

Christiformitas in Nicholas of Cusa's Roman Sermons (1459)

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ABSTRACT

In 1459, while Pope Pius II was out of Rome, Nicholas of Cusa served as governor of the city and attempted reform of the clergy of the city. The sermons for his reform synod and visitations emphasize *Christiformitas*, conformity to Christ. No individual could attain Christ's perfection. However, the Christian could conform more closely to Christ, attaining greater perfection. The concept of *Christiformitas* thus brought Nicholas' ideas on the limits of human knowledge and reform together in preaching to the clergy of Rome. The subtleties of Cusanus' thought were thus adjusted to the needs of pastoral care and Christian life.

KEYWORDS: Nicholas of Cusa, Rome (city), Reform, Preaching, *Christiformitas*

The objective of Pope Pius II when he left Rome in 1459 to convoke the Congress of Mantua was to launch a crusade against the Ottoman Turks (Russell 51–93). The Piccolomini pope could not, however, leave Rome, a frequently turbulent city, ungoverned. He chose the Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa to become temporal vicar and legate for the Patrimony of St. Peter, Campania, and other regions in Central Italy. Cusanus also received the authority to conduct visitations on Rome's churches and monasteries, especially the four major patriarchal basilicas: Saint Peter's at the Vatican, Saint Paul's Outside the Walls, Santa Maria Maggiore and Saint John Lateran (Meuthen 143–46). Cusanus' tenure as vicar was not entirely uneventful, yet it does seem that the city did not descend into chaos.¹ The cardinal also was able to use his

¹Cusanus discharged his responsibilities well, according to Bett (65). Pius, however, later downplayed Cusanus' achievements, emphasizing the agitations of Tiburzio and Valeriano di Maso:

authority to hold a synod in the papal chapel at the Vatican Palace (February 10, 1459) and visit at least two of the basilicas, the Lateran and Santa Maria Maggiore (on February 23 and March 6 respectively). As expected, Cusanus' efforts to promote reform were not received kindly by those who were subjected to his scrutiny, nor were the clergy of Rome's churches quick to reform their conduct (Lübke 186).

Nevertheless, the cardinal took the occasion during each of these events, the synod, and the visitations, to preach his own particular message about Christ and concerning reform in sermons that have come down to us. Two of these sermons are of particular value for our understanding of the cardinal's later thought on reform, especially as it relates to his Christology. These two strands of Cusan thought are intertwined: reform follows the form (*forma*) of Christ, with that change leading the reformed believer into the life of the Trinity.² These sermons were also delivered shortly before Nicholas presented his proposal for reform of the Roman curia, the *Reformatio generalis*, to Pope Pius. Thus they cast light on the theological dimensions of this abortive effort to reshape the papal court along more pastoral lines (Watanabe 185–203; Watanabe and Izbicki 175–202). The sermons are less personal than Nicholas' outburst in front of the pope, and those around him scoffed at his reform efforts.³ They do, however, reflect his efforts to preach his message in the Rome of the Renaissance popes.

Christiformitas was not a new theme in Nicholas' preaching. He had preached *Christiformitas* to his congregation as early as Easter Sunday in 1432. In that sermon, Nicholas tied conformity to Christ to faith formed by charity. This connected Cusanus' early thought on *Christiformitas* to the idea of *fides caritate formata* that was typical of late medieval ecclesiology. Formed faith was the best way of belonging to the congregation of the faithful (*congregatio fidelium*) on earth while hoping to attain heaven (Miller, "Form" 2).⁴ Nicholas

see *Memoirs of a Renaissance Pope (158–60, 171–75)*. Cusanus was able to protect George of Trebizond from a local enemy as long as he remained in the city as vicar: see *Monfasani (142–44)*.

²Issues of continuity and discontinuity in Cusanus' thought are discussed in Cranz, "Development in Cusanus?" and in Mirov.

