

Ilya Kaplan

The Church as Christ's Availability in Gregory of Nyssa's *Cant.* 13

Abstract: In dem Beitrag wird eine Passage aus *In Canticum Canticorum* von Gregor von Nyssa analysiert, wo er versucht, die Aporie des Sehens des Unsichtbaren auf eine Weise zu lösen, die christologische, ekklesiologische und eschatologische Dimensionen einschliesst, und es wird gezeigt, dass für ihn das, was Christus sichtbar und zugänglich macht, die Kirche ist, d. h. der Leib Christi, der seine Vollendung bei der Auferstehung erreichen wird.

Keywords: Gregory of Nyssa, body of Christ, bride of Christ, resurrection of Christ, (in)visibility of Christ

1 Introduction

Negative theology's claim about God is that we cannot make claims about God.¹ At the same time, Christian theology proposes the paradigmatic image – or metaphor, symbol, parable – of God, Jesus of Nazareth, called “Christ” by the church.² The problem is, however, that all we are left with in regard to this Christ is only “the economy of the deferred identity” and “a series of displacements” of his body, as Graham Ward puts it in Derridean vocabulary.³ Gregory of Nyssa was well aware that we are in trouble not only when we try to speak of the unspeakable God but also of Christ, who always goes ungraspable *through* our language, as once he did “through” the crowd.⁴ This paper analyses a passage from Gregory of Nyssa's

1 Following Ilaria Ramelli, one can call this “the dialectics of apophaticism” (Ilaria Ramelli, “Philo as One of the Main Inspirers of Early Christian Hermeneutics and Apophatic Theology,” *Adam* 24 [2018]: 276–292).

2 Cf. Paul Avis, *God and the Creative Imagination: Metaphor, Symbol and Myth in Religion and Theology* (London: Routledge, 1999). To construct his Christological account, the author masterfully draws upon a range of prominent 20th-century theologians (as broadly as from Paul Tillich to Edward Schillebeeckx).

3 Graham Ward, “The Displaced Body of Christ,” in *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, eds. John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, and Graham Ward (London: Routledge, 1999): 163–181, 163.

4 In Luke 4:30 and in some not reliable versions of John 8:59.

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Homily 13 on the Song of Songs,⁵ where he tries to solve the aporia of seeing the invisible and approaching the unapproachable in a way that intrinsically includes Christological, ecclesiological, and eschatological dimensions (to use modern theological categories). For Gregory, as I argue, what makes Christ visible and available⁶ is the church, Christ's body that reaches its perfection at the eschaton. The scope of this paper is limited to demonstrating this point as it is expressed in *Cant.* 13 and some other closely related texts.

2 Christ: A Puzzle

In Song 5:8, the bride asks the daughters of Jerusalem, who accompany her, to tell the bridegroom, if they find him, that she is “wounded by love” (τετρωμένη ἀγάπης). And the question is how the virgins can possibly find the bridegroom, Christ. So, Gregory invites his audience to turn to the bride together with the virgins to inquire from her how it is possible to identify the bridegroom. The virgins recognised that, in fact, the bride “was seeking One who is not found by signs and [...] was calling upon One who does not answer to names.”⁷ Gregory puts in their mouth the following words: “How shall we find him who is not detected by any sign of recognition, who neither answers when called upon nor is secured when sought?”⁸ Here it is necessary to remember how Gregory perceives the nature of human language. He argued against Eunomius that human words are invented by people themselves; they are not given by God. Therefore, all words refer always to *human* concepts of the divine and never to God himself.⁹

⁵ For a concise and state-of-the-art introduction to Gregory's homilies, see Gulio Maspero, “The *In Canticum* in Gregory's Theology: Introduction and *Gliederung*,” in *Gregory of Nyssa: In Canticum Canticorum*, ed. Giulio Maspero, Miguel Brugarolas, and Ilaria Vigorelli, SVigChr 150 (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

⁶ The argument is thus partly based on Robert Jenson's notion of body as “availability” (cf. Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1999], 213).

⁷ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 379: ἐζήτει [...] τὸν διὰ σημείων οὐχ εὕρισκόμενον καὶ ἐκάλει [...] τὸν οὐχ ὑπακούοντα τοῖς ὀνόμασι. The English translation is taken from *Gregory of Nyssa: Homilies on the Song of Songs*, trans. Richard A. Norris Jr. (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2012) and was modified where necessary.

