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# Seeing, Embodying, and Proclaiming Christ

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**Abstract:** This essay examines the way Irenaeus of Lyons describes Blandina in her martyrdom: seen by others as embodying Christ and so encouraging them to also bear witness and be born into life by the Virgin Mother, the Church. It explores in particular Irenaeus' exegetical moves, so as to regain a sense of the unity of theology and exegesis as a transformed and transforming vision, which in turn extends the incarnation of Christ into the present in those who also take up the cross. In this way Irenaeus offers a way of understanding the unity of the discipline of theology and a vision of life and the Church that speaks to our contemporary situation.

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## Introduction

It has been increasingly recognized over recent decades that the study, or perhaps better, the *practice* of theology, is in something of a quandary, searching, as the 'God and the Good Life' project puts it, for 'new (and at the same time old) ways of doing theology that combine intellectual rigor with lived spirituality and social engagement'. Part of the problem is the fragmentation of the (singular) discipline of theology itself. Looking back at the last past century, the discipline of theology seems to have fragmented into various subdisciplines that no longer talk with each other, increasing specialization correlated to increasing fragmentation, to the point that it is no longer clear at all that the different areas belong to a common discipline of theology. In broad strokes, borrowing from Farley,<sup>1</sup> one might say that for the first millennium and more, theology was pursued by the contemplative reading of Scripture in the context of the school

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Farley, *Theologia: The Fragmentation and Unity of Theological Education* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

of liturgy and in the tradition of the Fathers; but during the course of the second millennium, this *paedeia* fell apart (East and West): the practice of *sacra pagina* became the discipline of *sacra doctrina*, in which passages of Scripture were accumulated in support of dogmatic points, the *loci communes*, which then took on a life of their own, as the building blocks for dogmatic theology, resulting in handbooks of dogmatic theology that in turn provided the categories used in the study of Church History and the Fathers. As the universities evolved – from the medieval university, in which theology was the queen of the disciplines, to the modern university, centered upon scientific study (*Wissenschaft*) – the nature of theology changed yet further, from *sapiential* wisdom to *scientific* knowledge. And the result of this explosion of knowledge, as valuable as it indeed is, was fragmentation, not only between theology and the other disciplines (philosophy, science etc.), but in theology itself, so that there are now so many different (sub-) disciplines, each working in isolation, making it hard to see how they belong together in the one discipline of theology.

A rather glaring example of this problem is evidenced in a monograph devoted to a particular locus – that of the Trinity – by Richard Hanson, who, after concluding his mammoth landmark tome, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God*, notes in an article summarizing his work that, through all the various debates: ‘The shape of Trinitarian doctrine finally achieved in the fourth century, then, was necessary, indeed we may say permanent. It was a solution, *the* solution, to the intellectual problem which had for so long vexed the church.’<sup>2</sup> The problem to be solved is an intellectual one, that of establishing the doctrine of the Trinity. Yet this is, for Hanson at least, a task separable from the exegetical practices of those whom he studied. For, as he puts it in the conclusion to his tome:

[T]he expounders of the text of the Bible are incompetent and ill-prepared to expound it. This applies as much to the wooden and unimaginative approach of the Arians as it does to the fixed determination of their opponents to read their doctrine into the Bible by hook or crook.<sup>3</sup>

He clearly has no time for the exegetical practices of the theologians of this period by which they reached their conclusions: reading the Scriptures – the Law, the Psalms and the Prophets – as speaking of Christ. He then continues with this rather perplexing statement:

It was much more the presuppositions with which they approach the Biblical text that clouded their perceptions, the tendency to treat the Bible in an ‘atomic’ way as if each verse or set of verses was capable of giving direct

<sup>2</sup> Richard P.C. Hanson, ‘The Achievement of Orthodoxy in the Fourth Century AD’, in Rowan Williams, ed., *The Making of Orthodoxy: Essays in Honour of Henry Chadwick* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 142–56, at p.156.

