



Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel*: An Emerging Christology*

Noel O'Sullivan

St Patrick's College, Thurles, County Tipperary

De Lubac's long and arduous involvement in the question of the relationship between nature and the supernatural reveals a theologian struggling to break through the encrustation of neo-scholastic concepts. The solution to this aporia is to understand the human relationship with God in terms of the Mystery of Christ, which becomes evident in the wider de Lubac corpus. The author argues that this process begins in the supernatural debate itself and that de Lubac's writings on the subject reveal an emerging christology.

KEYWORDS: *Desiderium Naturale*, *Grace*, *Nature*, *Natura Pura*, *Paradox*, *Potentia Oboedientialis*, *Supernatural*

Theological development does not take place in an intellectual vacuum. The historical, ecclesial, social and even political contexts determine why a particular theological question is highlighted and, no less significantly, how the problematic is presented and treated. This is true not only of the great controversies and debates that led to the seven ecumenical councils of the first millennium of the Church (325–787), but of subsequent issues that engaged the theological mind ever since. Thus, when we search for illumination from the past on a doctrine that concerns us today, we will be disappointed if we are not prepared to look behind the historically-conditioned elaborations of particular questions, even if these seem at some remove from our area of research. For this reason if we are to unravel the nature and significance of Jesus Christ we will not always find it neatly wrapped in christological terms. We are more likely, for example, to discover it in the labyrinth of the theology of grace, as it has been played out since the fourth century. This is certainly true in the case of Henri de Lubac, whose writings on nature and the supernatural are significant as one means of discerning his christology.

The language and categories of his famous work, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques*, are not those that we would use today to deal with the human

*This article is extrapolated from a doctoral thesis presented at the Institut Catholique in Paris, entitled: 'Christ and Creation: Christology as the key to interpreting the theology of creation in the works of Henri de Lubac.' The full text of the thesis will be published in due course.

relationship with God.¹ We would discuss it rather in terms of Covenant or the Mystery of Christ. Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, writing after Vatican Council II, when the dust had begun to settle after decades of controversy, summed up the nature–supernatural relationship in more integrated soteriological terms, incorporating creation and divinization. This is how he put it: ‘Current Christian reflection has substituted the relationship between earthly waiting and the eschatological Kingdom for the old problematic nature-supernatural. . . . Creation and divinization together form the one supernatural order of salvation.’² The Dutch Dominican is here giving expression to what had become common currency during the years of the Council. One strong indication that neo-scholasticism would no longer hold sway is the fact that the key concept ‘*natura pura*’ – which we explain below – is not mentioned in the Council documents. The economy of salvation is understood and expressed in more biblical and patristic terms than had been the case in the four centuries that preceded the Council. One of the architects of this new theology is Henri de Lubac.

The category of writings that probably best sums up the impact and trials of de Lubac concerns the question of the supernatural.³ A trenchant criticism of two different and erroneous interpretations of St Augustine’s understanding of grace, published in 1931, marks the beginning of his public involvement in the question of the supernatural. His interest, however, goes back to his student days at Ore Place (1924–1926) when he was part of a little research group that consisted of twelve students under the direction of Joseph Huby (1878–1948). It was the latter who encouraged de Lubac as part of his research task to verify if the neo-scholastic understanding of the supernatural really represented the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas. In particular, he was asked to clarify the understanding of *natura pura* in Aquinas’s work. The exposition he gave on the fruit of his research formed the basis of a dossier that eventually led to the publication of the two articles in 1931 which formed the first three chapters of his controversial, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques* (1946). These treated the interpretations of Augustine by Baius and Jansen, both of whom wanted to be faithful to the master but who failed to see the wood from the trees. Their myopic concern with the letter of Augustine’s writings blinded them to its spirit and led them – each in opposite ways – to grave misinterpretations of the Doctor of grace. Baius did not

1. Henri de Lubac, *Surnaturel: Etudes historiques* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1946).

2. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Theologische Peilingen IV, De zending van de kerk*, Bilthoven: Nelissen. French translation by P. Bourgy and I. Berten as *Approches théologiques IV* (Bruxelles: CEP, 1969), 75–78.

3. Henri de Lubac, ‘Deux Augustiniens Fourvoyés,’ *Recherches de Science Religieuse* 21 (1931): 422–443, 513–540; De Lubac, *Surnaturel*; De Lubac, ‘Le mystère du surnaturel,’ *RSR* 36 (1949), republished in Henri de Lubac, *Théologie dans l’histoire II* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), 71–107. Our references to this article are from the latter publication; Henri de Lubac, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965); Henri de Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965); Henri de Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce* (Paris: Fayard, 1980).

recognize the gratuity of grace but claimed it as a right. For Jansen, in contrast, the human person had no rights but was a victim of natural and supernatural determinism. De Lubac contrasts them succinctly: 'If both tend to dissolve the union between God and man which is essentially the Mystery of Christ, is it not that one has man stand up to God, while the other obliterates him?'⁴ Baius emphasizes man's rights, which justify his standing up to God to demand them; Jansen's man, on the other hand, has no rights before God and is utterly dependent on God's willingness to bestow his grace. Union between God and man is impossible in both cases. Union is only possible where the true nature of both parties is recognized, in this case God and man. Baius's man oversteps his position; Jansen fails to recognize man's autonomy and freedom. Both authors failed to appreciate the significance of the Christ event. Thus Baius and Jansen failed to see the potential dignity of the human person, which is made possible by Christ. De Lubac gives each of them the benefit of the doubt in regard to their motivation and concludes that in their enthusiasm to be faithful to Augustine, they fell into error.

The question arises as to why de Lubac sought to dialogue with these 16th-century theologians, since their interpretations of Augustine had been shown clearly to be inadequate both in their lifetime and afterwards. Was de Lubac's analysis of their writings simply that of an historian of theology? Our view is that he chose the writings of Baius and Jansen not for any interest that they contain in themselves, but because they enabled him to criticize the scholastic world from within and open it up to a new way of thinking, one that will eventually reveal an incipient christology.

Status Quaestionis

At the core of the debate is the theological understanding and expression of the relationship between nature and the supernatural, a question that is fraught with interpretative difficulties. Does a natural desire imply that it is constitutive of nature? Is this desire absolute or conditional? Is 'pure nature' always understood as simply a construct to protect the gratuity of grace or did it evolve into a system? And there is of course the whole issue of the reception of de Lubac's contributions to the debate on these issues. On the one hand, it was necessary to avoid a dualistic interpretation of the relationship which would imply that the supernatural is externally added to an already fully-constituted nature, a *superadditus*.⁵ We will refer to this dualism as a *duplex ordo*. On the other hand, all attempts to express an internal or intrinsic relationship would have to avoid the pitfalls of implying that the supernatural was somehow a continuation of nature, a *sequela creationis*, and that nature could lay claim to it. Any suggestion of it

4. 'Si l'un et l'autre tendent à dissoudre l'union entre Dieu et l'homme en quoi consiste essentiellement le Mystère du Christ, n'est-ce pas que l'un dresse l'homme en face de Dieu, tandis que l'autre l'anéantit?' (De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 41).

5. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 375.

being a development of nature would violate the gratuity of grace and even blur the distinction between nature and grace.

As so much of the debate and controversy centres around the question of the gratuity of grace, this demands special mention at the outset. All of God's grace is gifted and, while it can be solicited, it cannot be presumed or demanded. This is true, in particular, of the human person's final end which de Lubac identifies as the supernatural, the *ὑπὲρ φύσιν*, which we will explain in the next section. Later we will deal with the philosophical basis of a desire that is not in vain. Here we focus our analysis on the implications of the gratuity of grace in the New Testament.

Lexicographical and Semantic Survey

It is important to give a preliminary clarification of some of the key terms involved in this discussion. We will examine in particular the use of the terms: 'nature,' 'supernatural,' and 'pure nature.'

Nature

According to de Lubac, 'nature' can be understood in either of two ways. It may stand for creation in general or it may mean human nature:

In the couplet 'nature-supernatural' ... the word 'nature' can mean either – in a general way – the whole universe, the entire order of creation, or rather, in a more particular and direct way, *human* nature, but without cutting off the human entirely from the universe.⁶

Created in the image of God, the human person is superior to the cosmos but, for that, is no less a 'microcosm,' as Christian anthropology has always claimed and which is exemplified in the writings of, for example, Teilhard de Chardin.⁷

De Lubac recognizes that the term which translates the Latin *natura* and the Greek *φύσις* is very difficult to pin down because it is susceptible to multiple resonances. Theologically, he uses it as a correlative of 'supernatural' and invokes Gustave Martelet, whom he quotes as follows: 'Everything in the human person that does not come from the divine adoption, even if that emerges in him from the spirit and from freedom, can be called natural.'⁸ Using the term 'nature' of the human is not in

6. 'Dans le couple "nature-surnaturel" ..., le mot "nature" peut désigner soit, d'une façon générale, tout l'univers, l'ordre entier de la création, soit plutôt, de façon plus particulière et plus directe, la nature *humaine*, mais sans qu'il y ait lieu de couper totalement l'homme de l'univers' (De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 10).

