The Human Emotions of Jesus, the Incarnate Word.
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Introduction

By the mid-fifth century, the Church’s development of its understanding of Christ’s person and nature came to definitive conclusions. Much controversy led the Fathers of the Church to clarify the understanding of Christ’s nature. Leo the Great, bishop of Rome, expounded the Catholic belief in his dogmatic Tome to Flavian affirming the, “one persona and two naturae of Christ.”¹ The concern of the Church at that time dealt with soteriology as seen in one of Pope Leo’s homilies, “Each nature, then, retains all that was proper to it, yet comes together in one person. … This was so that, as was needed for our healing, one and the same mediator between God and men might, through the one nature die and, through the other rise again. Unless he were true God, he could bring us no aid; unless he were true man, he could offer us no example.”²

The Council Fathers of Chalcedon, while acknowledging the creeds of Nicaea and Constantinople, referred to Leo’s Tome as a guideline to clarify the meaning of “He became flesh … and was made man.”³ The elucidation concerning his nature reads, “We confess that one and the same Lord Jesus Christ, the only begotten Son, must be acknowledged in two natures (physis) … the character proper to each of the two natures was preserved as they came together in one person (prosopon) and one hypostasis.”⁴

Although the dogmatic conclusions were drawn for soteriological clarification, other

⁴ Ibid.
conclusions may be drawn as well. One such conclusion is that because he was truly and fully human, Jesus had a fully developed human emotional life. Pope Pius XII solemnly affirms this conclusion, “He assumed [his human nature] in no diminished way, in no different sense in what concerns the spiritual and corporal: that is, it was endowed with intellect and will and the other internal and external faculties of perception, and likewise with the desires and all the natural impulses of the senses.”

This paper will develop that particular Christological aspect through firstly looking at the emotions proper to human nature and secondly through a brief exegesis of Gospel passages in which Christ displays use of human emotions.

Study of the human emotions of Christ is foundational for the process of human development of priests. As priestly formation is drawn from the truths of the Catholic faith, this study of the human emotions of Christ in the Gospels will return to the core of our faith seeking part of the integral vision necessary for human formation.

**Emotions proper to human nature**

The emotions, natural to the psyche, are motors which either move one to recognize an object as a good (pleasure appetite) or operate in order to prepare the way for the desire to attain its object (utility appetite). Love, desire, joy, hate, aversion, and sadness are movements of the pleasure appetite (concupiscible), the first three move one toward a good, while three last three

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7 Cf. Ibid., 14.

8 According to CCC 1763, “the term ‘passions’ belongs to the Christian patrimony. Feelings or passions are emotions or movements of the sensitive appetite that incline us to act or not to act in regard to something felt or imagined to be good or evil.” For the sake of uniformity within this essay, I will refer to ‘feelings,’ ‘passions,’ and ‘movements of the sensitive appetite’ as ‘emotion(s).’
move one away from an evil. These ought to be followed by a reasoned action. The other utility appetites (irascible) of hope, courage, fear, despair, and anger are meant to move people, “to stimulate their muscles.”

The good and the evil that are the objects of emotions are the good and evil of sense; therefore, in themselves emotions are non-moral. Whether one acts or not is a secondary matter. Only in so far as they are subject to the will do they come under the moral law. When regulated by reason and subjected to right control of the will, the emotions can be considered good and used in the practice and acquisition of virtue.

A fascinating study by Rabbi Jacob Neusner reveals that the doctrine of emotions in the early development of Judaism after the fall of the Temple remained unchanged throughout their sacred writings, the Talmud and the Midrash. Jews understood the nature of emotions to be that “the heart belongs, together with the mind, to the human being’s power to form reasoned viewpoints.”

The consistent understanding of the emotions after the destruction of the Temple did not change in its nature but in circumstances. Jewish sages developed a framework of feelings in which individuals had to change their emotions in accord with the Jewish nation’s emotions. Their motivation for the control came as a reaction to the Temple’s destruction, which was seen as an act of vain hatred. Neusner summarized early Judaism’s hermeneutic key, “Israel is estranged from God … the single word encompassing the entire affective doctrine is alienation.”