<sup>3</sup> Richard P.C. Hanson, *The Search for the Christian Doctrine of God: The Arian Controversy*, 318–381 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1988), p. 848.

information about Christian doctrine apart from its context, the ‘oracular’ concept of the nature of the Bible, the incapacity with a few exceptions to take serious account of the background and circumstances of the writers. *The very reverence with which they honoured the Bible as a sacred book stood in the way of their understanding it.* In this matter they were of course only reproducing the presuppositions of all Christians before them, of the writers of the New Testament itself, of the tradition of Jewish rabbinic piety and scholarship.<sup>4</sup>

Their exegetical practice is simply wrong, even if it is a practice going back to the apostles themselves and their proclamation of the gospel, a manner of exegesis moreover shared with the rabbis, and which was, in fact, the common approach to sacred texts in antiquity.<sup>5</sup> And, more perplexingly, this was also the exegetical practice within which ‘Trinitarian theology’ was elaborated and has its meaning. Hanson never, as far as I am aware, addressed the question of what happens when one takes supposed core theological elements (in this case, the Trinity) out of the context in which they were composed – the particular practice of reading Scripture and the celebration of liturgy within which they had meaning, both leading to a *praxis* of piety, practices of identity formation shaping the believer in the image of Christ, to be his body – and places them in another context, in this case that of systematic theology and a reading of Scripture that focuses on the historical context of each verse, rather than seeing Scripture as the book of Christ.

## Blandina

There has, of course, been much work done over the last couple of decades in trying to recover a properly ‘theological interpretation of Scripture’, and also systematic reflections on Scripture itself.<sup>6</sup> There is, of course, much to be said about all of this. But in this essay I will take a different tack, and consider theology as fundamentally being the transformation of vision, so that we can see, embody, and proclaim or witness to Christ. To do so, I will begin with the ‘Letter from the Churches of Vienne and Lyons to their brethren in Asia and Phrygia’, almost certainly written by Irenaeus himself, and in particular the figure of Blandina.<sup>7</sup> It describes how during the persecution of Christians around Lyons in the late 170s, some Christians were taken to the arena, but they

<sup>4</sup> Hanson, *Search*, pp. 848–9, italics mine.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. James L. Kugel, *Traditions of the Bible: A Guide to the Bible as It Was at the Start of the Common Era* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), pp. 14–19.

<sup>6</sup> For example, the *Journal of Theological Interpretation*; for systematic reflection see most recently Joseph K. Gordon, *Divine Scripture in Human Understanding* (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2020).

<sup>7</sup> The Letter is preserved in Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (hereafter EH) 5.1–2. Ed. and trans. K. Lake, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980 [1926]), modified. On Irenaeus’ authorship, see Pierre Nautin, *Lettres et écrivains chrétiens des II<sup>e</sup> et III<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris: Cerf, 1961), pp. 54–61, 93–5.

‘appeared to be unprepared and untrained, as yet weak and unable to endure such a great conflict’. About ten of these, the letter says, proved to be ‘stillborn’ or ‘miscarried’, causing great sorrow to the others and weakening the resolve of those yet to undergo their torture (EH 5.1.11). However, these stillborn Christians were encouraged through the zeal of the others, especially the slave girl Blandina, the heroine of the story (more lines are devoted to her than to any other figure, and she is named, while her Christian mistress remains nameless). As a young female slave – practically a non-person in antiquity, the weakest of the weak – she personifies the theology of martyrdom based on Christ’s words to Paul: ‘My strength is made perfect in weakness’ (2 Cor. 12:9). Blandina is specifically described as so ‘weak in body’ that the others were fearful lest she not be able to make the good confession. But

[She] was filled with such power that even those who were taking turns to torture her in every way from dawn until dusk were weary and beaten. They themselves admitted that they were beaten [...] astonished at her endurance, as her entire body was mangled and broken (EH 5.1.18).