7. *Ibid.*, 11.

8. Gustave Martelet, *Victoire sur la mort, éléments d'anthropologie chrétienne* (Chronique sociale de France, 1962) 127–128 (as quoted in De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 12).

opposition to understanding it as person, or freedom or spirit.⁹ The person cannot be reduced to 'nature,' as is evidenced by such diverse philosophies as phenomenology, personalism, existentialism and a particular branch of Marxism.¹⁰ The person is more than a 'nature'; the correlative 'supernatural' is an essential designation for a full understanding of the human person. It is useful to situate de Lubac's conception of nature in relation to the two great theologians of the Christian tradition. He distinguishes between Augustine and Aquinas as follows:

Let us say just that the most usual difference between the two of them, an essential difference but not a contradiction, arises because Saint Thomas frequently begins by considering human nature as such in a way that is still abstract, independently of sin and its consequences, whereas Saint Augustine takes as his starting point the experience of the sinful human being. While fully recognizing the transcendence of the supernatural, Saint Thomas – betraying perhaps a somewhat weak interpretation of the Augustinian *Fecisti nos ad Te* – shows it to be 'a completion bestowed on nature in the direction towards which its active inclinations already tended.'¹¹

In the light of this contrasting analysis we will find, not surprisingly, that de Lubac's use of the term human nature is more patristic than Thomist. But it is not a case of either/or. The *Fecisti nos ad Te* of the Confessions¹² may be considered as the underlying inspiration of de Lubac's understanding of the natural orientation to God, whereas the *desiderium naturale* provided him with the conceptual framework for teasing out that orientation.

Supernatural

'*Surnaturel*' is a term that is difficult to translate because its English equivalent, 'supernatural,' has the unfortunate connotation of the preternatural or of supra-natural happenings; events that are not otherwise explainable, like the abnormal, such as miracles. In contemporary language 'supernatural' can even signify the darker, nefarious, side of life. However, despite these misgivings, we will translate the term '*surnaturel*' with the English 'supernatural.'

The word 'supernatural' entered late into Latin theology and still later into ecclesiastical documents. De Lubac instances its first mention in the bull of Pius V condemning Baius *Ex omnibus afflictionibus* (1567).¹³ Its meaning

9. De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 12.

10. See De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 13.

11. De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*. 86–87. The quotation is from Guy de Broglie, S.J., 'Autour de la notion thomiste de la béatitude,' *Archives de philosophie*, 3 (1925): 222.

12. Saint Augustine, *Confessions* 1, 1, PL 32, 661.

13. De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 17.

requires considerable clarification. First of all, it is not an entity. It does not, for example, designate God or the divine order understood in itself, in its pure transcendence. It is rather 'the divine order understood in its relationship of opposition and union with the human order.'¹⁴ Despite its not being an empirically verifiable entity the 'supernatural' is not outside nature or humanity. As Blondel says, 'What goes beyond the empirical is still not, because of that, outside nature and humanity.'¹⁵ Thus one is not implying a *duplex ordo* when one uses the terms nature and supernatural. De Lubac clarifies the matter further when he writes:

We can say then, that the supernatural is this divine element, inaccessible to human effort (there is no self-divinization!), but which unites itself to man, raising him up ... becoming part of him so as to divinize him, in this way becoming like an attribute of the 'New Man' such as Saint Paul describes. ... In summary, it is what the scholastics of old, and particularly Thomas Aquinas, used to call ... an 'accidental form,' an 'accident.'¹⁶

De Lubac's use of the Aristotelian category of 'accident' protects the supernatural from any hint of its being a constituent of human nature; it is not part of the substance of the human. Thus the pure gratuity of the supernatural is assured. De Lubac traces the etymological and theological development of 'supernatural' in the third part of his *Supernaturel: Études historiques*.¹⁷ Because of its importance in his theology, we will follow his exposition in some detail.

In the ninth century John Scotus Eriugena, translating the work of Pseudo-Dionysius, uses the word *supernaturalis*. However, it did not become common currency until several centuries later. Though it is used by St Thomas, his predecessors, Anselm and Bernard, seem to have been unaware of the term. Only in post-Tridentine times is it found in ecclesiastical texts, for example, in Pius V's condemnation of Baius, *Ex omnibus afflictionibus* in 1567, as we have mentioned already in our preliminary comment on the term. De Lubac draws attention to the various nuances of meaning to which the term supernatural is susceptible in different temporal and cultural contexts.

We will follow the conceptual and linguistic development of what would eventually be translated as *supernaturalis*, from its origins in Greek culture through its adaptation by the Fathers for use in a Christian context. We will do so in three stages. Firstly, the origins of the term are, in part, cosmological. Words that were used in a Hellenistic culture to describe the physical

14. 'L'ordre du divin envisagé dans son rapport d'opposition et d'union à l'ordre humain' (De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 17).

15. 'Ce qui dépasse l'empirique n'est pas encore pour cela en dehors de la nature et de la l'humanité' (Maurice Blondel, 'Lettre à propos de la communication de M. Berger, *Empirisme et Transcendance*,' *Études philosophiques* 6 [1932]: 3–5).

16. De Lubac, *Petite catéchèse sur nature et grâce*, 31–32.

17. De Lubac, *Supernaturel*, 323–428.

universe were invoked by the Christian world to express spiritual realities.¹⁸ Two such terms – usually considered as synonyms – are ὑπερουράνιος and ὑπερκόσμιος, meaning respectively ‘above the heavens’ and ‘above the universe,’ where the gods reside. Ὑπερουράνιος is found in Plato, whereas ὑπερκόσμιος is more common in neo-Platonic writings. These cosmological terms are used by, for example, Gregory of Nyssa merely as comparative terms to express spiritual realities. Origen says of the biblical authors that ‘they prophesied realities that were beyond the heavens.’¹⁹ In contrast to their use by pagan authors, these terms have no spatial sense when used by the Fathers.

Secondly, *supernaturalis* is more directly related to the adjective ὑπερφυής, which can be traced as follows.²⁰ The verb ἐμφυω means ‘to be born in or rooted in’; this, in turn, gives way to the compound ὑπερφυομαι, meaning ‘to be born or grow above, to go beyond.’ Thus the adjective ὑπερφυής means ‘that which grows beyond itself,’ thus becoming a synonym for the wonderful or extraordinary. It was used of the incarnation, the virginal conception and our filial adoption.

In a third stage of development, de Lubac relies on the distinction made by the Fathers, particularly Leo of Byzantium, between the following three terms: κατὰ φύσιν (that which is in accordance with nature); παρὰ φύσιν (that which goes against nature)²¹ and ὑπὲρ φύσιν (that which goes beyond nature). Leo distinguishes between three human acts, according to the three principles that produce them: simply human operations have their source in nature; the depravation of nature leads to acts that are παρὰ φύσιν; while that which uplifts produces activities that are ὑπὲρ φύσιν. De Lubac’s theological interpretation of these distinctions is enlightening. First of all, he emphasizes that the third type of activity (ὑπὲρ φύσιν) does not destroy the first (κατὰ φύσιν): it reinforces it, rather, ‘because the power from which it derives enhances our natural power, carrying us to places we could not reach were we to rely on those things that are κατὰ φύσιν.’²² The supernatural brings nature to its completion by enabling it to go beyond itself. Christ is the source of the ὑπὲρ φύσιν. De Lubac quotes Theodore of Mopsuestia in support of the idea of Christ as source of what is beyond our nature.²³ His quotation from Saint John Damascene brings together several of the theological interests that concern us here:

With the Fall we passed from what was according to nature to that which is against nature. But the Lord has brought us from what is

18. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 325ff.

19. ‘Προεφήτευσαν τὰ ὑπερουράνια,’ Origen, *In Librum Primum Regnorum*, Homilia 2, PG 12, 1025.

20. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 355ff.

21. Παρὰ is susceptible of several meanings, including ‘that which is contrary to.’ This is the sense in which de Lubac interprets it.

22. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 363.

23. *Ibid.*, 364.

against nature to that which is according to nature, and it is in the latter state we find what it is to be *in the image and likeness* of God.²⁴

There is a clear indication in this quotation that sin is against nature and that nature is restored by Christ. This state of restoration is creation in accordance with the image and likeness of God. What we retain here is the idea of Christ as restorer of human nature to its pristine state. However, we have to move deeper into the exploration of *Sumaturel* to see that for de Lubac Christ is so much more than a restorer of lost innocence.

