However, while I want to uphold much of what the theologians in this chapter advocate, I do not believe that one must conclude that God is, therefore, passible. I believe a passible God is actually less personal, loving, dynamic and active than an impassible God. The remainder of this study will attempt to demonstrate this, seemingly, paradoxical thesis.

2

Theology – Problems and Mysteries

To take up the topic of God's impassibility is to address not simply the mystery of God in himself, but also, and maybe even more so, his relationship to the created order, especially his relationship with human persons and their history. As is clearly evident from the previous chapter, it is a theological issue that is not only on the minds of theologians, but also in the hearts of many Christian faithful.

Before we begin to examine the question of God's impassibility it is, I believe, imperative that I first articulate what I consider the precise nature of the theological enterprise, for this will govern my whole approach to the issue at hand. The questions are: What is the theologian attempting to achieve when he or she does theology? More specifically, what is the *Christian* theologian hoping to achieve when he or she is pondering, in the light of reason, the revealed truths of the gospel and the received tradition and doctrines of the Christian faith? In the present case, when we wish to examine whether God is passible or impassible and the impact that the alternatives have on God's relationship to the created order, to human history, and to individual human beings, what is it that we are theologically trying to accomplish? Moreover, what attitude of faith should we possess and what theological disposition should we embrace in pursuing this topic?[1] In this chapter I will address these issues.

Theology and the Development of Doctrine

I want first to articulate briefly some of the ingredients that foster and encourage the theological enterprise, and so help define the task of the theologian. Moreover, in so doing we will also see more clearly how this study of God's impassibility is theologically situated.

1 For a different, but very compatible, approach to the one that I will present here on the nature of theology and the craft of the systematic theologian, see R.W. Jenson's excellent preparative chapters to his *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 3–41. For other fine introductory essays on the same subjects, see C. Gunton, 'Historical and Systematic Theology,' pp. 3–20; G. Loughlin, 'The Basis and Authority of Doctrine,' pp. 41–64; and F. Watson, 'The Scope of Hermeneutics,' pp. 65–80, all in *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine*, ed. C. Gunton (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997); and J. Webster, *Theological Theology: An Inaugural Lecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).

First, inherent within the very nature of Christian revelation is the principle that faith seeks understanding.[2] Precisely because rational persons are the beneficiaries of this revelation, they are eager, impelled by the Spirit of truth, to deepen their understanding of what they believe. Such searching and querying is a sign, not of a lack of faith, but of an authentic spiritual vibrancy. Thus, it is characteristic of believers to wish to grow, for example, in their understanding of what it means for Jesus to be the Son of God or to discern more deeply the importance of his resurrection. Christian theology cultivates this growth in the understanding of revelation, and so discloses its deeper significance.

Christian theologians, their reason guided by faith and the light of the Holy Spirit, clarify and advance what has been revealed by God, written in the scriptures, and believed by their fellow Christians. In so doing Christian theologians wish to make what has been revealed more intelligible, lucid, and relevant to the Christian community. This present study exemplifies that Christian theologians and the Christian body at large are presently searching, in faith, for a clearer perception of the nature of God and his attributes, specifically whether or not reason and revelation demand that God be impassible or passible – 'Does God Suffer?'.[3]

Second, Christian theology also wishes to defend, by reasoned argument, what has been revealed against those who question, distort, or attack it. However, not all questioning and dissent are in bad faith. Today, for example, many Christians, theologians and faithful alike, argue and believe that revelation and reason necessitate that God be passible and so suffer. I am not of that mind, but it is precisely this

2 St Augustine was the first to articulate this principle. He wrote 'Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore do not seek to understand in order to believe, but believe that you may understand.' *Tractatus in Joannis Evangelium*, 29,6. He also wrote: 'For although no one can believe in God unless he understands something, nonetheless the faith by which he believes, heals him, so that he may understand more fully. For there are some things which we believe only if we understand and other things which we understand only if we believe.' *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, 119. [Unless otherwise stated all translations of the works of the Fathers in this book are taken from *The Ante-Nicene/Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. P. Schaff, reprinted by T & T Clark and Eerdmans, 1989.] Also see, Augustine's sermon on Isaiah 7:9 and *De Trinitate*, 1,1–2 and 5,2,2. St Anselm articulated the principle more succinctly. 'For I do not seek to understand in order to believe but I believe in order to understand. For I believe even this: that I shall not understand unless I believe.' *Proslogion*, 1.

