When studying the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries that led to the formulation of the creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon many students find themselves frustrated with all the theological hair splitting and feel that somehow the message of Jesus had gotten buried underneath all the debates about the precise relationship between the humanity and divinity in Jesus Christ. One question that frequently emerges is whether it really matters whether the Son is co-equal with the Father or shares a common human nature with us. For the early church such questions mattered because they went to the heart of the manner of our salvation in Christ.

It is worth noting that there have been no conciliar statements about the precise manner by which our salvation is achieved, but there have been plenty about the nature of the agent of our salvation – Jesus Christ. Why? One possibility is that the reality of the salvation offered by God remains in excess of any single model of understanding. Christian doctrine has its origins in the experience of the first Christians and their conviction that they had experienced in Christ, definitive liberation and salvation from God. The hope to which the Easter experience gave rise came to be expressed in a variety of ways, none of which exhausted the content of that hope.

It was the question of salvation that was at stake in the Christological controversies of the fourth and fifth centuries. The Nicaean - Constantinopolitan Creed (381 A.D.) associates salvation with the incarnation - “for our salvation . . . he became incarnate”, but these words were not themselves at the centre of the controversies. What was at stake is encapsulated by Athanasius when he stated that “the Son of God became human so that we might become God”, [1] and by Gregory Nazianzen – also known as “The Theologian” due to his influence at the Council of Constantinople - in his axiom that, “What has not been assumed has not been healed”. [2] In other words, although the mode of our salvation was not the explicit concern of the Christological councils, it was implicit in that our salvation hinged upon the person of Christ in whom salvation was accomplished. The debates about the human and divine natures of Christ are in fact debates about the nature of our salvation. Otherwise, why did the ontological status of Christ matter so much?

In this paper I want to try to sketch a model of the process of salvation that is consistent with what was at stake in the Christological debates of the early Christian centuries. These debates and controversies were part of the process of bringing to consciousness an intuition about the nature of our salvation in Christ. Although there has been and is a legitimate plurality of theories and approaches to understanding the nature of our salvation in Christ, I believe that the implicit concerns of the Christological councils, because of their importance for Christian doctrine, should have a certain priority in assessing the value of a soteriology. In other words, the particular models of salvation proposed must address why it is important that Jesus the Christ be both fully divine and fully human.

Models of Salvation: Perspectives on Salvation History

But first I will examine briefly the some of the principal models according to which Salvation in Christ has been understood. John Galvin identifies and discusses four basic models of salvation offered throughout the Church’s history. [3] The list is to some extent arbitrary as many other models or divisions could be posited. [4] However, these four models do serve to describe the basic orientation of the broad spectrum of theories.

Recapitulation
The first model that Galvin identifies is the model of recapitulation in which salvation is the perfection of creation. In this view creation, incarnation, and redemption are part of a single movement of God’s grace. The incarnation of the Word flows from creation through the Word and inaugurates the process whereby creation itself is exalted and enabled to share in the fullness of the divine life itself. It was an idea common to many of the church fathers that our redemption also entailed our divinisation and participation in divine
life. This model finds its clearest expression and development in the second century in the writings of Irenaeus of Lyons, Christianity’s first great post-apostolic theologian:

When [Christ] was incarnate and became a human being, he recapitulated in himself the long history of the human race, obtaining salvation for us, so that we might regain in Jesus Christ what we had lost in Adam, that is, being in the image and likeness of God. [5]

There are two aspects to recapitulation. The first aspect involves the restoration of what was lost, but it progresses beyond the idea of simple restitution towards the idea that redemption is none other than the fulfilment of creation itself. Irenaeus argues against the idea of the restitution of a lost perfection as this idea was foundational to the heretical Gnostic thought systems that Irenaeus was attempting to refute. For the Gnostics, the whole of the material world itself was the result of the fall from grace, the loss of perfection. Instead, Irenaeus offers us a view of creation and salvation history that fits surprisingly well with the contemporary understanding of an evolutionary universe. Consequently, Irenaeus’ approach is ontological rather than juridical and is marked by a strong anti-dualist stamp. Against the Gnostics Irenaeus would claim that we are not saved from the world, but within and with the world.

Adam’s sin was due to immaturity rather than maliciousness. Drawing on Paul’s statement in 1 Corinthians 3.2, “I have fed you with milk and not solid food, for you were not able to take it”, Irenaeus argues, that just as a mother may give solid food to her child, she refrains from doing so since the child is not yet able to receive it. Similarly, God could also “have endowed man with perfection from the beginning, but man was as yet unable to receive it, being as yet an infant.” [6] The growth and development of humanity, nourished by the Spirit and fulfilled in the Son is a growth towards the perfection of God.

