PERSONA IN THE CHRISTOLOGY OF LEO I: A NOTE

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This note is not intended to duplicate the substantial treatments of Leo’s christology already in existence but to supplement them by looking to the source of his christological ideas through the prism of what for him is the essential basis of the unity of Christ, the persona. In one sense the answer to the question of Leo’s sources, both for this term in particular and for his christology as a whole, is an obvious one: Leo is the self-conscious heir and guardian of the entire Latin theological tradition. In this instance it is mediated to him through the Augustinian Libellus Emendationis which he received from John Cassian and through his fellow-Umbrian Ambrose. However, there remains to be considered the particular emphasis and motivation that Leo brought to the tradition in its restatement.

Since Evans’ destruction of Harnack’s thesis that Tertullian’s use of the word substantia is legal in connotation, it is difficult to look for legal usage in Leo. But to restrict the meaning of any term in a Latin writer to univocality is to do violence to the workings of the language, in which the line between metaphor and literal meaning is often blurred. Thus treatments like that of Nedoncelle are useful in depicting the range of possible meanings of a term, but not insofar as they seek to come up with an overarching definition.

In the same way we are not to look for watertight definitions and

3 See e.g. Epistle 9, to Dioscorus.
4 That Leo received the Libellus of the Gallican monk Leporius through Cassian at Marseilles is supported by the sudden change of tone in the last two books of the De Incarnatione. This is presumably due to the intervention of Leo, who as Archdeacon of Rome had commissioned the work, and who had been awakened by the authentic voice of the Latin tradition by the inclusion of Leporius’ recantation in the first book. Nicolas (‘La Doctrine’) calls it ‘une première ébauche du . . . tome à Flavien.’
5 Ernest Evans, Tertullian’s Treatise against Praxeas (London, 1948), introduction.
6 So Evans (ibid.) talks of Tertullian’s use of words in which the primary meaning is ‘almost lost in metaphor’.
precise theories of the atonement in the fathers but for a collection of images and metaphors. Two predominate in Leo, that of the payment of a debt, and that of the duping of the devil by God in the taking of the likeness of sinful flesh.

Since Leo conceives of christology in terms of soteriology, we should seek his understanding of persona in the context of these images. Thus it is that one regulating idea of persona is that Christ, as persona in the legal connotation of that term, is equipped to pay a debt on our behalf; being of double substantiality he is equipped to transact business both on his father’s account and on ours. Persona here does not mean l’individualité humaine but homo cum statu suo consideratus.

The other theory of atonement points us to the more basic meaning of persona. It is the persona of flesh that dupes the devil, it is by virtue of his sinlessness that the devil has no hold over him. Thus the unity of Christ in persona is upheld as the means of salvation. If this were not so then Christ could not save.

This must lead us to ask what the source of Leo’s marked dyophysitism is, since the idea of persona, whilst not carrying the import of the Chalcedonian hypostasis, is nonetheless a strong unifying factor. Again, it is present in the Latin tradition, but how does Leo understand it? The key must be sought in another shade of meaning of the term persona, one who acts in a role.

Ullmann writes of the manner in which Leo solves the problem of the relationship between Peter and his successors by the use of the concept of the haeres indignus. It is so that the equation Christ = Peter = Pope is set up. But this piece of juridical theology surely left problems in its train. Let us take the example of universal compassion as treated by A.K. Squire. Christ held this, and Peter is charged to continue it. But what could universal compassion mean for Leo the man?

Leo would have been in no doubt that he was one persona, but

9 Tractatus, 64. 55–64; 72. 48ff; 21. 43ff.
10 Ibid., 62. 58ff; 28. 55ff.
12 The first is Nédoncelle’s definition, the second is that of the jurists. As further evidence of legal terminology creeping into theology, note the use of sacramentum in Tractatus, 50. 74–5; 25.
14 So e.g. Tractatus, 33. 44; 35. 55; 74. 74. cf. 3. 148–9.
16 ‘Universal Compassion in St Leo the Great’, Studia Patristica, 13 (1975), 280–5.
within his *persona* he would surely have been conscious of a dual operation, as man and pope, Leo and Peter. It is easy enough to project this on to Christ, and so it is that when he comes to think of Christ, *agit utraque forma*.\(^{17}\)

Leo entered the christological fray in the first instance as the result of a confusion between Nestorianism and Pelagianism,\(^ {18}\) and his *Tomus ad Flavianum* is still a cause of controversy.\(^ {19}\) What this note suggests is that neither eastern critics nor western supporters of Leo are allowing him to make his own contribution to the broad field of patristic christology.

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\(^{17}\) The phrase, deriving from a Christmas Sermon, which caused such controversy at Chalcedon from its inclusion in the Tome by Prosper of Aquitaine.

\(^{18}\) J. Plagnieux, 'Le Grief de Complicité entre Erreurs Nestorienne et Pelagienne', *Revue des Études Augustiniennes*, 2 (1956), 391-402, charts the confusion. It is for this reason that Leo commissions John Cassian to write against the Nestorian heresy before it has even been recognized as such. It is not simply a matter of damaged Roman *amour propre* as a result of Nestorius' first letter to Coelestine. Cf. Owen Chadwick, *John Cassian* (Cambridge, 1968), 141ff.

\(^{19}\) See the essays in *Does Chalcedon Divide or Unite?* (Geneva, 1981) for continued dogmatic controversy over the Tome.