

Contemporaneity with Christ: Cornelio Fabro's Kierkegaardian

Approach to the Mystical Writings of St. Gemma Galgani

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Abstract

The Italian priest-philosopher and Kierkegaard scholar Fr. Cornelio Fabro (1911-1995) published a monograph on the mystical experiences of Gemma Galgani (1878-1903), and interpreted Gemma's testimony using a Kierkegaardian motif. This chapter shows that for Fabro, Kierkegaard's notion of 'contemporaneity with Christ' i) in general, can be given content with the lives of the saints as concrete examples of the intensification of Christian existence; and ii) in particular, can be used as an interpretive lens to make sense of Gemma Galgani's mystical experience of the stigmata as supernatural testimony.

Introduction

Roughly one year before *Aeterni Patris* was promulgated, Gemma Galgani was born in Lucca, Italy on March 12th, 1878. A series of mystical experiences and visions began in 1898 and she received the stigmata on June 8th, 1899 (cf. Bell & Mazzoni 2003). Like other members in her family, Gemma died of tuberculosis on Holy Saturday April 11th, 1903. Gemma's canonization process began in 1929 – two years after the publication of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* – and she was beatified on May 14th, 1933, by Pope Pius XI – a few months after Adolf Hitler became chancellor of Germany. One week before Germany invaded Western Europe, Pope Pius XII canonized Gemma as a saint on May 2nd, 1940. Among other things, Gemma is venerated in the Roman Catholic Church as the patron saint of pain and suffering for those seeking purity of heart.

The two positive *Voti* from Gemma's canonization process – which Fabro included as an appendix – were requested by Pope Pius XI and were written by the papal theologian Fr. Marco Sales O.P. (1877-1936) and biblical scholar Fr. Alfredo Idelfonso Schuster O.S.B. (1880-1954). The reports excluded *a priori* the possibility that Gemma's mystical experiences were hallucinations, and instead affirmed that the experiences of the stigmata, visions, ecstasy, and private revelations were real, echoing previous censor reports (see Fabro 1987, 15-19). Both authors highlighted the congruence of Gemma's experiences with other important mystics and saints in Church history and highlighted the fact that Gemma (and her confessor) were aware of her fantasies and distinguished between them adequately with humility (Fabro 1987, 460). Moreover, any theological shortcoming or imprecision in Gemma's rendering of dogmatic truths about the Trinity did not invalidate her mystical experience, but only indicated her lack of formal theological education or an error of transcription (Fabro 1987, 461).

What remained significant for the canonization process was the simplicity and affectivity of Gemma's feminine friendship with God, which were often described in terms of hugs, kisses, embraces, and holding hands with Jesus, Mary, and her Guardian Angel (Fabro 1987, 462). It was Gemma's humble and holy disposition before the extraordinary that the authors highlighted as praiseworthy because her reports of the private revelations went to her spiritual director Monsignor Giovanni Volpi, who repented of his earlier skepticism after sending Gemma to a doctor (Fabro 1987, 465, 473). Thus, the Church canonized primarily Gemma's faith and virtue as conditions of sainthood, rather than "the extraordinary facts" reported to her confessor (Fabro 1987, 486). Although the canonization process emphasized Gemma's virtue and bracketed her mystical experiences, Fabro sought to reemphasize her mystical experiences as legitimate to guard against

the ethical subsuming the religious because it was Gemma's extraordinary, holy, and loving familiarity with Jesus that set the interpretive framework of her sanctification.

My aim in this chapter is to provide a brief overview of a few key instances of Gemma's mystical union with Jesus that Fabro identified as paradigmatic examples of what Kierkegaard described in his writings as 'contemporaneity with Christ.' For Fabro, Kierkegaard's term referred to the intensification of Christian existence, which was not epiphenomenal or ornamental to human existence, but rather a deepening of what it means to be genuinely human. Space does not permit a full-length analysis of Fabro's reception of Kierkegaard and its relevance for his work on Gemma.¹ It remains for future studies to compare Fabro's remarks about Gemma Galgani with Kierkegaard's analysis of the case of Adolph Peter Adler, who claimed to have experienced a revelation, and Fabro's subsequent defense of Adler. Indeed, more might be said about the explicit references that Fabro makes regarding the essentially transparent character of Gemma's simplicity as "being before God" (Fabro 1987, 112), or Gemma's mystical experiences of pain and suffering as "being before Christ," and a non-identical "repetition" (Fabro 1987, 115), or how paradoxically Gemma understands that she does not understand her visions (Fabro 1987, 213). However, these passages must be left unexplored at this time to focus instead on how Fabro depicted Gemma's 'contemporaneity' with the Passion of Christ. In what follows, I will uncover the theological foundations that Fabro illuminated for a better understanding of Kierkegaard's phrase 'contemporaneity with Christ' by exploring the themes of atonement, sin, vocation, and virtue as exhibited mystically in Gemma's life.

