Thomas Aquinas’ mature Christology, developed primarily during his second and final Parisian residency in the years 1269 to 1273 is notable for—among other things—its increasing focus on explicating and defending the full humanity of the incarnate Son. In several important works that Thomas undertook during this period, particularly the Tertia Pars of the Summa Theologiae, and Quaestio Disputata De unione Verbi Incarnati, an early Christian hymn preserved in Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians, 2:6-11, with its emphasis on the Son’s kenosis or “self-emptying,” the assumption of a human nature whereby the pre-existent Word comes to subsist in the “form of a slave,” often plays a key role in Aquinas’ arguments regarding the truth of Christ’s humanity. However, a complete appreciation of the importance of the notion of kenosis in Thomas’ mature Christological cannot be achieved without first establishing the prominence of the concept of kenosis in the Bible and its reception in the Patristic and Medieval eras.

In the remainder of the dissertation I trace the development of Thomas’ understanding of certain aspects of this hymn from the beginning of his career, a development often seen in conjunction with his increasing familiarity with the Christological Councils. In the process, I explicate the crucial task played by this hymn in what has come to be recognized as one of the most controversial topics in Aquinas’ final Christology: the intrinsically human existence of the enfleshed Word, what in the De unione Thomas refers to as the secondary created human act of existence (esse) of the enfleshed Word, and the function of that esse secundarium in the saving work of Christ Jesus. After considering the reception history of this contested notion in modern Thomism, I conclude with a proposal that the incarnate Son’s unique mode of human subsistence mirrors the Son’s properly obediential relationship to the Father. This kenotic reciprocity is in turn manifested in the incarnate Word’s theandric existence, at once both truly human and fully divine, and in the divine-human instrumentality of the God-man’s operations as mediator and salvific exemplar pro nobis.