³Pius' claim to have reduced Cusanus to tears with his reply is typical of the Piccolomini pope's representation of himself as the most capable ecclesiastical statesman of his day: see O'Brien's *Anatomy of an Apology and "Aeneas Sylvius."*

⁴On *fides caritata formata*, see *Hendrix (15–74)*.

would hold on to the term *Christiformitas*, but his Christology became more complex as he worked out his insights into humanity and divinity in their coming together in the hypostatic union that bridges the gap between the infinite God and the finite human intellect.⁵

Cusanus gave more attention to this theme while he was bishop of Brixen and explored the theological ramifications of conformity to Christ in greater depth. He preached to his flock, especially to the diocesan clergy, a doctrine of *Christiformitas* that offered the reformed Christian an opportunity to share in the life of the Trinity. This brought his mature Christology into the realm of pastoral practice, which included the exegesis of biblical texts from the pulpit to encourage the spiritual growth of Brixen's clergy and laity. These and other Cusan sermons, made Christ the center of Scripture, and made the image of the Trinity, especially of the Father, available to humanity (Hoenen 43–68). (These sermons also represented the legalistic background of Cusanus, who occasionally described Jesus as legate or nuncio of the Father on earth [Euler, *Christusverkündigung* 72 n. 25].) *Christiformitas* appeared in the sermons of this period, which continued to emphasize charity, which is the soul's response to divine love with love. The soul was described as taking on the "form" of Christ by conformity to Jesus, the divine exemplar revealed on earth. Since Christ is the figure of the Father's substance, conformity to Christ is conformity to the Father (Miller, "Form" 3–4). These sermons taught that conformity to Christ effects transformation and causes the soul to mature and the practice of faith to rise to a higher level of practice within the limits of human capacity. This involved living "after the pattern of Christ's life, death and resurrection" (Miller, "Form" 8–10). Cusanus remained in the framework of medieval ecclesiology by continuing to emphasize Christ effecting the transformation of the believer, whose faith is formed by charity, through a continuous process (Miller, "Form" 12).

Nicholas' episcopate in Brixen is most often remembered for its practical failures that included reform efforts that degenerated into wrangles with local interests and that culminated in enforced absence in Rome (Pavlac 84–97). Nonetheless, we should give due attention to the diocesan synod he held in Brixen in 1457, in which he preached *Christiformitas* to his often fractious clergy.

⁵The most detailed study of Nicholas' Christology is *Haubst, Die Christologie des Nikolaus von Kues*.

The bishop Cusanus there applied the more general idea of conformity to Christ to the practical challenges of pastoral care.⁶ In that synod Nicholas preached on the theme *I am the good shepherd* (John 10.11). This was an ideal text for teaching local pastors about their responsibilities. The bishop could preach about how Christ fed those who were entrusted with feeding His flock. It was typical of Cusanus that he was interested in the intellectual feeding of his clergy. In line with his idea of “learned ignorance,” Nicholas said that those who confessed their ignorance would be illuminated.⁷ On the other hand, “those who presume that they have the light of intelligence He blinds, because sin remains in them” (*Writings* 488–89).⁸

Christ had offered Himself as the example, the exemplar, the Good Shepherd of all His sheep. His subsidiary shepherds were to be like Him, Christiform. They were to be fed by Christ on knowledge and true doctrine in order to feed others. This food could be found through Jesus and no other. If the pastors submitted to Him through faith, they would be fed and could feed the faithful on the Scriptures. Otherwise, they were mere hirelings, from whom the flock flees (*Writings* 490–95). The food in the Scriptures was hidden beneath the letter of the text: “Indeed, that which feeds the soul in the field of the Scriptures, the word of God, is contained beneath the letter” (*Writings* 490–91).⁹

In theological terminology, Nicholas referred to Jesus as “image and figure of [the Father’s] essence (‘imago’ et ‘figura substantiae eius’).” This made Him the means of reaching the invisible God (*Writings* 518–19). Likewise, in tune with the ecclesiology of his day, Nicholas spoke of receiving Christ not just by faith but by faith “formed” by charity (per fidem formatam), an inversion of “fides caritate formatam” (*Writings* 496–99).¹⁰ Nicholas told his pastors that the

⁶*The Latin and my translation of it appear in Nicholas of Cusa* (*Writings* 488–527). *The annotated Latin text is found in Nicolai de Cusa opera omnia, vol. 19* (585–98). *A discussion and German translation facing a Latin text are found in Lentzen-Deis, Den Glauben Christi teilen* (137–44, 213–35).

⁷For Cusanus’ Christology, see Euler (“Does Nicholas of Cusa Have a Theology of the Cross?” and “Christ and the Knowledge of God”).