Not only is she, in her weakness, filled with divine power by her confession, but, as the account continues, she becomes fully identified with the one whose body was broken on Golgotha:

Blandina was suspended on a stake [ἐπι ξύλου κρεμασθεῖσα], and exposed to be devoured by the wild beasts who should attack her. And by being seen hanging in the form of a cross [διὰ τοῦ βλέπεσθαι σταυροῦ σχήματι κρεμαμένη], and by her earnest prayers, she inspired great zeal in those struggling [τοῖς ἀγωνιζομένοις], for while struggling they saw, with their outward eyes through the sister the one who was crucified for them [βλεπόντων αὐτῶν ἐν τῷ ἀγῶνι καὶ τοῖς ἔξωθεν ὀφθαλμοῖς διὰ τῆς ἀδελφῆς τὸν ὑπὲρ αὐτῶν ἐσταυρωμένοι], that he might persuade those who believe in him that all who suffer for Christ’s sake will have eternal communion with the living God [ἵνα πείσῃ τοὺς πιστεύοντας εἰς αὐτὸν ὅτι πᾶς ὁ ὑπὲρ τῆς Χριστοῦ δόξης παθὼν τὴν κοινοῦν αἰεὶ ἔχει μετὰ τοῦ ζῶντος θεοῦ.] (EH 5.1.41).

After describing her suffering, and that of another Christian called Attalus, the letter then continues a little later:

Through their continued life the dead were made alive, and the witnesses [μάρτυρες] showed favor to those who had failed to witness. And there was great joy for the Virgin Mother in receiving back alive those who she had miscarried as dead. For through them the majority of those who had denied were again brought to birth and again conceived and again brought to life and learned to confess; and now living and strengthened, they went to the judgment seat (EH 5.1.45–6).

The Christians who turned away from making their confession are simply dead; their lack of preparation has meant that they are stillborn children of the Virgin

Mother, the Church. But strengthened by the witness of others, they also are able to go to their own death, and so the Virgin Mother receives them back alive, finally giving birth to living children of God. The death of the martyr, the letter says later on, is their ‘new birth’, and the death of the martyr is celebrated as their true birthday (*EH* 5.1.63).

## Embodying

There are several points to be made from this striking account. First, Blandina is no longer simply an example of the paradigm of strength in weakness: she now embodies Christ himself. As Christ was only known by his disciples in his ‘exodus’ (cf. Luke 9:31), the paschal *transitus*, with each of the resurrectional accounts specifying a turning point through which the disciples, who initially don’t recognize him or believe that he has risen, come to encounter him, most importantly in the Lukan account of the Road to Emmaus: only when the Scriptures (the ‘Old Testament’) are opened by the Risen Christ – to show how Moses and all the Prophets spoke about how the Son of Man must suffer before entering his glory – do the disciples’ hearts start to burn, and Christ reveals himself in the breaking of bread, only to immediately disappear. Christ is, and always is, ‘the Coming One’, whose coming or *parousia* coincides with his *transitus*, his exodus, so that Christians from the beginning are awaiting his coming as Augustine put it in his *Confessions*: ‘Through him you sought us when we were not seeking you, but you sought us that we might begin to seek you’.<sup>8</sup> The New Testament itself does not speak of a ‘second’ coming, as a distinct, discrete, event, but rather speaks simply of ‘the coming, the *parousia*, of the Lord Jesus with all his saints’ (1 Thess. 3:13; cf. 2 Thess. 2:1, ‘concerning the *parousia* of our Lord Jesus Christ’) so that Christians await the Savior, who will change their body to be like his glorious body (Phil. 3:21; Col. 3:4; and 1 Jn. 3:2). Thus it is that, known in his exodus, Christ returns in those who follow him in this exodus, so that Blandina is the very embodiment, the body, of Christ, seen by ‘outward eyes’.