⁸ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 379: πῶς ἐπιγνώμεν αὐτὸν ἡμεῖς τὸν μηδενὶ σημείῳ γνωριστικῶ εὕρισκόμενον, ὃς οὔτε ὑπακούει καλούμενος οὔτε κρατεῖται ζητούμενος.

⁹ This is quite a “postmodern” view of human language – or its anticipation, to be less anachronistic – that Gregory proposes in *Eun.* 2. Although the whole text of *Eun.* 2 is, in a way, a treatise on the philosophy of language, see especially: *Eun.* 2,237–246 (GNO I, 295–298), 281–288 (GNO I, 309–310),

However, the virgins still demand some guidance: namely, for some “signs” (σημεῖα) and “tokens” (τεκμήρια) by which they can detect the bridegroom.¹⁰ And the question here is how the bride can, in fact, “portray in speech the distinctive marks of the desired One” and “bring the Unknown One within the sight of her virgins.”¹¹ The reason that Gregory gives for this difficulty is that Christ is both creature and uncreated. And here lies the epistemological problem. On the one hand, “uncreated” *per definitionem* means unknowable; on the other, this uncreated one is at the same time creature and thus can be known. But since Christ is one, then the two opposite predicates are applied to the same subject so that it is unclear how Christ can be and cannot be known.¹² Gregory explains that it is impossible to make any theological speculations regarding the eternity of the divine Word, while the proper and only possible object of our reasoning and speech is the economy, *oikonomia*. As Gregory puts it, “that of him [Christ] which is uncreated and before the ages and eternal is by nature completely incapable of being grasped and unutterable, while what is manifested for us through the flesh can to a degree come into our knowledge.”¹³

The problem proves to be even more complicated if we remember how Gregory understands Christ's resurrection. In *Antirr.*, he writes: “everything, which then appeared as an attribute of that flesh, was also changed with it into the divine, immortal nature. Neither weight, form, colour, hardness, softness, quantity, nor anything else that was then visible remains: the mixture with the divine takes up the lowliness of the fleshly nature into the divine attributes.”¹⁴ Therefore, abso-

and 577–587 (GNO I, 394–397). For further guidance, see the collection of articles in Lenka Karfiková, Scot Douglass, and Johannes Zachhuber, eds., *Gregory of Nyssa: Contra Eunomium II*, SVigChr 82 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).

10 *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 380. The virgins also ask the bride to take the veils from their eyes and to give them guidance on their way to the bridegroom whom they seek, which echoes 2 Cor 3:14–18; they also ask her how the bridegroom “is to be classed by nature (φύσεως),” which may point to confusion caused by two mutually exclusive sets of Christ's predicates (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Or.* 30).

11 *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 380: ζωγραφεῖ τῷ λόγῳ τοῦ ποθομένου τὸν χαρακτῆρα [...] ὑπ' ὅσιν ἄγει ταῖς παρθένους τὸν ἀγνοούμενον.

12 Here, Gregory provides the reader with a Christological excursus on the incarnation, namely on how Christ “*tabernacled in us*” and “*we have seen his glory*” (John 1:14). Christ was perceived on two different registers: a human being was *observable* while the glory of the Word was *known*.

13 *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 381: τὸ μὲν ἄκτιστον αὐτοῦ καὶ προαίωνιον καὶ αἰδίων ἀληπτον μένει καθ' ὅλου πάσης φύσει καὶ ἀνεκφώνητον, τὸ δὲ διὰ σαρκὸς ἡμῖν φανερωθὲν δύναται ποσῶς καὶ εἰς γνῶσιν ἐλθεῖν.

14 *Antirr.* (GNO III.1), 201: συμμετεβλήθη καὶ πάντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν σάρκα τότε φαινόμενα πρὸς τὴν θείαν τε καὶ ἀκήρατον φύσιν· οὐ βάρος, οὐκ εἶδος, οὐ χρῶμα, οὐκ ἀντιτυπία, οὐ μαλακότης, οὐχ ἡ κατὰ τὸ ποσὸν περιγραφή, οὐκ ἄλλο τι τῶν τότε καθορωμένων οὐδὲν παραμένει, τῆς πρὸς τὸ θεῖον ἀνακράσεως εἰς τὰ θεϊκὰ ιδιώματα τὸ ταπεινὸν τῆς σαρκώδους φύσεως ἀναλαβούσης. The English