From his study we see that the Jewish understanding of emotion before the destruction of the Temple is similar to what Thomas Aquinas held. Aquinas taught that the foundational emotion is love, which is aroused by the attraction of the good, while the apprehension of evil

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11 Cf. Ibid., 55-57.
arouses hatred, aversion, and fear. He lists the principle emotions in opposing pairs: love and hatred, desire and pleasure, pain and sorrow, hope and despair, fear and courage, and also includes anger. Aquinas contextualizes Jesus’ emotions; Christ is truly divine and truly human, and so his divine actions are mingled with his human actions and vice-versa. Therefore, the human nature of Jesus was always under the control of the Person of Christ – a divine Person. He also differentiates Christ’s emotions from ours in three ways: 1) As regards the object, in Christ they tended only towards the good; 2) As regards the principle: in Christ they followed the command of reason; and 3) As regards the effect: passions in Christ were perfectly subject to reason.

Aquinas explains that the emotions of Jesus were directly willed so as to show us his human nature. Second, his example of controlling his emotions serves as a model of how to act, revealing to us that emotions are not bad and must be experienced throughout life. Let us turn to the Gospels for elucidations.

**An exegesis of Gospel passages in which Christ displayed use of human emotions**

Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh, “was sent to perfect revelation by fulfilling it through his whole work of making Himself present and manifesting Himself: through His words and deeds” and also to manifest us to ourselves. A Christian’s attitude toward emotions, therefore, should be based on a sound exegesis of Holy Scripture. And because Jesus reveals both through

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13 ST, III, 15, 4.

14 Cf. Aquinas, 1535. Also see Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ’s Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (Scranton, PA: University of Scranton Press, 2009), 35; and Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 38-39. Hans Urs von Balthasar has a variant understanding. He recognized a difficulty in Jesus being a model of a Christian existence if he had foreknowledge of the Father’s will, rather he points to Jesus’ kenosis as a choice to refuse anticipation and live only in the moment to moment assent of the Holy Spirit’s mediating the Father’s will.

15 DV 4 & Cf. GS 22.
words and deeds, both of them must be considered; in other words, we should interpret the words of Jesus in the context of Jesus’ actions.\textsuperscript{16}

Originally, I had hoped to include the human love of Jesus, but Paul shares a poignant reality in his letter to the Ephesians, it takes much power to “comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ which surpasses knowledge” (Eph 3:18-19). Love guided Jesus’ whole earthly life and ministry, since his mission was a continual act of obedience toward the Father, that is, volitional love. How this love interacted with and determined his emotional love as well as his other emotions is a complex problem beyond the scope of this paper.\textsuperscript{17} Through a close exegetical reading of four Gospel passages, a clearer vision of Christ’s emotions (Christian revelation on emotions), particularly anger, hate, sadness, and fear, emerges.

\textbf{1. Anger:}\textsuperscript{18} Mt 5:21-26 & 39; Jn 18:22-23

While Mark, writing to the Gentiles, focuses on the gradual unfolding of the understanding of Jesus, Matthew stresses from the beginning that Jesus is a noble and dignified figure. Already in his earthly life Jesus is seen as the exalted Christ. Because of his Jewish audience, Matthew focuses more on Jesus’ teaching as the Lawgiver, or second Moses. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus states the Law by using the divine passive, “you have heard that it was said,” and then counters by interpreting the Law’s meaning according to the original will of God. He makes a counter statement using a common exegetical formula: “But I say to you.”


\textsuperscript{17} Pius XII expounds greatly on the emotional love of Jesus’ Sacred Heart in his Encyclical, \textit{Haurietis Aquas}.

\textsuperscript{18} \textit{ovrgizo, menoj} — to make angry. \textit{The Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary}, 1941 ed., s.v. “Anger” : “a strong emotion aroused by an evil that is present but not acquiesced in. It includes the agreeable consciousness of energetic reaction against evil.”
What surprised many was his implicitly assumed authority when he deepened the understanding of God’s Law. In chapter 5 of Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus, the lawgiver, interprets a saying about anger: “But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment” (Mt 5:22). Jesus goes beyond the traditional interpretation, instead of responsibility only for an act of murder; he includes its emotional root, anger. Anger is the first step in the human experience that leads to murder, if it is unchecked or not ordered by reason. Following Jesus’ teaching, by dealing with the root cause of murder in the beginning, the evil outcome is excluded.19

In the same sermon Jesus later another antitheses, “But I say to you, Do not resist one who is evil. But if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also” (Mt 5:39). By using the phrase, ‘but I say to you,’ he teaches non-resistance to an evil doer, avoiding the moral evil of violence. This is not to resign one’s self or to be indifferent to evil or the Evil One (Satan), but to change the heart of the human aggressor.20 The function of anger is “to energize us, to arouse us to overcome obstacles; to defend against and throw off an evil; and to demand restitution as a means of restoring the order which is required for justice.”21 Anger must be ordered correctly, “be angry but do not sin” (Eph 4:26). A striking example in Jesus’ life is recorded by John:

> When he had said this, one of the officers standing by struck Jesus with his hand, saying, “Is that how you answer the high priest?” Jesus answered him, “If I have spoken wrongly, bear witness to the wrong; but if I have spoken rightly, why do you strike me?” (Jn 18:22-23)

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20 Ibid., 42:34.