Humanity came to be created and fashioned in God’s image likeness, the Father being well pleased and giving the command, the Son acting and creating, the Spirit nourishing and giving increase, and humanity making gradual progress and so advancing towards perfection, coming closer, that is to say, to the Uncreated One. . . Now it was necessary that humanity should in the first instance be created; and having been created, should receive growth; and having received growth, should be strengthened; and having been strengthened, should abound; and having abounded, should recover [from the disease of sin]; and having recovered, should be glorified; and being glorified, should see his Lord. For God confers incorruption, and incorruption brings us close to God. [7]

The idea of recapitulation has its biblical foundation is in the Pauline epistles which describe Christ as the new Adam: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive” (Rom. 5; 1 Cor. 15:22). Christ is the head of the new creation who summaries or recapitulates in himself the whole of creation. His coming is the fullness of time (Gal. 4:4), the climax of human history. The central text for this approach is Ephesians 1:10, which speaks of God’s plan to sum up all things in Christ.

In the theology of the Church fathers, the incarnation is the beginning and foundation of our salvation, but the resurrection is also crucial as it is as “firstborn of the dead” (Col. 1:18) that Christ restores the human race to the existence in the image and likeness of God that had been lost in Adam. .

Divine education

The model of recapitulation is often supplemented by the idea of the divine education of the human race through Christ. Irenaeus argues “that through imitation of his works and performance of his word we might have communion with him.” [8] This supplement is important if recapitulation is to be more than an automatic process. After the Enlightenment, with its focus on Jesus as an ethical teacher, this supplementary theory became a distinct theory of redemption in itself, although it has its beginnings as a separate theory of salvation with Peter Abelard in the early 12th century.

Abelard argued that Christ died, not out of any necessity, but in order to reveal the profound depths of God’s love for humanity. It was the attitudes of men and women, their fear and ignorance that keep them
from God. According to Abelard’s theory, the death of Christ provides more than just a moral example. It has a transforming influence that shifts the perspective of humanity, leading us to trust and repentance.

Although the idea of salvation through divine education is often identified as a theory in its own right, I would prefer to include this model with the broader model of recapitulation and divinisation. As part of the theory of recapitulation this model offers a developmental perspective in which our growth towards our divinisation is organic.

Ransom or deceiving the devil
Another model of how our redemption is effected is encapsulated by the idea of ransom, in which the devil, likened to a fish, is deceived and defeated by the divine bait that is hidden within the hook that is the man Jesus. Human beings are held captive by sin and as a result of this, the devil had certain rights over humanity. But when the devil killed the sinless one he made a terrible blunder, he had overreached himself. The devil was deceived and swallowed the bait. But the devil couldn’t swallow Christ’s divinity and when Christ rose from the dead the devil was completely overcome. Because of that error the devil had to forfeit his rights over those who follow Christ.

The language of ransom is drawn from Isaiah 53. Associated with it is the idea of victory over Satan. This idea was prominent until the middle ages. Gregory Nazianzen thought the idea blasphemous, but defenders of the theory would argue that it is not a matter of deception on God’s part, but rather “the inability of the prince of this world to understand the divine love”. [9] But as strange as the idea may seem it does seem to be having a sort of revival today. The mimetic theory of René Girard, for example, follows this pattern whereby the devil’s own devices bring about his own demise. According to Girard the death and resurrection of Jesus unmasks the scapegoat mechanism and inherent violence in society that arises from mimetic contagion, thereby using the devil’s devices to defeat the devil. [10] According to Girard, “Western theology, in rejecting the idea of Satan tricked by the Cross, has lost a pearl of great price in the sphere of anthropology”. [11]

However, the idea was taken up within Greek Christianity and at one point in the history of theological fashion the ransom model of redemption came to be the most popular. It eventually came to be eclipsed by another theory that in time became so influential that many people today mistakenly consider it to be the only valid and orthodox model of how salvation in Christ is effected. The theory that eventually came to replace the idea of “victory over Satan” was that of “satisfaction” as elaborated in its classic form by Anselm of Canterbury in the 11th century.

Satisfaction
One of the clear advantages of Anselm’s theory of satisfaction is that it draws explicitly upon the double homo-ousios of Chalcedon – that Christ is both consubstantial with the Father in his divinity, and consubstantial with us in his humanity – in attempting to explain why it was so important for our salvation that Christ be both fully human and fully divine. However, as I hope to demonstrate it the theory remains constrained by the limited world view out of which it emerged, offering an overly legalistic – or juridical - understanding of salvation.