3 I hope that this doctrinal and systematic study will, in some small way, faithfully actualize Pope John Paul II's grand vision of the true and fruitful relationship between faith and reason, that is, of faith seeking understanding. See the whole of his *Fides et Ratio* (1998).

> For its part, *dogmatic theology* must be able to articulate the universal meanings of the mystery of the One and Triune God and of the economy of salvation, both as a narrative and, above all, in the form of argument. It must do so, in other words, through concepts formulated in a critical and universally communicable way. Without philosophy's contribution, it would in fact be impossible to discuss theological issues such as, for example, the use of language to speak about God, the personal relations within the Trinity, God's creative activity in the world, the relationship between God and man, or Christ's identity as true God and true man. Ibid., n. 66

The question of God's impassibility demands that all of the above examples given by John Paul be examined, in the light of faith and philosophy, during the course of this study.

climate of controversy that has compelled me and others to address newly the nature of God in the light of these contemporary issues.

This relationship between controversy and growth should not surprise us. The principle that faith seeks understanding is often, historically, most clearly observed when theologians were forced to clarify the truths of faith, not simply for the edification of believers, but in order to protect and demonstrate the reasonableness of what had traditionally been believed. In the fourth century it was in the midst of defending the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit that the church came to a new clarity about the Trinity. Theological controversy by its very nature forces theologians and the church to address pressing questions, and so reasonably to justify anew what has been revealed. This fresh theological clarity will, it is hoped, lead all believers to a deeper and more committed faith, and aid those who find it difficult to believe.

Third, Christian theology also wishes to demonstrate the inter-relationship between the various truths of faith. This too clarifies and expands the understanding of the truths related. For example, in clarifying the relationship between the Father and Jesus one not only acquires a better understanding of their relationship, but also what it means for the Father to be the Father and the Son to be the Son. In this study, issues concerning the nature of God and his impassibility must be related to the notion of creation, to the manner of God's presence and activity in the world and in human history, and to the salvation that comes through Jesus. Our study of the inter-relationship between all of these topics will shed light on them both individually and collectively.

Fourth, the work of individual theologians is not done in isolation. Theologians work within an historical context and within the Christian community. Clarity and understanding grow within the history of the Christian church and within the context of the community of believers. What may come to greater clarity in one historical era will differ from what becomes clearer in another. Again, for example, the early church experienced a growth in understanding with regards to the Incarnation and the Trinity. During the Reformation the church's recognition of the nature and importance of faith and justification increased.

This does not mean that these issues were never addressed previously nor does it imply that they will cease to be addressed in the future, as if all has now been concluded. Rather, this only specifies that certain key theological questions or issues were raised and certain important communal concerns for the church were addressed at specific times, and that through this historical and communal process, with the help of theologians and church authorities, a new clarity was achieved.

This study concerning the impassibility of God exemplifies a concern that is presently challenging Christian theologians of all denominations and their respective communities. The issues have been discussed, as we will see, in the past, but today they have come to the fore with new intensity arising out of contemporary concerns, and so innovative arguments and fresh clarity are demanded in our day.

Fifth, personal prayer and communal worship likewise foster theological understanding. Liturgy is a living expression of what is believed, and so through participation in it one grows in an understanding of the

faith. Historically, liturgy at times expressed an intuitive apprehension of the faith that actually preceded and exceeded the later explicit intellectual exposition. For example, the baptismal formula and the doxologies clearly expressed the church's belief that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit were all equally God. When some in the early church doubted or denied that the Holy Spirit was God equal to the Father and the Son, one of the principal arguments on behalf of the Spirit's divinity was the church's ancient liturgical practise.[4] Here we not only see that liturgical prayer and practise fostered the faith, but also that it later became a primary source for theological reflection and argument. This illustrates the well-known formula: *lex orandi, lex credendi* (the law of prayer is the law of belief) – as the church prays, so the church believes.