Contemporaneity with Christ and *Imitatio Christi* in Kierkegaard's Thought

It is important to address the apparent discrepancy between Kierkegaard's description of 'contemporaneity with Christ' and Fabro's application of this theme in the life of Gemma. For example, for some readers of Kierkegaard, the 'supernatural' aspects of Gemma's mystical experiences and the need for an observable object in her physical suffering with the stigmata, clash explicitly with Kierkegaard's understanding of 'contemporaneity with Christ' in terms of the unrecognizable nothingness of hidden interiority. However, Kierkegaard does highlight the psychological suffering and mockery associated with following Christ while others deny His existence as the God-*Man*, and dying-to-oneself. Elsewhere, I have explored Kierkegaard's mystical notion of Christ's real presence in terms of 'contemporaneity' – especially in reference to his communion discourses (Furnal 2016, 139f.). However, I should make more explicit how Fabro understands Kierkegaard's view of 'contemporaneity with Christ' as a neighboring theme to Kierkegaard's emphasis on 'the imitation of Christ' in the Christian life.

Following Valter Lindström, Fabro argued that Kierkegaard was not concerned primarily with a new theory about Christianity, but rather the practice of Christian faith. At a time when people identified themselves as Christians as if it were another accidental feature of birth, the problem of the need to appropriate the teachings of Christ manifested itself. Moreover, Kierkegaard's emphasis on the act of the faith presumed positive content regarding Kierkegaard's view of what it means theologically for followers of Christ to imitate Christ in public (Lindström 1955, 379). Kierkegaard formulated his approach against the backdrop of the failure of the Church's proclamation actually to foster the appropriation of the faith (Lindström 1955, 380). Thus,

Kierkegaard's emphasis on "the believer's contemporaneity with Christ" was a key feature of Kierkegaard's theology of imitation (ibid.).

To validate this interpretive maneuver, consider Kierkegaard's later commentary on his authorship and the need for direct 'recognizability' in a post-Christendom context. In 1852, Kierkegaard wrote:

Assuming that the illusion "Christendom" is truth, that it must remain standing, then the maximum is unrecognizability. On the other hand, if the illusion is to be removed, our approach must be: "You are not really Christians" – then there must be recognizability [...] But now suppose (something I was not aware of at the start) that the actual preaching in Christendom leaves out something very essential in the proclamation of Christianity: "imitation, dying away, being born again, etc.," then we in Christendom are not Christians, and here the emphasis must tend toward recognizability. (*KJN* 9, 17/*SKS* 25, 32f. (NB26:12))

Or consider the remark by Climacus in *Philosophical Crumbs* that our participation in eternal truth is realized through our relationship with the divine revelation of Christ (*PF*, 99-104/*SKS* 4, 297-301). Climacus characterized this interval with *the moment* that refers at once to the historical occurrence of the Incarnation and the soteriological upbuilding of one's conversion and sanctification. For Climacus, the incarnation at once makes available the content of faith and one's conversion through the act of faith in contemporaneity with Christ.

In *Practice in Christianity*, Anti-Climacus emphasizes the imitation of Christ by first becoming contemporary with oneself. For Anti-Climacus, Christ, as truth itself, is the salvific model of humility for us in each generation, which his followers strive to imitate imperfectly as sinners (*PC*,

81f., 159f./SKS 12, 92, 164). In his opening prayers, Anti-Climacus does not present a rivalry between Christ as the humble model versus Christ the glorious redeemer, but rather unites these aspects in the person of Jesus (cf. *PC*, 9f., 151/SKS 12, 17f., 155). Indeed, the emphasis on the imitation of Christ appears at this unitive moment – not in aesthetic terms of a portrait of a Gospel scene, but rather in existential terms of the martyr who follows Christ into his Passion (Lindström 1955, 382). Moreover, in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Anti-Climacus argued that one must see how one's relation to God grounds selfhood in terms of a non-reciprocal creaturely dependence upon God – the power that establishes the entire relationship, and invites the act of faith (*SUD* 14/SKS 11, 130). And yet this task cannot be achieved without grace, mercy, and divine charity, which first loved us and encounters us amid the striving (Furnal 2022).