The argument as set out by Anselm in Cur Deus Homo? – Why God Became Man? - begins by asking what problem was created by the fall of Adam and Eve. God could not simply forgive them, Anselm argues, because his own “honour” was diminished by what they had done. God, being aware of his responsibilities as the upholder of the moral order of the universe could not simply ignore the debt. This basic assumption that grounds Anselm’s argument is that feudal society in which Anselm lived was universal, constant and absolute, rather than a particularity of history and geography. The basic feudal premise is that social order and hierarchy is fundamental to the ordering of creation. To deviate from the proper order of things is to court anarchy. In sinning, Adam transgressed this eternal social order. Something had to be done to make things right again, to restore right order. Could God himself have intervened?. The objection to that is that
he was not the debtor. To pay oneself a debt someone else owes is not to discharge the obligation of another person. Could God have used an angel? Again the angel would not be the debtor.

Could God have used a human being? The difficulty there was that all human beings were certainly debtors, but now tainted with original sin were simply not able to do what was required. Logically the only possibility was for a being who was both God and man to do what was needed, for only he both owed the debt and was able to discharge it.

So the incarnate Christ was the only solution. According to this view the incarnation was a response to the fall such that if humanity had not fallen into sin then the Word would not have become incarnate. In line with Anselm’s presuppositions of a static worldview, redemption is simply the restoration of a pre-existing and pre-ordained order. There is no organic growth or development in Anselm’s theory, but simply the restoration of the ancient regime. Although Anselm does emphasise the role of divine love within a feudal worldview, we are unable to accept the worldview in which this logic operates.

Although Anselm’s theory does make sense of the importance of the double homo ousios of Chalcedon, it doesn’t take account of the other theological insights of the christological councils. The view of God presupposed by this Anselm’s model is hierarchical and does not take proper account of the Trinitarian understanding of God as a communion of equals in mutual relations of interdependence. Neither does it take account of creation as a whole. Its juridical view of the universe fails results in an account of salvation history that is partial and limited in scope. The same applies for any account that focuses exclusively on the death of Christ. This is not to say that those theories of salvation based upon ideas of Christ’s death as a sacrifice are unsatisfactory, merely that they are incomplete. The saving significance of Christ’s death should be seen in its broader context. In this respect, earlier theologies of salvation as atonement often did much better.

A holistic or “catholic” approach
The first problem with an approach based solely upon the sacrifice of the cross is that the resurrection becomes no more than an appendix to the death of Christ and has no saving significance in itself. The early Church did consider that Christ’s death must have been salvific but they always interpreted it within the broader context of Jesus’ incarnation, life, and especially the resurrection. In doing so they offered a more holistic approach and a context that makes sense of Christ’s death in light of and in consistency with Christ’s life, mission and resurrection. As Anne Hunt notes in her discussion of the work of Francois X. Durrwell:

“If redemption equals satisfaction then the Resurrection, which is seemingly not a work of satisfaction, is not redemptive in any intrinsic manner” [12].

According to Saint Paul, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is pointless and you are still in your sins. Then those also who have died in Christ have perished” But Christ was raised. And just as “death came through a human being,” so “the resurrection of the dead has also come through a human being; for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ” (1 Corinthians 15:17-18, 21-22).

We should keep in mind what I call the principle of catholicity, meaning the principle of the whole. Take Paul, for instance, who does not use his metaphors in an exclusive way but is pluralistic in his understanding. Although Paul does talk of Christ’s death in terms of atonement, his emphasis is sacramental and participatory rather than juridical. For Paul it is by sharing in Christ’s death that one dies to the power of sin with the result that one belongs to God. But of course, for Paul all of this depends in the first instance upon the resurrection “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” (1 Cor 15:17.)

It is the Easter experience that is the foundation of Christian faith in the divinity of Jesus. The earliest christological patterns in the New Testament begin with Jesus’ exaltation in the resurrection to God’s right
hand where he is established by God as Saviour, calling people to reconciliation with God and among themselves in justice and love. But gradually, with prayer and reflection and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit the exaltation of Jesus came to be pushed back beyond the Resurrection. In Mark’s gospel Jesus is declared Son of God by a voice from heaven at his baptism and when he is acknowledged as such again by a Roman soldier at the cross. Matthew and Luke carry this a step further with their infancy narratives making it clear that Jesus is Son of God from the very first moment of his human existence - which is to say that Jesus was of God from the very beginning of his life. Finally, the divinity of Christ is pushed back before his birth to his pre-existence with the Father in Colossians and especially in John’s Gospel.