Prayer and liturgical practise embody and express then the Christian understanding of God, his attributes and his relationship to believers. Thus the question of God's impassibility must be examined in the light of how Christians pray and how the church worships. Does Christian prayer and worship entail and manifest belief in God's impassibility or passibility?

All of these various ingredients, which advance the growth of theological understanding, contribute then, to what John Henry Newman was first to call, the development of doctrine.[5] The Christian community's understanding of the truths of revelation grows and develops. These components, which make up the theological enterprise of the entire church body, testify that the knowledge of faith is not static. Faith, in constantly seeking to be more deeply understood and ardently lived, by different Christians at different times and in different cultures, evolves. As the Christian church progresses through history and confronts, thoughtfully and prayerfully, the problems and issues of its particular time, its understanding of what God has revealed develops and matures. The question of God's impassibility and all its theological, spiritual, and practical ramifications is presently a case in point.

Problems and Mysteries

Having briefly enunciated some of the ingredients which cultivate theological understanding and doctrinal growth, it is now important to examine how theologians, in the light of these elements, should approach and foster such understanding and development. What is it that the theologian does, as a believer seeking understanding within the historical and communal setting, to help bring about new theological focus and advance authentic development? It is here that I believe there is a great deal of confusion among theologians, and the issue of God's impassibility illustrates this confusion.

Gabriel Marcel, in his Gifford Lectures of 1949 and 1950, and later Jacques Maritain, who borrowed the distinction from Marcel, spoke of two

4 See, for example, Basil the Great's treatise *On the Holy Spirit* where he argues for the divinity of the Holy Spirit from the church's doxological practise.

5 See John Henry Newman, *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1974).

contrasting attitudes a person may possess when approaching questions. Marcel pointed out that we can approach a field of inquiry as either a *problem* or as a *mystery*.[6] He was critical of the modern mentality which approached every intellectual endeavor under the rubric of *problem*, that is, as if one were always examining some detached state of affairs which could be coldly dissected and systematically analyzed so as to produce complete and comprehensive knowledge. This was being done, he believed, not only within the natural sciences, where it may be legitimate, but also within the humanities, specifically within his own discipline – that of philosophy.[7] Marcel argued that some fields of human enquiry cannot be properly understood, and in actual fact they become distorted, when approached as problems. Rather, they must be approached under the rubric of *mystery*, which 'by definition, transcends every conceivable technique.'[8] Human beings are, for Marcel, a mystery and the fundamental concerns of human beings are mysteries – personhood, identity, friendship, family, good and evil, etc. By mystery then Marcel meant that while one could say a great deal about human beings and the central issues that surround them, yet no matter how much one said and no matter how true it may be, there is always more to be understood and articulated. There is no comprehensive, complete, and final answer. We may come to a greater understanding of the mystery of human life, but we never come to a complete comprehension of it. Maritain states that where there is mystery 'the intellect has to penetrate more and more deeply the *same* object.'[9] The mystery, by the necessity of its subject matter, remains.

While Marcel and Maritain were primarily concerned with distinguishing the problems of scientific enquiry from the mysteries of philosophic enquiry, I believe that such a distinction between problem and mystery is relevant to how theologians ought to approach issues of faith and theology.

Marcel and Maritain were well aware that, arising out of the Enlightenment, there grew the mentality that intellectual advancement

6 See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, I, Reflection and Mystery* (London: The Harvill Press, 1950), pp. 204–19.

7 Jacques Maritain states: 'The problem aspect naturally predominates where knowledge is least ontological, for example, when it is primarily concerned with mental constructions built around a sensible datum – as in empirical knowledge, and in the sciences of phenomena.' *A Preface to Metaphysics* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1939), p. 6.