Lindström characterized Kierkegaard's development in this way: in the early period, Kierkegaard emphasized self-denial amid the struggle against selfishness as the refusal to recognize the gift of creaturely dependence; in the later period, the imitation of Christ focused this general concern in a concrete way on the person of Christ as the redemptive model. In other words, the dialectical focus on the gift of creatureliness and self-abnegation was sharpened analogically as the path of self-giving Christlikeness (Lindström 1955, 385). Indeed, for Kierkegaard, suffering only takes on a qualitatively different sense as 'Christian' when it stems from the persecution of the faith (Lindström 1955, 386). Moreover, Kierkegaard's emphasis upon poverty as a requirement of self-giving love reflects "a companion to the distinction made by the Roman Church between Christian commandments and evangelical counsels" (Lindström 1955, 387). Finally, for Kierkegaard the path of Christian discipleship is a voluntary decision to renounce earthly goods that cannot be coerced or contrived (Lindström 1955, 387). According to Lindström, "what Kierkegaard sees as

exemplary in the life of Christ is his obedience to the demands of the first commandment. In obedience, Christ sacrifices his life for humanity in a movement of absolute mercy, and the imitator of Christ must, likewise, give his life in the service of his neighbor” (Lindström 1955, 391).

The shift from the *ethical* focus on service to the neighbor becomes *theological* insofar as the life of Christ becomes a model for the disciple to imitate. Lindström concluded that Kierkegaard’s view of imitation is “closely related to the Catholic and pietistic conception of the imitation of Jesus” (ibid., 392).

To sum up, for Kierkegaard, Christ was not a martyr whose death was accidental and could have been otherwise; rather, His voluntary self-sacrifice redeems humanity from sin and death by showing humanity what it truly means to be human (cf. *KJN* 7, 216/*SKS* 23, 35ff. (NB17:69)). Furthermore, Kierkegaard’s reference to ‘the situation of contemporaneity’ includes the everyday and ordinary time and place where Christ becomes our model and redeemer by the decisive act of faith (Lindström 1955, 383). Finally, the proclamation of Christ’s redemption cannot be at the expense of the demand of Christian discipleship.

Gemma’s World as God’s Project

Gemma’s life and mission culminated in her existential participation in Christ’s Passion and the mystical union of love and suffering, to which Fabro assigned a soteriological value in a Kierkegaardian way. Moreover, Fabro suggested explicitly that Gemma was an indispensable exemplar for the post-Vatican II Catholic Church (Fabro 1987, 9). For Fabro, Gemma’s mystical experience was a gift to the twentieth century as a critical counterpoint to any secularizing ideology

seeking to eliminate divine transcendence in light of the rationalistic reduction of limiting consciousness to sense perception. Indeed, the subtitle of Fabro's study *Gemma Galgani testimone del soprannaturale* refers to Gemma as a "witness" or "testimony" of the supernatural, a phrase that reflected Fabro's own philosophical and theological account of "Gemma's world as God's project" (Fabro 1987, 20).

Fabro charted his itinerary across five chapters. The first chapter explored how Christ's Passion is the source and charism of the mystery of salvation, which 'effects' the event of contemporaneity and conformity in Gemma's experience of the stigmata. Chapter two highlighted Gemma's acute awareness of the universality of sin, which generates the need for redemption and manifests in evil, and the ambiguity, awareness, and forgetfulness of sin. Fabro devoted the third chapter to Gemma's mission as a witness who testifies to the supernatural in her everyday experience of sensing the supersensible without comprehension and through her faith-deepening pain. Chapter four explored Gemma's experience of the presence and absence of Jesus, which was often illustrated in terms of light and darkness. Chapter five surveyed Gemma's life and highlighted her virtues of meekness, simplicity, femininity, and everydayness as contributing to her paradoxical yet credible witness of the supernatural.

In addition to *Gemma Galgani*, Fabro also edited an anthology entitled *Breviary of Love*, which included some thematic passages from Gemma's writings and was published after his death (Fabro 1999). Originally, Fabro wanted a different title for the anthology: "Diary of love." However, Gemma's hagiographers chose "Breviary" instead. This subtle change indicates how the reader is meant to take the words attributed to Gemma. As a diary, Gemma's words are meant to reflect the

everydayness of Gemma's life. As a breviary, the reader is invited to make Gemma's experiences their own through prayer. It seems counter-intuitive, but as a diary Gemma's life could be preserved as unique and unrepeatable. A breviary presents itself to the reader as direct communication, which is brought out in the breviary's introduction and encourages the reader to repeat the life they are reading: "to instill within the reader the desire to *re-live* the passionate love that our Saint had for the salvation and perfection of herself and others" (Fabro 1999, 10).

