

## Liturgy and Vocation

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PERHAPS ONE WAY OF DEFINING “liturgy” is to understand it as a restored participation in the original created order. That is, by the grace of Christ, the New Adam, humanity can reclaim its Adamic vocation as priest. By the grace of baptism, Christ extends his own priesthood, sharing it with all who are born again by water and the Spirit. The baptized thus share in the unique Priesthood of Christ, which restores—and elevates—the original priesthood shared by Adam and Eve.

God, as Irenaeus was to argue strenuously against Gnostic theorizing about cosmic origins, creates everything *ex nihilo*, out of his own goodness, and not from any need or compulsion; creation is not the result of the malevolence of a lesser deity or cosmic mismanagement on the part of an inept inferior power. The distinction central to Gnosticism—matter versus spirit—is trumped in Christian theology by a more fundamental one unavailable to the Gnostics: between created reality, comprising both matter and spirit, and the one, good God, himself distinct from but not disinterested in his creation. Creation, fashioned by the very *Logos* of God, “through whom all things were made” (John 1:3, RSV), has a meaningful purpose and end. The entire created order is meant to reflect, by its very status as created, the goodness of the good God and thereby offer him glory. It is the very vocation of creation to glorify God. In this sense, the created cosmos is also a sacrament; that is, it is patent of the glory of the Creator and indeed points to him. Rational creation—encompassing both humans and the angelic orders—is to perceive God’s glory reflected in, by, and through all created things and freely to

order its own act of grateful praise to God. It is precisely in this way that rational creatures glorify their Creator, seeing the goodness and beauty of God's handiwork (including their own literally marvelous existence) and glorifying God. As the French Oratorian Louis Bouyer put it most elegantly, the very heartbeat of the cosmic order is heard as the graced reciprocity of divine *agape* and humanity's free—and genuinely free precisely because graced—*eucharistia*:

Across this continuous chain of creation, in which the triune fellowship of the divine Persons has, as it were, extended and propagated itself, moves the ebb and flow of creative *Agape* and of created *eucharistia*. Descending further and further toward the final limits of the abyss of nothingness, the creative love of God reveals its full power in the response it evokes, in the joy of gratitude in which, from the very dawn of their existence creatures freely return to the One who has given them all . . . like an infinitely generous heart, beating with an unceasing diastole and systole, first diffusing the divine glory in paternal love, then continually gathering it up again to its immutable source in filial love.<sup>1</sup>

This created response, which Bouyer calls “created *eucharistia*,” is itself, of course, graced—the synergy of divine and human freedoms is made possible (one might even say forged) by the fire of the Spirit—for as the Apostle would chide the cliquish Corinthians, “what do you possess that you have not received?” (1 Cor 4:7). Of course, our own erratic life of prayer and the muddles of a fallen existence betray the fact that this heartbeat may not echo as clearly in our quotidian experience as Bouyer describes. But what he is describing is, of course, the original order intended by God that, despite being skewed by sin, is to be restored finally in Christ, who alone has revealed *agape* in its fullness. Sin—our own unreflective self-referentiality that distorts our perception of ourselves, of others, of the world, and that leads us to see God as perhaps simply not quite to be trusted, as a wily and invisible competitor for the glory we seek for ourselves—has occluded our perception of the cosmos and wreaked havoc on our imagination. The primal, sacramental nature of all that is created by God is lost on the fallen imagination, which sees things as just that—things, and no longer as signs.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Meaning of the Monastic Life*, trans. K. Pond (New York: P. J. Kenedy and Sons, 1955), 29 (translation revised slightly).

Augustine, in his *De doctrina christiana*, argued that signs are of course also things, but in the sacramental economy it is equally important to remember that *res* are very much also *signa*. And when things no longer point to or speak of their Creator, they quickly become opaque obstacles, then substitutes, and finally idols. Ironically, the fallen imagination falters not in seeking too much from life, of aiming too high, but in settling for far too little, of aiming too low, of being willing and desirous of being satisfied with any of the various things that are meant to lead us through themselves to their Creator, and as a consequence, it both misapprehends and misuses them, simultaneously losing sight of their Creator and ours and of our true vocation and end.