Similarly, the redemption that we have received in Christ came to be associated not just with his resurrection, but with his death, and ministry and his life as a whole, even to his pre-existence to the creation of the universe itself which is the first grace given to us by God in Jesus. The death of Christ should be considered in line with the example of Christ, not simply in his life, but in the incarnation itself considered as a kenosis (self-emptying). We should recall the Christological hymn in Philippians 2: 6-11, where it is said that “he did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself”.

In Jesus, God has not just redeemed the world but disclosed God’s own being. This should be another principle of interpretation: God’s actions are consistent with who God is and not simply masks presented to the world. God does not simply act in a loving manner but “God is love”. It is in this way that Jesus reveals who God is. God is self-giving, self-emptying. The Father empties himself and gives all that he has to the Son, who in turn gives all back to the Father.

The image of God revealed here is not one of hierarchy and subordination, but one of mutual interdependence. The suggestion here is that the kenosis that Paul ascribes to Christ is in fact a divine characteristic. [13] “This means that the kenotic form of Jesus Christ in the paschal mystery is not new or foreign to God but is, in fact, thoroughly consistent with this eternal supra-temporal “event” of triune love.” [14] There is “a real kenosis in God that has ontological status”. [15] All this is to say that God acts in way that is totally consistent with who God is. “It is truly as God that God is involved in the world.” [16]

**A Participatory model of Salvation - Salvation as a process and relation**

In approaching an understanding of the nature of our salvation in Christ I would prefer to return to an approach taken by many of the early Church Fathers that seems to me to offer a more holistic account of both creation and salvation, seeing them as part of the whole. What I will now attempt to sketch is a participatory model of salvation as one that I believe is implicit in the Christological councils and debates. It is a model that I believe makes the best account of all the data and as such is more “catholic” or holistic. It has its foundation in the idea of recapitulation in which salvation is the perfection of creation. In this view creation, the incarnation, and redemption are part of a single movement of God’s grace. The first thing to note about this approach is that Salvation is a process. The idea of “salvation history” suggests as much.

The idea that salvation is a process is particular evident in the thought of Irenaeus. But if we look to the Gospels themselves, and the parables of the kingdom, we find that the coming of the reign of God is often depicted in terms of growth and process involving mustard seeds, yeast transforming the loaves, fields of wheat and weeds that should be left to grow. Salvation to the extent that it is linked to the reign of God must also be a process rather than a single event. Even Martin Luther attests that, “this life is not godliness but the process of becoming godly, not health but getting well, not being but becoming”. [17] Our salvation begins here in this world, and has indeed already begun. This means that God is not simply our destination, but also our companion on the way. The Eucharistic connotations here are deliberate, for a companion is one with whom we share our bread, whose bread we share. It is food for the journey. Through sharing in Christ, the first fruits of the new creation we our nourished in our own divinisation and growth in Christ, towards God our destination.
Of course, all this talk about salvation simply begs the question: what am I saved from? Sin is the usual answer. The primary meaning of the Greek word for sin – *amartia* - is failure, or more specifically “failure to hit the mark”, or going astray. Ultimately, sin is “failure to achieve the purpose for which one is created”. Continuing the analogy of a journey, we might say that sin is to lose one’s sense of direction, or to deviate from the right path. In juridical terms: it is the transgression of a moral code. But in broader, more existential terms: it is a failure to be one’s true self. Sin is not simply an offence against God but a failure to co-operate with God in the process of salvation. Hugh Connelly argues that failure to respond, failure to strive toward right relations, and failure to be fully responsible is if the very essence of sin. This understanding underscores the inadequacy by itself of a ‘debt-language’ that places too much reliance on those models of law and obedience that tend to characterise and indeed caricature sin in a mechanical, individualistic and actualistic way. [18]

In keeping with the contemporary Catholic theological insight that theology “*is* anthropology; less the science of God than the study of humanity as it stands before God”, [19] one can consider sin as a lack of true humanness, but above all else a loss of relationship. To be human according to God’s Trinitarian image is to love one another after the model of the mutual love of the persons of the Trinity. Sinfulness as a lack of true humaneness is isolation, from both God and our fellow human beings. It is the absence of communion. In hell, it has been suggested, “we cannot see each other’s faces”. [20]