In the breviary's postscript, Fabro's biographer Sr Rosa Goglia wrote that Fabro had framed portraits and letters of St Gemma on the walls and upon his desk at home (Fabro 1999, 392). Goglia observed how Fabro first encountered the story of St Gemma as a young boy and then again in the seminary of the Stigmatine Fathers in Verona. Fabro's discovery of St Gemma was

an incandescent encounter that marked his soul and oriented him toward an existential theology, rooted and based in Christ's Passion, the dogmatic truth of God-becoming-human to redeem every one of us. The God-in-time that is not unworthy to appear "dripping in blood" that "feels" the atrocity of his suffering to liberate souls from sin. (Fabro 1999, 392)

What I am suggesting is that for Fabro, Gemma's mystical encounter with Christ is refracted through Kierkegaard's notion of 'contemporaneity' to help the modern reader understand what traditionally has been described as *imitatio Christi*. Fabro also described Gemma's experience of the stigmata as "a real phenomenon" of Christ's ongoing suffering for the sin of the world (Fabro 1987, 58). Indeed, Gemma's "mission and testimony in the Church of God is the conviction that Christ has come to the world, has suffered and died, and continues to suffer for the sins of humanity" (Fabro 1987, 23).

Gemma's stigmata bear witness to the supernatural, that is, the charism of "real participation in the pain of Christ's passion in a visible way, as another *Christus patiens*" (Fabro 1987, 82). Fabro described Gemma's existential participation in Christ's sufferings as "a growing tension of repulsion and attraction, which is the humiliating conflict between the corrupt nature and the merciful movements of the communications of grace, operating in every one of us" (Fabro 1987 25). In this way, Fabro applied the Kierkegaardian motif of 'contemporaneity' to understanding her story, which opened up a "theological space" in which faith "reveals 'another world' to us, beyond and above this shadowy [*umbratile*] world of ours" (Fabro 1987,7).

Daughter of the Passion

In the published version of Gemma's *Autobiography* (1976), there is an account of the untimely death of her parents and siblings throughout her childhood. However, during the immediate grief of her father's death, Gemma reported that "Jesus made himself *felt* in my soul all the more during those sorrowful days" (Fabro 1987, 26; cf. Galgani 1976, 239). For example, Fabro highlighted an episode where the accompanying and peaceful presence of Jesus appeared to Gemma during this painful event:

"My daughter," Jesus said embracing me, "I give myself entirely to you and you will be entirely mine." I saw well that Jesus had taken away my parents from me, and at times I despaired, because I believed to be abandoned. That morning, I lamented with Jesus about this, and Jesus always so good and tender, repeated to me: "My daughter, I will always be with you. I am your Father, and your mother will be her (indicating our Mother of Sorrows)." (Fabro 1987, 393; cf. Galgani 1976, 249)

In contrast to the caring presence of Jesus and Mary, Gemma also encountered her Guardian Angel, who often admonished her to reframe her physical suffering in terms of spiritual purification. For example, sometimes Gemma's angel would say things like "If Jesus afflicts you in the body, he does it always to purify you in spirit. Be good!" (Fabro 1987,27; cf. Galgani 1976, 243). During Holy Week 1899, Gemma reported that her Guardian Angel "corrected me every time I did something wrong and he taught me to speak but little and only when I was spoken to" (Fabro 1987, 27; cf. Galgani 1976, 251). Moreover, the angel "taught me to keep my eyes cast down, and one time in church he rebuked me strongly saying to me: "Is this the way to conduct yourself in the presence of God? [...] If you are not good, I will not let you see me anymore" (Fabro 1987, 27). In short, Gemma's visions often served to reinforce and sustain her vocation.

In passages like these, Fabro highlighted the role of a disapproving accuser of sin that demands obedience and vigilance of various offences. Often Gemma faced a dilemma between exclusion from Jesus for an offence, or suffering with Jesus to be in conformity with his Passion. For example, on Wednesday during Holy Week 1899, Gemma reported:

I felt myself so full of sorrow for my sins that it was a time of continual martyrdom. However, in the midst of this sorrow there was one comfort, namely, weeping. This was both a comfort and a relief to me. I spent the entire hour praying and weeping [...] I found myself before Jesus Crucified. He was bleeding all over. I lowered my eyes and the sight filled me with pain. I made the sign of the cross and immediately my anguish was succeeded by peace of soul. I continued to feel an even stronger sorrow for my sins and I had not the courage to raise my eyes and look at Jesus. I prostrated myself on the floor and remained there for several hours. "My daughter", He said, "Behold these wounds. They have all been opened for your sins. But now, be consoled, they have all been closed by your sorrow. Do not offend me anymore. Love me as I have always loved you. Love me". This he repeated several times. The vision vanished and I returned to my senses. From

that time on I began to have a great horror for sin (which was the greatest grace Jesus has given me). The wounds of Jesus remained so vividly impressed in my mind that they have never been effaced. (Fabro 1987, 57; cf. Galgani 1976, 252)

Fabro prefaced his remarks with the proviso that he intended to recover the supernatural for modern theology from undesirable tendencies toward naturalism and subjectivism (Fabro 1987, 37). However, commenting on liminal scenes like these, Fabro observed that the seemingly “irrelevant relevance [*attualita-inattuale*] of her spiritual magisterium” was an existential participation in “the *pain* of the failure of one’s most ardent aspirations, which was to enter the convent,” in exchange for the much higher calling of “the living magisterium of *Christus patiens*” (Fabro 1987, 36). Indeed, the contrast of Christ’s loving and abiding presence amid prayerful tears and the wounding sorrow over sin are common tropes in Christian spirituality (see Ross 1987; see also Marshall 2010).