⁸*Opera omnia, vol. 19* (585): “Praesumentes vero se lucem intelligentiae habere excaecat, quia peccatum in illis manet.”

⁹*Opera omnia, vol. 19* (586): “Id enim quod pascit animam in prato scripturarum, verbum Dei est sub littera contentum.”

¹⁰Here Cusanus shares common ground with the more conventional thought of Juan de Torquemada: see Izbicki, *Protector of the Faith* (31–41).

more charity they had the more willing they would be to suffer for the sheep entrusted to them, just as Christ had done. Nicholas told them that the shepherd who was willing to suffer for the flock on account of charity would attain greater glory (*tanto maiorem gloriam assequetur*) (*Writings* 520–21).

Here, briefly, is a Christiform ecclesiology of reform. The conformity to the exemplar is crucial to the right life and conduct of the Church's leadership. This places an episcopal sermon, designed for a specific pastoral occasion, into the larger context of Cusanus' thought. Beginning with *De docta ignorantia*, Nicholas had placed Christ between God and man, bridging the gap between divinity on the one hand and feeble humans with their limited powers on the other. This Christology made the internal *imago Dei* of the individual, in some sense, into an *imago Christi*, which the believer sought to realize in his or her life. This theology, as noted in *De coniecturis*, involved a reaching up by the intellect, the highest human power; but that reaching up was limited by human incapacity and the propensity to fall back into a mundane life.¹¹ The *De visione Dei* mentions that Nicholas, during his Brixen period, dispatched an omnivoyant image or icon of Christ to the monks of Tegernsee for them to contemplate, and they saw images of themselves at their most divinized gazing back (Bond 205–31). By 1450 Cusanus already had, in the *Idiota* dialogues, described the human mind as an image of the divine mind, which measured all things even though it could not create new things.¹² This allowed human beings to assimilate themselves, within their limits, to divinity. This process of divinization was never complete, but it offered the reformed cleric and even the transformed lay person a chance to rise up toward God.¹³ This was a spiritual transformation, not an "ontological" one, as Jasper Hopkins notes (*Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons* xix), especially focusing on terms like "in Christum transformari" and "in Deum transformari" that were used in the sermons. Cusanus' idea of spiritual transformation was less emotional and more intellectual than what another preacher might have expected to achieve in reaching his audience.

Nicholas was also not content to leave individuals as the sole focus of Christ's transforming power. His ecclesiology, especially as it is reflected in the 1442 letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo, revolves around the link

¹¹See Watts.

¹²See *Nicholas of Cusa, The Layman on Wisdom and the Mind*.

¹³See Hudson, *Becoming God*. See also *Nicholas of Cusa's Didactic Sermons: A Selection* (xviii).

between God and the Church through the hypostatic union of divine and human natures in Christ (Izbicki, "Learned Ignorance" 196-214). Although Nicholas did not say it outright, he believed that understanding the Church in the light of learned ignorance would resolve the schism that had divided Pope Eugenius IV from the Council of Basel. This could be done, apparently, by bringing each Christian to conformity with Christ, i.e. *Christiformitas*. That would change the natures of the partisans of both sides in the Basel schism, thus bringing peace and union in obedience to the Roman pontiff, through whom the Church was unfolded by means of the divine gift to Peter (*explicatio Petri*) (Izbicki, "Ambivalent Papalism" 49-65).

This was the state of Cusanus' thinking on the Church and its reform when he held a synod and visited the patriarchal basilicas of Rome. The theme of *Christiformitas*, moreover, would feature prominently in his synodal sermon and in the sermon at Santa Maria Maggiore. Only at the Lateran did he take a different tack, treating the Church as a vineyard and the clergy as the hired hands to whom God had leased the property. Although he did not say it outright in the surviving version of that sermon, Nicholas hinted that the canons of the Lateran might also be condemned by God and cast out if they did not live according to Christ's teaching and example.¹⁴ In both of the other sermons treated here, Cusanus showed his tendency to work his own thought about God and humanity into the exposition of biblical and liturgical texts (Hundersmarck and Izbicki 79-88).¹⁵

The synod Cusanus held in Rome did not leave a record of its decisions or written reactions to its proceedings.¹⁶ The site probably was the *Cappella Maggiore* at the Vatican, of which there still were records by 1368. It would be replaced by Pope Sixtus IV with the present Sistine Chapel that would be adorned with famous works of art.¹⁷ It was on that site that Cusanus gave his

¹⁴The text of this sermon appears as no. 291 in *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (668-72).