In short, our imagination itself needs conversion. The language enshrined at the Council of Trent—that the divine image in humanity has certainly been disfigured but not destroyed, that our wills are weakened and our intellect darkened by sin—is, of course, quite helpful in diagnosing our own inabilities and instabilities in the orders of thought and action. But perhaps another way of talking about the effect of the Fall is to say that our very imagination has been warped by sin and that it too needs grace and healing. Blessed John Henry Newman wrote of the importance of the “sacramental principle” in his own grasp of the faith: the visible world is charged with significance, manifesting unseen realities available to the eyes of faith.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as he observed in one of his University sermons, “the influence of the world, viewed as the enemy of our souls, consists in its hold upon our imagination”<sup>3</sup>; he refers of course to the “world” in the Johannine sense, much as Paul uses the term “flesh,” to express the corrosive and distorting effects of self-love and the desire for domination that reign in this age.<sup>4</sup> But with the coming of Christ in the flesh, this cosmos has begun to regain its sacramental power—this was precisely what

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<sup>2</sup> See *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, ed. D. DeLaura (New York: Norton, 1968), e.g., 34. See also John R. Connolly, “Newman’s Vision of Holiness in this World,” in *Newman and Life in the Spirit: Theological Reflections on Spirituality for Today*, ed. J. R. Connolly and B. W. Hughes (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014), 145–65, esp. 155–57.

<sup>3</sup> “Human Responsibility, as Independent of Circumstances,” in *Sermons, Chiefly on the Theory of Religious Belief, Preached before the University of Oxford* (London: Francis and John Rivington, 1844), 139 (this sermon was preached November 4, 1832).

<sup>4</sup> See the superb treatment of these themes in Louis Bouyer, “The Two Economies of Divine Government: Satan and Christ,” in *God and His Creation*, ed. A. M. Henry (Chicago: Fides, 1955), esp. 469–75.

was at stake in the iconoclast debates of the eighth and ninth centuries—and glimpses of the age to come, the victory of *agape* and glory of Christ's Kingdom, can be discerned even here and even now. Fr. Robert Imbelli's recent book *Rekindling the Christic Imagination* is to be highly recommended in this regard: it is an extended meditation that makes splendid use of art, literature, and music as occasions and vehicles of theological reflection, pointing us ultimately to the "Love that moves the sun and the other stars."<sup>5</sup> Central to the thought of G. K. Chesterton, particularly in *Orthodoxy* and in *The Everlasting Man*, was to call for a re-enchantment of the imagination. Our imaginations, wounded by sin, have been further hampered by what Joseph Ratzinger would call the reduction or constriction of *logos* to the narrow confines of the empirical sciences, whose canons and modalities exercise an often unimaginative but growing hegemony over the academy.<sup>6</sup> Grace brings not only enlightenment to the intellect and strengthening to the will but also re-enchantment to the imagination. Inasmuch as Truth nourishes the intellect and Good powers the will, so it is that Beauty can ravish the imagination.

While modern science may classify humans as *homo sapiens*—beings of the genus *homo* literally specified by the capacity for rational thought, and whereas Karl Marx was to reduce humans to *homo faber*, those whose life, value, and meaning were to be identified with their capacity to produce or construct,<sup>7</sup> the Orthodox émigré liturgiologist Fr. Alexander Schmemmann has contended that the noblest definition of humanity is as *homo adorans*: rational beings, the full actualization of whose potentialities is to be found in the praise and worship of Almighty God.<sup>8</sup> As created by God, we are made to worship; it is built into the very fabric of our nature: not only are we equipped for it, but it is the deepest and fullest expression of our humanity, of creatureliness at its best. It is not simply that humans have a *capacity* for worship—even anthropologists and sociologists might acknowledge or even highlight that phenomenon—but that worship of God is the

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<sup>5</sup> *Rekindling the Christic Imagination: Theological Meditations for the New Evangelization* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

<sup>6</sup> See his *Introduction to Christianity* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2004), 74–79, and the study of *logos* in his thought by Christopher S. Collins in *The Word Made Love: The Dialogical Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> Ratzinger's analysis is typically shrewd (see, for example, *Introduction to Christianity*, 72–73).

<sup>8</sup> *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's, 1973), 118.