8 Marcel, *The Mystery of Being, I*, p. 211.

9 Maritain, *A Preface to Metaphysics*, p. 7. Maritain also states:

> Where the problem aspect prevails one solution follows another; where one ends, the other begins. There is a rectilinear progress of successive views .... Where the problem aspect predominates I thirst to know the answer to my problem. And when I have obtained the answer I am satisfied: *that particular* thirst is quenched. ... In the second case where the mystery aspect predominates I thirst to know reality, *being* under one or other of its modes, the ontological mystery. When I know it I drink my fill. But I still thirst and continue to thirst for the same thing, the same reality which at once satisfies and increases my desire. Thus I never cease quenching my thirst from the same spring of water which is ever fresh and yet I always thirst for it. *A Preface to Metaphysics*, pp. 7–8.

For Maritain God is the fundamental mystery, and our thirst can only be satiated when we see him face to face. See *ibid.*, pp. 5 and 8–9.

consisted in solving problems that had hitherto not been solved. The former 'mysteries' of the physical universe were being resolved by approaching them as scientific problems to be decoded and unraveled. The scientific and physical laws of nature became transparent and unmistakable. The new enthusiasm and success of the scientific method was the major contributing factor to this mentality. Science became the means of resolving all kinds of problems and issues concerning nature and how nature worked. All this was done in a concise, rational, mathematical, and experiential fashion. It was equally eminently practical. Scientific knowledge could solve a host of practical problems, and everyone gloried in its success. This mentality is illustrated in the contemporary belief that technology, one of the fruits of science, can solve almost any problem. In the realm of science and technology this mentality, that intellectual advancement consists in solving theoretical and practical problems, may be legitimate.[10] However, I want to argue that this mentality, to disastrous effect, has coloured how many philosophers and theologians approach questions of faith and theology.

Many theologians today, having embraced the Enlightenment presuppositions and the scientific method that it fostered, approach theological issues as if they were scientific problems to be solved rather than mysteries to be discerned and clarified. However, the true goal of theological inquiry is not the resolution of theological *problems*, but the discernment of what the *mystery* of faith is. Because God, who can never be fully comprehended, lies at the heart of all theological enquiry, theology by its nature is not a problem solving enterprise, but rather a mystery discerning enterprise.

This can be seen already in the early stages of God's revelation of himself to the Jewish people. God manifested himself to Moses in the burning bush (see Exod. 3). Moses, in the course of the conversation, asked God: 'What is your name?' Since names, for the Israelites, both revealed the character of the person so named and allowed the knower of the name to call upon the person so named, Moses, in asking God to tell him his name, wanted to know God as well as have the power to call upon him. Moses was attempting to solve, what was for him, a theological problem. God must have chuckled[11] to himself as he replied to Moses: 'I Am Who Am' or 'I Am He Who Is.'[12]

God did reveal to Moses his name and so Moses now knew more about God than he knew before. He now knew that God is 'He who is.' However, Moses must have quickly realized that, in knowing God more

10 However, even in the field of science there remains a sense of 'mystery' and, I believe, many scientists are coming to this awareness. The more science unlocks the 'mysteries' of the universe, the more mysterious it becomes. New knowledge always leads to new and baffling questions. Science may solve *problems*, but its solutions often create even greater *mysteries*.

11 It was, obviously(?), an 'impassible' chuckle!

12 Scholars debate as to the exact translation of the name *Yahweh*. Scholars agree that it comes from the Hebrew root word meaning 'to be.' Some translate it in the causative sense of 'he causes to be,' but the more likely and traditional translation is 'I am who am' or 'I am the one who exists,' or 'I am he who is.' For a concise treatment, see *The New Jerusalem Bible* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1985), Exodus 3:13 fn. g.

fully, God had become an even greater mystery (problem) than he was before. Previously Moses in calling God, for example, *El Shaddai* – God of the Mountain – may not have known a great deal about God, but the little he did know was at least somewhat comprehensible. God was he who dwelt on the mountain, which was the home of the gods. However, Moses now knew much more about God. He actually knew that God is 'I Am Who Am,' but what it means for God to be 'He Who Is' is completely incomprehensible. Moses, nor we today, can comprehend that God's very nature is 'to be,' that he is the one who is the fulness of life and existence.