¹⁵Cusanus used devices like dialog and metaphor in his sermons, thus balancing out the speculative content he infused into some of the surviving texts; see Nicholas of Cusa's *Early Sermons: 1430-1441* (x-xi).

¹⁶This period of Cusanus' life is not yet covered by *Acta Cusana: Quellen zur Lebensgeschichte des Nikolaus von Kues*. See, however, the documents printed in Meuthen (127-306). For a brief summary of the opinions of Joseph Koch on the periodization of the sermons, plus a critique of these by Hopkins (who noted that the Roman sermons were apart from Koch's grouping of the larger corpus), see Nicholas of Cusa's *Early Sermons* (xiii-xiv).

¹⁷See Ettliger.

sermon on the theme, *When I shall be sanctified in you* (Ezekiel 36.24). These words had been sung as part of the Introit of the mass of the day, the Saturday before the second Sunday in Lent. Nicholas was entering upon his official duties, and (as he mentioned later at Santa Maria Maggiore¹⁸) he had his mandate from the pope read to the assembled clergy.

Cusanus began his sermon by treating the biblical text as a foretelling of the synod's work and a précis of it. He claimed to have found the text by opening the missal at random, a sort of biblical divination or bibliomancy similar to the Roman *sortes virgilianae*. Cusanus, however, found precedents for this in Augustine and John Climacus (*Writings* 528–31). His sermon spoke of the Jewish exiles of Ezekiel's time as spreading the word of God's holiness by their witness while scattered among the gentiles. God gave them holiness the way an object attains heat by being heated. Only then can it pass heat to another object while remaining grateful to the source of its heat. Applying this to a human being, a believer, Cusanus said:

The cold person (*frigidus*), who is made warm so pleasantly, cannot praise sufficiently the heat, which liberated him from the cold, the enemy of life, and guards and preserves him, and will keep him safe from the cold, as long as he remains with the source of heat.¹⁹

This holiness required of the clergy unshakable faith and obedience to Christ, even unto death. Then sanctifier and sanctified could begin to coincide maximally and minimally:

If you acutely reflect on this, you will see that sanctifying and being sanctified coincide, so that in the maximum sanctifying coincides maximally with being sanctified, and in the minimum, minimally.²⁰

¹⁸The text of this sermon appears as no. 292 in *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (673–80), with mention of the mandate in (673).

¹⁹Revised from *Writings* (532–33). *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (660): “*Frigidus, qui delectabiliter calefit, non potest sufficienter laudare calorem, qui ipsum de inimico vitae, scilicet frigore, liberavit et conservavit, atque tutatur ab eo, quamdiu manserit cum ipso.*” There are echoes here of Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae*, I^a II^{ae} q. 5 art. 6. Thomas' text has echoes, in turn of Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

²⁰Revised from *Writings* (534–35). *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (661): “*Et si acute respicis, sanctificare et sanctificari coincidere vides, quomodo in maximo sanctificare coincidit maxime sanctificari et in minimo minime.*”

This change required knowing Christ, the only source of real knowledge of God the Father, and “being changed into Christ by the spirit of Christ” (in *Christum mutatus spiritu Christi*) (*Writings* 538–39; *Opera omnia* Vol. 19 662). Cusanus underlined the identity of the Son with the Father via a reference to canon law, the subject in which he had been educated at the University of Padua (Duclow, “Life and Works” 27). Christ becomes, in this sermon, like a papal legate with fullness of power, who represents the maximal dignity, authority, and undivided papalness (*papalitas*) of the pope (*Writings* 538–39; *Opera omnia* Vol. 19 661–62).²¹ The simile seems strained in terms of law, since popes could overrule their legates. In fact, Nicholas V had overruled some of Cusanus’ own legate acts from his 1451 mission to Germany (Sullivan 382–428). It also bears asking how a professional theologian would have understood the relationship Nicholas was positing between the Father and the Son, even by way of a simile.