## Seeing: Transformation of Vision

The second point to be made pertains to this ‘seeing’. Within the terms of the letter, those who looked at Blandina and saw her as the embodiment of Christ are specifically those in the arena, struggling alongside her, *not* those sitting in the stalls enjoying the games: one must be in the arena to see Blandina as the embodiment of Christ – this is not for bystanders. The affirmation, then, that she images Christ so completely that looking at her they saw Christ himself is not a neutral, ‘objective’ statement of a natural phenomenon, but has, as its were, its own phenomenality, one which operates in a different

<sup>8</sup> *Confessions*, 11.4, trans. Maria Boulding (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1997).

manner than the way things appear in the horizon of the world illuminated by the physical sun.<sup>9</sup>

But we cannot stop there, for *as a letter*, we are forced to realize that in fact it is Irenaeus who, with his theological understanding, is able to look at this scene of obscene barbarity and ugly violence and see not only trials and tribulations to be rewarded with future rewards but the ‘incarnation’ of Christ himself. It by ‘theologizing Christ’, as another second century text puts it, that is, affirming that *this one* – the crucified and risen One, proclaimed by the apostles in accordance with the Scripture and known in the breaking of bread – is the image of the invisible God in whom the fulness of divinity dwells bodily (Col. 1:15, 2:9), that Irenaeus is also able to see Blandina, hanging on the wood in the form of a cross, in the same light, as an image of Christ, embodying him.<sup>10</sup> To ‘theologize’ is not to speak ‘about’ God, in the way that other ‘-ologies’ speak ‘about’ their own subjects, but to see with a transformed (and transforming – it is a transitive verb) vision.

But we cannot stop even there. For we must now also recognize that, again *as a text*, it is in fact the readers of the letter – us, today – who, by virtue of Irenaeus’ verbal icon of Blandina, are able to look at her as the image of Christ in a manner not available to a bystander then or now. The ‘seeing’ in question, then, does not require physical presence in a specific moment of a space-time point, just as to encounter the risen Christ does not require seeing him on the physical road to Emmaus and being there oneself, but rather sharing in the opening of the Scriptures and the breaking of the bread. The phenomenality involved in the revelation of God in Christ is eternal and universal.

By starting with the Gospel – the apostolic proclamation of the crucified and risen Christ in accordance with the Scriptures now opened or unveiled – Irenaeus can see the whole economy of God that leads from the first Adam to the second as a single continuous paedagogic economy. So much is this the case that he can even state: ‘Since the Saviour pre-exists, it was necessary that the one to be saved should

<sup>9</sup> Here Michel Henry’s ‘phenomenology of life’ offers a very rigorous consideration of what is involved in such phenomenality. Cf. John Behr, *John the Theologian and His Paschal Gospel: A Prologue to Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), pp. 273–322.

<sup>10</sup> The text referred to is the document known as *The Little Labyrinth* (fragments of which are preserved by Eusebius, EH 5.28). It speaks of how in many earlier Christian writings, especially Irenaeus and Melito, ‘Christ is theologized’ (θεολογείται ὁ Χριστός), and how in hymns ‘Christ is hymned as the Word of God, theologizing him’ (τὸν λόγον τοῦ θεοῦ τὸν Χριστὸν ὑμνοῦσιν θεολογοῦντες), in contrast to the Theodotians, who ‘abandoning the Holy Scriptures of God, pursue the study of geometry’ (!), presumably meaning the things of this world, ‘for they are of the earth and speak of the earth’, so that they do not know ‘him who comes from above’ (τὸν ἄνωθεν ἐρχόμενον). Cf. John Behr, *The Way to Nicaea* (Crestwood, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001), pp. 142–4.



come into existence, so that the Savior doesn't exist in vain!<sup>11</sup> There is, for Irenaeus, a single, uninterrupted economy that leads from the 'type' (cf. Rom. 5:14) to reality, a movement which, as always seen through the Pascha of Christ, leads from mortality, *through death*, to life, a movement that leads from our initial animation by a breath of life, which necessarily expires (that is what a breath does!), to the life-giving Spirit, which, as given through death (anticipated in baptism), gives a life that cannot be touched by death. And so, the very apostasy itself has an instructive role to play; 'your own apostasy shall instruct you', as Jeremiah, quoted by Irenaeus, affirms.<sup>12</sup> God is 'patient' with us, Irenaeus affirms, while we learn from our own apostasy and death that we do not have life in ourselves, and in our experience of ultimate weakness – in our actual death – come to know the strength and the power of God. God's own project, then, of making human beings in his own image and likeness (Gen. 1:26–7) is thus only completed at the end: the creation of the human being is eschatological not protological:

[...] *just as*, from the beginning [*ab initio*] of our formation [*plasmationis*] in Adam, the breath of life from God, having been united [*unita*] to the handiwork [*plasmati*], animated [*animavit*] the human being and showed him to be a rational being, *so also*, at the end [*in fine*], the Word of the Father and the Spirit of God, having become united [*adunitus*] with the ancient substance of the formation [*plasmationis*] of Adam, rendered [*effecit*] the human being living [*viventem*] and perfect, bearing the perfect Father, *in order that just as* in the animated we all die, *so also* in the spiritual we may all be vivified [*vivificemur*]. For never at any time did Adam escape the Hands of God, to whom the Father speaking, said, 'Let us make the human being in our image, after our likeness' [Gen. 1:26]. And for this reason at the end [*fine*], 'not by the will of the flesh, nor by the will of man' [John 1:13], but by the good pleasure of the Father, his Hands perfected a living human being [*vivum perfecerunt hominem*], in order that Adam might become in the image and likeness of God (*Haer* 5.1.3).

I have argued elsewhere that the background of this approach is the Gospel of John, in which Christ's final words on the cross, 'it is finished', refer back to Genesis 1:26–7 (witnessed, unwittingly by Pilate: 'Behold the human being'), so that Jesus Christ, on the cross, is the true living human being, *the image* of the invisible God

<sup>11</sup> *AH*. 3.22.3; Cf. John Behr, "'Since the Savior Pre-Exists': A Reconsideration of Irenaeus AH 3.22.3", forthcoming in *Studia Patristica*, and more generally, *Irenaeus of Lyons: Identifying Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Jer. 2:19; Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* (hereafter *Haer.*) 4.37.7; ed. and French trans. A. Rousseau et al, *Haer.* 1–3 SC 263–4, 293–4, 210–11 (Paris: Cerf, 1979, 1982, 1974); *Haer.* 4, SC 100 (Paris: Cerf, 1965); *Haer.* 5 SC 152–3 (Paris: Cerf, 1969); ET A. Roberts and J. Donaldson (eds.), *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1 (Edinburgh, 1887; repr. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1987), modified. See the discussion throughout 4.37–9, and also, regarding the parallel between Jonah and the human race in *Haer.* 3.20.1–2; John Behr, *Irenaeus*, pp. 192–8, 158–62 respectively.

(Col. 1:15), laying down his life in love for others.<sup>13</sup> We see this also in Ignatius, who implores the Roman Christians not to interfere with his coming martyrdom:

Birth pangs are upon me [...] Suffer me, my brethren; hinder me not from living, do not wish me to die. [...] Suffer me to receive the pure light; when I shall have arrived there, I shall be a human being (ἐκεῖ παραγενόμενος ἄνθρωπος ἕσομαι). Suffer me to follow the example of the passion of my God.<sup>14</sup>

Similarly when Irenaeus says (as is often quoted, but incompletely, and so imprecisely): ‘the glory of God is the living human being’, he continues, ‘and the life of the human being is to see God’ (*Haer.* 4.20.7; for no one can see God and live! cf. Ex. 33:20): he is speaking about the martyr (cf. *Haer.* 5.9.2). Not only is the creation of the human being eschatological rather than protological, but its realization – the only work specifically described by Genesis 1 as God’s own project, initiated with a subjunctive (let us make...) rather than an imperative (let there be) – requires our own ‘let it be’, changing, by the Cross of Christ, the ground of our being from the necessity and mortality in which we have come into existence into freedom in voluntary, self-offering love.