*fulfillment* of our humanity; we are most truly and fully who we are when we are adoring God. In the language of St. Thomas, it is the point of contact where divine and human *beatitudo* can be genuinely shared: our prayer, our worship, enabling a created and graced participation in God's own beatitude. Now, in a fallen eon, this is played out in curious, if ultimately unsurprising, ways. To put it bluntly, if we are not striving to worship God, since we worship by default, as it were, then any number of things take the place of the one, true God in the pantheon of our psyche: our career, our convenience, our relationships, our comfort, our pleasure, our security, all of them of course tied to our *selves* by the first-person pronoun. The self-assertion and self-promotion enacted by our first parents in the garden is re-enacted, recapitulated, in our own grasping and clingy affections and aspirations. The idols we construct or erect for ourselves actually disable genuine beatitude, and so are continually knocked down and replaced in a futile striving for the very thing closer to us than we are to ourselves and yet hidden to us, occluded by our own swollen self-love.

If the Scriptures begin by revealing the Adamic priesthood and the sacramentality of the cosmos, they conclude by showing us just what our true *telos* will be, accomplished proleptically, in Christ. While for many readers the Book of Revelation, the Apocalypse, has functioned as something of a *Michelin Guide* to the end of the world, so much so that, in contemporary parlance, to speak of "apocalypse" is to speak of chaos, disaster, and destruction, the fact of the matter is that the "revelation" being made in the letters addressed to the seven churches is not principally the coming "events" rocking the first century Roman world (or, for that matter, our own), but rather what is unseen and unknown to the oppressing pagan powers and cosmic principalities yet available to the baptized: the victory of the Lamb. The book is less about plagues, trumpets, vials, seals, and woes and much more about witness and worship: *martyria*, *latreia*, and the privileged nature of that witness *as* worship.

Arguably, the most fruitful reading of Revelation is to see at the center of the work what is revealed to John the visionary in chapters 4 and 5. The veil is lifted, and the eternal worship of God and the Lamb is, for a moment, made visible to the persecuted churches of Asia Minor (and subsequent generations of listeners and readers). What is being revealed is that, in the face of the horrors of persecution and the seeming ascendancy of evil, the victory is already won: it is accomplished and effected by a love that is willing to suffer, by

the Lamb who is also the Lion of the Tribe of Judah, and communicated, made both real and available, in the Church's liturgy. In fact, the center panel of the Ghent altarpiece, which depicts the heavenly worship of the Lamb that is described in Revelation and in which our earthly liturgy participates, captures with splendor what the Second Vatican Council affirmed as the Church's fullest identity, being gathered around the altar, praising and adoring God in Christ. One of the most beautiful manifestations of this mystery each year is the Chrism Mass during Holy Week, which really is a snapshot of the Church most fully *in act*, one might say: as James Joyce had described the Church Catholic, "here comes everybody,"<sup>9</sup> which is only a modern Hibernian rendition of St. Ephrem's maternal image of the "big church with the big lap"<sup>10</sup>—lay, religious, priests, deacons, the elect of the catechumenate, and the entire local Church together celebrating the Lamb's Supper under the presidency of the Bishop.

The *telos* of redeemed creation is thus revealed and glimpsed even now, a *telos* made possible by a divine economy whose power is *agape* and whose wisdom is subversive to all that fallen minds can conceive or construct. Further, those who follow the Lamb, who still bears his wounds, not only witness this love made visible; what is more, they are made capable of sharing it, participating in it, and uniting themselves to it. Their love, their sacrifice, can participate in and be made one with his unique and all-sufficient sacrifice, and—in and through the liturgy—*it already is*. The key to their (and our) experiences, the key to the meaning of all things, is precisely the One who is worthy to break open the seals and unravel the scroll. If we seek meaning, we need look no further than to the *Logos (meaning)*-made-flesh, who is simultaneously the fullest revelation of *agape*, of what this meaning looks like concretely: crucified love.

Within what biblical scholars refer to as Jesus's "high priestly prayer," part and parcel of John's account of the Last Supper, he prays for his disciples and those—like us—who will believe because of them. The mission of the Son in the temporal order is to give glory to the Father, a glory shared fully and eternally with his Son and now refracted in the created order by the Incarnation, a glory now illumined by the Cross and Resurrection. Our vocation, the vocation

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<sup>9</sup> From *Finnegan's Wake* (1939).