Here we learn a primary lesson concerning the nature of revelation and theology. The more God reveals who he is and the more we come to a true and authentic knowledge of who he is, the more mysterious he becomes. Theology, as faith seeking understanding, helps us come to a deeper and fuller understanding of the nature of God and his revelation, but this growth is in coming to know what the mystery of God is and not the comprehension of the mystery.[13]

Examples from the History of Theology

Let me further illustrate the difference between approaching questions of revelation as problems to be solved rather than as mysteries to be clarified by examining a couple of theological controversies that arose within the early church.

In the early fourth century, Arius, a priest in Alexandria, took up the issue of how God could be one and how simultaneously the Son could be God. This is an authentic theological concern, and one that had been percolating in the early church for a long time. Arius, having examined all of the previous attempts at explaining this 'problem' concluded that there was no way to resolve the issue rationally. If God was one, then the Son, Arius concluded, could not possibly be God and, therefore, he must be a creature. Arius resolved the 'problem' of how God could simultaneously be one and the Son be God by denying one of the truths that the church had previously held, that is, the divinity of the Son. Arius provided an answer. It was very clear and understandable. The problem was solved. However, in solving this theological 'problem' Arius also dissolved the faith of the church which believed that not only was the Father God but also equally the Son.

In response to Arius, the church held its first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325. The majority of the church Fathers probably did not know how to answer fully or satisfactorily Arius' arguments, but they did know what the church believed, and so proclaimed that Jesus is God as the Father is God and that he was *homoousion* (one in being) with the Father.

13 Christians believe that Jesus revealed God to be a trinity of persons – the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Christians now know more about God than did Moses, but in coming to a greater knowledge of God, God has become even more mysterious than he was for Moses.

It was Athanasius, in the ensuing controversy after the council, who grasped the real significance of Nicea's *homoousion* doctrine. Athanasius reconceived what it meant for God to be one. Where in the past all Christian theologians conceived the one God to be the Father (this understanding included Arius), and then attempted to show how the Son shared in the one nature of God, an attempt that Arius realized was doomed to failure, Athanasius recognized that Christian revelation completely shattered this view of God. Athanasius' great insight was to perceive that the one God is not just the Father, but rather that the one God is the Father begetting the Son. This is the very nature of the one God. This is what God is. What the one nature of God is is the Father eternally begetting the Son. Therefore, the Father and Son are the one God, one in being, for the one God is the dynamic inter-relationship between Father and the Son.

Athanasius approached the issue of how God can be one and the Son be God not as a problem to be solved, but as a mystery to be discerned. With Arius all becomes comprehensible. With Athanasius a new clarity is achieved as to what the mystery is, but the mystery itself does not become completely comprehensible. We know more precisely and clearly what the mystery is, that is, that the one God is the Father begetting the Son, but we do not comprehend the mystery, that is, we do not fully grasp how the one being/nature of God is the Father eternally begetting the Son. That remains a mystery and has become, in a sense, even more a mystery, but one that has obtained new depth of clarity.[14]

14 One could also cite the example found in the fifth century with regards to the Incarnation. The Council of Nicea had proclaimed the full divinity of the Son, and equally the church later condemned Apollinarius for denying the full humanity of Jesus. There then arose, with greater intensity, the question of how the one Jesus could be both fully God and fully man. Nestorius upheld the full divinity and the full humanity. The problem for him was how to conceive of them as one without jeopardizing either the humanity or the divinity. He rightly argued that some in the past, for example Apollinarius, in order to make Jesus one denied the full humanity of Jesus. Apollinarius denied the human soul of Jesus, and thus the divinity was united to the body alone so as to form the one reality of Jesus, after the manner of the human soul and body forming the one reality of man. Apollinarius had resolved the problem of Jesus' oneness by denying the full humanity. Nestorius knew that this was erroneous. The incarnation demanded the fulness of divinity and the fulness of the humanity. However, Nestorius himself solved the problem by ultimately denying the ontological union between the humanity and the divinity, that is, that Jesus is really one. The divinity and the humanity were only united by a moral union, that is, the Son assumed the humanity in love or by 'good pleasure.' Nestorius proposed this because he could not conceive how God and man could be truly one without destroying either the divinity or the humanity. Nestorius solved the theological problem, but again he equally dissolved the mystery. The mystery of the Incarnation is that the Son of God, in the fulness of his divinity, did actually, *come to exist* as a full man.