Thus, from an initial borrowing of cosmological terms (ὑπερουράνιος and ὑπερκόσμιος) to express divine realities, the concept that will eventually be translated as *supernaturalis* passed through Greek terms which expressed the miraculous and extraordinary (ὑπερφυής and ὑπερφυομαι), to arrive at its apogee in the term ὑπερ φύσιν. The latter is the most immediate sense of *supernaturalis*. However, this term is still susceptible of a variety of meanings and can be used, variously, to refer to the divine, the miraculous, and Truth itself. Saint Thomas, for example, speaks of God as the ‘supernatural Truth.’²⁵ De Lubac gradually etches his way towards a precise understanding of the term supernatural, namely, for him it is the epithet for the final end of man. Emphasizing the various nuances of meaning that preceded this theological understanding of the term, he summarizes:

At the origin of the word supernatural, there is a dual meaning of which we always need to be conscious if we are to go on to discern the different nuances of its use. On the one hand, the cosmological and ontological meanings which designate transcendent objects; on the other hand, the modal and miraculous meanings which designate certain effects and operations within our world. In neither of these two cases does the word refer directly to the final end of the spirit, as conceived by Christianity.²⁶

It is in this third sense, referring to the final end, that de Lubac uses the term ‘supernatural.’ Furthermore, he considers it as an essential category for situating the human person in a relationship with God and for understanding the mysteries of revelation. In 1965 he wrote: ‘This mystery of the supernatural, which is the mystery of our divine destiny, appears rather as the framework within which all the other mysteries of revelation find

24. Ἐκ τοῦ κατὰ φύσιν γὰρ εἰς τὸ παρὰ φύσιν διὰ τῆς παραβάσεως ἠλάσαμεν. Ὁ δὲ Κύριος ἐκ τοῦ παρὰ φύσιν εἰς τὸ κατὰ φύσιν ἡμᾶς ἐπανήγαγε, τοῦτο γὰρ ἐστὶ τὸ κατ’ ἐικόνα καὶ καθ’ ὁμοίωσιν.’ Saint John Damascene, *De fide orthodoxa* III, 14, PG 94, 1045. This is quoted in French in De Lubac, *Sumaturel*, 364.

25. Saint Thomas Aquinas, STh II-II 5.1, ad 1.

26. De Lubac, *Sumaturel*, 431, note 2.

their place.²⁷ This is a statement of considerable importance and one which highlights the need to explain his understanding of the supernatural in any study on de Lubac. It implies that the perspective of the supernatural is essential to an understanding of faith, the Church, Scripture, the Eucharist, atheistic humanism in both its Western and Eastern varieties, and, of course, christology. We cannot properly enter de Lubac's christology without embarking on his understanding of the supernatural.

Pure Nature

In the polemical atmosphere of the 16th century the concept of 'pure nature' (*natura pura*) began to play a dominant role in the Catholic understanding of the relationship between nature and grace. The Church sought to avoid two extremes: on the one hand, the exaggerated optimism associated with the humanist, neo-Pelagian spirit of the Renaissance, and on the other, the extreme pessimism of the Reformers regarding the human condition. In attempting to manoeuvre between these two extremes, Catholic theology tried to maintain – against the 'total depravity' view of the human condition – the intrinsic value of created human nature, even when deprived of grace, while, at the same time, emphasizing that salvation depended wholly on the gratuitous gift of divine grace and was not something that could be attained or merited by human effort alone. Thus an exaggerated distinction between nature and grace crept into the debate, leading to a 'two-storey' or 'two-tier' view of reality, a *duplex ordo*, one in which, theoretically at least, human nature could exist in a 'pure' state, unconnected with God and seek a 'natural' fulfilment or, alternatively, could seek fulfilment at a 'supernatural' level by accepting the gift of divine grace. The dualism that marked the neo-scholastic period was encrusted in concepts that became the measure of orthodoxy, often at the expense of obfuscating the dynamic of the Christian mystery.

It is necessary to give some indication of how this extrinsic dualism found its way into neo-scholastic theology. Its origin is to be found in different attempts to interpret Aquinas's understanding of nature and the beatific vision. What Aquinas actually said and what subsequent interpretations propounded as representing his thought can differ considerably. For Aquinas the gratuitous vision of God is beyond human reach, yet in a certain sense it is in accordance with human nature since the person is capable of receiving it, being created in the image of God.²⁸ The human being cannot be thought of apart from a final union with God.

The difficulty is how to explain the desire for God, the *desiderium naturale*, taking into consideration human nature, on the one hand, and divine grace,

27. 'Ce mystère du surnaturel, qui est le mystère de notre destinée divine, apparaît un peu comme la forme à l'intérieur de laquelle viendront s'inscrire tous les autres mystères de la révélation' (De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 209).

28. STh III 9.2, ad 3.

on the other. Aquinas held out the possibility of a double fulfilment for the human being, in this life and the next, one fulfilment being perfect, the other imperfect. He interpreted the desire for perfect fulfilment in the light of a *potentia oboedientialis*, understood as a passive receptivity. This latter term came to be interpreted in post-Thomistic commentaries as the non-resistance of nature to grace. It no longer retained the connotation of a capacity. A concomitant development was that nature came to be seen in its static Aristotelian sense and produced the concept of 'pure nature,' whereby an autonomous humanity had its own ends which were only externally related to its ultimate destiny. Thus nature and the supernatural formed a *duplex ordo*. It is important to emphasize that the understanding of pure nature in neo-scholastic theology did not correspond to Aquinas's idea of the imperfect fulfilment that is characteristic of the human condition in this life.

The intention behind the idea of 'pure nature' was logical: it was an attempt both to protect the fundamental value of human nature itself and, at the same time, to safeguard the gratuitous and transcendent nature of grace. Charles Boyer, the great critic of de Lubac's position, defines pure nature thus: 'It is a state in which man possesses all that belongs to his definition, everything necessary for the exercise of his faculties, everything required to live reasonably and reach a proportionate end.'²⁹ This definition is consistent with the understanding of pure nature criticized by de Lubac, especially as it was formulated and popularized by Francisco de Suarez (1548–1619). It relied on the Aristotelian principle: 'It is necessary that every natural substance has an ultimate end of the same nature to which it tends.'³⁰ The difficulty arose when something that was merely an intellectual construct or abstraction took on a reality of its own and distracted from the classical understanding of human nature as understood in the Western Catholic tradition. Both Augustine and Aquinas expressed the traditional view that the human person had been created by God and for God and that in Jesus Christ God had gratuitously offered the gift of participating in his own divine life. De Lubac holds Cajetan (Thomas de Vio 1465–1534) responsible for misunderstanding Aquinas's position on nature, and canonizing the idea of 'pure nature' into a system. In turn, he considers Suarez ultimately responsible for the widespread diffusion of such a system.³¹

The Paradox of the Natural Desire for God

De Lubac proposed his solution to the nature–supernatural question on the basis of the Thomistic idea of the natural desire to see God, *desiderium*

29. Charles Boyer, 'Nature pure et surnaturel,' *Gregorianum* 28 (1947): 379–396, at 387.

30. 'Necesse est omnem naturalem substantiam habere aliquem finem ultimum connaturalem in quem tendat' (as quoted in De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 114). We have been unable to identify this quotation, even with recourse to the CD-Rom, *Aristotelès Latinus*. Consultation of the *Index Thomisticus* did not confirm our hypothesis that perhaps de Lubac was quoting Aristotle from a work of St Thomas.

31. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 117.

naturale videndi Deum; the human person has a natural desire for the beatific vision but has no claim to it and is incapable of fulfilling that desire by natural means alone. In this lies the paradox of the *desiderium naturale* as understood by de Lubac. For him the concept of paradox was essential; he describes it in the conclusion of *Surnaturel* as follows: 'Let us understand that we have here a unique case where the paradox is a necessary sign of truth.'³² Though the desire is absolute³³ and is a constituent of human nature, the human person depends totally on the gratuity of God for its fulfilment. The desire is of itself inefficacious and unknown: 'To desire divine communication as a free gift, as a gratuitous initiative, is really to desire it with a desire that is of itself inefficacious, but for all that it is not, as it is sometimes said to be, just a platonic, conditional or conditioned desire.'³⁴ It is not merely a wish (*une veilléité*): it is 'the most absolute of all desires.'³⁵ Furthermore, the desire is unknown; it is humanly impossible to know the end desired. De Lubac develops the idea of the unknowability of the desire in chapter XI of *Le mystère du surnaturel*.³⁶

A crucial question is to tease out how precisely de Lubac interpreted the *desiderium naturale*. The key to his nuanced interpretation is to be found in several passages where he distinguishes between what is 'in' man and what is 'of' man. We will examine this distinction in three different works, each of which is dealing with a different aspect of his anthropology. The first is directly concerned with the desire to see God. In the conclusion to *Surnaturel* he writes:

If there is in our nature a desire to see God, it can only be that God wants this supernatural end for us which involves seeing him. It is because, willing it and not ceasing to will it, he has put it and doesn't cease to put the desire for it in our nature, in such a way that this desire is nothing other than his call. ... This desire is in us, yes, but it is not of us, since it only satisfies itself in mortifying us. Or rather, it is so much in us that it is ourselves, but it is we who do not belong to us: we are not ourselves: *non sumus nostri*.³⁷

This comment nuances the claim that the desire for God is an absolute constituent of our nature. De Lubac emphasizes that the desire does not

32. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 484.

33. *Ibid.*

34. 'Désirer la communication divine comme un libre don, comme une initiative gratuite, c'est bien la désirer d'un désir par lui-même inefficace, mais ce n'est pas pour autant, ainsi qu'on le dit parfois, n'en avoir qu'un désir platonique, conditionnel ou conditionné' (*ibid.*, 484).

