quia non ita proprietates suas tenuit utraque substantia, ut personarum in eis posset esse discretio . . . sed ita ut naturae alteri altera misceretur” (Leo, *Tract.* 23.1 [CCSL 13.103]). *Miscere* is a verb that admits of many shades of meaning. In the next sentence Leo writes of the diversity of the two natures (*utriusque diuersitas*) which comes together into so great a unity (*unitatem conuenit*), who is the one Son (*ut unus idemque sit Filius*). In the sentence after that Leo uses the verb *conserere* to describe the union. A. Grillmeier sees here a christological language that confuses the natures (*Christ in Christian Tradition* 1.537). The English translation of Grillmeier’s quotation from this passage translated *misceretur* as “blended.” The fact that Leo here says that the two natures did not preserve their properties so as to become two persons does raise the question, as Grillmeier observes, of what was forfeited in the union. Grillmeier answers his own question when he quotes Leo just a little further along “Each nature holds onto its own properties without any deficiency” (*Tract.* 23.2 [CCSL 138.104]). A homily is a holistic and unfolding experience. One can always find incomplete and confused ideas if one takes one sentence out of the context of the whole homily. A complex idea is explained over the course of several sentences and all the sentences need to be considered together. The fact that Leo stated repeatedly that both natures admit of no change in this union: “For his nature cannot admit of diminution or change with respect to the supreme and eternal essence” (e.g. *Tract.* 25.2 [CCSL 138.118]). The statement in its wider context is provided below in the body of the paper. This suggests that *miscere* ought not be understood in any sense that permits confusion or blending. We have seen above, in 21.2 (CCSL 138.87) the use of the verbs *conserere* and *coire* and the noun *foedus*. We may note also that in this passage, concerned as it is to

a cohabiting of the two natures together but a real and lasting<sup>24</sup> union—not just an association—stated in opposition to Leo’s understanding of Nestorius. It was not such a union, however, as to destroy the integrity of each nature through absorption—stated in opposition to Leo’s understanding of Eutyches.<sup>25</sup> He even spoke loosely of a (new and unique) God-human “nature.”<sup>26</sup> This union is not something that he believed could be demonstrated but is something accepted in faith.<sup>27</sup> So strong is this union that the passible cannot be separated from the impassible.<sup>28</sup>

From this flows his statement that whatever is characteristic of a particular nature must be asserted not just of that nature but of the person: “As a result, so strong a bond of unity has been made between the two natures that, though each retains its own proper characteristics, whatever belongs to God cannot be separated from the man, while whatever belongs to the man cannot be disjoined from the divinity.”<sup>29</sup> It is not, however, to be asserted of the other nature alone: “To leave aside all else that is subject to change in the human condition, the divinity alone was crucified, the divinity alone died, the divinity alone was buried.”<sup>30</sup> To do so would be to

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refute those who would have a “distinction of persons” (a Nestorian position), there is use of the term *substantia*, as N. W. James argued (“Leo the Great and Prosper of Aquitaine” 558).

<sup>24</sup> Leo, *Tract.* 29.2 (CCSL 138.148).

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 28.5 (CCSL 138.143). As far as Leo was concerned, Eutyches’s position appeared to be Docetism revisited.

<sup>26</sup> “*eandem Dei hominisque naturam*” (*ibid.* 23.2 [CCSL 138.104]). Perhaps Leo would have been better off continuing to speak here about *persona*, as he had done a couple of sentences earlier, rather than *natura*, for he could be open to the charge of having created a blended reality.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* 29.1 (CCSL 138.146).

<sup>28</sup> “We cannot in any way divide the visible from the invisible, the corporeal from the incorporeal, the passible from the impassible, the tangible from the intangible, the ‘form of a servant’ from the ‘form of God’ ” (*ibid.* 30.6 [CCSL 138.158]). Interestingly, Leo recognized that the Father must be impassible even while the Son is passible not only because the Son is passible through human nature (which the Father does not have) but because Father and Son, even though they are of the same nature, are separate persons. (28.4 [CCSL 138.142]). T. G. Weinandy points out that the Son of God did not suffer in his divine nature because then it would not be truly human suffering. For him, the Son of God did not suffer *in* a man but *as* a man (*Does God Suffer?* 204).