<sup>10</sup> *Hymns against Heresies*, 2.16–17, quoted in Simon Tugwell, "Revelation and Human Experience," *New Blackfriars* 60 (1979):500–15, at 509 (it is worth noting that its original context for St. Ephrem was anti-Marcionite).

of those called to be sons and daughters in the Son, is to participate by grace in that mission. This, in theological terms, is what the fifth chapter of *Lumen Gentium* meant when it spoke of the “universal call to holiness.” It means nothing more—but also nothing less—than a created participation in the Eternal Son, a genuinely filial (and not merely metaphorical) relation to the Father through the Son, in the Holy Spirit: this is what divinizes our humanity; this is what St. Thomas meant by *beatitudo*, not as a passive state, but as an active participation in the triune life of God. This is what the liturgy and the entire sacramental economy communicates in and through the Church: it reveals to us and makes possible our share in this eternal relation to God the Father, a deeply personal and abiding *communio*.

The Son’s mission is to glorify the Father and to implicate his followers, literally to enfold them, to clothe them, in this glorification and in his own priesthood (hence the baptismal garment<sup>11</sup>). In turn, the Father glorifies the Son, and those who live in him. Christ, the new Adam, restores and elevates that original vocation of the old Adam in and through his own created human nature.

How is it, precisely, that the Son “glorifies” the Father? In Johannine language, the “hour” of Jesus and his “glory,” anticipated throughout his ministry by the seven signs chosen and highlighted by the Evangelist, coincide on the cross. The supreme sacrifice—one to which all the sacrifices of the Old Law pointed and that they anticipated and from which they take their true meaning (much of the second-century bishop Melito’s hymn on the Pasch sees all the rituals of the old as somehow participating in the one perfect Pasch of Christ<sup>12</sup>)—the perfect and complete act of worship is discovered in Christ’s self-gift to the Father on our behalf. Christ is, at this moment, as the fifth Paschal Preface says, “the priest, the altar, and the lamb of sacrifice.” Crucified, paschal love, self-donation, the Son’s *agape*, is the essence of this glorification. For Christians, the Cross is always, as Bouyer would say, illumined by the resurrection, but the

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<sup>11</sup> Being clothed in the baptismal garment (in which Christ’s priesthood is quite literally “implied”) also communicates his very life. See the dated but still valuable study by J. Quasten, “The Garment of Immortality: A Study of the *Accipe vestem candidam*,” in *Miscellanea Liturgica in onore di Sua Eminenza il Cardinale Giacomo Lercaro* (Rome: Desclée, 1966–67), 1:391–401, although he perhaps gives too much attention to pagan precedents and inadequate weight to the Pauline theology of Rom 13:14 and Gal 3:27.

<sup>12</sup> See G. S. Hall, *Melito of Sardis: On Pascha and Fragments* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2012).

only way to that life is through that self-gift; there is nothing whatsoever magical about it.<sup>13</sup> Just as the Son, by such love, glorifies the Father, so the Father glorifies the Son, whose risen life witnesses that glory and communicates this risen life to his disciples.

To speak of vocation as participation in the Son's glorification of the Father means that the essence of our vocation must be self-gift, a crucified, paschal love like Christ's. In the tenth book of his massive *City of God*, Augustine engages in a lengthy reflection of the nature of sacrifice, culminating in a discussion of the sacrifice of Christians. He makes very clear that God does not *need* any of the things offered to him in sacrifice: "Far from needing cattle or any other earthly or corruptible thing, we must believe that God does not need even the righteousness of men and women; for it is men and women, not God, who benefit from the worship rightly offered to God. No one says he does any service to a spring by drinking from it or to a light by looking at it."<sup>14</sup>

Still, what is it that these external sacrifices are meant to represent or engender? Simply put, it is charity, the twin-love of God and of neighbor with reference to God that forms the heart of Augustine's view of the Christian life:

We can see now that these sacrifices are to be understood as symbolizing the love of God and the love of one's neighbor. . . . Thus, true sacrifice is offered in every act which is intended to unite us to God in a holy bond: this means that every act directed toward our final good that makes true happiness possible for us. . . . True sacrifices are acts of mercy, whether toward ourselves or our neighbors, when they are referred to

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<sup>13</sup> "So we see how this life can and must become a preparation for eternity: first of all by becoming an anticipation of it, through the effective presence here on earth of the charity which will blossom into life eternal. It is admittedly a paradoxical kind of anticipation: in eternity, life with God, life in God's love, will be nothing but life, and superabundant life; here and now it implies the Cross, and can only be achieved through the Cross. For the Christian, however, the Cross is already illuminated by the resurrection. Even the Cross itself is glorious when seen from inside, as the earthly fulfillment of what Christ brought to it, the love of God. The Christian's cross, like Christ's, is a victory, still hidden, but already visible to the eyes of faith"; see Bouyer, *Christian Initiation* (London: Burns and Oates, 1960), 116.

<sup>14</sup> *City of God* 10.5, trans. H. Bettenson (London: Penguin, 1972), 377 (revised slightly).

God, and these acts of mercy are intended to liberate us from our misery and bring us true happiness. This being said, it follows that the entire Redeemed Community, that is, the congregation and fellowship of the saints, is offered to God as a universal sacrifice, through the Great Priest who offered Himself in His suffering for us—in order to make us the Body of so great a Head—in the form of a servant (Phil 2:7). For it was this “form” that He offered, and it was in this “form” that He was offered, because it was precisely in this form that He was the Mediator. In this “form” He is both priest and sacrifice. Thus the Apostle Paul exhorts us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God (Rom 12:3) as the spiritual homage that we owe Him. . . . For we ourselves are that whole sacrifice.<sup>15</sup>

What God desires, or requires, is that we make a gift of ourselves in and through the Body of his Son, which is the Church. As Augustine concludes: “This is the sacrifice of Christians who, though many, make up one Body in Christ. This is the sacrifice which the Church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, a sacrament well-known to believers, where it is shown to the Church that she herself is offered in the very offering she makes to God.”<sup>16</sup>

This is an expression of the *admirabile commercium*—the marvelous exchange—first spoken of in the *Epistle to Diognetus*<sup>17</sup> in the second century and later enshrined in the liturgical texts of the Christmas Octave, an expression not only of the mystery of the Incarnation but also of how that mystery is celebrated and experienced by Christians in the sacrament of the altar. What God offers us is nothing less than himself. What he asks of us is nothing less than ourselves. In this exchange he communicates to us his own divine life, and he who was rich but became poor for our sake freely imparts to us poor creatures his own richness.

In a recent article, Fr. Michael Lang has argued that one must read this particular text from Augustine carefully in its context as apologetic over and against pagan sacrificial systems, as Augustine was often cited by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century reform-

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 10.5–6 (pp. 379–80; revised slightly).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.6 (p. 380; revised slightly), cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, at § 1372.

<sup>17</sup> *Epistle to Diognetus* 9; the otherwise unknown author wrote ca. AD 180.

ers as witness to the effect that external rites are unnecessary and that the internal, personal dimensions of this self-gift are what truly matter. While Fr. Lang's analysis is clear, perceptive, and helpful, I would further posit that those who are tempted to juxtapose external ritual and internal disposition vis-à-vis the Eucharist are apt to miss their vital connection. It is precisely the Eucharist that forms in us the capacity for self-gift, for paschal love. If the external rites remain simply symbolic acts, tokens of a love accomplished long ago, a passion play meant to stir our hearts to a similar love, then, to paraphrase Flannery O'Connor, "to hell with them."<sup>18</sup> But if they are in fact efficacious signs, signs that truly accomplish what they signify, then it is the sacrament of the altar that both enables and forms in us this capacity for paschal love. It is actually his love with which we love because we eat it, we drink it, and we assimilate it: his love becomes our love. Our ineffectual love is taken up into his own, efficacious love, and, to use Augustine's language, we ourselves are offered in the very offering we make to God. Our self-gift is united with his self-gift, our feeble and often feckless sacrifices to his one, all-sufficient and perfect sacrifice, and our participation at the altar capacitates us to love as he loves, to die as he died so as to live through him and with him and in him (is this not—rather than maudlin displays of sentimentality and quasi-canonizations—fundamentally the theology of the *Order of Christian Funerals*?).