lutely nothing from Christ's physical and visible qualities that he possessed during his earthly life remained after the resurrection. His flesh possesses now *other* qualities, that is, those which belong to the divine. Gregory formulates it quite radically: "there was no man before the birth of the Virgin, nor after his return to heaven did the flesh retain its own characteristics."¹⁵ The scriptural proof-text for Gregory is 2 Cor 5:16, where it is stated that we know Christ no longer "according to the flesh." Beyond the bounds of Christ's earthly life, there is no man that can be identified by a set of characteristics (ιδιώματα). Therefore, we cannot say that there is such a man because, for us, all human beings are necessarily identified by their individual characteristics, while in the case of Jesus, there is no longer any subject that would possess all those qualities listed above ("weight, form, colour, hardness, softness, quantity" and so on). All this means that for Gregory, Christ is now recognised and known *not* as any other object within the created realm.

Gregory explains that this, so to say, deformation of Christ's flesh was inevitable. Since divinity cannot undergo any change, it was human flesh that must have been changed because of the union between the two. The union, culminating at the resurrection, should not be understood as though the risen Christ had a mixture of qualities, composed of the divine and human ones, but it rather means that in the risen Christ, the qualities that are proper to the human are substituted by those of the divine. The following passage is a key one for understanding Gregory's Christology with its eternal, incorporeal and formless character of Christ's humanity: "the human nature in Christ has experienced change for the better, that is, from corruptible to incorruptible, from perishable to unfading, from temporal to eternal, from bodily and invested with form to incorporeal and formless."¹⁶ The point that Gregory makes is, in fact, polemical. Below, he directly attacks Apollinarius' idea that after the resurrection, Christ remained in human form.¹⁷ Now, after this Christological excursus, we have to go back to Gregory's exegetical homily.

translation is from *St. Gregory of Nyssa: Anti-Apollinarian Writings*, trans. Robin Orton (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 2015); the quotations are slightly modified where necessary.

¹⁵ *Antirr.* (GNO III.1), 222: οὕτε γὰρ πρὸ τῆς παρθένου ὁ ἄνθρωπος οὕτε μετὰ τὴν εἰς οὐρανοὺς ἄνοδον ἔτι ἡ σὰρξ ἐν τοῖς ἑαυτῆς ιδιώμασιν.

¹⁶ *Antirr.* (GNO III.1), 223: ἡ δὲ ἀνθρωπίνη φύσις ἐν Χριστῷ πρὸς τὸ κρεῖττον κέχρηται τῇ τροπῇ, ἀπὸ τοῦ φθαρτοῦ πρὸς τὸ ἀφθαρτον ἀλλοιωθεῖσα, ἀπὸ τοῦ ἐπικήρου πρὸς τὸ ἀκίηρατον, ἀπὸ τοῦ ὀλιγοχρονίου πρὸς τὸ αἰδιδιον, ἀπὸ τοῦ σωματικοῦ καὶ κατεσχηματισμένου πρὸς τὸ ἀσώματόν τε καὶ ἀσχημάτιστον.

¹⁷ *Antirr.* (GNO III.1), 228. Here Gregory criticises how Apollinarius – whether his views are presented correctly by Gregory is not of any importance for the purpose of this paper – envisages the coming of the Son of Man described in Matt 24:30. Cf. *Antirr.* (GNO III.1), 229: "he [Apollinarius] thinks it necessary to believe that Christ has human characteristics until the end of time (μέχρι

3 First Clue: Christ and the Church

Gregory argues that the Word drew to himself the whole human nature through its first fruits, the risen Christ, and sanctifies it now through the same medium. However, Christ's body is nourished through others who, joining the church, are fitted into "the common body," τῷ κοινῷ σώματι.¹⁸ *Inter alia*, Gregory paraphrases Eph 4:11–16, a passage on how the whole body of Christ is built up until "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" is reached. And here, Gregory formulates his key thesis: "anyone, therefore, who looks at the church is, in fact, looking at Christ – Christ, building himself up and augmenting himself by the addition of people who are being saved."¹⁹ This is Gregory's answer to the epistemological issue outlined above: to see and know Christ, one must look at the church, his body. Turning to the church is the only way to find Christ because he has no other body that could make him manifest to us in this world. The church, in short, embodies Christ and makes him available and approachable.