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.* 28.1 (CCSL 138.139).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.* 28.5 (CCSL 138.143–44). Leo’s statement is about the implications of Eutyches’ position, implications he rejects. See also 30.1 (CCSL 138.152), where Leo wrote that the divine nature “does not allow anything to be taken from its completeness nor anything to be added to it.” This would seem to indicate that no qualities of human nature may be predicated of it, though they may be predicated of the person.



transgress into the world of heresy.<sup>31</sup> Christ is the one subject, in whom the divine and human were both present.<sup>32</sup>

Thus we have an expression of the *communicatio idiomatum* from the year after the Council. It is not an altogether clear expression because it is not so much asserted positively as its opposite is denied. It is obvious that he would not have been happy to accept the notion that if his human nature suffered, it could be said that his divine nature suffered as well. Leo's insistence that each nature remained unchanged and intact would have precluded that. His letters after Chalcedon attest to his awareness that this was an ongoing issue.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in the homilies after Chalcedon we find the most comment about how Leo understood and defended the unity of the two natures in one person, the very issue upon which some Alexandrians accused him of being insufficiently developed. What is communicated is not from nature to nature but from each nature to the one person.<sup>34</sup> When Leo writes "*totum igitur corpus implet tota diuinitas*,"<sup>35</sup> it would have to be taken that he was admitting that the characteristics of the divine nature could be predicated of the human nature if we understand *corpus* to refer to human nature. However, if, as I believe, we are to understand *corpus* as

<sup>31</sup> "Others have declared that he took on real flesh but did not have the nature of God the Father" (ibid. 28.4 [CCSL 138.142]). This passage in particular notes that to attribute what properly belongs to the human nature of Jesus to his divine nature (inequality) results in Arianism.

<sup>32</sup> "Man, taken up into the Son of God, was so received into the unity of Christ's Person from its very bodily origins, that he was not conceived without the divinity, nor born without the divinity, nor nourished without the divinity. He was the same Person in miracles as he was in dishonor. Through human weakness, he was crucified, died and was buried. Through divine power, he rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and sat the right hand of the Father" (ibid. 28.6 [CCSL 138.144]).

<sup>33</sup> Leo, *Ep.* 124.165. Pelikan writes with regard to the confusion that arose after Chalcedon: "To say that the difference of the natures was not taken away by the union could mean that the activities and properties appropriate to each nature were to be predicated ontologically only of that nature, even though verbally it might be permissible to predicate them of 'one and the same Christ'" (*The Christian Tradition* 1.265). If Pelikan means "only of that nature" and not ontologically of the person, then a person reaching that conclusion would be misinterpreting Chalcedon. If Pelikan means "only of that nature" and not of the other nature as well, then a person reaching this conclusion would have the understanding of Chalcedon supported by Leo as orthodox (in which case Pelikan's statement that this is how the Council could, but presumably should not, be interpreted must be rejected as a misreading of Chalcedon). His precise meaning is somewhat unclear.

<sup>34</sup> Here I agree with R. V. Sellers, *The Council of Chalcedon* 240 and against Andrea Valeriani, who characterizes Leo's understanding of the *communicatio idiomatum*: "A motiva dell' unità di persona le azioni dell' una vengono attribuite anche all' altra natura" (*Il Mistero del Natale* [Rome: Paoline, 1983] 31).

<sup>35</sup> "The entire divinity fills the entire body" (Leo, *Tract.* 30.3 [CCSL 138.154]).

referring to Jesus' person (which is how I would interpret Colossians 2:10), then this is consistent with Leo's position as I have outlined it, the position to which some Alexandrians after Chalcedon took exception. For Leo, the impassibility of the divine must be preserved, but in a person who is capable of suffering through human nature.<sup>36</sup>

The *persona* of Jesus is the basis of his unity. Alistair Stewart has commented that Leo's use of the term *persona* must be understood in the context of his soteriology: a *persona* was one entitled to enact business on behalf of another (in Jesus' case on behalf both of God and humankind), was the means of fooling the devil, and was the role one acted.<sup>37</sup> Basil Studer has pointed to Leo's dependence on Augustine at this point and notes that the unity of person in Jesus is not the starting point of Leo's Christology but its conclusion.<sup>38</sup> In an environment of acrimonious debate in the Eastern Mediterranean, perhaps Leo's Western moderation and balance is to be commended. What is important to highlight is that Leo had in mind the need to assert the completeness of God's entering or embracing or assuming of complete humanity in Jesus.<sup>39</sup> Only in the last of his Christmas homilies, though, does he say that those who deny the complete humanity of Jesus do so because of a fear that it would compromise the impassibility of God.<sup>40</sup>