As such, theology can only speak eschatologically, in the light of the end. It is an end which is, however, given, in the Passion of Christ, when the books of Scripture are opened or unveiled and ‘the apocalypse of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages is now made manifest and made known through the prophetic writings’ (Rom. 16:25–6). It is, as Richard Hays puts it, ‘the eschatological *apokalypsis* of the Cross’ that provides a hermeneutical lens by means of which Scripture can be brought into focus with ‘a profound new symbolic coherence’.<sup>15</sup> This unveiling, moreover, creates a ‘two-level’ discourse or ‘stereoptic’ vision (to borrow the phrase of J. Louis Martyn): how things might have seemed at the time, and how, from the point of view of the end, they actually are.<sup>16</sup> It is important to emphasise that both are true, but that they are not said in the same register. We can see this at work throughout the whole of Scripture. It is most clear, for instance, in the account of Joseph in Genesis: he was, concretely, sold into slavery by the sinful actions of his brothers; yet by the end he can tell them: ‘Do not be distressed or angry with yourselves, because you sold me here; for God sent me before you to preserve life. [...] So it was not you who sent me here, but God’ (Gen. 45:5, 8). It is also evident in Peter’s great speech in Acts: ‘This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and

<sup>13</sup> Cf. John Behr, *John the Theologian*, pp. 195–217.

<sup>14</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Romans*, 6; text and ET A. Stewart, *Ignatius of Antioch: The Letters*, Popular Patristics Series 49 (Yonkers, NY: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2013).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 169.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. J. Louis Martyn, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel: The New Testament Library*, 3rd edn (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press 2003 [1968]), p. 130.



foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men' (Acts 2.23). It is also, I have argued recently, the difference between the Synoptics and the Gospel of the Theologian.<sup>17</sup>

There are two further points which must be clearly made regarding this 'stereoptic vision' of an eschatologically oriented theology. First, that it enables us to see the whole of creation, in its present state, as groaning in travail, as Paul puts it, 'awaiting with eager longing the unveiling of the sons of God', although this hope is not seen (for we live by faith not sight – back to the issue of phenomenality), but awaited with patience.<sup>18</sup> The second point is that one must not conflate the two registers opened up by 'the eschatological apocalypse of the cross' or reduce them to a single horizon. Origen offers some really important observations regarding this. In view of the end, when God will in fact be 'all in all', we can indeed affirm that all things are held together by God, providentially ordered and arranged towards that *telos*; but this does not give us permission or grounds to explain how or why anyone or anything is where it is: we may certainly, as he puts it, 'endeavour to inquire and examine how that great variety and diversity of the world may appear to be consistent with the whole rationale of righteousness'; but he then immediately adds, 'I say "rationale," of course, in a general sense, for it is the mark of an ignorant person to seek, and a foolish person to give, the particular rationale for each being'.<sup>19</sup> To conflate the two registers, or to offer an account of why a particular tragedy happened or why a specific person suffers in a particular way is to embark on a different kind of discourse, no longer starting from the end – life brought about through death. Neither, of course, does faith that in the end God will bring all things together such that God will be all in all remove the absolute demand that we do whatever we can to bring comfort to the afflicted!

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Behr, *John the Theologian*.

<sup>18</sup> Rom 8:19–25. Cf. Maximus the Confessor, *Ambiguum* 6: 'For it is true – though it may be a jarring and unusual thing to say – that both we and the Word of God, the Creator and Master of the universe, exist in a kind of womb, owing to the present conditions of our life. In this sense-perceptible world, just as if he were enclosed in a womb, the Word of God appears only obscurely, and only to those who have the spirit of John the Baptist, while, on the other hand, human beings, gazing through the womb of the material world, catch but a glimpse of the Word who is concealed within beings (and this, again, only if they are endowed with John's spiritual gifts). For when compared to the ineffable glory and splendor of the age to come, and to the kind of life that awaits us there, this present life differs in no way from a womb swathed in darkness, in which, for the sake of us who were infantile in mind, the infinitely perfect Word of God, who loves mankind, became an infant.' Ed. and ET Nicholas Constatas, *On Difficulties in the Church Fathers: The Ambigua*, Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, 2 vols. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), modified.