Cusanus posited that God wanted to be known. He argued that the nobler an intellect is, the more it wants to be known (*quanto nobilior, tanto magis*). The “Creator of the intellect” desires to be known and that we conform to Him. This knowledge comes best by conformity to God (*deiformitas*), which can only be effected through conformity to Christ (*christiformitas*), Christ being the source of our knowledge of God. Otherwise, our inability to grasp God would block our progress. Jesus was sent to draw us into this conformity. The Son thus enables us to become sons of God. By shedding our vices, we become more like the sinless Christ as far as is humanly possible. We are “holy and immaculate” if we have the spirit of Christ.²²

Here Nicholas expounded on the limits of the human intellect and its inability to attain God without Christ. We must approach God via our own spirit with its “powers of will and intellect (potentiam intellectivam et volitivam).”

²¹On the terminology of “fullness of power,” see Benson (193–217). The idea that the bishop was a legate of Christ appears at least as early as 1443 in a sermon Cusanus gave for a visitation of St. Simeon, Trier, by Archbishop Jakob Sierck: see *Opera omnia*, vol. 17 (29–30). Nicholas’ use of the legal term *legatus* requires further research.

²²*Writings* (540–41). *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (663): “*Sic conditor intellectus, cum sit infinite bonus, cognosci volens, quia intellectus infinitus, omnia creavit, ut cognoscatur seu videatur in Gloria sua et sanctificetur...Diceret: Cum sanctitas sit deiformitas, quomodo acquiritur? Dico: In christiformitate. Nam, cum Deus sit nobis incognitus, ut nos ad deiformitatem attraheret, misit Filium in nostrum naturam, qui cum sit homo, accedi per nos potest....Tunc enim mundi sumus, quando vitio caruerimus. Carere vitio est, quando spiritum Christi habuerimus...*”

The intellect, however, cannot approach unaided, “since [God] surpasses all intellect (quoniam omnem intellectum exsuperat).” Consequently, God provided us Christ as the necessary mediator. Taught by Christ, the human being loves Christ, and thus attains unity through “God” Who is “charity known by love and loved by knowing” (Deus autem caritas est, quae amore cognoscitur et cognoscendo amatur), uniting the whole person with God (*Writings* 542–43; *Opera omnia* Vol. 19 664).

Cusanus held out Peter, “our patron (*patronus noster*),”²³ as the model of this process. This ascent to unity is Petrine, united in a single household of which all of Peter’s successors served in turn as visible head (*Writings* 544–45; *Opera omnia* Vol. 19 665).²⁴ The priesthood existed within this household to administer the sacraments and preach the gospel. Here Nicholas returned to his message of reform, demanding that his fellow clergy sanctify God in their hearts. They were not just co-heirs with the Son but legates. This required the transformation of souls through “conformity with Christ” to fulfill this legatine mission, a change he compared to the Eucharist. The transubstantiation of bread and wine also signified the transformation of the faithful: “[The Eucharist] signifies that the faithful are transformed spiritually into the mystical body of Christ.” The priesthood was required to effect this transubstantiation of souls, just as it effected transformation of the elements when celebrating mass.²⁵ Those who were purified received “a new spirit” that could never fail. The love of the purified soul was fired “with the infinite Lovable present” (*praesente infinito amabili*), conformed to Christ; and thus it lived in delight.²⁶ This sermon would have preceded the discussion of reform decrees.

The sermon at Santa Maria Maggiore, like that at the Lateran, almost certainly was followed by a formal visitation of the resident canons, which included questioning them about duties and discipline, and an inspection of

²³Cusanus might have intended multiple meanings here: Peter as first pope, as namesake of the Vatican basilica and as the namesake of his titular church, San Pietro in Vincoli.

²⁴This message about Peter is found in other writings of Cusanus, including the Letter to Rodrigo Sánchez de Arévalo and his sermons for Petrine feasts: see Izbicki, “The Church in the Light of Learned Ignorance” and “An Ambivalent Papalism” (*passim*).

²⁵Revised from *Writings* (546–47. *Opera omnia*, vol. 19, 665–66): “et significant sic fideles transire spiritualiter in corpus Christi mysticum.” For Cusanus’ ideas about priesthood and the sacraments, see Casarella, “Sacraments,” and Duclow, “Eckhart and Nicholas of Cusa”.