Gemma’s Vocation of (Com)passion

Understanding ‘contemporaneity’ in terms of a shared pain and suffering with Jesus in His Passion, Fabro offered an experimental phenomenological and existential reflection on Gemma’s expression of a “desire to suffer and help Jesus in his pain” (Fabro 1987, 53). For Fabro, Gemma’s mystical insight was that “Jesus *always* suffers, *still* suffers, and suffers even *now* for the sin of humanity” (Fabro 1987, 54). To illustrate, Fabro indicated a letter Gemma wrote to her spiritual director where she reported a dialogue with the suffering Jesus in prayer:

Jesus, *why are you crying?* And he replied: My Daughter, do not ask me that. It made me start to cry too, and it seemed to me that he embraced me tighter than normal, and gave me a kiss on my forehead [...] Oh! And when I see Jesus cry, my own heart is pierced [...] In that moment, Jesus sees all my sins, all my shortcomings

and together sees the place that I would have occupied in hell, if the Heart of Jesus had not forgiven me.
(Fabro 1987, 62f.)

In contrast to the negative pain and suffering, Gemma's tears indicated a positive sharing in Christ's compassion, which illuminated the mystical exchange of an awareness of her own sin and the forgiveness Jesus offered to all of humanity. For instance, Gemma often claimed to meet Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane to share in his sadness over her own sins and the sins of all humanity (Fabro 1987, 63n).

For Fabro, Gemma's relationship to the event of Christ's Passion reflects Kierkegaard's biblical understanding of "contemporaneity," which is diametrically opposed to Heidegger's notion of a cosmic "presence of the present" (Fabro 1987, 54).² Fabro indicated that Heidegger's fundamental ontology referred to the presentation of an event's immediacy of presence, whereas Gemma indicated "the intensity of theological and mystical transcendence," which is qualitatively different from finite consciousness (Fabro 1987, 54n).

For Fabro, Kierkegaard's Christian dialectic spans "two moments: the human being before God (in the sphere of being) and the human being before Christ (in the open arc of salvation history)" (ibid.). This is not the approximate aesthetic-intellectual calling to mind a past event in the consciousness of immediacy, but rather an ethico-religious appropriation of the real presence of Christ in and beyond time. Fabro explained that "on the existential level, the relation of 'double contemporaneity' of Christ with humanity, to every single person, and of humanity, each single person, to Christ the God-Man in the *moment* of decision for or against God, for or against Christ, in the conscientious refusal or acceptance of saving grace" (ibid.).

Indeed, Fabro contextualized Gemma's mystical encounters with the crucified Christ through the lens of a Franciscan emphasis on "folly to the second power" to reframe the moral and physical pain with Gemma's participation in Christ's passion (Fabro 1987, 47f.).³ Moreover, to highlight 'contemporaneity' as a sharing in the real pain of Christ, Fabro mentioned Origen's remark that "My Savior even now laments my sins," which is also cited explicitly by Kierkegaard in his *Journals* (Fabro 1987, 63n; cf. *KJN* 8, 267/*SKS* 24, 268 (NB 23:127)).⁴ Fabro turned to Anti-Climacus to illustrate the awareness of sin, self, and God as a hinge commitment that unites metaphysical and soteriological perspectives. Fabro cited his own translation of *La malattia mortale*:

A self before Christ is a self that is enhanced by an immense concession from God, empowered by the immense importance that one comes to concede the fact that God, even for the love of this self, deems it worthy to be born, to be incarnated, to suffer and die. As said before, the more idea of God one has, the more self there is – even here one needs to say: the more idea of Christ one has, the more self there is. A self is qualitatively what is its measure. The fact *that* Christ is my measure, is expressed on God's part with maximum evidence as the immense reality that the self has; because only in Christ is it true that God is the goal and measure, or the measure and goal of humanity. However, the more self that there is, the more intensive the sin. (Kierkegaard 1965; my translation of Fabro's rendering; cf. *SUD* 113f./*SKS* 11, 226)

For Fabro, Anti-Climacus provided a theoretical lens through which Gemma's 'being before Christ' can be rendered with sense so that the sanctifying effect of her visions of divine mercy can be united with the forgiveness of sin (cf. Fabro 1987, 117, 133, 273). Indeed, Fabro explained that "the effect that Gemma feels growing in her soul is the sanctifying momentum and sharpening of

her compassion for the sufferings of Jesus together with the comprehension of her sins” (Fabro 1987, 56).