Cyril of Alexandria, Nestorius' arch-opponent, who himself had some of his own theological ambiguities, nonetheless realized that the Son of God did actually become man. He began to discern, what the Council of Chalcedon in 451 would later affirm, that the Incarnation is not the union of natures, which would demand that either or both the humanity and the divinity be transformed in the process and so produce some third kind of being which was neither God nor man, but rather that in the Incarnation it is the *person* of the Son who takes on an entirely new mode of existence. He comes to exist as man. Thus Jesus is the one person of the Son existing as God and as man. The Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus is one and the same Son existing as fully God and fully man without destroying either the divinity or the humanity. Within the Incarnation the identity of Jesus, who he is, is the eternal divine Son but the manner of the Son's identity is as man. Again, Cyril and Chalcedon did not solve a theological problem. What they did was clarify the mystery of the Incarnation. We now know more clearly that the mystery of the Incarnation is that the one person of the eternal Son actually exists as a complete man, but we do not comprehend the mystery. That remains, and is, in a sense again, even more mysterious.

For a fuller account of the controversies surrounding Arius, Apollinarius and Nestorius see A. Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, Vol. 1 (London: Mowbrays, 1975); J.N.D. Kelly, *Early Christian Doctrines* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), chapters 4–6, 9–12; B. Studer, *Trinity and Incarnation* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1993); J. Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine 1: The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100–600)* (Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 1971), chapters 4–5; and T. Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, chapters 1–2.

15 For a further examination of kenotic christology and its refutation see T. Weinandy, *Does God Change?*, chapter 4, and *In the Likeness of Sinful Flesh: An Essay on the Humanity of Christ* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1993), pp. 8–13.

An example of a more contemporary nature may be also helpful. Kenotic christologists ask the question: How can a God who is almighty, all-knowing, and all-powerful become man, and so take on human limitations – weakness, lack of knowledge, etc.? It would appear that we are faced, within the Incarnation, with contrary and irreconcilable attributes. Kenotic christology, both past and present, solves *the problem* by having the Son of God either give up (empty himself – *kenosis*) those divine attributes which would be incompatible with his human limitations, or holding them in abeyance or restraint. The problem is solved. However, again the mystery is also equally dissolved. No longer is the Son of God, in the fulness of his divinity, existing as man. Rather, a truncated and lesser 'humanized' form of divinity now exists as man. Kenotic christology always proposes that someone less than fully God exists as man and not that God, in all his wholly otherness, exists as man.

Kenotic christology misconceives the nature of the Incarnation. It is not a union of incompatible natures with the ensuing conflict of incompatible attributes. Rather, within the Incarnation the person of the eternal Son, while remaining fully divine, takes on a new life as man, and so assumes a fully human life in all its human frailty and weakness. The mystery is that one and the same person or subject, who actually is all-powerful as God, is equally weak and frail as man, for it is in that manner that the same Son now also exists.[15]

The Contemporary Theological Mindset

Examples of how theologians have treated theological questions as either problems to be solved or mysteries to be clarified could be multiplied throughout the history of theology. Hopefully, the above examples make it evident that true Christian theology has to do with clarifying, and so developing, the understanding of the mysteries of faith and not the dissolving of the mysteries into complete comprehension. The point at issue here is that this distinction between solving problems and elucidating mysteries has, since the Enlightenment, become almost

completely lost within theology. While multiple examples again could be given to illustrate this, the question of God's impassibility is the subject of this book, and itself well exemplifies the point.