35. *Ibid.*

36. De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 257–272.

37. 'S'il y a dans notre nature un désir de voir Dieu, ce ne peut être que parce que Dieu veut pour nous cette fin surnaturelle qui consiste à le voir. C'est parce que, la voulant et ne cessant de la vouloir, il en dépose et ne cesse d'en déposer le désir dans notre nature. En sorte que ce désir n'est autre que son appel. ... Ce désir est en nous, oui, mais il n'est pas de nous, puisqu'il ne se satisfait qu'en nous mortifiant. Ou plutôt, il est si bien en nous qu'il est nous-mêmes, mais c'est nous qui ne nous appartenons pas: *non sumus nostri*' (De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 486–488).

come from us; it too is gift. He captures well the tension between the strength of the desire, on the one hand, and, on the other, our frustration or humiliation at not being able to satisfy it ourselves. The desire is not ours and, yet, we are not ourselves apart from it; hence the paradox. De Lubac resumes here so much of his vision of the human person; we are not at home with ourselves if this desire is ignored or denied. Failure to take cognizance of the desire to see God leads to the dehumanizing ideologies as critiqued in, for example, *Le drame de l'humanisme athée*.³⁸

The nature–grace relationship can also be articulated, as was so prevalent in the Fathers, by the biblical terms image and likeness; nature corresponds to ‘image,’ while the supernatural corresponds to ‘likeness.’ De Lubac comments: ‘The relationship between nature and grace is almost akin to the image and likeness of God.’³⁹ This is an example of the *caveat* we expressed earlier whereby the author sometimes refers to grace when he means the supernatural. This brings us to the second passage where he distinguishes between what is ‘in’ man and what is ‘of’ him:

God created man for a divine end: so there must be in man, in some way that explains it, something that prepares him for this end and its revelation. It is what can be expressed, speaking like Irenaeus, Origen and others, by saying that God created man in his image with a view to his likeness. In the depth of human nature, and as a result in every person, the image of God is imprinted, which is that something which is in him – still without him – as a secret call to the Object of full and supernatural revelation, brought by Jesus Christ.⁴⁰

De Lubac distinguishes between ‘that something which is in him’ and is ‘still without him’; in other words, it is not ‘of’ him. Here this ‘something’ is not expressed in ontological categories but, rather, in the biblical language of ‘image’ and ‘likeness.’ This ‘image’ corresponds to ‘nature,’ but in a nuanced way; it is ‘in’ man but is not ‘of’ him. Creation in the image of God, prepares for ‘this end and its revelation.’ The end – the supernatural end – corresponds to the ‘likeness’ of God. De Lubac adds a significant elaboration here that is of christological significance. This ‘something,’ this ‘imprint,’ is a call, ‘a secret call’ – implying that it is hidden and not fully known – to the ‘Object’ of revelation, which is brought by Jesus Christ. And, of course, the ‘Object’ is Christ: he is the fullness of revelation. ‘Image’ then is the capacity for ‘likeness,’ which is the ‘Object’ of ‘full and supernatural revelation.’ While the predominant articulation of the nature–grace relationship is in ontological terms in the works under consideration here, the biblical and patristic sources are never totally absent.

38. De Lubac, *Le drame de l'humanisme athée* (Paris: Spes, 1944).

39. De Lubac, *Surmatériel*, 367.

40. Henri de Lubac, *Paradoxe et mystère de l'Eglise* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1967), 127.

The third reference, which illustrates the distinction 'in' and not 'of' man, is to be found in his article on the tripartite anthropology of St Paul.⁴¹ In his essay on Paul's understanding of body, mind and spirit, de Lubac is at pains to explain the relationship between spirit and nature, recognizing that 'spirit' cannot be part of human nature in the same way as 'body' and 'mind.' He concludes that 'spirit' is 'in man' but not 'of man.'⁴² Despite some evidence to the contrary, we can conclude that for de Lubac 'spirit' corresponds to 'image.'

The radical element in de Lubac's position on the supernatural lies in the fact that he rejected the solution based on the abstraction of 'pure nature' (*natura pura*) because he saw this as postulating a human nature with its own 'natural' end implying that a 'supernatural' end was an added, and therefore optional, extra. He proposed the term 'paradox' to express the *desiderium naturale videndi Deum*, understood, on the one hand, as an absolute desire which is a constituent of human nature but, on the other, a desire which is incapable of fulfilling itself and is only partially known. The supernatural is not just a continuation of nature. De Lubac wrote in his 1949 article: 'The supernatural gift then is no more a simple *sequela creationis* than is creation itself the necessary consequence of something that preceded it.'⁴³

What is important to retain here is that de Lubac's notion of paradox is an attempt to avoid the idea that there are two separate orders or two economies – one natural, the other supernatural – and, at the same time, to avoid the pitfall of identifying these two orders. In short, he is proposing the concept of paradox to avoid the extremes of naturalism on the one hand and, on the other, dualism. While the human mind is unable fully to understand or express the complexity of the relationship between nature and the supernatural, the term paradox holds together the difference, albeit with a certain tension. De Lubac also uses the idea of paradox in relation to the incarnation and to the church. At the end of his thorough study of the idea of paradox in the work of de Lubac, Vitor Franco Gomes, concludes: 'In fact, for our author, the paradoxical nature of the human desire for God is decisive because it measures and determines the humility and the daring of human intelligence in its permanent quest.'⁴⁴ That de Lubac managed to rethink the nature–supernatural relationship in a new way – without recourse to the notion of pure nature – is, in the view of Fr Franco Gomes, a tribute to the greatness of human intelligence and, at the same time, an indication of its limitations, given that paradox is a compromise term.

Our view is that de Lubac's refusal of a *duplex ordo* can only be resolved on the basis of christology. Furthermore, we are arguing that de Lubac

41. Henri de Lubac, 'Anthropologie tripartite,' in Henri de Lubac, *Théologie dans l'Histoire I* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1990), 113–147.

42. *Ibid.*, 127.

43. 'Pas plus que la création même n'est la suite nécessaire de quelque chose qui l'aurait précédée, le don surnaturel n'est donc une simple *sequela creationis*' (Henri de Lubac, 'Le mystère du surnaturel,' 93).

44. Vitor Franco Gomes, *Le paradoxe du désir de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 2005), 46.

himself goes some distance, in his writings on the supernatural question, to do just that. The concept of paradox, for all its subtlety, is more the statement of a problem than its resolution. By means of this term de Lubac manages to express what, at first, seems like an apparent contradiction, namely, the natural desire for God as a constituent of human nature on the one hand and, on the other, the gratuity of grace. The dynamic character of the idea of paradox is more in tune with the Tradition than is the idea of pure nature. However, it does not go far enough. Franco Gomes draws attention to the christological lack in the supernatural debate and refers, in particular, to *Surnaturel*; a lack which was not lost on de Lubac, as we will see. In his conclusion, Fr Franco Gomes writes: 'Finally, the problematic of *Surnaturel* often appears abstract and, without at all being separated from the revelation fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the latter is not explicitly developed in it.'⁴⁵ We contend that this statement is true in respect of the 1946 publication but could not be taken as an accurate summary of de Lubac's writings on the supernatural taken in their entirety. The thrust of our argument is that these writings reveal an emerging Christology, whereby the author gradually reveals a christological underpinning of his understanding of the nature–supernatural relationship. Furthermore, we will show that it is only in christological terms that this relationship can be adequately expressed.

***Surnaturel*: Imploding a Neo-Scholastic Bastion**

Surnaturel retains its place among the great works of historical theology, principally because of its influence on the renewal of theology in the 20th century. Its method was as significant as its content. Not satisfied with accepting the presumed meaning of contemporary theological conclusions, de Lubac retraced the steps that led to these conclusions and proposed a radical and provocative reinterpretation. Bernard Sesboüé describes the significance of *Surnaturel* thus: 'It enveloped a debate on the very nature of theology in its relationship with the faith. On this level the vanquished of the time seems to be the great victor with the hindsight of history.'⁴⁶ Sesboüé is referring to the fact that *Surnaturel* led to the temporary demise of its author. In 1950 de Lubac was no longer allowed to teach theology and some of his books were removed from circulation. At the time of its publication (12 August 1950) the encyclical of Pius XII, *Humani Generis*, was regarded as a censure of de Lubac's *Surnaturel* – though it never mentioned him by name – because of his criticism of the system of pure nature and the consequent charge that he did not adequately protect the gratuity of grace. Commentators certainly believed at the time that the *nouvelle*

45. Gomes, *Le paradoxe du désir de Dieu*, 446–447.

46. Bernard Sesboüé, 'Le Surnaturel chez Henri de Lubac. Un conflit autour d'une théologie,' RSR 80 (1992): 373–408, at 373.

théologie in general, and de Lubac in particular, were targeted by the encyclical, referring especially to the following Article: 'Others deform the true "gratuity" of the supernatural order, when they claim that God cannot create beings endowed with intelligence without ordaining and calling them to the beatific vision.'⁴⁷ However, de Lubac does not accept that the encyclical was aimed at him.