**Original Sin as a way of Expressing The Communal Nature of Sin**

If sin is about relationship, then this offers a helpful perspective by which to look at the doctrine of Original Sin. As early as the third century Origen had pointed out that Adam is not a personal name but simply means human being. [21] Adam, therefore, was understood to represent humanity. In the same way that many of the Church fathers considered salvation to be a process, so the fall was often understood in a similar manner. The image of God is not so much obliterated as it is tarnished and obscured. [22] This is where the Catholic and Orthodox traditions differ from the reformed traditions which consider our nature to have become totally corrupt. The fall was cumulative. By virtue of the fall, on the moral level, we have inherited an inclination towards what is sinful. But in what way can we possibly be said to share in Adam’s sin? As has often the case it was liturgical practice that both guided and required theological explanation.

The question was asked why did the early Church practice the baptism of infants? The question can be approached in two ways: positive and negative. What does baptism save us from and what does baptism save us for? This difference of emphasis is the difference between justification and sanctification. The view that I am presenting in this paper, in line with both Catholic and certainly Orthodox emphases, is salvation through sanctification. The approach of the Protestant Churches however tends to emphasise justification. However, these two approaches are simply two sides of the same coin. Justification is the negative aspect of salvation in Christ, which is freedom from sin and death. Sanctification is the positive aspect of God’s saving act, that of spiritual growth in the new life in Christ communicated by the Holy Spirit.

Augustine interpreted it in light of the creedal statement that baptism is for the remission of sins, therefore infants, although without personal sin are, nonetheless, in sin. Since we do baptise infants, then infants must be in need of having their sins forgiven, but what sins could they possibly have that need forgiveness. To explain this Augustine came up with the doctrine of original sin. But Augustine was being a little reductive and individualistic. The problem with Augustine’s idea of original sin is that it is an individualistic answer to a communal / social problem. But as Augustine bashing is a little too easy nowadays I usually like to use a contemporary of Augustine’s to provide some balance.

One of Augustine’s contemporaries, Theodoret of Cyrus wrote that:

If the only meaning of baptism were the remission of sins why would we baptise the newborn children who have not yet tasted of sin? But the mystery [of baptism] is more than this; it is a promise of greater and more perfect gifts. In it are the promises of future delights; it is a type of the future resurrection, a
communion with the master’s passion, a participation in His resurrection, a mantle of salvation, the tunic of gladness, a garment of light, or, rather, it is light itself. [23]

View positively then, Theodoret asks why wouldn’t we want to baptise infants? Naturally we would want to share so great a gift with our children as soon as possible.

But this positive response does not yet take account of Paul’s statement that “we all die in Adam” (1 Cor. 15:22) Why should this be so? We could go into all sorts of convoluted theories about the transmission of guilt, but I suspect that this would miss the point. Are we looking forward to what we are called to be, or looking backward to what we have lost. The idea of growth in divinisation suggests that we should look forward. For even if Adam had not sinned, he was still called to be in God’s likeness. Or as Irenaeus explained, even before Adam sinned, he was still a child unable to receive the fullness of perfection of his humanity. [24]

The monastic tradition has long taught that we should not only offer repentance on our own behalf, but on the behalf of our neighbour as well. The sense of our common guilt here comes out of a strong sense of mutual solidarity. Sin, after all is never an isolated occurrence since it is always in some way about a break down of relationship. All members of the human race – past, present and future – are interdependent. Belonging to a single organic body, we are each responsible to and for each other. That at least is the ideal of what being human is all about. As it says in Ephesians 4:25, “We are members of one another”. Salvation then is not solitary but social. We are not saved in isolation but in union with our fellow human beings from every generation. Related to this are the notions of the communion of the saints, the unity and catholicity of the Church as the one Body of Christ. Our salvation in Christ is ecclesial, not simply individual.

Emmanuel Levinas was fond of quoting a passage from Dostoyevsky's Brothers Karamazov, “Each of us is before everyone and everyone, and I more than the others." [25] But I think this idea is more clearly expressed by some of Father Zossima’s subsequent exhortations.