²⁶Revised from *Writings* (548–49). *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (666–67).

the church itself. The reading of the cardinal's mandate thus opened the way for this disciplinary process (*Opera omnia* Vol. 19 673).²⁷ He chose as his text *When it was already about the middle of the feast day* (Jn. 7.14). What followed was a close reading of this chapter of John's gospel, focusing on Christ's legation from the Father, His curing of a man on the Sabbath, how the Jews could not recognize Jesus as the Son of God from his physical appearance, and His need to demonstrate His identity and the voluntary nature of His sacrificial death.²⁸ Cusanus spoke not just about Jesus going up to the Temple but also about the presence of those who were teachable by God and eager to receive divine teachings. They needed Christ as their teacher, a mission for which He had been sent; and those who were "teachable and eager to receive divine teaching" (*dociles et avidi ad recipiendum divinas doctrinas*) received His teachings with humility (*Opera omnia* Vol. 19 673–74). This statement led Nicholas to speak at length about the Jews who rejected Jesus as teacher because they did not know how He could teach without having studied. This leads, in turn, to a series of contrasts between Jesus and human beings (*homines*), He being perfectly all that they wished to be by His very nature. The principle behind these contrasts can be summarized in Cusanus' own words: "For all that human beings can know, using their intellect, Christ Himself was actually (*actu*)."²⁹

The list of contrasts follows this statement. The paragraph concludes with a description of Christ as the maximum who makes possible all human possibility of perfection (*possibilitas perfectionis*): "Therefore, every possibility of perfection is guided and perfected by that maximality or fullness."³⁰

What Nicholas said in the series of contrasts was not typically homiletic in his own day. It was derived from his mature speculative thought:

And you know that no one is so perfect that he cannot be more perfect; and, therefore, the perfection of all human beings, since it can become more or

²⁷All translations from this text are mine. They have been checked against Nicholas of Cusa's *Didactic Sermons* (442–51).

²⁸See the *Divisio* in *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (673).

²⁹*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (674): "Nam omne id, quod omnes homines intellectu vigentes scire possunt, actu erat Christus."

³⁰*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (674): "Unde ab illa maximitate seu plenitudine omnis possibilitas perfectionis perducitur et perticitur."

less, is not proportionate to the perfection of Christ, since it is the highest perfection, than which nothing can be greater or higher.³¹

Christ had the plenitude of perfection, and all human perfection was enfolded in Him in actuality. Every possibility of perfection was fulfilled in Him, and humans could share in that perfection within limits, a “concrete possibility” (*concretam possibilitatem*). What human beings, however, could not do, according to Cusanus, was lead themselves to that limited perfection by their own actions. This transition from potency to act required divine initiative, just as fire had to heat a cold object to make it warm (*Opera omnia* Vol. 19 674–75).³²

Nicholas then switched back to his ideas about teaching, with Christ as the teacher, the master. The summit of perfection for a disciple, he said, was to become like his master. The summit of intellect was to be “conformed to the Word or the divine intellect.” Christ is the only teacher able to lead an individual to that summit. Cusanus continued:

Therefore, no human being can be happy unless he is Christiform. No spirit can be happy unless it is conformed to the spirit of Christ.³³

Cusanus said learning required both effort (*ars*) and nature. Without effort, an individual remained ignorant; without natural ability (*ingenium*), learning was impossible. In Christ, however, both things coincided. Christ was the divine speech (*sermo*) through which God made all things.³⁴ The Jews, he said, would not have wondered that Jesus taught with authority if they had understood He was the living word and “expression of all speech that can be

³¹*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (674): “*Et scias quod nemo est ita perfectus, quin posit esse perfectior; et ideo perfectio omnium hominum, cum recipiat magis et minus, non est proportionabilis ad perfectionem Christi, cum illa sit altissima, qua nulla potest esse maior aut altior.*”

³²Much of this passage is similar to the text in Bessarion’s translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*; see *Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (674), notes to 4.5–7. See, however, Bond, “Mystical Theology” for similar use of this simile by Thomas Aquinas.