As we saw in the first chapter, many theologians argue that God's impassibility, as traditionally believed by Christians through the centuries, cannot be compatible with his being a loving person who cares for and interacts with human beings within time and history. Thus, they deny that God is impassible, and instead assert that he must be passible, and so suffers. Again, the problem is solved, but is it solved at the expense of maintaining the great mystery of God and of his relationship to the world and human beings? An affirmative answer to this question will be given in the course of this study. However, this study will not solve this theological *problem*. This study only hopes to clarify the *mystery* of God's impassibility in relationship to the passible lives of human beings within the ever-changing world of history. In so doing the mystery, it is hoped, will come into sharper focus and so become more deeply known and appreciated, but it will not become comprehensible. As Pope John Paul II has stated: 'In short, the knowledge proper to faith does not destroy the mystery; it only reveals it the more, showing how necessary it is for people's lives.'[16]

Openness to Further Development

Before concluding this chapter, I would like to make two final points. Firstly, it should be noted, as alluded to above, that when theological issues are treated as problems to be solved, once the seeming solution has been found, usually by denying one of terms of the problem, the issue becomes completely closed. The problem is solved. The complete answer has been given. There is no longer any further need for clarification or development. One can move on to the next problem.

This is not the case with true theological and doctrinal development. While the mystery has been clarified, it has not become fully comprehensible, and so it remains open to further clarification and development. The depth of the mystery can still be plunged further. True development is an impetus to further development.[17]

The reason for the open-ended nature of true theological and doctrinal development is that we are ultimately engaged with the mystery of God in himself and with his actions in time and history. God, in himself, is incomprehensible, and thus his relationship to the created order and his actions within that order throughout history and in the lives of human beings can never be fully comprehended.[18] We can come to know who the mystery of God is, and we can come to know the mysteries embodied in his dealings with human persons, but we will never be able to fully comprehend him or his actions – not even in heaven. In heaven the

16 *Fides et Ratio*, n. 13.

17 This is one of the most insightful points that Cardinal Newman makes in his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*.

18 This is the point Maritain makes, see n. 8 above.

mystery of God will become crystal clear for we will see God face to face, but in seeing him face to face the incomprehensibility of God will equally become luminously evident.[19]

It must be remembered too that our guiding principle that faith seeks understanding does not mean that faith seeks comprehension. Precisely because it is the faith – the mystery of God and all his words and deeds – that we are attempting to understand more fully, we will never be able to comprehend it entirely. Faith by its very nature is 'the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen' (Heb. 11:1). Here 'we see in a mirror dimly' (1 Cor. 13:12).

The Compatibility of Truths

Second, as was briefly noted above, one of the primary reasons theological issues become problems is that two or more 'truths' are seen as seemingly incompatible. God cannot be one and the Son be God. Jesus cannot be both God and man. God cannot be impassible and yet loving. Some would solve the problem, as we saw, by denying one of the truths. This is often seen as the most rational way forward, but I believe it is the all too easy way forward, and one that ultimately comes to a dead end.

Others, who seek less radical solutions to theological problems, propose that such incompatible 'truths' must be held dialectically, that is, that even though they are incompatible, yet both must nonetheless be maintained. The opposition is between truths that are held together for the sake of preserving 'the mystery.' Thus, for example, despite the fact that God's impassiblity does conflict with his being loving, yet both must be held because there is a 'mystery' present. I do not subscribe to, as will become evident in this book, a dialectical approach to theological issues. I believe that such a proposal still approaches theological issues as problems or riddles, but now ones that cannot be solved.

To address the mysteries of faith as true mysteries is to clarify why two or more seemingly incompatible truths are not incompatible, and why they actually complement one another.[20] Thus, this book wishes to demonstrate not that *despite* God's impassibility he is nonetheless loving and kind, but rather precisely *because* he is impassible that he is loving and kind. I want to argue in this study that *only* an impassible God, and not a passible God, is truly and fully personal, absolutely and utterly loving, and thoroughly capable of interacting with human persons in

19 This is in keeping with the writings of the great Christian mystics of the East and the West who maintain that the more one grows in union with God, and so comes to know him ever more intimately, the more incomprehensible he becomes. The mystics are fond of such phrases as 'luminous darkness' and 'the rays of divine darkness.' Besides the standard introductions and histories of eastern and western spirituality and mysticism see also O. Clément, *The Roots of Christian Mysticism* (London: New City, 1993); and A. Louth, *The Origins of the Christian Mystical Tradition* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981).