Paving the Way for Secularism and Atheistic Humanism

In his *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* de Lubac records the reasons for his involvement in the 'supernatural' question but he is also self-critical, especially of what he considers as his failure to tease out its christological implications. First of all, he defends his 1946 work as a legitimate criticism of what he saw as the sterile confrontation of certain schools of 'modern scholasticism,' which showed more interest in the self-righteous defence of their own positions than in a concern for creative thought, leaving the way open to the vicissitudes of a 'separated philosophy.'⁴⁸ One of the central concerns of de Lubac in the 'supernatural' question was the issue of separation; the separation of theology and philosophy, of nature and the supernatural, of faith and reason. In a submission to the permanent secretary of the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques*⁴⁹ de Lubac explained the purpose of his 1946 work as follows:

In *Surnaturel*, it is a more fundamental problem from the point of view of rational reflection that is undertaken: the problem of the relationship between philosophy and theology, between reason and faith, between the development of the resources of human nature and the potential reception of a supernatural given, a relationship as conceived in principle in Christian thought. It seems that what emerges from this essentially historical study is a certain conception of two orders, called natural and supernatural, which has been expressed in certain schools in more recent centuries, resulting in a 'separated theology' which itself leads to a 'separated philosophy.' This conception does not fully conform to the whole of Christian tradition nor to the full blossoming of the life of the spirit.⁵⁰

47. 'Alii veram "gratuitatem" ordinis supernaturalis corrumpunt, cum autem Deum entia intellectu praedita condere non posse, quin eadem ad beatificam visionem ordinet et vocet' (Denzinger-Schönmetzer, *Enchiridion symbolorum definitionum et declarationum de rebus fidei et morum*, ed. Peter Hünermann, 37th edn [Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder], 3891).

48. De Lubac, *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), 34.

49. In 1959, Henri de Lubac was elected to the *Académie des sciences morales et politiques* which is one of the five branches of the prestigious *Institut de France*. *Ibid.*, 93.

50. 'Dans *Surnaturel*, c'est un problème plus fondamental au point de vue de la réflexion rationnelle qui se trouve abordé: le problème des rapports entre philosophie et théologie,

In de Lubac's view this 'separation' led to an understanding of the human person that did not take into account a final end which, in turn, opened the way to atheistic humanism. Fergus Kerr describes the consequences of a 'separated philosophy':

Philosophy could now proceed without taking any account of the longing for God that had hitherto been taken to be natural to the human creature. Endless, complicated speculations about the hypothetical status of human nature prior to or apart from grace gradually led to the emergence of totally secularized conceptions of humanity and indeed to the appearance of human beings without any desire for God.⁵¹

In theology, the human person could be considered as autonomous with a natural end, sufficient in himself, thus giving a basis in reality to the abstraction 'pure nature,' which we have described above. In practice this separation paves the way for secularization and a life without God, a phenomenon that concerned de Lubac throughout his career, but which he expressed with such force and cogency in the preface to *Le mystère du surnaturel*, when he writes:

On the one hand, if the dualist or, to put it better, the separatist thesis has exhausted its sway in the schools, perhaps it is only beginning to bear its bitterest fruit. To the extent that professional theology is abandoning it, it is continuing more than ever to exercise its influence on the level of practical action. While wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, it has in fact been exiled both from the living spirit and from public life, leaving the field open to the invasion of secularism (*laïcisme*). Today that secularism, true to form, is beginning to invade the consciousness of Christians themselves. Harmony with all is sometimes sought on the basis of an idea of nature which would suit a deist or an atheist: *everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to Him, is pushed so far into the background as to risk disappearing forever*. The ultimate in Christian progress and coming of age would then appear to consist in a total secularization which would exclude God not merely from public life, but from culture and even from relationships in the personal domain.⁵²

entre raison et foi, entre développement des ressources de la nature humaine et accueil éventuel d'une donnée surnaturelle, rapports tels que la pensée chrétienne les conçoit dans leur principe. Il se dégage, semble-t-il, de cette étude essentiellement historique, qu'une certaine conception de deux ordres, dits naturel et surnaturel, qui s'est exprimée dans certaines écoles au cours de ces tout derniers siècles, aboutissant à constituer une "théologie séparée" génératrice elle-même d'une "philosophie séparée", n'est pleinement conforme ni à l'ensemble de la tradition chrétienne, ni à l'épanouissement complet de la vie de l'esprit' (ibid., 93).

51. Fergus Kerr, 'French Theology: Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac,' in *The Modern Theologians*, ed. David F. Ford (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), 115.

52. De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 15 (emphasis NOS).

The new practical dualism, of which de Lubac speaks here, leads not only to a separation of Christian life and secular life, but it also permeates Christian life itself. It even leads to a form of Christianity that seeks the lowest common denominator with atheistic humanism. Most significant of all is the danger of undermining the uniqueness and centrality of Christ. The Christ event reveals to humanity its true greatness, which left to its own resources it could never even dream. To exclude the light of Christ is to be cast into the darkness of minimal vision where there is no possibility of knowing the self nor of realizing the ultimate end.

Christological Impoverishment of the Supernatural Debate

While de Lubac tried to give a certain wake-up call to the 'dogmatic slumber' of neo-scholasticism, he reproaches himself for not going far enough. And this is the second point he makes in his *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, which brings out the christological impoverishment of the supernatural debate. De Lubac regrets not making clear from the beginning that the debate presupposed a basic abstraction, which explained 'an almost complete absence of any reflection on historical revelation or on creation in Christ and for Christ.'⁵³ He failed to free himself fully from the confining categories of the neo-scholastic tradition. In this regard he refers to the more concrete and synthetic way of proceeding as outlined by his colleague Henri Bouillard, who substituted the more existentialist title 'the Christian mystery' for that of 'the supernatural order.'⁵⁴ While his diagnosis of the problems at the heart of neo-scholasticism was accurate, his remedy may have fallen short of revealing 'with ever increasing clarity the Mystery of Christ,' to evoke the words of *Optatam Totius*.⁵⁵ It was largely within the categories of natural/supernatural that de Lubac began to arouse a rigid theological world to a new way of thinking, one that would eventually cause a presumably impenetrable neo-scholastic bastion to implode.

De Lubac's acute awareness of the christological limitations of his contribution to the supernatural debate is evident long before his *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, published in 1989, a limitation which he tries to correct as he enters more deeply into the question of the supernatural. A comparison of *Surnaturel* (1946) and *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* (1965) gives an indication of the author's desire to make his theology of grace christologically explicit. For example, in the later work he includes the two chapters on Baius and Jansenius, with only minimal changes to what had been published in the earlier work. We will refer to two such changes – though there are others in similar vein – which highlight the christological source of grace. In the first instance, he comments on the non-opposition between nature and grace in the theology of Saint Augustine. The following juxtaposition reveals a

53. De Lubac, *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, 201.

54. *Ibid.*, 201–202.

55. *Optatam Totius* § 14.

simple but most significant change between the two works (the emphasis is ours):

<p>1946</p> <p>Grace becomes holy desire in order the better to overcome the other (evil desire) and is not for all that the direct opposite (of nature).⁵⁶</p>	<p>1965</p> <p><i>The grace of Christ</i> becomes holy desire in order the better to overcome the other (evil desire) and is not for all that the direct opposite (of nature).⁵⁷</p>
---	--

Grace is referred to as the grace of Christ in the later work. Grace is seen here, not as obliterating nature, but as enabling nature to become what it can be at its best. Christ is the Mediator of this perfection. The significance of this change in the two texts brings out the personal – the christological – aspect of grace. An understanding of grace which is divorced from the self-communication of God in love runs the risk of being reified.

De Lubac's concern to bring out the christological dimension of grace is more fully appreciated when we consider the second instance, where the earlier text is considerably amplified in the later edition. Commenting on the relationship between grace and the human will, as understood by Augustine, de Lubac corrects Jansenius's interpretation whereby he obliterated the will and replaced it with grace, whereas Augustine saw grace as informing and enabling the will but not replacing it:

<p>1946</p> <p>Grace enables the will to overcome concupiscence, the spirit to overcome the flesh. <i>Grace is liberating.</i>⁵⁸</p>	<p>1965</p> <p>This grace enables the human will to overcome concupiscence, free will to overcome sin, the spirit to overcome the flesh. 'Victory by which sin is overcome is nothing other than a gift of God, aiding free will in that struggle.' On our own we are overpowered in the struggle; but <i>if the grace of God is helping us, through Jesus Christ our Lord</i>, the strength of health returns to us and the attraction of righteousness is in us the victor over everything that leads us to sin. ... <i>The grace of Jesus Christ, which must never on any account be thought of apart from the Incarnation itself, is therefore liberating.</i>⁵⁹</p>
--	--

56. 'Se faisant sainte convoitise pour mieux triompher de l'autre, la grâce ne lui devient pas pour autant symétriquement inverse' (De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 70).