During Holy Week 1899, Gemma’s pain and her layered awareness of sin increased in proportion to her participation in the wounds of Christ. Gemma reported what it was like to be prepared for ‘the communication of the stigmata’:

The entire hour past by praying and weeping; finally, as tired as I was, I sat down; the pain persisted. Soon afterwards I felt myself gathering up everything and, then, almost all at once, I lost all my strength [...] I laid face down on the ground, and stayed there for hours. “My Daughter – He said – look, these wounds you have opened them all for your sins, but now console yourself, because you have closed them all with your pain. Do not offend me any longer. Love me, as I have always loved you. Love me!” He kept repeating to me. (Fabro 1987, 57)

Reflecting on this supernatural event alongside others, Fabro – whose religious order was called the Stigmatines – argued that Gemma’s pain was real as a “total participation in the Passion of Christ” (Fabro 1987, 59). Moreover, Fabro claimed that this religious phenomenon had a threefold structure: i) the intense interior pain of sin; ii) the participation of all the faculties of her soul to understand the offense, remember the torment, and willingness to expiate sin; iii) deploying the full range of human emotions in total conformity of her soul to Christ (Fabro 1987, 59f.). In short, Fabro argued that Gemma’s mystical experience of ‘being before Christ’ was real, and the saint’s awareness of sin comprises the sacramental encounter with the sacrifice of Christ – also in the Eucharist (Fabro 1987, 61).

The call to self-abnegation becomes explicit in Gemma's letters to her spiritual director when she wrote that Christ invited her to "die on the cross with me" (Fabro 1987, 64). Fabro interpreted this remark to indicate that for Gemma, Christ continued to suffer in agony for the sin of humanity, resembling a remark by Blaise Pascal (Fabro 1987, 66f.; cf. Pascal, *Pensées* §522). Fabro explained that "although the Gospels do not say explicitly that Christ in the garden had anticipated all the sin of humanity and had suffered for them when sweating blood, however, Christ wants that Gemma repeat in herself the physical and moral suffering of his Passion" (Fabro 1987, 64).

For Fabro, Gemma's 'being before Christ' refers not only to the interiority of her soul, but also to the transtemporal presence of the Incarnate Word as eternity-in-time. In short, Fabro concluded that all of the Christian mystics indicated "an intensive reality of actual presence that we might call 'double contemporaneity'" (Fabro 1987, 70). He explained that contemporaneity is "double" in the sense that Christ is present to human history and believers are present to the sufferings of Christ for the sin of humanity (ibid.). The event of the Savior's Passion and Gemma's imitation of the Redeemer come together in a decisive and salvific way that joins heaven and earth.

Contemporaneity with Christ Crucified

Fabro interpreted Gemma's mystical experience of the stigmata explicitly in a Kierkegaardian and Thomistic register so that Gemma's 'contemporaneity with Christ' provided not only an ethico-religious 'model' for the Christian life, but also an aesthetic-intellectual model of reasoning in Christian philosophy. For Thomas, what are the metaphysical and soteriological effects of the atonement? Fabro explained that for Thomas, the salvific mystery of the event of Christ's Passion

is the source of the supernatural life, which is displayed in the devout lives of the saints and martyrs who imitate Christ.

Moreover, the gift of supernatural life belongs not exclusively to the spiritual elite but remains available to all humanity by virtue of the spiritual soul reflecting God's image as a finite human creature that understands the truth and wills the good. Fabro further expounded the Thomistic link between the good, God, and the Incarnate Word, which highlighted not only our capacity for the good and God, but also our capacity to receive the communication of grace sacramentally through Christ's Passion, which is the source of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love and the sanctifying gifts of the Holy Spirit.⁵ Indeed, this capacity joins the soul to its Creator in the order of being (*esse*), and the sacramental activity of the Incarnation in Christ's Passion perfects our redemption from sin and death by eliciting our participatory response. Since sin is shared with human nature through Adam, it can be realized actually and individually by the rest of us. Fabro explained that the consolation for sinners is that the event of Christ's Passion is a demonstration of God's love for us and a model of salvific virtue enabled by justifying grace and oriented toward beatific glory. In short, the event of Christ's Passion absorbed natural and moral evil in a maximal way that united both God's justice and mercy (Fabro 1987, 38-41; cf. S.Th. IIIa q. 46).