Aquinas recognizes a seeming contradiction between Jesus’ words (Mt 5:19) and actions (Jn 18:22-23). Jesus defends himself rather than turning the other cheek. A difficulty arises here for as we just noted Jesus commands us to turn the other cheek, but Jesus’ actions during his trial seem to contradict his teaching. Are we missing something? Augustine, whom Thomas cites, shows Jesus moderating the power of anger to oppose evil and serve the good,

[Jesus] answered truthfully, meekly and righteously, and at the same time prepared His whole body to be nailed to the tree. He showed, what needed to be shown, namely, that those great precepts of His are to be fulfilled not by bodily ostentation, but by the preparation of the heart. For it is possible that even an angry man may visibly hold out his other cheek.

In this way Christ’s anger resisted evil and demanded restitution for the injustice, as well as bearing witness to the wrong, and yet he endured the evil he could not change. According to Augustine, we find in his actions a deeper understanding of the emotion of anger subordinated by reason in the service of love. Meekness channeled the power of anger in order to serve the good, but did not destroy or annul it, accomplishing the Father’s will. The example of Jesus in this regard is instructive on the proper use of anger.

2. Hatred:

In the Gospel of Luke, Jesus speaks about hatred, “If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple” (Lk 14:26). Matthew teaches the lesson by removing the

22 Cf. Aquinas, 2321. “I say to this, with Augustine, that the statements and commands found in sacred scripture can be interpreted and understood from the actions of the saints, since it is the same Holy Spirit who inspired the prophets, the other sacred authors and the actions of the saints. Thus, sacred scripture should be understood according to the way Christ and other holy persons followed it. Now, Christ did not turn his other cheek here so we should not think that Christ has commanded us to actually turn our physical cheek to one who has struck the other.”


24 Ibid.

25 *mì̂se, w* – to hate. *The Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary*, s.v. “Hatred.”: “An emotion opposed to love, aversion for a thing, for a person or for his actions, qualities, evil deeds or habits.”
word hate in favor of using its opposite emotion, an inordinate love (Mt 10:37) in relation to our love of God. What is Jesus teaching or commanding when he says we must hate? Does it mean as C.S. Lewis questions “to cherish resentment, to gloat over another’s misery or to delight in injury”?  

No, rather hatred “rejects, sets one’s face against, and makes no concession to the [b]eloved when the [b]eloved utters, however sweetly and however pitiably, the suggestions of the Devil.”

We see Jesus’ emotion of hatred when he rebuked Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are not on the side of God, but of men” (Mk 8:33). Peter had rebuked Jesus, pushing him to choose something contrary to the Father’s will, namely to reject the cross and save his own life (Mk 8:31). Jesus responds with hatred of Peter’s sin, not his person, teaching Peter that the condition of discipleship is bearing the cross. One can only imagine the change in Jesus’ face as he responds to Peter. Aquinas teaches that the “emotion caused by anger is conveyed to the external members, and in particularly to those members in which the heart’s imprint is more obviously reflected, such as the eyes, the face, and the tongue.”

Peter and the others needed to be strengthened in their spiritual judgment. They needed to learn to evaluate all things, including the cross, in the way God judges them. This phrase from Luke, “whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me, cannot be my disciple,” (Lk 14:27) which immediately follows Jesus’ teaching on hatred, contextualizes the previous verse, so that we see this hatred pertains to inordinate love.