"There is only one means of salvation, then take yourself and make yourself responsible for all men's sins, that is the truth, you know, friends, for as soon as you sincerely make yourself responsible for everything and for all men you will see at once that it is really so." [26]

"My brother asked the birds to forgive him; that sounds senseless, but it is right; for all is like an ocean, all is flowing and blending; a touch in one place sets up movement at the other end of the earth. It may be senseless to beg forgiveness of the birds, but birds would be happier at your side- a little happier, anyway- and children and all animals, if you were nobler than you are now. It's all like an ocean, I tell you. Then you would pray to the birds too, consumed by an all-embracing love, in a sort of transport, and pray that they too will forgive you your sin. Treasure this ecstasy, however senseless it may seem to men." [27]

The manner of our salvation
If sin is a break down of relationship then our salvation is also about the restoration of relationship. We are saved by faith. But faith is not a hypothesis, or adherence to certain propositions about Christ. It is a personal relationship. Direct trust in Jesus the Christ himself. It is Christ who is our salvation and saviour, not his titles, although this does underscore the importance of the identity and person of Jesus.

We are saved in Christ, by his incarnation, life, death and resurrection. We are not simply saved by what Christ has done although what Christ has done is an authentic expression of who Christ is and how the God of Jesus is revealed. Who Jesus is and what he has done form, like the mystery of Christ himself, an undivided harmony.

The mystery of Christ is also an internal relationship. The Paschal mystery is the whole. The incarnation, baptism, transfiguration, ministry, crucifixion, resurrection, ascension are all moments of Christ’s
incarnation that form a single whole. Although the tradition offers a rich variety of models and images to describe what Christ has done for us these models are not mutually exclusive.

Medieval theologians used to ponder the extravagance of the cross. Surely it was enough that God simply will our salvation or that surely the incarnation was enough. This problem only arises when the cross is separated from the rest of life and ministry. The death of Jesus can better be understood as the result of his total fidelity to his mission of proclaiming the reign of God, even in the face of death. The soteriology, or theology of salvation that best respects the integrity of Jesus’ life as a whole is, I believe, a soteriology of participation.

The sources of Participation Soteriology
Salvation means healing, and this healing is brought about through sharing, mutual solidarity and exchange. Christ saves us by becoming what we are and by sharing totally in our humanity, enabling us in turn to share in what he is. Through a reciprocal exchange of gifts, Christ takes our humanity and communicates to us the divine life, re-establishing that communion between Creator and creation that sin destroys. Salvation according to this model is realised above all through indwelling: “Christ in us” rather than “Christ for us”, although the two are compatible and belong together.

The New Testament is replete with examples of this approach to the nature of our salvation in Christ: We are “sharers in the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4) ; “Although he was rich he became poor for your sake, so that you should become rich through his poverty”. ( 2 Cor. 8:9) ; There is a reciprocal indwelling; Christ in us – “not I but Christ in me” (Gal. 2:20)

Our participation in Christ has a sacramental basis in baptism: “Since everyone of you who has been baptised has been clothed in Christ” (Gal. 3:27);

“So by our baptism into his death we were buried with him, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father’s glorious power, we too should begin living a new life. If we have been joined to him by dying a death like his, so we shall by a resurrection like his; realising that our former self was crucified with him . . . But we believe that if we died with Christ we shall live with him too.” (Rom. 6: 4-10)

Our participation in Christ also has a sacramental basis in the Eucharist in that sharing in the Eucharist is sharing in the body and blood of Christ (1 Cor. 10:16).

The notion of mutual participation is likewise central to the argument of the Epistle to the Hebrews. As our High Priest, Christ has been made like us “in every respect”, and it is by virtue of this solidarity with us that He is enabled to offer a “sacrifice of atonement” for our sins (Heb. 2:11, 17 – 18; 4:15.)

Mutual sharing and indwelling is especially prominent in the gospel of John: “You know the Spirit because he abides in you and will be in you” (John 14:17); “Abide in me as I abide in you” (John 15:4); Just as Christ and the Father dwell in each other, so we are to dwell in Christ and He in us. (John 14:21-23). And in the Johannine epistles, to be saved is thus to participate in God and to be made “like him” (1 John 3:2).

This is why the Church insisted on the fullness of both divinity and humanity in Christ because it was perceived that it was the becoming human of God, that makes possible the deification of human beings. God takes into Godself what is ours and in exchange God gives us what is God’s own, so that we become by grace what God is by nature, being made sons and daughters in the Son.

This approach is then developed throughout the writings of the Church fathers.

According to Irenaeus in the 2nd century:
“The Word of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, who did, through his transcendent love, become what we are, that he might bring us to be even what He is Himself.” Against the Heresies, V. Preface.

Athenasius in the 4th century:

“For the Son of God became human so that we might become God.” On The Incarnation, 54. 3.