In commenting on how the gates of heaven are thrown open to the baptized through Christ's Passion, Aquinas wrote that Jesus "removed the obstacle; but by His ascension, He introduced us, as it were, to the possession of the heavenly kingdom. And thus it is said that by ascending He 'opened the way before them'" (STh IIIa q. 49 a. 5 ad 5). The biblical reference Thomas makes to the ascension is found in the first chapter of Acts and Kierkegaard also deployed a similar theo-

logic in his reflection “Christ is the Way” (see *FSE*, 53-70/*SKS* 13,78-93). Kierkegaard’s emphasis on the imitation of Christ is the proof for what is Christian in a stricter sense: “Those whose lives were marked by ‘imitation’ have not doubted the Ascension. And why not? In the first place, because their lives were too strained, too devoted in daily sufferings, to be able to sit in idleness and consort with reasons and doubt, playing odds and evens. For them, the Ascension stood firm” (*FSE*, 68/*SKS* 13, 90). In short, Fabro observed that for Kierkegaard and Thomas Aquinas, the ascension was not the end of the story of Jesus, but rather the beginning of ‘the narrow way’ of suffering, which comprises the task and goal of following Christ.

Indeed, the event of Christ’s Passion ‘models’ the ideal for his followers to ‘imitate.’ Fabro’s argument is that the mystics and saints who experienced the stigmata like St. Francis of Assisi, St. Catherine of Siena, St. Gemma Galgani, and St. Padre Pio of Pietrelcina all exhibit the scandalous cruciform life that follows after Christ in purifying love and suffering that communicates existence sacramentally (Fabro 1987, 43).

Moreover, by connecting Kierkegaard with Thomas, Fabro highlighted the way that an encounter with grace is not withheld from those facing physical and spiritual suffering in the Passion of the impassible God – a dogmatic theological point clarified at the Council of Ephesus (Fabro 1987, 44). For Fabro, the mystical insight of participated suffering illuminated the task of Christian philosophy to hold the pagan and Christian in proper tension. He explained that the Christian difference is that the model refers not to an eternal Form, but rather to the Incarnate Word:

The living imprint that the Christian has received in baptism is to conform oneself to Christ and to follow His path of humiliation and suffering, *without compromising* with worldly wisdom and the concupiscence of

the flesh. Now the “Model” is Christ, and He has redeemed us through His death on the cross, which is the intensive paradigm of the synthesis of the God-Man; a mysterious synthesis of eternity and time, of fragility and omnipotence, of humiliation and glory, of mercy and justice. So humanity, fallen in sin and death, now finds itself raised to “participate” by the grace of Christ in the very same nature of God (2 Pet 1:4). (Fabro 1987, 46; see Mitchell 2024)

In other words, the abstract form of an empty category was considered a “folly” (1 Cor. 1:24), unless and until sense perception could grasp it concretely in time. Yet for St. Paul and his followers, the eternal *Logos* is the formal model of our experience of what emerges in temporal reality *because* the Incarnation unites the orders of creation and redemption (Fabro 1987, 45).

Time as the Space of Freedom and Grace

By reflecting on Gemma’s mystical experiences in light of Kierkegaard’s writings, Fabro observed not only the expiatory nature of Gemma’s existential participation in Christ’s sufferings, but also the existential situation of human freedom in light of the Incarnation. Fabro wrote that the mystical “conformity with the crucified Christ” also indicates how the Incarnation issues “the new quality that human time has assumed as ‘the new space of freedom’” (Fabro 1987, 72).

The irruption of freedom in time breaks the continuity of time and prevents time from being coextensive with being or identifying itself with it [...] [*in some way*] thanks to the entanglement of immanence and transcendence especially in the form of the encounter-clash of two freedoms – divine and human – the Passion of Christ, caused by the continuous sins of humanity, continues *in some way* (“mystically and really”) in Christ, because we continue to sin and to qualify history with the novum of our choices to rebel against God [...] [and] this is the work of freedom that gives to humanity the possibility of the alternative for or against God, for or against Christ. Christ as the God-Man and Redeemer, certainly is not indifferent to the quality of

our choices and so delights if they are for God and include suffering instead of being against God. (Fabro 1987, 73)

Here Fabro explained how the Incarnation unites the orders of creation and redemption in the person of Christ and in our response to him. Neither Kierkegaard (cf. *KJN* 4, 56f./*SKS* 20, 57f. (NB:69)) nor Fabro endorse a view of autonomy here that is separate from God, but rather a participated freedom that freely responds to the divine initiative in a qualitatively distinct yet non-reciprocal dependence (Fabro 1987, 140). The metaphysical dependence of created freedom remains independent existentially for freedom's sake (Fabro 1987, 74). Fabro explained that created freedom still depends non-reciprocally upon divine causality, "but depends as a free cause *in order to be free*, to act freely and to liberate oneself, and to become always freer in the sacrifice for the independence of freedom according to the teachings of Christ" (Fabro 1987, 74n).