³³*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (675): “*Nullus igitur homo potest esse felix nisi christiformis. Nullus spiritus felix nisi conformis spiritui Christi.*”

³⁴*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (675): “*In Christo igitur ars et natura vendentur coincidere, ipse qui sermo est et ars omnipotens (per quam Deus fecit et saecula).*”

formed" (sermonem omnium sermonum formabilium)(*Opera omnia* Vol. 19 675; Izbicki, "Nicholas of Cusa and the Jews" 119–30). Nicholas did not apply these principles directly to his clerical audience at Santa Maria Maggiore. In fact, the sermon seems incomplete: the text ends with an indication that what we have probably is the preamble to a longer discourse.³⁵ What is most striking about this sermon is its equation of learning with *Christiformitas*, indicating that the cardinal expected life and learning to coincide in the clergy. They were supposed to conform their lives to Christ—not just utter the right words—in order to attain true happiness through Him, and thus learn to live rightly by this conformity to Christ.

Before leaving Nicholas' sermons, we should pay attention to an absence. Nicholas was noted for preaching abstruse sermons that sometimes passed over the heads of his hearers.³⁶ Nonetheless, he never used in these sermons the terms for the divinization of the believer via Christ that he had derived from the Greek Fathers. Thus both the Greek *theosis* and Nicholas' own term *filiatio* were absent. Cusanus might have regarded them as too difficult for his hearers, whereas he used them earlier in his treatise *De filiatioe Dei* (1445). Although that work was Christological, it could be seen—in Western terms—as being far too intellectual to engage the issues of sin and repentance, reform and pastoral renewal that belonged to a pastor's labors (Hudson 134–78). Ideas of sonship (*filiatio*) and deification (*deificatio*) also had been employed in *De visione Dei* (1453), but there is no echo of that text in these sermons (Miller, *Reading Cusanus* 172–76). We must consider too that Nicholas, who experimented with various metaphors and dialectical strategies, might simply have abandoned filiation for other terms, like *posse ipsum*, in his later years (Cranz, "Late Works" 43–60).

In this context we should look briefly at the *Reformatio generalis*, Cusanus' proposal for reform of the Roman curia. It was not the only proposal made in that period; Pius II even drafted a reform bull that was never issued (Watanabe *passim*).³⁷ Nicholas prefaced his proposal with a claim that reform is "necessary for salvation." He argued that human nature desires to know the

³⁵*Opera omnia*, vol. 19 (680): "Quae sic quam breviter dicta de evangelio et praecambulari sermone sufficient." "

³⁶See above n. 15.

³⁷For a fresh edition of the *Reformatio*, see *Opera omnia*, vol. 15 (19–59).

God Who wrote the book of creation, but humanity did not know the Word through which the book was created. This required that the Word become flesh and gather disciples into the Church to teach them the truth. The clergy existed not just to learn from Christ by putting on His form (*Christiformitas*), but to also put that form onto others. The pope himself was to put on that form, and so he too was to accept reform (Watanabe and Izbicki 188–91). The work of renewing the visible Church, of building up the mystical body of Christ through charity, was to start with the pope himself, who would accept correction from a committee of three “mature men,” before the work descended through the ranks of the curia and spread throughout Christendom (Watanabe and Izbicki 191–92).

In this proposal, Nicholas treated putting on the form of Christ (*Christiformitas*) at the center of the effort, just as he had highlighted the necessity of conformity to the savior in his synodal sermons and during his visitation of Santa Maria Maggiore. His reform proposals did not separate personal from institutional renewal. Personal reform of the pope through *Christiformitas* was expected to overflow into the renewal of the Mystical Body of Christ that was united to God through charity. Christocentric reform was not a new concept, but Cusanus placed it at the heart of his (unsuccessful) argument, expressed in his own unique idiom, that the Roman curia needed to be reformed and renewed.³⁸ The concept Cusanus preached was mimetic: it emphasized the imitation of Christ, but made room for a resemblance that led to the assimilation of the believer, especially of the reformed pastor or prelate, as far as humanly possible into Christ. This assimilation, however, came by way of conduct as well as by conformity of the intellect to Christ’s mind, these two aspects of reform being intimately connected. Christ was too far above human capacities for it to be completely possible to imitate his divine intellect, but thoughts and lives could be conformed to Him within the limits of finite human nature.³⁹

³⁸The literature on reform is vast. For some of the works on Cusanus’ contribution, see the works listed in Izbicki and Breighner (446–47).

³⁹On the tension between assimilation (assimilation) and measurement (mensuratio) in Nicholas’ thought, especially in the *Idiota dialogues*, see Miller, “Nicholas of Cusa and Philosophic Knowledge.”

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