57. 'Se faisant sainte convoitise pour mieux triompher de l'autre, la grâce de Jésus-Christ ne lui devient pas pour autant symétriquement inverse' (De Lubac, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, 92).

58. La grâce donne à la volonté de vaincre la concupiscence, à l'esprit de vaincre la chair. La Grâce est libératrice' (De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 72).

59. 'Cette Grâce donne au vouloir humain de vaincre la concupiscence, au libre arbitre de vaincre le péché, à l'esprit de vaincre la chair. *Victoria qua peccatum vincitur, nihil aliud est quam donum Dei, in isto certamine adjuvantis liberum arbitrium.* Seuls, nous sommes vaincus dans la lutte; mais si la grâce de Dieu nous aide, par Jésus-Christ notre seigneur, les forces

The 1965 text, whose context is the 'victorious delectation'⁶⁰ of Augustine, is explicitly christological and contrasts starkly with the 1946 work. In de Lubac's view the autonomy of the human person is respected; the will does not become the pawn of a power coming from outside itself. Grace is not a reified commodity; it is rather the power of God which is active internally 'through Jesus Christ our Lord.' It is significant that de Lubac highlights the connection between the grace of Christ and the incarnation. The gift of God, which frees the human will to act in accordance with its higher nature, is none other than Jesus Christ who is known through the historical event of the incarnation. It is the decisive event at the heart of de Lubac's christology. The 1965 quotation is a considerable advance on the 1946 work which did not relate the liberating gift of God to the person of Christ. Much could be made of the fact that grace is linked to the God incarnate and not to the redemptive act of the cross. However, for de Lubac the incarnation is redemptive. He makes this explicit in the note on the *De correptione et gratia* of Augustine, which he adds to the third chapter of *Augustinisme et théologie moderne* where he writes: 'This grace comes from the redemptive incarnation by which God lowered himself to the level of our wretchedness.'⁶¹

We retain two important points from this analysis of the relationship between the 1946 text, *Surnaturel*, and the 1965 text, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*. Firstly, grace is explicitly defined as the grace of Christ in the later text. De Lubac is obviously aware of the christological limitation of the earlier work. This grace of Christ comes from the redemptive incarnation. Thus the redemptive act of the incarnate one is the source of grace. Secondly, it is clear that de Lubac does not separate incarnation and redemption, a point whose import is extensive.

De Lubac and the Supernatural Existential

Further precision on de Lubac's understanding of nature and the supernatural can be gleaned from an examination of Rahner's dialogue with him on this question. This took place when Rahner critiqued an article by an anonymous writer 'D' entitled: 'Ein Weg zur Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von Natur und Gnade,'⁶² which was a faithful summary of de Lubac's position

de la santé nous reviennent, et l'attrait de la justice est en nous vainqueur de tout ce qui nous portait au péché ... La grâce de Jésus-Christ, qu'il faut se garder de considérer jamais le moins du monde à part de l'Incarnation Même, est donc libératrice' (De Lubac, *Augustinisme*, 96). The quotation is from Saint Augustine, *De gratia et libero arbitrio* I, IV, 8, PL 44, 887.

60. The phrase 'victrix delectatio' is from Augustine, *De peccatorum meritis et remissione* II, 19, 32, PL 44, 170, though in that context it is found in the accusative case: *victricem delectationem*. See De Lubac, *Augustinisme*, 93, note 8.

61. De Lubac, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*, 109.

62. D, 'Ein Weg zur Bestimmung des Verhältnisses von Natur und Gnade,' *Orientierung* 14 (1950): 138–141.

on the supernatural as developed in his *Surnaturel* (1946) and his 1949 article, 'Le mystère du surnaturel.' The anonymous author is presumed to be de Lubac's Jesuit colleague, Emile Delaye.⁶³ Rahner's article, 'Eine Antwort,' was published later in extended form under the title: 'Über das Verhältnis von Natur und Gnade.'⁶⁴ For the purposes of our analysis here we will refer to the English translation of the later article, 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace.'⁶⁵ In this article Rahner, first of all, outlines the broad area of agreement that exists between the two authors, and then proceeds to explain his difficulties with his fellow Jesuit's understanding of the 'natural' desire to see God, *desiderium naturale videndi Deum*. We will follow the argument as developed by Rahner and then conclude with our own analysis of their respective positions.

Rahner agrees with de Lubac's criticism of the *duplex ordo* which had bedevilled the neo-scholastic presentation of the relationship between nature and grace. Like the Fourvière theologian, Rahner understood the *duplex ordo* as a coexistence of the natural and supernatural orders as separate 'layers' whereby the supernatural was a superstructure imposed on the natural order.⁶⁶ Their relationship was an external one, the only link between them coming from the *potentia oboedientialis*, understood negatively as the non-repugnance of nature in regard to the action of grace. This diminished view of the human relationship with God betrayed an all too physical and static Aristotelian understanding of nature and failed to take adequate account of the spiritual nature of the person, leading to a separation of the natural and the spiritual whereby the human person could exist quite contentedly without bothering about a supernatural end. Though acknowledging the end (glory) and the means (grace) of the supernatural order as in themselves the highest good, nature – understood in this way – is not clear why it should seek these highest goods. Both Rahner and de Lubac reject this extrinsicism because of its inherent danger of making nature self-sufficient and of relegating God to the realm of an optional extra. The ultimate logic of this neo-scholastic understanding of grace, rejected by both theologians, is to posit a system of *natura pura*. Rahner summarizes his position as follows:

Thus it is presupposed that the concretely experienced (contingently factual) quiddity of man squarely coincides with man's nature as

63. See Bernard Sesboué, 'Le surnaturel chez Henri de Lubac: Un conflit autour d'une théologie,' *RSR* 80 (1992): 373–408, at 403. See also George Vass, *The Mystery of Man and the Foundations of a Theological System* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1985), 64; David Coffey, 'The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential,' *Theological Studies* 65 (2004): 95–118, at 98 note 7.

64. Karl Rahner, 'Eine Antwort,' *Orientierung* 14 (1950): 141–145.

65. Karl Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,' in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations I* (London: DLT, 1961), 297–317.

66. 'There is widely prevalent in the average teaching on grace an extrinsicist view which regards this as being merely a superstructure imposed from without upon a nature in itself indifferent with regard to it' (*ibid.*, 303).

the concept opposed by theology to the supernatural. Supernatural grace then can only be the superstructure lying beyond the range of experience imposed upon a human nature which even in the present economy turns in its own orbit (though with a relationship peculiar to itself to the God of creation). Hence this nature is first of all merely disturbed by the purely external decree of God commanding the acceptance of the supernatural, a decree which continues to be a purely exterior divine ordination so long as grace has not yet laid hold of this nature, justifying and divinizing it, and has in this way made the vocation to the supernatural end into man's inner goal. If this external decree, which obliges man to the supernatural purely from without, is not taken into account, a man in the present economy without grace is equal on this view to the man of pure nature.⁶⁷

The concept of pure nature implies a human autonomy with its own natural end which is only related extrinsically to the supernatural end. It is important to distinguish between *natura pura* understood, on the one hand, as a constant – in the Aristotelian sense – of human essence realized in history and, on the other, as an abstraction or a theoretical assumption about nature as yet unaffected by the operation of grace, even if we have no experience of this nature. Rahner understood 'pure nature' in this latter sense, though de Lubac interpreted him as understanding it in the same way as Cajetan, that is as a *system* of pure nature and not merely as an abstraction.

Rahner defines nature as a remainder concept (*Restbegriff*) that is, what is left when the supernatural is removed, implying that nature cannot be understood without revelation. Thus, like de Lubac, he manifests a holistic view of the human person as one who is created in the image of God and who is called to a life of grace and glory. Unlike de Lubac he retains – at least as a theoretical assumption – some notion of pure nature. But for both authors the nature of the human person is such that its inner structure is other than it would be had it not been given a supernatural end. Rahner writes:

If God gives creation and man above all a supernatural end and this end is first '*in intentione*,' then man (and the world) is by that very fact always and everywhere inwardly other in structure than he would be if he did not have this end, and hence other as well before he has reached this end partially (the grace which justifies) or wholly (the beatific vision).⁶⁸

There is no place in Rahner's vision for a separate human nature with its own natural end with no reference to the supernatural end. But how he understood the latter and how he related it to nature bring us to the core

67. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship,' 299.

68. *Ibid.*, 303.

of the nuanced difference between the understanding of nature (and grace) in our two theologians.

The problem arises in relation to the gratuity of grace. Rahner finds that de Lubac's understanding of the Thomistic term *desiderium naturale* does not adequately protect the gratuity of grace. De Lubac, in turn, also wants to protect the gratuity of grace. He argues that while the *desiderium* is a constitutive of nature, it does not demand fulfilment. His vision of human nature is not the static concept characteristic of neo-scholasticism but, rather, a dynamic subjectivity which he shares with Rahner. True to his patristic inspiration, de Lubac understands Aquinas's *desiderium naturale* in conjunction with Augustine's *inquietum cor hominis*. This human desire and restlessness are already God's gift and it ensures that the person is never fulfilled outside of God and the vision of God. To justify theologically this interpretation de Lubac relies on the Thomistic principle that the natural desire for God cannot be in vain. St Thomas, quoting Aristotle, writes in the *Summa Contra Gentiles*: 'Again, it is impossible for natural desire to be unfulfilled, since "nature does nothing in vain."⁶⁹ It would not be logical for God to create a desire in the human person and then fail to fulfil it.