Gregory makes the same point in *Cant.* 8. He claims there that "the great economy of the theophany" took place not only for human beings but also for the sake of angels. Drawing on Eph 3:10–11, Gregory says that "the manifold Wisdom of God was also made known to the heavenly rulers and powers, having been revealed through the economy of Christ that was carried in human beings."²⁰ As the author of Eph put it, it was "through the church" (not simply Christ *per se*) that the "manifold (πολυποίκιλος) Wisdom of God" was made known to heavenly powers who, in Gregory's formulation, "discerned the beauty of the bridegroom by the agency of the bride." The invisible Word "established the church as his body," a *visible* body, and he shapes it himself: Christ "forms the countenance of the church with the stamp of his own identity."²¹

παντὸς οἶεται δεῖν ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώπινους αὐτὸν ιδιώμασι πιστεύειν εἶναι)." In what follows (*Antirrh.* [GNO III.1], 230), Gregory proposes a more detailed critique of the Apollinarian idea, making a far-reaching claim that there is *nothing corporeal* (οὐδὲν σωματικόν) in the risen Christ.

18 *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 382. The same ecclesiological conception of the *totus Christus*, built primarily on the material from Eph, is found throughout the corpus of Gregory's works. How it is expressed in *Tunc et ipse*, is shortly outlined in my other paper in this volume.

19 *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 383: οὐκοῦν ὁ πρὸς τὴν ἐκκλησίαν βλέπων πρὸς τὸν Χριστὸν ἀντικρυς βλέπει τὸν ἑαυτὸν διὰ τῆς προσθήκης τῶν σωζομένων οἰκοδομοῦντα καὶ μεγαλύνοντα.

20 *Cant.* 8 (GNO VI), 254: ἀλλὰ καὶ ταῖς ἀρχαῖς καὶ ταῖς ἐξουσίαις ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐγνωρίσθη ἡ πολυποίκιλος σοφία τοῦ θεοῦ διὰ τῆς κατὰ Χριστὸν ἐν τοῖς ἀνθρώποις οἰκονομίας φανερωθεῖσα.

21 *Cant.* 8 (GNO VI), 256: τῷ ἰδίῳ χαρακτῆρι μορφῶν τῆς ἐκκλησίας τὸ πρόσωπον. Here Gregory also uses a metaphor of a mirror; namely, the church reflects Christ as a mirror. For more on this metaphor in Antiquity and Paul, see Rainer Hirsch-Luipold's paper in this volume.

What is essential here is that the church is intrinsic to the theophany of the Word made flesh and to the economy “that was carried in human beings.” And this claim of Gregory is coherent with his overall vision since, on the one hand, he associates that theophany primarily with Christ’s resurrection, but on the other hand, for him, the risen Christ loses human appearance. Therefore, it is the church, the *only* body of the risen one, that shows by and in herself who Christ is.

4 Second Clue: The Church and Creation

Returning to Homily 13, we see that it is a rather striking interpretation that Gregory proposes there for Rom 1:20 (read by him in parallel with Isa 65:17). First, Gregory makes clear that everything that the bride says about the bridegroom’s beauty does not concern “the invisible and incomprehensible realities of the Godhead” but “the things that were revealed in accordance with the economy.” The bridegroom’s beauty cannot be, *in principle*, shown by telling “that which was *in the beginning*”²² because “it is not possible for the unutterable to be made manifest by the power of words.” And according to Gregory, it is precisely by that revelation – “the theophany that came to us through the flesh” – that “God’s invisible things [...] have been clearly apprehended,” as stated in Rom 1:20. In short, Gregory reads this verse as referring to “the foundation of the world of the church” (τῆς τοῦ ἐκκλησιαστικοῦ κόσμου κατασκευῆς). Thus, the *oikonomia* of Christ’s flesh is for him the creation of the world that Paul is speaking about so that where the “invisible things” can be “clearly apprehended” is Christ and his ecclesial body. Moreover, this is creation in its proper sense because here, the human being is finally brought to the final destiny, namely to their being in the image of God: “*the creation of the world* signifies the foundation of the church, in which, according to the word of the prophet,²³ both a new heaven is created [...] and a new earth is established [...] and another human being is fashioned, who is renewed by the birth from above *after the image of his Creator*.”²⁴

There is a parallel passage to this one in one of Gregory’s *Easter homilies*. There Gregory applies the verse from the Psalms, “*this is the day that the Lord has made*,”

²² Cf. John 1:1.