O'Keefe points to key passages of the Scriptures utilized by Cyril of Alexandria. He notes the interpretation of John 1:14.<sup>41</sup> Leo too offered an interpretation of this important passage (as well as quoting it numerous times). For him, to say that the Word *was made* flesh does not mean that the divine nature of the Son changes, alters or is otherwise transformed

<sup>36</sup> T. G. Weinandy criticizes Leo for failing to point out that the actions by which Jesus revealed he was God were done as a man (*Does God Suffer?* 204, n. 60). I think Weinandy's position is limited because he relies only on the *Tomus* and not on the other letters and the homilies. Leo's point, gained from a wider reading of his writings, was that all Jesus' actions, divine and human, were through his concrete existence as person. I find Weinandy's statement that the Son of God was a man theologically ambiguous. I think it fair to say that the Christian interpretation of this mystery is that Jesus was not a human person, but a divine person with a human nature, using person and nature in their classical senses.

<sup>37</sup> Alistair C. Stewart, "Persona in the Christology of Leo I: A Note," *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 71 (1989) 3–5.

<sup>38</sup> "Für Leo ist nämlich, so gut wie für Augustinus, die *una persona* nicht der Ausgangspunkt, sondern das Resultat der Einigung" (B. Studer, "Una Persona in Christo" 454).

<sup>39</sup> Leo, *Tract.* 28.4 (CCSL 138.142).

<sup>40</sup> "They do not feel that divinity should be attributed to him, since his earliest infancy, his bodily growth, and then his ability to suffer in general (right up to his Crucifixion and Death), had allegedly proven him to be not unlike other human beings" (ibid. 30.2 [CCSL 138.153]).

<sup>41</sup> John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering?" 46–47.

into something else.<sup>42</sup> Leo stated his belief in the unchanging divine nature in Jesus after the Incarnation a number of times, as has been noted above. In one instance, quite explicitly, he offered an explanation of the Johannine prologue to support this. What the passage means is that the Son, with divine nature unchanged and intact, takes on something else:

Corporeal birth did not take anything away from the majesty of God's Son, nor add anything to it, for the unchangeable substance can neither be diminished nor increased. "The Word became flesh" does not mean that the nature of God was changed into flesh, but that flesh was taken up by the Word into the unity of this Person.<sup>43</sup>

Further, just as Cyril made extensive use of Philippians 2:6–7,<sup>44</sup> so too did Leo. The kenotic theology of the pre-Pauline hymn was used, often as part of Leo's characteristic antithesis, to indicate the extent to which God had both joined with humankind by the Son taking human nature and had not sacrificed to any extent divine nature.<sup>45</sup>

What we discover in these homilies is acknowledgment that impassibility is part of the nature of divinity, that Jesus was passible through his human nature, and that Jesus could be both impassible and passible at the same time without there being any contradiction. Like Cyril, Leo was committed to the position which held that God's presence with humankind in Jesus is full and complete though without in any way compromising, weakening or damaging the divine nature (or the human nature itself for that matter, except that it was restored to wholeness).

In Christ, born from the womb of a virgin, though his birth was miraculous, his nature is not on that account different from ours. He who is true God is also true man; there is nothing false in either substance. "The Word became flesh," by an elevation of the flesh, not by a falling away from divinity. His divinity conducted his power and goodness in such a way that he raised what was ours by taking it up and did not lose what was his own by sharing it.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> We find such an understanding in more recent theology: "When at this point in Christology it deals with this apparently so vexing problem that God 'became' something, it declares that the becoming and the change are on the side of the created reality which is assumed, but not on the side of the eternal, immutable Logos. Without a change in itself, the Logos assumes something which as a *created* reality does become: the human nature of Jesus" (Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych [New York: Crossroad, 1984] 219–20).

<sup>43</sup> Leo, *Tract. 27.2* (CCSL 138.133).

<sup>44</sup> John J. O'Keefe, "Impassible Suffering?" 48–49.

<sup>45</sup> Leo *Tract. 21.2* (CCSL 138.87); 22.2, 3 (CCSL 138.92, 95); 23.2 (CCSL 138.103); 24.2 (CCSL 138.110); 25.2 (CCSL 138.118); 27.1 (CCSL 138.133); 28.1 (CCSL 138.139); 30.5 (CCSL 138.156).

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.* 24.3 (CCSL 138.112).