The cost of discipleship is great and stark. Jesus teaches, through his own example of hatred, the need to love God above all things with an undivided heart: “For no one can serve two

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27 Ibid.
28 Mk - ἐπετιμά, ἀγαπάω = ‘rebuked’ vs. Mt - εἶπεν = ‘says to.’
29 ST I-II, 48,4 in Pius XII, 53.
masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other” (Mt 6:24). The emotion of hatred, understood and correctly ordered through reason, helps us reach eternal life (cf. Jn 12:25).31


“So the sisters sent to [Jesus], saying, ‘Lord, he whom you love is ill’... Jesus loved Martha and her sister and Lazarus” (Jn 11:3, 5). Jesus reveals his tender affectivity, something he is not ashamed of, when he loves. This love refers not to the divine charity that Jesus has for all, but a special love for Lazarus and his sisters. It is Jesus’ personal human love, which is mysteriously tied also to the divine Word. This is the context in which we find Jesus experiencing sadness.

When Jesus heard of Lazarus’ illness he said, “This illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God” (Jn 11:4). We can already ascertain that Jesus knows what the Father’s will is in this situation. But when he arrives in Bethany and meets Lazarus’ sisters one finds that despite his knowing the situation will ultimately end well, John writes one of the most powerful literary lines in the Gospel: “Jesus wept” (Jn 11:35). These tears are a more intimate expression than those he shed over the fate of Jerusalem for these come from a personal love. We witness through the course of events “his expression of his human love for Mary, Martha and Lazarus; of his sorrow; of his compassion with their sorrow and of the full experience of the human aspect of death with all its horror.”33

32 evmbrima, omai- to have an intense, strong feeling of concern. The Catholic Encyclopedia Dictionary, s.v. “Sadness.”: “A pain caused by an interior apprehension, through our sensitive appetite, of some evil that affects us. This interior apprehension extends to more objects than he exterior since it can perceive the present, past and future. The proper object of sadness is one’s own pain or loss.” See also Gondreau, 390-394.
When Aquinas identifies the object of Christ’s sorrow, he points to the evil that Jesus interiorly perceived, the death of his friend Lazarus. Lazarus’ death was a direct personal loss to Jesus of one whom he loved. Sadness of this kind is not an act of the will alone, for on its own it is morally neutral, being an emotion. Tears, which John confirms, help to alleviate the affective burden with a somatic remedy.\(^\text{34}\) This is a natural and appropriate response because human nature is properly moved by the sadness and the evils which trouble others.

Aquinas illustrates the process of a reasoned response when he explains why Jesus “troubled” himself when Jesus saw Mary weeping. He took on sadness by a judgment of reason because one is rightly troubled by the sadness and the evils which afflict others. Jesus, therefore, reveals for us an appropriate response to the evils others experience.\(^\text{35}\) Paul, in his letter to the Romans teaches the same, “Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep” (Rom 12:15). Jesus therefore wept to show us that we are not at fault to weep out of compassion. We should experience ordered emotions, even when we know the Father will draw a greater good from a situation.\(^\text{36}\)


St. Hilary, bishop of Poiters, had a massive impact on medieval Christology. He had a clear understanding of human fear: “the trepidation our weak humanity feels when it is afraid of suffering something it does not want to happen … We do not have to learn what we should fear: objects of fear bring their own terror with them.”\(^\text{38}\) Yet, he also explicitly denied the presence of

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\(^\text{34}\) Cf. Gondreau, 397.

\(^\text{35}\) Cf. Aquinas, 1532-3

\(^\text{36}\) Cf. Ibid., 1532-3,7.


fear in Christ’s soul. Aquinas responds to this earlier thought by considering the emotion of fear objectively.  

Fear, as opposed to sorrow, perceives the harmful sense object in the imagination as an absent-yet-impending evil difficult to avoid.  

“[Jesus] took with him Peter and James and John, and began to fear and be troubled” (Mk 14:33). Jesus experienced what he imagined as impending sense evils. He agonized over the awful choice to endure or to escape the cross. The agony in the garden is a direct revelation of Jesus’ heart. He lifts the veil and we find a “fundamental manifestation of the human nature of Christ; it reveal to us Jesus as Son of Man, intimately connected with the infinite divine love of Christ.”  

Fear arises when there is some hope of escape, thus “he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him” (Mk 14:35). Since fear relies heavily upon the power of imagination (Thomas excludes all forms of ignorance in Christ), Jesus’ internal visualization could well lead him, as he wrestled in prayer, to be drenched in his own sweat “which ran like blood to the ground” (Lk 22:44). The object of Jesus’ fear was the evil of his impending crucifixion and death, or the internal realization of the inevitable torture: “My soul is sorrowful even unto death” (Mt 26:38). St. Ambrose observes Jesus’ weakness and sensibility here as being “sorrowful even unto death, but not because of death.”  