Gregory Nazianzen:

“What has not been assumed has not been healed”. Letter 101, to Cledonious (PG 37:181C)

Augustine in the 5th century:

“In order to make gods of those who were merely human . . . one who was God made himself human.” Sermon 192.1.

Maximus the Confessor in the 7th Century:

“We lay hold of the divine to the same degree as that to which the Logos of God, deliberately emptying himself of his own sublime glory, became truly human.” On the Lords Prayer (PG 90:877A)

Aquinas in the 13th century:

“The only-begotten Son of God, wanting to make us sharers in his divinity, assumed our nature, so that he, made man, might make men gods.” Opusculum, 57. 1- 4.

Participation soteriology is not only found through the New Testament but it is also at the heart of the double homo-ousios of the Council of Chalcedon that affirmed both the fully divinity and the full humanity of Jesus Christ. Only if Christ is both totally divine and at the same time totally human, can Jesus Christ truly be our Saviour. But just as the distinctness of the Son is not lost in the Son’s triune relationship with the Father, so our uniqueness is also preserved. Just as the life of the Trinity is mutual interdependence and distinction in unity, our individuality is not compromised but raised to its highest level. To be a person is to be in relationship.

God is our Salvation

According to Rahner God “does not originally cause and produce something different from himself in the creature, but rather that he communicates his own divine nature and makes it a constitutive element in the fulfilment of the creature”. [28] The fulfilment of the human person lies in his or her divinisation which is the proper end of Christian ethics. This divinisation or the theosis “means being conformed in our personal existence to God’s personal existence, achieving right relationship and genuine communion in every respect, at every level”. [29] It is God who is the ultimate “end” of salvation and the fulfilment of our very identity as persons. To be saved is to be divinised, to participate in the life of God. Salvation, then, is much more than an alteration in our juridical status. Likewise, it is more than imitating Christ in moral conduct. Salvation is nothing less than the all-embracing transformation of our humanness.

Salvation is Social and Communal

Salvation is social and communal, not isolated and individualistic. We are not saved alone but as members of a single human family. Salvation is social and communal especially because of our faith in the Holy Trinity. The determining element of our humanity is the fact that we are created in the image of God, and that means the image of the Holy Trinity which is not merely personal but interpersonal. God as Trinity is not a unit but a union; not self-love but shared love. God is communion and as Trinity is mutuality, self-giving, “I and Thou”.
If this is true of God as Trinity then it is also true of the human person created in God’s Trinitarian image. My human being is also a relational being. My personhood is fulfilled in relationship and community. I am truly personal and truly human only so far as I show love to others, in “I-thou” relationships. My salvation then as a human person in God’s image can only be attained in union with other persons, and through mutuality and interpersonal encounter, as expressed in Jesus’ life and mission.

Because God is Trinity my salvation is bound up with the salvation of my neighbour. The doctrine of the Trinity means then that I cannot be saved unless I make myself “responsible for everyone and for everything”. In our quest for divinisation / theosis we cannot be indifferent to our fellow human beings. Our faith in Christ and the reign of God that he preached commits us to combating all forms of injustice and oppression and deprivation. As Nikolai Berdyaev has expressed: “The question of bread for myself is a material question, but the question of bread for my neighbour is a spiritual question.” No one is saved alone, and without mutual forgiveness there will be no salvation.

**Salvation is Ecclesial**

We are not to set bounds on God’s saving power, but as far as we Christians are concerned the appointed means of salvation is in and through the community of the Church. This is the original context of Cyprian’s statement in the 3rd Century that there is “no salvation outside the Church”. As with all interpretation, context is important to understand what is being said. Cyprian was talking to insiders and addressing the question of schism. In other words he was concerned to safeguard the unity and communion of the Church, which was valued highly in the first Christian centuries. In effect, what Cyprian was saying was that there is no salvation outside of communion. It is inappropriate to take this statement outside of that context.

Salvation is also sacramental: it is founded upon baptism and the Eucharist. Baptism is the sacrament of mutual indwelling with Christ. Eucharist is the sacrament of Church prefiguring the Kingdom of God.

**Salvation is Cosmic**

Our soteriology needs to be holistic as it is the total person that is saved. A human body is not a soul dwelling temporarily in a body but an integrated unity of body and soul, and so the two are sanctified and divinised together. Christians do not simply believe in the immortality of the soul, but also await the resurrection of the body. Through our bodies we relate to the material environment around us and so our sanctification implies the sanctification of that environment as well.