In this he had the Docetism of the Manichaeans clearly in his sights.<sup>47</sup> In the catalogue of christological heresies Leo mentioned to his congregation in the homily of 443 (in order to highlight how, in contrast to other heresies, there is nothing at all that can be salvaged of Manichaean thought), Leo could mention Photinus as being concerned to assert the full humanity of Jesus (with a consequent deficiency to his divinity) and Apollinaris as being concerned to assert the full divinity of Jesus (with a consequent deficiency to his humanity). This indicates that Leo wanted to hold a balanced position that God could become truly human with us without the nature of divinity or humanity being altered in the process.<sup>48</sup> It is not enough for Leo simply to hold that the Son has participated fully with us by taking on a complete humanity without at the same time equally strongly holding that there is no change to his divinity.<sup>49</sup>

In his homily given at the end of the year during which Chalcedon was held, we can detect Leo's sense that the question of Jesus' humanity was connected intimately with the question of Jesus' equality with the Father, the Nicene question: "For it would be equally dangerous to deny either the reality of our nature in him or his equality with the Father in glory."<sup>50</sup>

In these Christmas homilies Leo's interest was on both issues together: the extent to which God participated with humankind is answered by asserting that it is a complete human nature in the Son, but at the same time this is coupled with the assertion that there is no change or compromise in the Son's truly divine nature, which had been recognized at Nicaea. Behind this proclamation of the lack of change to the divine nature is the belief that a divine nature must be essentially immutable and impassible.<sup>51</sup> It is Leo's developed sense of the *communicatio idiomatum* which allows him to see in the one person both impassibility (from his divine nature) and passibility (from his human nature).

Of course, in his Christmas homilies, Leo was interested in more than the issue of the impassibility of God or the humanity of Jesus. He was interested in more than the union of human and divine in Jesus. Not only did he want to defend the Nicene position of the Son's complete divinity while asserting the Son's full humanity, he wanted to see what this meant for his congregation.<sup>52</sup> The soteriological implications of the Incarnation were

<sup>47</sup> Ibid. 24.4 (CCSL 138.113).

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. 24.5 (CCSL, 138.113–14).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. 28.4 (CCSL 138.142).

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. 27.1 (CCSL 138.132).

<sup>51</sup> From his Christmas homily of 452 we see Leo recognising that impassibility lies behind the orthodox rejection of Arianism and Sabellianism (28.4 [CCSL 138.142]).

<sup>52</sup> Frances M. Young demonstrates that soteriology was just as important a consideration for Alexandrian theologians like Cyril as was impassibility. ("A Reconsideration of Alexandrian Christology," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 22 [1971] 103–14).

behind what he said.<sup>53</sup> In his Christmas homily from the year of Chalcedon we can find Leo's own statement that he was just as much concerned with soteriology as with preserving the impassibility of the God who entered fully into humanity: "In each nature it is the same Son of God who both assumes our characteristics and does not lose his own, who both renews human nature in human beings and remains unchangeable in himself."<sup>54</sup> In condemning Eutyches's "docetic" Christology Leo was concerned with it because not only did it mean that the impassibility of God would be threatened but because it would also deny the possibility of our hope in being raised from the dead.<sup>55</sup>

Precisely because complete human nature and complete divine nature are in the one person this means for humankind the freeing from eternal death,<sup>56</sup> the outwitting of the devil and the cancellation of the debt of sin,<sup>57</sup> the raising up or rebuilding of human nature (and not the lowering of God's divine nature),<sup>58</sup> and the possibility of being a participant in divinity.<sup>59</sup> What Adam lost through pride and disobedience Jesus has restored through humility and obedience; what humankind could not do for itself because of sin, one who took on human nature, though not its sinfulness, was able to do for the rest of us.<sup>60</sup> This is not the place to raise the question of whether his approach to soteriology was influenced by his Christology or vice versa, but it is appropriate to note that the two go hand in hand in Leo's Christmas homilies.<sup>61</sup> For Leo the "christological arrangement" is

<sup>53</sup> "In warding off the errors of the separation of the two natures by Nestorius and their mingling by Eutyches, as Leo understood this, soteriological arguments are ultimately decisive" (Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition 2: From the Council of Chalcedon (451) to Gregory the Great (590–604)*, Part 1, trans. Pauline Allen and John Cawte [London: Mowbray, 1987] 153). At the same time it must be recognized that Leo was just as interested in the role the Virgin played in the Incarnation as she, quite naturally, is mentioned frequently throughout these homilies.