<sup>19</sup> Origen, *Princ.* 2.9.4; cf. 2.9.8; 3.5.8. Ed. and ET John Behr, *Origen: On First Principles*, Oxford Early Christian Texts (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017).

## Witnessing and the Church

Returning to the text describing Blandina's martyrdom, a final and equally striking point in the account is the appearance, in this reversal of life and death, of the Virgin Mother (*HE* 5.1.45). Those who had turned away from making their confession (that is, who stayed 'alive' in this world) are simply dead. Their lack of preparation has resulted in their condition of being stillborn children of the Virgin Mother. However, strengthened by the witness of others, especially Blandina, they were able to go to their martyrdom, so that the Virgin Mother, with great joy, can receive them back as alive, finally giving birth to living children of God.

Speaking of the Church as mother, or more emphatically 'the Virgin Mother', is largely absent from modern ecclesiology, although it was native and primary for Christians from the beginning. The background for this seems to be Isaiah 54:1: 'Rejoice O barren one, who did not bear; break forth into singing and cry aloud, you who have not been in travail; for the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her that is married'. This verse is already quoted by Paul with such an interpretation: it speaks, the Apostle says, of the Jerusalem above, 'our mother' (cf. Gal. 4:46–7). It is also a connection made by others in the second century; as the 'Second Epistle of Clement' puts it, 'In saying "rejoice O barren one who did not bear", he meant us, for our Church was barren before children were given to her'.<sup>20</sup>

A further background for speak of Church as the Virgin Mother is the description of Eve coming from the side of Adam (cf. Gen. 2:18–24), paralleled by John in his Gospel with the blood and water, baptism and Eucharist, coming from the side of Christ at the Crucifixion. As Tertullian commented: 'As Adam was a figure of Christ, Adam's sleep sketched out the death of Christ, who was to sleep a mortal slumber, so that from the wound inflicted on his side might be figured the true Mother of the living, the Church'.<sup>21</sup> The image of Eve also seems to be behind the figure of the woman in travail evoked by Christ in Jn. 16:20–2, whose tribulation will turn to joy when 'a human being is born into the world', and again at the cross as address by Christ, again speaking of birth and sonship: 'Woman, behold your son!' (Jn. 19:26).<sup>22</sup> Whereas Eve was called 'the mother of the living' (Gen. 3:20), all her children die, and so it is the Church that is the true 'mother of the living', acquiring as living human beings those who, following Christ, are born through martyric death, anticipated by baptism.

Irenaeus's fullest reflections on the Church, seen in this perspective, occur in *Haer.* 4.33.9–11. She is the one who 'in every place, because of that

<sup>20</sup> *Second Epistle of Clement*, 2; ed. and ET Christopher Tuckett, Oxford Apostolic Fathers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>21</sup> Tertullian, *De Anima*, 43.10; ed. J. H. Waszink (Amsterdam: Mühlenhoff, 1947); ET in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, p. 3.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Behr, *John the Theologian*, pp. 183–6, 215–16.

love which she cherishes towards God, sends forward throughout all times a multitude of martyrs to the Father'; she is the one who 'alone sustains with purity the reproach of those who suffer persecution for righteousness' sake and endure all sorts of punishments and are put to death because of the love which they bear to God and their confession of his Son' (*Haer.* 4.33.9). Irenaeus continues this passage by describing how the persecution of those upon whom the Spirit would rest and who would obey the Word of God was foretold by the prophets, who also prefigured it in their own lives, 'because of their love of God and on account of his Word'. In so doing, however, they not only prefigured Christ, but also contributed to the completion of the economy:

[I]n the same way that the activity of the entire body is shown by our members – for the figure of the whole human is not shown by a single member but by all – so also the prophets, while all prefiguring the one [Christ], did each of them, in accordance with their position as a member, complete the economy and foreshadow the work of Christ connected with that member (*Haer.* 4.33.10).