To illustrate his point biblically, Fabro refracted a Kierkegaardian emphasis on "only divine omnipotence makes free" (cf. *KJN* 4, 56f./*SKS* 20, 57f. (NB:69)) into St. Thomas's view of Mary's response: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Lk 1:38). For Fabro, the physical process of natural causality remained distinct from the qualitative decision of participated freedom (Fabro 1987, 75).⁶ Thus, the Incarnation of eternity-in-time refers then to "a new internal relation" from within time between time and eternity in an analogous way to the interaction between human and divine freedom in the soul (Fabro 1987, 75). In short, the Creator and Redeemer is never absent from the sin of history and the Kierkegaardian term for this mystical and suffering presence is "contemporaneity" (Fabro 1987, 76).

To make the explicit connection with Kierkegaard, Fabro cited a passage from Kierkegaard's *Journals*. In the reference, Kierkegaard wrote about what Christ's atonement gives to His followers:

[With the Exemplar], there is no reduction in self-denial, but the gospel teaches me to believe that God and Christ help me toward self-denial. "Grace" actually relates to the juxtaposition of temporality and eternity that constitutes a human being [...] when eternity and the requirement of ideality simultaneously collide with a person and make their demands on him: then he may despair, lose his mind, etc. In such a situation he must cry out to God: Give me time, give me time. And this is grace – indeed, this is why temporality is called the time of grace [...] Faith, which relates to grace and grasps it, intervenes redemptively. In faith there is rest [...] To obtain the courage to strive, he must repose in the blessed assurance that everything is already decided, that he has won – in faith and through faith. Then he begins to strive, but faith, relating itself to grace, is always instantly ready to strengthen him in patient striving, always granting time, the time of grace. (KJN 6, 377/SKS 19, 373 (NB14:46))

Fabro concluded that all of "human history and every free act, whether from a saint or sinner, is present to Christ in an extensive and intensive way such that every act is present to him in the quality of its own 'moment' of its real occurrence" (Fabro 1987,79). This is how Fabro uncovered the theological implications of the content of Gemma's mystical visions. For Fabro, mystical visions involve not only faith but also "an observable object available for phenomenological reflection" insofar as it touches upon the real-life experience of the mystic and Church authority (Fabro 1987, 82).⁷ In Gemma's case, Fabro refers to her as "the testimony of the supernatural" who describes grace in terms of God's time, which unites being and history at once (Fabro 1987, 203).

At first glance, relating Kierkegaard and mysticism seemed like a difficult task. Yet Kierkegaard himself expressed his appreciation of mysticism, for instance when he described the special attention needed to engage with mystic thought: “Just like certain bird songs the mystic is only heard in the still of the night; most often the mystic has less significance for the din of current times than for the heedful kindred spirit, listening after the course of time, in the stillness of history” (*KJN* 3, 194/*SKS* 19, 199 (Not6:21)). What I have tried to suggest here is that Kierkegaard was such a “kindred spirit,” and so was Cornelio Fabro. In Fabro’s hands, the life of St. Gemma Galgani is receptive to a Kierkegaardian motif of ‘contemporaneity’ that illuminates the shared aim of the imitation of Christ in the life of the mystic.

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Notes

¹ For more, see Fabro’s book-length introduction to the Italian translation of in Kierkegaard’s *Book on Adler* (Kierkegaard 1976). Also see Fabro (1978) and Powell (2014).

² See Heidegger (1965, §44: Fundamental Ontology).

³ Space does not permit further elaboration, but Fabro also highlighted the explicit links between the theology of the cross in Angela of Foligno and the German pietist tradition (Fabro 1987, 47-52). In addition, Fabro later mentioned the importance of the Stations of the Cross and St. Alphonso di Liguori for Kierkegaard (ibid., 125n). For more on Kierkegaard’s relation to the Pietist tradition, see Barnett (2011), and for his appreciation of Alphonso, see De Rosa (1992).

⁴ For more, see Origen (1990). Fabro noted that Kierkegaard’s access to Origen’s homily was mediated by Böhlinger (1842).

⁵ For more on how this point relates historically and textually to Kierkegaard’s theology, see Furnal (2022).

⁶ For more, see Furnal (2024).

⁷ Some readers of Kierkegaard would typically distinguish Kierkegaard’s view of contemporaneity from the phenomena of Gemma’s mystical experience at this point. However, for Fabro (1976), Kierkegaard’s critical view of Adler’s private revelation was not disconnected entirely from Kierkegaard’s implicit ecclesiology of apostolicity.