20 I attempted to demonstrate this principle in my book *Does God Change?*. There I argued that the immutability of God is not in opposition to the Incarnation, but rather that *only* an immutable God can actually come to exist as man.

time and history.[21] This is the great challenge of this study. This is the awesome mystery that ultimately needs to be clarified and developed. Whether this book meets this challenge, can be judged at the end.

Definition of Terms

Before proceeding it would be helpful to define briefly the terms 'impassibility' and 'passibility.' *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church* states:

> There are three respects in which orthodox theology has traditionally denied God's subjection to 'passibility', namely (1) external passibility or the capacity to be acted upon from without, (2) internal passibility or the capacity for changing the emotions from within, and (3) sensational passibility or the liability to feelings of pleasure and pain caused by the action of another being.[22]

It is this understanding of impassibility that is employed throughout this study, and it is this understanding of impassibility which I will be defending. God is impassible in the sense that he cannot experience emotional changes of state due to his relationship to and interaction with human beings and the created order. This understanding of impassibility

21 In this chapter I have attempted to describe the nature of the theological enterprise and the work of Christian theologians in a manner that would be 'ecumenical,' that is, in a manner that theologians of all Christian denominations might affirm; although I realize that some, and maybe many, might not. Nonetheless, while I have made appeal to the received Christian tradition, the early ecumenical councils, and to the church's teaching authority, I, consciously, did not specifically mention doctrines and dogmas that would be peculiar to specific Christian denominations. Nor did I specify any particular form of ecclesial teaching authority other than the ancient councils. It is this 'ecumenical' understanding of the theological enterprise which will govern this work. However, in honesty, I should say that, being a Roman Catholic, the tradition and magisterial teaching of my own denomination has also guided my thinking from the onset of this undertaking. While the common Christian tradition has, from the patristic age, upheld the impassibility of God in himself, and therefore is obliged, I believe, to continue to do so, I also believe that I must do so in order to be faithful to the tradition and teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. I do not think that such an obligation has constrained either my freedom or my creativity as a theologian. Rather, it has forced me and freed me to be more creative, as this book will hopefully demonstrate, than the vast multitude of contemporary theologians who argue that God is passible.

22 *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, 3rd edition edited by E.A. Livingstone (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 823. R. Creel discusses eight different, but interconnected, understandings of what it means for God to be impassible which result in a choice of sixteen permutations. While such a detailed discussion may be useful for the sake of clarity, the clarity can easily become lost in the complexity. See *Divine Impassibility*, pp. 3–12.

H.P. Owen states that impassibility 'means particularly that he [God] cannot experience sorrow, sadness or pain' (*Concepts of Deity*, p. 23). M. Sarot defines impassibility as '*immutability with regard to one's feeling, or the quality of one's inner life.*' 'Patripassianism, Theopaschitism and the Suffering of God: Some Historical and Systematic Considerations,' *Religious Studies* 26 (1990):368.

It should also be noted that divine impassibility is a logical consequence of divine immutability. If God is ontologically unchangeable, then, by definition, he is equally ontologically impassible, for to undergo inner emotional changes of state would render him ontologically mutable.

does not imply, as this study will demonstrate, that God is not utterly passionate in his love, mercy and compassion.

For God to be 'passible' then means that he is capable of being acted upon from without and that such actions bring about emotional changes of state within him. Moreover, for God to be passible means that he is capable of freely changing his inner emotional state in response to and interaction with the changing human condition and world order. Last, passibility implies that God's changing emotional states involve 'feelings' that are analogous to human feelings. Thus one can speak, for example, of God's inner emotional state as changing from joy to sorrow, or from delight to suffering. It is this notion of passibility – that God experiences inner emotional changes of state, either of comfort or discomfort, whether freely from within or by being acted upon from without – that will be denied in this study.