²³ Cf. Isa 65:17.

²⁴ Cf. Col 3:10. *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 384–385: κόσμου γὰρ κτίσις ἐστὶν ἡ τῆς ἐκκλησίας κατασκευή, ἐν ᾗ κατὰ τὴν τοῦ προφήτου φωνὴν καὶ οὐρανὸς κτίζεται καινός [...] καὶ γῆ καινὴ κατασκευάζεται [...] καὶ ἄνθρωπος πλάσσεται ἄλλος, ὁ διὰ τῆς ἁνωθεν γεννήσεως ἀνακαινιζόμενος κατ’ εἰκόνα τοῦ κτίσαντος αὐτόν.

to Easter day, arguing that this day “is the beginning of another creation.” This day is different from all the other days: the ordinary days flow from the chronological beginning (ἀρχή) and are measured by time, χρόνος. But Easter day is in itself ἀρχή. And not only “a new heaven” and “a new earth”²⁵ are created on this “day,” but also “the true (ἀληθινός) human being made after the image and likeness of God is created”²⁶ in this “beginning.” Thus, the creation after the image happens in what Gregory calls “another creation,” ἄλλη κτίσις. This creation does not take place in the temporal beginning, that is, the beginning of χρόνος but goes back to the different ἀρχή, namely Christ’s resurrection. Gregory adds ἀληθινός to avoid any misunderstanding: here he is talking about the final realisation of God’s plan, that is, the real and actual human being finally made after the image of God.

In *Cant.* 13, Gregory juxtaposes the two creations,²⁷ and it is actually in the case of both that the human mind can be led through things visible and comprehensible to those invisible and incomprehensible: “just as the person, looking upon the sensible world and having grasped the Wisdom that is displayed in the beauty of these beings, by analogy infers from what is visible the invisible Beauty and the wellspring of Wisdom, whose emanation constituted the nature of what is, so too the person, who looks at this new world of the church’s creation, sees in it the One who is and is becoming *all in all*.”²⁸ Interestingly, the first creation is depicted here as an emanation of the divine Wisdom, whereas in the second creation, God enters into that order in a different, new way, namely being incarnate in Christ and his body in order to become *all in all*. In other words, God – although he is the absolute being – is in Christ a subject of a certain *becoming* until the ever-growing body of Christ and the whole world coincide in the ultimate end.

It is worth comparing this to Gregory’s interpretation of the “manifold (ποικίλη) Wisdom of God” in *Cant.* 8 (this concept Gregory borrowed from Eph 3:10). What angels knew before Christ was only “the simple and uniform Wisdom of God.”²⁹ Before, “the divine nature made the entire creation by its power, bringing into exist-

²⁵ Cf. Isa 65:17.

²⁶ *Trid. spat.* (GNO IX.1), 280: κτίζεται καὶ ὁ ἀληθινὸς ἄνθρωπος ὁ κατ’ εἰκόνα γενόμενος θεοῦ καὶ ὁμοίωσιν.

²⁷ Gregory’s teaching on the two creations is a complicated and debatable topic; it is touched on in my other paper in this volume.

²⁸ Cf. 1 Cor 15:28. *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 385–386: ὥσπερ [...] ὁ πρὸς τὸν αἰσθητὸν ἀπιδὼν κόσμον καὶ τὴν ἐμφαινομένην τῷ κάλλει τῶν ὄντων σοφίαν κατανοήσας ἀναλογίζεται διὰ τῶν ὀρωμένων τό τε ἀόρατον κάλλος καὶ τὴν πηγὴν τῆς σοφίας, ἧς ἡ ἀπόρροια τὴν τῶν ὄντων συνεστήσατο φύσιν, οὕτω καὶ ὁ πρὸς τὸν καινὸν τοῦτον κόσμον τῆς κατὰ τὴν ἐκκλησίαν κτίσεως βλέπων ὁρᾷ ἐν αὐτῷ τὸν πάντα ἐν πᾶσιν ὄντα τε καὶ γινόμενον.