Irenaeus then gives a tapestry of scriptural quotations and allusions, exemplifying the complete figure witnessed to by the prophets,<sup>23</sup> and concludes:

Those, again, saying, 'He is a man, and who shall know him?' [Jer. 17:9], and, 'I came unto the prophetess, and she bore a son, and his name is called Wonderful Counselor, mighty God' [Isa. 8:3, 9:6], and who proclaimed the one from the Virgin [to be] Immanuel [cf. Isa. 7:14], showed the union of the Word of God with his handiwork, that the Word would become flesh and the Son of God the Son of man – the pure one opening purely that pure womb which regenerates humans unto God and which he himself made pure [*purus pure puram aperiens vulvam eam quae regenerat homines in Deum, quam ipse puram fecit*] – having become that which we are, he is *mighty God* and has a generation which cannot be declared (*Haer.* 4.33.11).

Again it seems to be an allusion to Isa. 54:1 (and figured also by Eve): 'the pure one' is Christ himself, whose 'opening purely that pure womb which regenerates humans unto God' must refer to his Passion, spoken of in Isa. 53,

<sup>23</sup> He begins by alluding to Isaiah, who beheld him in glory, at the right hand of the Father (Isa. 6:1, cf. Ps. 109:1), while others saw him coming on the clouds (Dan. 7:13), and yet others said of him, 'They shall look on him whom they have pierced' (Zech. 12:10), indicating his *parousia*, about which Christ himself referred (asking whether the Son of Man would find faith when he comes, Lk. 18:8) and so too Paul (2 Thess. 1:6–8). Yet others saw him as a judge, speaking of the fire of the Day of the Lord (Ps. 49:6; Mal. 4:1), to which the words of Christ and Paul again bear witness (Mt. 3:12, Lk. 3:17; Mt. 25:41; 2 Thess. 1:9–10). The third group of quotations (Ps. 44:3, 8, 4–5) speak about that beauty and splendor of his kingdom and 'the transcendent and pre-eminent exaltation of all those under his reign'. The first two groups of OT quotations are also followed by words of Christ and Paul.

the hymn of the suffering servant, so that Isa. 54:1 is read as its conclusion: Christ's Passion opens the way for our adoption as children of God, born of God (cf. Jn. 1:13), by baptismal conformity to the death of Christ (cf. Rom. 5:3–5, etc.), who is 'the first-born of many brethren' (Rom. 8:29) and is so as 'the first-born of the dead' (Col. 1:18). Or, as Irenaeus puts it: 'For the Lord, who was born 'the first-born of the dead', receiving the ancient fathers into his bosom regenerated them to the life of God, having becoming the beginning of those who live, as Adam had become the beginning of those who die' (*Haer.* 3.22.4). It is as 'the first-born of the dead' that Christ himself was born from the Virgin, so himself becoming the beginning of life for all those who are regenerated in his own new generation, in the same pure, virginal, womb. In other words, Christ's birth from the Virgin cannot be separated from his Passion. Moreover, as our text puts it, it is Christ himself, the pure one, who not only 'opens purely the pure womb', making a path for those who follow him, but in so doing makes that womb 'pure'.

## Conclusion

Irenaeus's account of Blandina's martyrdom has proved to be a rich resource for thinking again about the nature and task of theology, opening up new, and yet old, perspectives on the horizon in which theology speaks (and its relationship to Scripture read 'apocalyptically'), the 'stereoptic' vision it allows (and the problem of not recognizing this), the relationship between life and death, creation and what it is to be human, the 'incarnation' of Christ himself, and the Church, where ecclesiology is not simply yet another sub-discipline within theology by the connecting link between Christology and anthropology. This transforming vision, moreover, requires that one recognize oneself as already in the arena, not only in the way in which those with her that day were, but in the multitudinous ways in which this paradigmatic witness was lived out thereafter. Returning to the beginning of that history, however, has perhaps enabled us to see again with greater clarity what is involved in the practice of theology and the spiritual life.