<sup>54</sup> Leo, *Tract.* 27.1 (CCSL 138.132). <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 28.5 (CCSL 138.143–4).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 21.2 (CCSL 138.86); 25.2 (CCSL 138.119).

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.* 21.2 (CCSL 138–87); 22.4 (CCSL 138.96–97); 28.3 (CCSL 138.140).

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.* 22.2 (CCSL 138.93); 23.2 (CCSL 138.105); 24.3 (CCSL 138.112); 25.2–3 (CCSL 138.119–20); 27.2 (CCSL 138.134); 28.1 (CCSL 138.139).

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 21.3 (CCSL 138.88); 25.5 (CCSL 138.123) quoting 2 Pt. 1:4. See also 27.2 (CCSL 138.134); 28.1 (CCSL 138.139).

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.* 25.5 (CCSL 138.123); 28.3 (CCSL 138.140–41).

<sup>61</sup> I can think of no better example than *Tract.* 28.1 (CCSL 138.139) which has already been mentioned in the context of both its Christology and soteriology: "God the Son of God—only begotten of the eternal and unbegotten Father, remaining eternally in the 'form of God,' having unchangeably and beyond time no other being than that which the Father has—received the 'form of a servant.' This happened without any damage to his majesty, so that he might lift us up to his state rather than that he should decline into ours."

the way it is because of soteriology: “Were he not indeed true God, he could apply no remedy. Were he not indeed true man, he could not show example.”<sup>62</sup>

By way of summarizing Leo’s Christmas homilies, we can refer to a passage from one of the late homilies (of 454), part of which passage I have quoted above, in which all these themes are present:

Let us not be weakened, then, in the plan of God’s mercy. It restores us to innocence and to life. Since we recognize in our Savior the clear signs of the dual nature, let us not in the glory of God have doubts about the reality of his flesh, nor in the lowliness of man have doubts about the majesty of the divinity. He who took on the ‘form of a servant’ also has the ‘form of God.’ He who took up a body also remains incorporeal. He who can suffer in our weakness cannot be harmed in his strength. He who was crucified by the godless on a piece of wood has not been separated from his Father’s throne. He who ascended over the heights of heaven as a victor over death will not abandon the universal Church ‘up to the consummation of the world.’ Finally, he who submitted to judgment at the hands of the godless will sit in judgment over the actions of every mortal, coming with the same flesh as that in which he ascended.<sup>63</sup>

However, there is one final Christmas homily, the one of 457, *Contra haeresim Eutichis*. Here, late in his pontificate, as he addressed the workers gathered in St. Anastasia’s Basilica, Leo was well aware that the Monophysites, in asserting that there is only the divine nature in Jesus, challenged the notion both of the true humanity of Jesus and the impassibility of God: “What wickedness to say that Christ’s manhood was false and that God is able to suffer.”<sup>64</sup>

O’Keefe is correct to highlight divine impassibility as a major concern in the christological debates of the fifth century. Like both Alexandrians and Antiochenes, Leo wanted to preserve the impassibility of God and like Cyril, but unlike the Antiochenes, he wanted to assert the full participation of God in humanity. The *communicatio idiomatum* that occurred in the person of Jesus allowed that assertion to happen. Leo’s rhetorical rhythm and balance served him well in these controversial times. The impassibility of Jesus’ divine nature and the complete humanity within the person of Jesus needed to be stated, defended and explained equally as vigorously as the other in order to prevent one from straying to extremes. Protecting the divine impassibility enabled Leo to remain faithful to the Council of 325 and protecting the fullness of Jesus’ human nature enabled him to expound a soteriology. This ability to chart a course between extremes is Leo’s lasting contribution. Divine impassibility and salvation through suffering are the two building blocks upon which Leo constructed his Christology:

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. 21.2 (CCSL 138.87–88).

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 30.5 (CCSL 138.156–157).

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 96.1 (CCSL 138A.593).

“It [Catholic faith] confesses one Christ, both God and man, in such a way that it cannot say either that the man was false or that God was capable of suffering.”<sup>65</sup>

To understand Leo’s Christology one needs to read more widely than the *Tomus*; one needs to read not only his letters but his homilies as well. They provide a more complete picture. This analysis of Leo’s Christmas homilies demonstrates the importance of divine impassibility as a foundation for his Christology and makes an initial contribution to meeting the need for a broader reading of Leo’s output.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 65.1 (CCSL 138A.395).