²⁹ *Cant.* 8 (GNO VI), 255: τὴν ἀπλὴν τε καὶ μονοειδῆ τοῦ θεοῦ σοφίαν.

ence the nature of things only by the impulse of will.”³⁰ There is nothing “multiform” in these acts of God’s Wisdom, or of “the divine nature,” as Gregory puts it in a quite impersonal way. But now there is something radically different since, in Christ, the “opposite things” (τὰ ἐναντία) were wisely and paradoxically knitted together. And most interestingly, all this was made known exclusively “through the church”; namely, “how life is mingled with death [...], how the invisible was revealed in flesh [...], how he died and did not depart from life,” and so on. And Gregory claims that “the friends of the bride learned through the church that all these things [...] are multiform and not simple works of Wisdom.”³¹ Therefore, the incarnation, death and resurrection of Christ are known and seen in the church, never independently from her. There is no other Christ but the one who is recognised, interpreted and proclaimed in and by the community of believers. To use the modern term, it is not in the so-called historical Jesus that one sees how God’s manifold Wisdom knits those “opposite things,” but rather in the Sacramental life of the church, where God’s Wisdom does indeed mingle life with death. In short, the church is the only access to the person of Christ.

5 Final Solution: Christ’s Ecclesial Flesh

Coming back to *Cant.* 13, we see that the bride eventually fulfils the virgins’ request by giving them an answer. With her reply, the bride, in Gregory’s interpretation, “describes for the virgins the marks of the One they seek, by appealing to the things that have been revealed to us for the sake of our salvation.”³² Interestingly, by these revealed things, Gregory understands not the life of Jesus on its own but the extension of it in the life of the church and her members since the bride “treats of the whole church as the one body of the bridegroom”³³ and thus names different members of the bridegroom’s body in her description. So, to show the bridegroom and his beauty, the bride invites others to look at each member of the church so that all of them *together* can portray by themselves the identity of the bridegroom.

But before considering the bride’s speech as interpreted by Gregory, it would make sense to turn shortly to *Cant.* 14, where Gregory expresses some similar ideas

³⁰ *Cant.* 8 (GNO VI), 255: τὴν θεϊάν φύσιν πᾶσαν τὴν κτίσιν κατ’ ἐξουσίαν ἐργάζεσθαι ἐν μόνῃ τῇ ὁρμῇ τοῦ θελήματος τὴν τῶν ὄντων φύσιν εἰς γένεσιν ἄγουσαν.

³¹ *Cant.* 8 (GNO VI), 256: ταῦτα γὰρ πάντα [...] ποικίλα ὄντα καὶ οὐχ ἅπλᾳ τῆς σοφίας ἔργα διὰ τῆς ἐκκλησίας οἱ φίλοι τοῦ νυμφίου μαθόντες.

³² *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 386: διὰ τῶν ἐπὶ σωτηρίᾳ φανερωθέντων ἡμῖν ὑπογράφει ταῖς παρθένοις τὰ τοῦ ζητουμένου γνωρίσματα.

³³ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 386: πᾶσαν τὴν ἐκκλησίαν ἐν σῶμα τοῦ νυμφίου ποιήσασα.

to those we have just seen. There, Gregory is commenting on the following words of the bride: *His appearance (εἶδος) is like Lebanon the chosen [...] and [he is] totally desire.*³⁴ The term εἶδος draws Gregory's special attention.³⁵ This term, as he explains, must refer to "the visible beauty of the bridegroom" (τὸ βλέπόμενον τοῦ νυμφίου κάλλος), which means for Gregory nothing else than that ecclesial body that consists of "individual members." Therefore, what the bride refers to is "the beauty of the bridegroom in its totality."³⁶ In the same way, the bridegroom is named by the bride as "totally desire," ὁλος ἐπιθυμία. In Gregory's interpretation, each member contributes to how Christ's body becomes totally desirable. And according to Gregory's universalist vision, the body is "totally" beautiful and desirable when no member is missing from the body. Moreover, this glorious completion of Christ, which comes at the eschaton, is already realised in a certain incipient, or potential, form since in Christ, "there was a portion of every nation [...] and all human beings at once."³⁷