The Eucharist is, then, the *culmen at fons*, the source and summit, because our love finds both its origin and its *telos* in Christ, dead and risen. The mission of the Church is not simply to proclaim the good news, to bring information hitherto unavailable to more and more people. It is rather to communicate his very life to the world. Ours is a Church of Word *and* Sacrament, the latter simply the enacting or embodiment of the former. What is communicated in the sacraments *is* the Word: the Word-made-flesh.

I have referred repeatedly to the language of vocation throughout this essay, and I have done so in a way that makes clear the multivalent quality of the term. If, in fact, one were to ask a gathering of Catholics what their vocation is, I suspect the great majority would immediately refer to their state of life: married, single, vowed religious, or

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<sup>18</sup> Her precise words, in reference to discussion of the Real Presence, were, "Well, if it's a symbol, to hell with it"; found in a letter to Betty Hester written on December 16, 1955; see *The Habit of Being*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1988), 125.

ordained. A few theological sophisticates might offer a correction to that and indicate that their fundamental vocation is holiness of life. But I would like to suggest we consider vocation in concentric circles, the most fundamental of which is not our particular state of life, nor even our baptismal vocation to holiness of life, but our very existence itself: our life is itself a vocation. None of us exists by our own will or choice, and each life is a precious calling-into-being by the Supernal Love that crafted all things into existence out of nothing.

In one sense, it is quite obvious, and yet it is imperative that we start here: with the utter gratuity of our being, a wonder and marvel captured and pondered by the Psalmist in the Psalm 139. It is *the* fundamental Christian distinction,<sup>19</sup> between God and all else that is, everything else that is created and thus dependent for its existence on his gracious will alone, the distinction that undercuts all Gnostic, Manichaean, and Albigensian dualisms of matter and spirit and that should underline and reinforce the utter gratuity of all vocation: at every level, in every concentric circle, we start with *a gift*, not something that is “just there,” that can explain itself, much less justify itself. The revised translation of the *Roman Missal* makes clear that what we offer God is nothing but what we have first received: “Blessed are you Lord God of all creation, for through your goodness we have received the bread we offer you, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, it will become for us the bread of life.” These words, frequently prayed *sotto voce* or covered by music, capture crisply the essence of the *admirabile commercium*: we present what we can muster, itself merely what we have first received. In exchange, God’s Spirit transforms that humble, simple gift, much as it transformed that lowly maiden’s *fiat*, and offers us to us the fullness of his own divine life, the Word-made-flesh anew under the appearances of the very bread and wine we have offered.

The essence of the vocation to holiness is, as I have suggested, to participate in the eternal Son’s temporal mission, the glorification the Father. As Irenaeus had taught, this glorification is found in the full actualization of our created humanity: *gloria Dei vivens homo*. But he also goes on to specify more clearly what that means: the life of the human is the vision of God. There is no autonomous creaturely

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<sup>19</sup> See Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), who argues not only that this is *the* Christian distinction, but also that this distinction affects every aspect of Christian doctrine and practice in a very particular way.

or human flourishing apart from the very vision of God. And, for Irenaeus, there is no knowledge of the Father apart from the Son: what is visible or seen of the Father *is* the Son.<sup>20</sup> In short, there is no holiness that is not Christocentric, and our glorification of the Father happens precisely through the Son, in our becoming, by the action of the Spirit, sons- and daughters-in-the-Son and offering ourselves to the Father with his Eternal Son. Our becoming disciples and bearing fruit glorifies the Father, and this happens only to the degree that we unite ourselves to the Son in his self-gift, his paschal love, a self-gift that, now that the Son has ascended and is seated at the Father's right hand, is indeed eternal.<sup>21</sup>

This is what it means, following the Letter to the Hebrews, to say that Jesus has an eternal priesthood: in the risen and glorified Jesus, now ascended to the Father, our Adamic humanity has achieved its true end, and the priestly vocation intended by God in his creative design is now fulfilled in Jesus, while not yet in us.