We are not saved from but with the world. There is to be a “new earth” as well as a “new heaven” (Rev. 21:1) Our human salvation leads in this way to the redemption of the whole created order, which through us “will be set free from its bondage to corruption and will enter into the freedom of the glory of the children of God”. (Rom. 8:21)

According to Maximus the Confessor, the human person in Christ is the priest of creation, bringing all divided things into unity, and so offering them back to the creator. The human person in Christ is a microcosm, “a laboratory”, in which everything is concentrated and in itself naturally mediates between the extremities.

In order to bring about the union of everything with God as its cause, the human person begins first of all with its own division, and then, ascending through the intermediate steps . . . it reaches the end of its high ascent, which passes though all things in search of unity, to God, in whom there is not division. [30]

This priestly task is fulfilled in Christ by whom and in whom “all things hold together” (Col. 1:17), and in whom all things are recapitulated (Irenaeus). Saved in Christ, we share in his cosmic mediation. The world is a sacrament of God and all that God has made can act as a channel of his grace and reveal its creator.

**Will all be saved?**
God desires everyone to be saved (1 Tim 2:4). Will God be frustrated or can we hope for the restoration of all things? Origen did not hesitate to affirm this doctrine of universal salvation. But his approach was too mechanical and automatic and his theory was condemned at the 5th Ecumenical Council. John Meyendorff argues that *apokatastasis* or universal salvation was rejected by the Council of 554 “precisely because it presupposes an ultimate limitation of human freedom – the freedom to remain outside of God”. [31] It is instructive to note that Gregory of Nyssa also entertained the hope that even the devil might eventually be saved, but he was much more subtle and guarded in expressing this hope and escaped condemnation. [32]

The issue is the tension between the two principles of divine love and human freedom. What we do know is that God has given us free will, and that he will never withdraw that gift from us. It is therefore possible for us to choose for all eternity to say “no” to God. But we also know that divine love is also inexhaustible. These two positions are reconciled by von Balthasar in an imaginative theological description of Christ’s descent into hell whereby “God chooses to accompany the sinner in the sinner’s choice. Thus in von Balthasar’s understanding of the descent God, out of love, enters into hell and gathers the abyss of our lostness into the ‘abyss of absolute love’.” [33]

It has been suggested that the very nature of God as love is self-emptying and that in the loving act of creation God allows a space for creation to unfold. God always allows a space for what is other than God. In any case, an adequate and holistic theology of salvation must also imply a theology of creation. But whatever approach we take there must be room for an authentic plurality of approaches. Christianity has its foundation in the experience of the Risen Christ, the gift of the Spirit and the offer of salvation that they brought. The abundance of the divine life offered in Christ is unable to be contained within any conceptual system when we are dealing eschatological realities. That being said, I believe that a soteriology of participation and divinisation is the most adequate of models and one that should be retrieved in order to make sense of salvation today.


[4] For example, John McIntyre’s *The Shape of Soteriology* lists thirteen distinct models but each from a distinctly Calvinist perspective. Interestingly, one of the most important models for the early Church and which continues to shape Eastern Christianity – namely divinisation – is conspicuously absent from his list. His thirteen models are: 1) ransom; 2) redemption; 3) salvation; 4) sacrifice: 5) propitiation: 6) expiation; 7) atonement; 8) reconciliation; 9) victory; 10) punishment; 11) satisfaction; 12) example; 13) liberation.


[6] Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*, 4. 38. 1. Further, Irenaeus explains: “God had power at the beginning to grant perfection to man; but as the latter was only recently created, he could not possibly have received it, or even if he had received it, could he have contained it, or containing it, could he have retained it.” *Against Heresies*, 4, 38, 2


[10] Irenaeus, “Had the truth already been known, the coming of the redeemer would have been superfluous”. *Against Heresies*, 2.18.6.


[13] “Even from the Father’s perspective there is sense in which the Father receives his being from the Son.” Anne Hunt, *The Trinity and the Paschal Mystery*, 85.

[14] Ibid., 61.

[15] Ibid., 63.

[16] Ibid., 81.


[22] According to Athanasius, “the rational human being created in the image was being obliterated, and the work created by God was being destroyed” *On the Incarnation*, 5-6.


[24] Irenaeus, *Against the Heresies*, IV, 38, 1-3. (PG 7, 1105a-1108c)


[27] Ibid., Book 8, Chapter 3.


[32] Kallistos Ware, “Dare we hope for the salvation of all? Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, Isaac of Ninevah”, 310. Other voices could be added. The great eastern saint Maximus the Confessor is said to have declared when asked if he believed in universal salvation something along the lines of “most certainly, but one could never preach it”.