Going back to *Cant.* 13, we see that the bride begins her description of the bridegroom in the following way: *My kinsman is white and ruddy.*³⁸ According to Gregory, these two colours point to "the characteristic trait of flesh."³⁹ So, in searching for the bridegroom, what we must look for is flesh. This is so because "our understanding will not reach up to the incomprehensible and the infinite until it has first grasped in faith what has been made visible."⁴⁰ In short, the visible flesh is the only way to the invisible God. But interestingly, this flesh is approached *in faith*. So, I would suppose that what Gregory has in mind here is the Eucharist. And the following discussion only supports this hypothesis. Gregory refers to another verse from Song where the bride compares the bridegroom to an apple,⁴¹ and he notes that an apple is also characterised by those two colours: "the apple is white and it blushes – and the blush, I venture, points symbolically to the nature of blood."⁴² Therefore, since Gregory distinctively emphasises blood, he must indeed allude to

³⁴ Song 5:15–16: εἶδος αὐτοῦ ὡς Λίβανος ἐκλεκτός [...] καὶ ὁλος ἐπιθυμία.

³⁵ Probably because of its significance in the Greek philosophical tradition. Still, in this case, it is taken as neither the Aristotelian "form" (as distinct from matter) nor as the Platonic "idea," which is transcendent to its "copy."

³⁶ *Cant.* 14 (GNO VI), 423: ὅλον τὸ τοῦ νυμφίου κάλλος.

³⁷ *Cant.* 14 (GNO VI), 427–428: παντός ἦν ἔθνους τὸ μέρος, [...] καὶ πάντων ἅπαξ ἀνθρώπων.

³⁸ Song 5:10: ἀδελφιδός μου λευκός καὶ πυρρός.

³⁹ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 387: τὸ τῆς σαρκὸς ἰδίωμα.

⁴⁰ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 387: οὐ πρότερον ἐπὶ τὸ ἀληπτόν τε καὶ ἀόριστον ἀναθίγεται ὑμῶν ἡ διάνοια πρὶν τοῦ ὁφθέντος διὰ τῆς πίστεως περιδράξασθαι.

⁴¹ Song 2:3.

⁴² *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 387: λευκόν τε γάρ ἐστι τὸ μῆλον καὶ ἐρυθραίνεται, τὴν τοῦ αἵματος οἶμαι φύσιν συμβολικῶς ἐνδεικνύμενου τοῦ ἐρυθρήματος.

the Eucharist here. Thus, the bridegroom, Christ, is to be searched for and met by the virgins, us, in a Eucharistic community that gathers together *in faith*.

The bride continues: *His head is as very fine gold*,⁴³ and this allows Gregory to speculate further on Christ's headship. He again explains that what we are dealing with is not God *per se* but the human being in whom God is incarnate: "when we speak of Christ, we are not using that name to refer to the eternity of the Godhead but to the human being that has received God [...], through whom the Word put on our nature."⁴⁴ This passage is of critical importance because Gregory's language here is very curious. It is through the human being Christ that the Word puts on our nature. Thus, the Word's putting on of human nature is mediated through the particular divinised human being and is, consequently, broader than what happened only in that head or the first fruits. The incarnation of the Word takes place in the whole body of Christ, the church, that will eventually include every human being, as Gregory believed. Therefore, it is this *completed* Christ, *totus Christus*, who is God made *fully* visible, from which one may conclude that for Gregory, "all the fullness of the Godhead" will "dwell bodily" in whole humanity.⁴⁵ And it is in this way that the unimaginable God will be imaged, and the immeasurable God will be measured, namely by "the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."

To sum up, we have seen most clearly that the bridegroom is to be found and seen nowhere else but in the bride herself. There is no Christ except the one whose visible, approachable, and comprehensible human nature is constituted by those who believe in him, search for him and eventually find him (or his trace⁴⁶) in themselves and each other. And Christian eschatology lies in the hope that Christ, who is still incomplete, will be completed when the whole of humanity constitutes him as the only perfect manifestation and image of God.

⁴³ Song 5:11.

⁴⁴ *Cant.* 13 (GNO VI), 390–391: Χριστὸν δὲ νῦν λέγομεν οὐ πρὸς τὸ αἰδίον τῆς θεότητος ἀναπέμποντες τοῦτο τὸ ὄνομα ἀλλὰ πρὸς τὸν θεοδόχον ἄνθρωπον, [...] δι' οὗ ὁ λόγος τὴν φύσιν ἡμῶν περιέβαλετο.

⁴⁵ Col 2:9.

⁴⁶ If I am allowed to adopt the concept from: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 61.