Further, the eternal self-giving of the incarnate Son to the Father, in which the baptized are called to an ever-deeper participation, is not static, but dynamic. As the biblical theologian François-Xavier Durrwell wrote during the great biblical *ressourcement* of the mid-twentieth century, with a kind of oxymoronic panache, Christ is "fixed forever in his redemptive act." He goes on:

Christ will never leave behind the immolation and that new life; his existence is fixed forever at the moment of the Redemption. The five wounds he showed his disciples are not merely the receipt for our ransom inscribed upon his body, but the wounds of a death from which he will never recover. . . . The life of glory is a perpetuation of his death; the fire of the Spirit which consumes him keeps him as an eternal holocaust. The Lamb of God stands in glory and is surrounded by hymns

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<sup>20</sup> For example, *Adversus haereses* 4.6.3: "Et propter hoc Filius revelat agnitionem Patris per suam manifestationem. Agnitio enim Patris est Filii manifestation [Thus, the Son reveals knowledge of the Father in manifesting himself. For knowledge of the Father is the manifestation of the Son]"; in *Adversus Haereses*, *Fontes Christiani* 8/4 (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder, 1997). See also the incisive study of M. C. Steenberg, *On God and Man: Theology as Anthropology from Irenaeus to Athanasius* (London: T&T Clark, 2009).

<sup>21</sup> See Douglas Farrow, *Ascension Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2011), who argues that the Ascension is integral to a full appreciation of the Paschal Mystery.

of triumph, but he is still slain. . . . That ever actual glorifying action coincides with Christ's death, and thus keeps the Savior forever at the moment of his death to the world, at the high point of giving himself to the Father. . . . The Church, identified with Christ finds this salvation of the Resurrection because she is incorporated into the Savior, not in this or that moment of his life—Bethlehem, Nazareth, the roads of Palestine—not yet in a heavenly existence subsequent to the act of redemption, but in the act of Redemption itself. She is the Body of Christ in one precise, and henceforth, eternal, moment, in the moment when the redemption takes place, in the moment of his death on the cross, when Christ was glorified by the Father.<sup>22</sup>

As an eternal self-gift, this act of the Son is fixed but not frozen; it is dynamic but unrepeatable. At our baptism, when we are plunged into the dying and rising of Jesus, we are capacitated for this paschal love. And this paschal love, this self-gift, which is both engendered by and participates in Christ's *agape* while refracted differently in the various states of life that adorn and enrich his earthly Body, the Church, is nonetheless one and the same for married, vowed religious, single, and ordained. In the economy of grace, no gift, grace, or vocation is given that is not given precisely *for* others. As Paul told the Corinthians, "If we are encouraged, it is for your encouragement" (2 Cor 1:6). That is, there is no gift given by God simply or merely for the recipient. In fact, the moment one mistakes the gift for a possession, when one clings to what is meant as gift as if it were solely for oneself, one simply recapitulates the sin of Adam and Eve. No, in the economy of grace, every gift is bestowed never solely or even primarily for the recipient, but upon the recipient precisely *for* others. Our sanctification will be accomplished in our "paying forward" the gift, not in preening ourselves over it like a coveted award or spiritual honorarium. And what is true of any particular grace or divine gift is equally true of vocation. No one is called to marriage for herself or himself; they are called for the sanctification of their spouse and children; no man is called to diaconal or priestly ministry for himself, but for the good of the Body, the Church; no contemplative religious is called simply so that he or she can stockpile merit or catalogue their experiences as they trundle along the unitive way (recall that both

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<sup>22</sup> *In the Redeeming Christ* (Notre Dame, IN: Christian Classics, 2013), 5–8.

Teresa of Avila and Thérèse of Lisieux wrote only under obedience, for their superiors discerned that their experiences were not granted to them principally for themselves, but for others).

We can ponder, in the concrete terms of our own life, for example, what this might look like. Those called to marriage are called to sanctify their spouse; those to priesthood, to sanctify their spouse, the Church—and, it is important to note, not a “reified” Church or an abstract husband or wife, but the actual people to whom one is espoused, in all their quirky individuality and fragile human particularity; so that, whether it is in marrying Walburga or Clovis or being assigned to St. Swithun’s-by-the-Swamp, *there* is where holiness is to be found. The degree to which we edify, literally “build up,” others into the Body of Christ, the more we assist them in their own bearing fruit and becoming better disciples, the more indeed we participate in the Son’s glorification of the Father, and the holier we, too, become. But this is almost, as the saints would have us know, as an afterthought.