His explanation revolves around the understanding of Jesus’ voluntary death, which mankind depended upon. Therefore, the Gospel says he was “sorrowful even unto death” because he was

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39 Cf. Gondreau, 404.
40 Ibid., 406.
41 Mk - evkqambei/sqai = ‘greatly distressed’ vs. Mt - lupei/sqai = ‘sorrowful.’
42 Von Hildebrand, 154.
43 Cf. Gondreau, 411.
44 Ibid., 397.
waiting for the grace to be carried to fulfillment. He referred to this when he said, “I have a baptism to be baptized with; and how I am in anguish until it is accomplished!” (Lk 12:50). Pius XII meditating upon the Sacred Heart in this scene proposes that “His heart was moved by a particularly intense love mingles with fear as he perceived the hour of his bitter torments drawing near and, expressing a natural repugnance for the approaching pains and death, he cried out: ‘Father, if it be possible, let this chalice pass from me.’”

This fear in Jesus in no way impeded his reasoning, which is confirmed in the text: “not what I will, but what thou wilt” (Mk 14:36). Conrad Baars speculates that the decision of Jesus following the consolation he received from the angel affirmed “his suffering as good, and when he received it he was able to undergo the suffering.” Von Hildebrand sees that the foregoing petition assumed its full impact only in the light of this ultimate abandonment of his will to God the Father, embodied in those final words, “yet not what I will …” (Mk 14:36). The Scriptures in no way show Jesus’ fear as undermining his mission, but rather the Scriptures act as a witness to his self-mastery, displaying fear’s transformation into the virtue of courage: “Rise, let us be going; see, my betrayer is at hand” (Mk 14:42).

**Conclusion**

We have found through exegeting these four passages a partial range of human emotions in the life of Jesus. By comparing the synoptic Gospels, we also recognize that the emotions of Jesus are better distinguished in Mark, Luke, and John. In fact, Matthew tends to editorially moderate the emotions of anger and tenderness in the passages he takes.
from Mark. He restrains presenting Jesus’ human emotions thereby exalting his reasoned decisions.\footnote{Cf. Bernard Orchard, ed., \textit{A Catholic Commentary on Holy Scripture} (New York: Nelson, 1953), 711c & 739k. Compare Mt 12:13/Mk 3:5, Mt 18:1/Mk 9:33-34 & Mt 19:21/Mk 10:21.} In regards to Jesus’ teaching, Matthew offers great contributions in his Gospel that have been used catechetically throughout the centuries and he is consistent in showing the final product, so to speak, through the actions of Jesus.

Taking the Gospels as a whole leaves no doubt that Jesus Christ took a true human body. He made decisions and moved through the proper emotions to reasoned decisions of virtuous behaviors, ultimately aimed at accomplishing his Father’s will. We see in these four examples of emotions that Jesus not only has emotions, but he fully embraces them, subjecting them to reason not only to fulfill the Father’s will but to fully reveal his human nature.\footnote{Cf. Pius XII, 46-50.} St. Paul in his letter to the Ephesians encourages them not to suppress or repress their emotions, but rather order them to their correct end: “be angry but do not sin” (Eph 4:26).

This is an important Christological understanding when returning to the initial purpose of our study, priestly formation. The recognition that Jesus had a full range of emotions and used them rationally is foundational in forming the identity of the priest. Each priest must “reflect in himself the human perfection which shines forth in the incarnate Son of God and which is reflected with particular liveliness in his attitudes toward others as we see narrated in the Gospels.”\footnote{John Paul II, \textit{Pastores Dabo Vobis}: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests (New York: Pauline Books and Media, 1992), 43. See also GS 22: “The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light. … Christ, by the revelation of the mystery of the Father and His love, fully reveals man to man himself and makes his supreme calling clear.”}

One particular context of growing in affective maturity is found in the prayer of the
Church, the *Liturgy of the Hours*. Priests will find within the Psalter, Ambrose says, “a medicine to cure the wounds caused by his own particular [emotions]. Whoever studies it deeply will find it a kind of gymnasium open for all souls to use.” Pius X states in *Divino Afflatu* that from the beginning of the Church the Psalter had a conspicuous part in the divine office, and the Psalms have the ability to rouse the same emotions the Psalmist recounts. Those emotions are the pictures of Christ. Augustine, during his formative period, “heard Christ’s voice in all the Psalms, the voice of praise, of suffering, rejoicing in hope or yearning for accomplishment,” and he conformed his identity to Christ’s.

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