It is opportune here to invoke the same principle from a completely different perspective, namely, that of St Thérèse de Lisieux. In Manuscript A we read: 'He *never* made me desire something without giving it to me.'⁷⁰ As we move to her later writings, in Manuscript C, we find an even stronger sense that the desire for God is, in the first place, God's initiative. Contemplating the immensity of the gap between herself and the saints, she still retains the desire to be a saint because, she says: 'The Good God could not inspire unrealizable desires.'⁷¹ Again we find her making explicit the authorship of God: 'He always gave me what I desired or, rather, He made me desire what He wanted to give me.'⁷² The simplicity and profundity of this insight of Thérèse cannot be traced to her reading of the great philosophers but is, rather, an indication of her intimate union with God. Her conviction coincides with that of de Lubac, though he and Rahner express it in more conceptual terms.

Rahner considers that de Lubac's logic, which understands the human person's desire to see God as part of nature, compromises God's free gift of grace leading to the beatific vision. If the desire for the supernatural end is part of human nature and if it is not to be in vain, then God is obliged

69. Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles* III 48, Eng. trans., Vernon J. Bourke, re-ed. (London: Notre Dame Press, 1975), 166. Here Aquinas quotes Aristotle, *De caelo* II, 11, 291b 13.

70. 'Jamais Il ne m'a fait désirer quelque chose sans me le donner' (Ms A, 71 r, in Saint Thérèse de Lisieux, *Œuvres complètes*, 2nd ed. [Paris: Cerf, 2001], 190).

71. 'Le Bon Dieu ne saurait inspirait des désires irréalisables' (Ms C, 2 v°, in Saint Thérèse, *Œuvres complètes*, 237).

72. 'Il m'a donné ce que j'ai désiré ou plutôt Il m'a fait désirer ce qu'Il voulait me donner' (Ms C, 31 r°, in Saint Thérèse, *Œuvres complètes*, 277).

to fulfil that desire and the human person can lay claim to it. Rahner succinctly summarizes the problematic in the form of a question:

Is it still possible to conceive of grace as unexacted,⁷³ supposing that the existential consisting in the inner and unconditional reference to grace and beatific vision were a constituent of man's 'nature' in the sense that man as such could not be thought without it?⁷⁴

Obviously, Rahner replies in the negative. If the reference to the beatific vision is intrinsic to nature then to withhold from the human person this end would be incompatible with God's wisdom and goodness. Again he poses a rhetorical question:

Can that person, who has *himself created* such an ordination to the personal and intimate communion of love between two persons (in our case man and God), once this has been presupposed still simultaneously refuse this communion without offending against the meaning of this creation and his very creative act itself?⁷⁵

Rahner thus rejects the possibility of the ordination being part of nature because if that were the case then the fulfilment of the ordination would be exacted. He concludes that de Lubac's position – as he finds in D's article – is at least equivocal, if not contradictory, because a reality cannot be unexacted and at the same time something which God could not refuse.⁷⁶ Rahner writes:

But this does not prove that a gift may still be regarded as unexacted in respect of its receiver when God's wise generosity has objectified itself in the world primarily by creating in the receiver, in his very nature, a disposition which under pain of losing its own meaning finds uniquely in this gift its unique end and its only possible fulfilment. In this case God's wisdom owes 'itself' the fulfilment of this disposition, because and in so far as it has created this *disposition* in such a way that the disposition itself exacts fulfilment.⁷⁷

Rahner also claims that the mystery of the paradox of the desire for God whereby grace is unexacted, and yet cannot be refused, is a theological

73. Cornelius Ernst translates the German word *ungeschuldet* as 'unexacted,' pointing out the limitation of such a translation in that 'unexacted' negates obligation from the point of view of the creditor while *ungeschuldet* negates it from the point of view of the debtor. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship,' 304 note 2. The French translation of the German is more felicitous where '*indu*' is used to translate *ungeschuldet*. See Karl Rahner, *Ecrits théologiques III* (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1963), 17.

74. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship,' 304.

75. *Ibid.*, 306.

76. *Ibid.*, 307.

77. *Ibid.*, 307.

hypothesis and lacks demonstration from positive theological sources. So how does the critic of the *nouvelle théologie* himself solve the difficulty of the relationship between nature and the supernatural?

Uneasy with de Lubac's interpretation of the *desiderium naturale*, Rahner relied on another Thomistic term to propose an organic link between nature and grace, namely, the *potentia oboedientialis*, a concept which he said was 'scorned by de Lubac,'⁷⁸ a charge which the Fourvière theologian vehemently rejects in his 1965 work.⁷⁹ While he accepted that the human person experiences a desire for God – desire understood as 'openness'⁸⁰ to the supernatural not as an element of human essence – he is not satisfied that experience alone is sufficient to ground a theological understanding of the desire and so he looks for the *a priori* conditions that lie behind it. Leaving aside the more passive interpretation of the *potentia oboedientialis*, which saw it merely as a non-rejection of grace, Rahner sees it in a self-transcendent dynamic way whereby the human person is open to an ever-extending horizon of mystery.⁸¹ Human self-understanding involves an awareness of knowing and willing towards an horizon which is limitless and unrestricted. It leads eventually to absolute being or absolute mystery. This is the ultimate meaning of human existence. The human person accepts it in accepting the mystery of being human. Putting it another way, the person has an *a priori* unreflective, unthematic self-understanding which precedes freedom. This *a priori* transcendental dimension of human concrete experience is a radical openness of the finite human spirit to the infinite, to the Transcendent (for Kant the transcendental is uniquely on the horizontal plane). This openness is the condition which determines the possibility of categorical experience. The latter, in contrast to transcendental experience, is reflective, thematic, and can be classified. The experience of revelation in Christ is an example of categorical experience. Rahner coins the term 'supernatural existential' to express the idea of the human condition open to grace.

The supernatural existential is a transcendental condition (*Befindlichkeit*) that disposes or attunes the human person to God's self-communication which is grace.⁸² Though not grace in the strict sense, the supernatural existential is nonetheless a divine gift. It is added to nature not by grace (*Gnade*) but graciously (*gnadenhaft*).⁸³ Of considerable significance is the fact that

78. *Ibid.*, 315.

79. De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 142 note 1.

80. 'Concerning the Relationship between Nature and Grace,' 309.

81. See Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (London: DLT, 1978), 31–35.

82. 'Grace is God himself, the communication in which he gives himself to man as the divinizing favour which he is himself' (Karl Rahner, 'Nature and Grace,' in Karl Rahner *Theological Investigations IV* [London: DLT, 1964], 177). In a lecture delivered in Chicago in 1966, Rahner defines grace as 'the self-communication of God acting freely in history' and emphasizes that this grace is 'the grace of Christ.' Karl Rahner, 'Theology and Anthropology,' in Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations IX* (London: DTL, 1972), 36.

Rahner does not consider the supernatural existential to be part of human essence or nature but is a constituent of the person's concrete existence or 'quiddity' (*Wesen*).⁸⁴ In his 1976 work, *Grundkurs des Glaubens: Einführung in den Begriff des Christentums*, Rahner defines the human person as 'the event of God's absolute self-communication.'⁸⁵ He sees this self-communication as present in every person 'at least in the mode of an offer.'⁸⁶ Thus grace is offered to every person who is, in turn, free to accept or reject it. Rahner goes on to say that God's self-communication, or grace, must always be present in the human person 'as the prior condition of possibility for its acceptance.'⁸⁷

The term 'existential' is one borrowed from the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889–1976). It characterizes the human person prior to the exercise of freedom: it 'is present prior to their freedom, their self-understanding and their experience.'⁸⁸ Other existentials, mentioned by Rahner, are corporality, finitude and sinfulness. We see then that they are neither deducible from the essence of the person nor contingent realities which may or may not characterize concrete existence. When the term existential is qualified with the adjective supernatural it stands for the transcendental horizon of being which we described above. The fact that the supernatural existential is not part of the essential nature of the person means that, since it does not define human nature, it is not due; it is a gift that is permanent and pervasive in all humanity. But what did de Lubac think of Rahner's solution?

De Lubac claims he had not known about the article by the anonymous author D and is vehement in his self-defence against the criticism of Rahner in the Swiss journal *Orientierung*, to which we have referred above. He says that Rahner had misunderstood his position – because of relying on the intermediary D – and that the criticism which he (Rahner) proffered actually represented the true Lubacian position.⁸⁹ De Lubac implies here that the anonymous author misrepresented him and that Rahner, as a consequence, was basing his criticisms on a false premise. In his article on the supernatural Bernard Sesboué states that Rahner had a reliable presentation of de Lubac's thought in D's article: 'In any case he was right to see in him (D) a faithful interpreter of the Lubacian position.'⁹⁰

While agreeing with Rahner in his interpretation of the supernatural question, de Lubac took issue with what he calls 'the mix of Heideggerian

83. Max Seckler characterizes the existential as '*gnadenhaft, ohne "die" Gnade zu sein* (gracious, without actually being grace).' Max Seckler, *Instinkt und Glaubenswille nach Thomas von Aquin* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1961), 213 (as quoted in Coffey, 'The Whole Rahner on the Supernatural Existential,' 106).

84. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship,' 302.

85. Rahner, *Foundations*, 126.

86. *Ibid.*, 127.

87. *Ibid.*, 128.

88. *Ibid.*, 127.

89. De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 142 note 1.

90. Sesboué, 'Le surnaturel chez Henri de Lubac,' 403.

vocabulary which appeared to me as unnecessary and not even appropriate in a study of the scholastic tradition.⁹¹ In his *Le mystère du surnaturel* he had earlier dismissed the existential, understood as a medium or a liaising reality, because he believed it would be a 'useless supposition, whereby the problem of the relationship of nature to the supernatural would not be resolved but merely put aside.'⁹² The issue that remains then is to decide how successful these two theologians were in attempting to resolve the nature–supernatural question.

The limitations of neo-scholastic categories to express the relationship between the human person and God are, as we have argued, all too obvious. De Lubac's insistence that the desire for the supernatural end is a constituent of nature remains fraught with difficulties, as was so vehemently articulated by his critics. On the one hand, he was accused of blurring the distinction between nature and grace and, on the other, not adequately protecting the gratuity of grace, given his rejection of the idea of 'pure nature.' To state that the supernatural is not due while, at the same time, insisting that the desire for it is absolute and that it is part of nature is not easily reconciled. In his defence it is important to point out how he interprets the *desiderium* as being constitutive of the human person. He understands it as being *in* man but not *of* him, thus avoiding the basis for the criticism he received, namely, that man can demand grace in virtue of his human nature. This nuance is extremely important and not always taken into account. It is almost akin to Rahner's distinction whereby the supernatural existential is not part of a person's essence but is a constituent of his concrete existence. However, it would be incorrect to equate the status of the supernatural existential with de Lubac's nuanced position on the *desiderium*. For the latter, man is not himself if that desire is not fulfilled.⁹³

The limitations of de Lubac's treatment of the issue can be summarized in two points. Firstly, he did not make sufficient use of relational categories and confined himself too much to the area of formal ontology. We saw, however, that he did use personal categories in the conclusion of *Surnaturel*, but this was more the exception than the rule. Secondly, he did not adequately show the christological and incarnational character of grace, a limitation which he admitted himself. His wider *corpus* gives testimony to his ability to move outside the neo-scholastic mindset when he gives prominence to the history of salvation based on scripture and the Fathers. In this, he becomes a prophetic theological voice that paved the way for the Second Vatican Council.

Both Rahner and de Lubac exposed the limitations of neo-scholastic debate and each in his turn contributed to its implosion. De Lubac shows the contrasting fecundity of retracing the God–man relationship in terms of the biblical ideas of image and likeness and the tripartite anthropology

91. De Lubac, *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits*, 63 note 5.

92. De Lubac, *Le mystère du surnaturel*, 136 note 1.

93. De Lubac, *Surnaturel*, 488.

of Saint Paul. His clear interpretation of the supernatural as the final end, or divinization, is an insight that can never lose its value. But the full blossoming of his contribution to the nature–supernatural debate is to be found in a more explicit christology. De Lubac went some way to bring that flower to full bloom in his writings on the supernatural, as we have seen. Even though it remained largely hidden in ontological categories, the mystery of love incarnate was never absent, certainly not in the later writings. Inspired by Augustine, de Lubac went to the core of the Christian mystery when he asked this question in 1965:

How can we recognize in this [Jansen's understanding of grace] that initiative of creative Love, which precedes the human effort that it has itself set in motion in order to make it efficacious or restore it to its first rectitude, and which brings about the marvellous union of which the incarnation of the Word is both the guarantee and the pre-eminent model?⁹⁴

The answer is that this vision of Love is not to be found in Jansen's interpretation but in Augustine's: 'But with St. John, with all humble Christians he [Augustine] believed in Love.'⁹⁵

Rahner too manifested his impatience with the extended discourse on nature and the supernatural, when he chose to highlight the kerygma to recall the basis of the relationship between the human person and God. He too has recourse to the language of love. 'The eternal miracle of infinite Love' offers the possibility of relational categories to understand and better express the relationship:

And so God makes a creature whom he can love: he creates man. He creates him in such a way that he *can* receive this Love which is God himself, and that he can and must at the same time accept it for what it is: the ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift. And let us not forget here that ultimately we only know what 'unexacted' means when we know what personal love is, not *vice versa*: we don't understand what love is by knowing the meaning of 'unexacted.' Thus in this second respect God must so create man that love does not only pour forth free and unexacted, but also so that man as real partner, as one who can accept or reject it, can experience and accept it *as* the unexacted event and wonder not owed to *him*, the real man. As unexacted, not only because he does not deserve it as *sinner*, but further because he can also embrace it as unexacted when, already blessed in this love, he is allowed to forget that he was a sinner once.⁹⁶

94. De Lubac, *Augustinisme*, 91.

95. *Ibid.*

96. Rahner, 'Concerning the Relationship,' 311.

Because human persons are created to love and be loved they are capable of receiving infinite Love. Situating the relationship in terms of love vitiates any sense of Love being owed or exacted. They only know the gift when they have already received it. The transforming power of 'infinite Love' is captured so beautifully in the above passage: the sinner forgets that he was 'a sinner once.' We see here the immediacy and power of relational language as used by Rahner. Though he does not use explicitly christological terms, the miracle of the incarnation bludgeons forth, especially in the phrase: 'The ever astounding wonder, the unexpected, unexacted gift,' a phrase that captures so well the newness of the Christ event that de Lubac is continuously at pains to emphasize.

Conclusion

De Lubac's writings on the supernatural question are of significance in a study of his christology for several reasons. First, his definition of the term 'supernatural' and the place he attributes to it in his overall theological vision are significant. He understands it as referring to the final end of the spiritual person, an end that corresponds to the biblical term 'likeness' and which is effected by the grace of Christ. For him the mystery of the supernatural is the mystery of our divine destiny and one within which all the other mysteries of revelation find their place. Second, his writings on the nature-supernatural question enable us to discern an emerging christology. Ostensibly, there seems to be a christological impoverishment, for which our author censures himself. However, the role and significance of Christ are clearly marked at certain points, even in *Summae*, but especially when he revises parts of that work in the 1965 publication, *Augustinisme et théologie moderne*. There he is at pains to show the christological nature of grace and to emphasize the necessity of realizing the connection between grace and the incarnation. Third, in his critique of Baius, the relationship between creation and christology is the subject of a precise and important insight. Christ is not just the restorer of an original innocence but is the mediator through whom the Christian enters into a new creation, which has its full blossoming in the contemplation of the beatific vision. His criticism of Jansen enabled us to see how vehemently de Lubac defends the distinction between nature and grace, respecting both the necessity of grace for the full exercise of free will and, at the same time, the autonomy of the human person. Grace does not obliterate human freedom, but releases it. Bringing together these two interpreters of Augustine enabled de Lubac to juxtapose two extreme positions: the one (Baius), for whom grace was a right to be demanded so as to recover Paradise Lost; the other (Jansen), that saw infralapsarian man as totally shipwrecked and retaining nothing that could be salvaged. Grace would come from outside to rescue him. Against these extreme misrepresentations de Lubac proposes a totally different image, that of 'creative Love'

which reaches its definitive revelation in the incarnation. Here he shows that grace must not be reified but should reveal the love of the Father who wants all to be saved. Christ is suggested here as the model of grace. Grace comes from within the human person in the form of love and brings about an inner transformation. The union of human and divine in the incarnation is the 'pledge' that this is possible: it is also the 'pre-eminent model' assuring humanity that it can reach its full dignity, which will not be a Paradise Regained but a new creation that will come to perfection at the end. Our fourth point is that the writings which we have analyzed here enable us to advance our understanding of de Lubac's sense of the incarnation. It is at once a redemptive and revelatory incarnation: it is redemptive in that the liberating grace of Christ restores the strength of health and enables righteousness to win over sin. It is a revelatory incarnation in that it reveals 'the initiative of creative Love' and, at the same time, reveals man to himself. Finally, the newness of Christ, which is an ever-present theme in de Lubac's writings, sums up so much of what we have hewn from the nature-supernatural quarry.

NOEL O'SULLIVAN, a priest of the diocese of Cork and Ross, is Administrator of the parish of Ballinhassig and teaches theology at St Patrick's College, Thurles, County Tipperary, Ireland. He was recently awarded a doctorate in theology, *summa cum laude*, by the Institut Catholique in Paris. Address: Roncalli, New Road, Bandon, County Cork. nosullivan@neuf.fr