Our baptismal vocation—the second concentric circle to which I have referred—is holiness of life. Its essence is self-gift, a participation in Christ’s self-gift, which is why the Eucharist and participation in the sacrament of the altar is considered the fullness of Christian initiation. The Eucharist forms in us this charity, this *agape* or paschal love, and enables us, by participation, to make a genuine gift of ourselves.

This self-gift is, however, necessarily cruciform because, in a fallen cosmos, every self-gift, even graced, must labor against sin’s bloated and ingrown torpor. Christ crucified reveals what real love looks like in a sinful cosmos. For, when pure love, divine love, *agape*, enters a world turned in on itself, a world whose operating system is self-love (precisely what St. Paul means by “flesh” and Saint John by “the world”), closed off by fear from any other possibility, such pure love is neither fully received nor fully reciprocated. In such a fallen and rebellious cosmos, that pure love, divine love, encountering indifference, denial, and rejection, is not welcomed with humility and delight but is refracted in suffering. Such pure love can be expressed fully in a sinful and contorted world only as sacrifice. For rational creatures whose will is wounded—that is, for us—real love, self-gift, *agape*, will always involve some kind of dying; it will necessitate sacrifice.

Further, there is no Christian state of life—married, vowed, ordained, or single—that does not require self-gift or that is not animated by paschal love. It will of course look somewhat differ-

ent—a married couple with children in the suburbs; a Carthusian solitary in Vermont; a parish priest in Boise; a single person living and working in Chicago—each is called to holiness in a way particular to the demands of their circumstances and the promises and commitments each has made. But the love in which each participates is none other than Christ's love poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit. And as different as these individuals or any individuals may be from one another, that love as such is the *vinculum*, the bond that binds the Church together, that links them and relates them one to another even if they have never met, or even if they live in two different millennia.

I conclude these reflections with a brief meditation on one of the most ancient vocation stories in Christian history. It happened on a beach shortly after the Lord had risen. It is found in the tail end of the Fourth Gospel. And it is precisely about the vocation to love:

When they climbed out on shore, they saw a charcoal fire with fish on it and bread. Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish you just caught." So Simon Peter went over and dragged the net ashore full of one hundred fifty-three large fish. Even though there were so many, the net was not torn. Jesus said to them, "Come, have breakfast." And none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they realized it was the Lord. Jesus came over and took the bread and gave it to them, and in like manner the fish. This was now the third time Jesus was revealed to his disciples after being raised from the dead.

When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs." He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep." He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." [Jesus] said to him, "Feed my sheep. Amen, amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where

you do not want to go.” He said this signifying by what kind of death he would glorify God. And when he had said this, he said to him, “Follow me.” (John 21:9–19)

The seemingly insignificant detail—a charcoal fire (*anthrakian*)—sets the scene, and the tone. Peter, if you recall, had just recently, after three direct inquiries, vehemently denied knowing Jesus, and he did so while warming himself in the company of others, at a charcoal fire (*anthrakian*, John 18:18). Jesus’s dialogue with Peter here is taking place on two different planes. They are, as it were, speaking in two different registers, and actually about two different loves. It is easy to forget that while, lexically, *agape* may have been available in the ancient vocabulary, at least in its form and content, Jesus brings something utterly new to its meaning. Jesus asks of Peter’s love using the verbal cognate of *agape*. Peter replies using a different term but one with a noble pedigree, *philein*, a verb ironically that Aristotle had once associated with loyalty. Jesus repeats his question, and Peter musters his reply, again using the verb *philein*. The third time, in a move that recapitulates in microcosm the humble accommodation of the Incarnation, Jesus adopts Peter’s term, *philein*, as if to say, “I will meet you where you are to be found, but do not expect to stay there,” as Jesus goes on to indicate how Peter would himself one day participate in the mystery of his own crucified, *agapic* love. In the end, God will accept whatever it is we can muster. And he will give us what we cannot.

**N·V**