

Hierarchy, Humility, and Holiness: The Meaning of Ecclesial Ranks according to Dionysius the Areopagite

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THE TERM “hierarchy” is very old. For almost 1,000 years it was thought to have been coined by none other than Dionysius, the convert of St. Paul following his speech at the Areopagus (cf. Acts 17:34) and who, according to tradition, became the first Christian Bishop of Athens. The term entered into Latin theological tradition in the ninth century, and was taken up along with the deeply mystical theology of Dionysius with broad enthusiasm. But then, at about the time of the Renaissance, the term suddenly came under suspicion. Under the scrutiny of historical-critical research, Dionysius’s writings were found to be the pseudonymous creation of a much-later, sixth-century figure. A further shadow was cast over the term by the Protestant Reformers in the sixteenth century. Despite his early indebtedness to aspects of Dionysius’s theology, Martin Luther soon became one the more hostile opponents of Dionysius’s doctrine of the heavenly and ecclesial “hierarchies.” Luther’s criticism of this theology of hierarchy was to some extent occasioned by its exploitation on the part of certain Catholic theologians in support of the divine institution of the papacy. In fact, as Luther gleefully pointed out, the Dionysian writings say nothing explicit about “the pope, cardinals and archbishops,” and it has been shown that arguments exploiting the Areopagite in this way were often piecemeal.¹ Moreover, despite rejecting the validity of the Dionysian

¹ Martin Luther, *The Babylonian Captivity of the Church* (1520), in *Luther’s Works*, vol. 36, ed. Abdel Ross Wentz (Philadelphia: Muehlenberg Press, 1959), 110; see also Karlfried Froehlich, “Pseudo-Dionysius and the Reformation of the

hierarchies for sacramental theology, the proponents of the Lutheran party apparently expressed the desire at least to uphold and preserve “the various ranks of the ecclesiastical hierarchy.”² Even so, since then the term “hierarchy” and the range of theological ideas connected with it have often been regarded with ambivalence.

This essay attempts to provide a renewed investigation into what the Dionysian writings really mean by the term “hierarchy.” The author is of the view that such an investigation may be of especial value today. Echoing Protestant suspicions, the word “hierarchy” in contemporary Catholic conversation is often intended to convey a morally negative meaning. When used to refer to the Pope and Magisterium of the Church, “the hierarchy” commonly seems to indicate an order of authoritative control built on fear and a disordered love of power and prestige. But it will be argued here that the original understanding of the term “hierarchy” in Dionysius’s theology holds out a very positive vision for Church order and life, and indeed, for the legitimate exercise of God-given authority. That is because Dionysius always thinks of ecclesial hierarchy within the wider framework of a vision of the universe where all things are participated expressions of self-diffusive divine goodness, and all are dynamically oriented toward union with the Good by the erotic metaphysical impulse of divine love. Within this universe, ecclesial hierarchies exist to serve a unifying purpose, working to establish harmony, holiness, and humility. These are the concrete ends which hierarchy serves, and to which it is indissolubly bound. Many fine analyses of Dionysius’s theology of hierarchy already exist.³ What I want to offer here, however, is something both more modest and more focused: an examination of hierarchy “at work,” as it were, as it can be found in Dionysius’s classic Letter 8.

Sixteenth Century,” in *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (Classics of Western Spirituality; New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 33–46.

² With the proviso that they are understood to have been established by human authority. See *Apology of the Augsburg Confession* 14.1 (1531) in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, trans. T. G. Tappert (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1959), 214.

³ Two of the best general introductions to Dionysius in English are Andrew Louth, *Denys the Areopagite* (London: Continuum, 1989), and Paul Rorem, *Pseudo-Dionysius: A Commentary on the Texts and an Introduction to their Influence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993). For more technical studies see René Roques, *L’Univers Dionysien: Structure hiérarchique du Monde selon le pseudo-Denys* (Paris: Aubier, 1964) and Ronald F. Hathaway, *Hierarchy and the Definition of Order in the Letters of Pseudo-Dionysius* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969).

Dionysius the Areopagite

The figure of Dionysius the Areopagite (*fl. ca. 500*) looms large in medieval Christianity. Although to this day his actual identity remains a mystery, sometime in the early sixth century a small body of treatises and letters came to light from Syrian provenance under the name, and prestige, of St. Paul's Athenian convert. They bore the stamp of a Christian philosopher with a profound theological vision simultaneously informed by a Neoplatonic view of the cosmos, an Alexandrian epistemology of Scripture, a Cyrilline theology of the incarnation, and an experience of the sacraments as means of gracious divine action. Introduced to the west via Eriugena's Latin translation in the ninth century, the Dionysian writings penetrated to the heart of the medieval Christian mind, shaping the intellectual development of the pre-modern Christian world to a degree second only to that of St. Augustine, and perhaps Boethius.⁴ In an era taken with Aristotelianism, St. Thomas Aquinas, so often praised or blamed for his synthesis of Christian thought and Aristotelian philosophy, quotes the Neoplatonist Dionysius more often than any other theological authority—after Augustine—save “the philosopher” Aristotle.⁵ In particular, it was Dionysius's mysticism of darkness and unknowing that proved most compelling, shaping the outlook of influential figures in Italy (e.g. Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, d. 1494), France (e.g. Jean Gerson, d. 1429), England (e.g. John Colet, d. 1519), and Germany (e.g. Meister Eckhardt, d. 1328).

It was not only Dionysius's mysticism that touched the medieval Christian world. From the twelfth century onward, his ideas on hierarchy were taken up into a wide range of metaphysical, ecclesial, and political theories about how best to structure the world in accordance with a divinely given pattern. Dionysius could not have foreseen the far-reaching impact of his scheme. He was the first to coin the word “hierarchy,” which means “sacred order” or even “administration of holy things.”⁶ Yet

⁴ For a general overview see David Knowles, “The Influence of Pseudo-Dionysius on Western Mysticism,” in *Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Gordon Rupp*, ed. Peter Brooks (London: SCM, 1975), 79–94; Christopher Dawson, *Mediaeval Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1934), 29–56; David Luscombe, *Medieval Thought* (A History of Western Philosophy II; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7–28.

⁵ St. Thomas became acquainted with Dionysius during his tutelage under Albert the Great in Paris. In all, the works of St. Thomas turn up some seventeen hundred quotations from Dionysius. See Josef Pieper, *Introduction to Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 44. On the importance of Dionysius for Aquinas's metaphysics, see Fran O'Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

⁶ G. W. H. Lampe, *A Patristic Greek Lexicon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), 669.

to him, hierarchy had nothing to do with secular power or even with a monarchical system of ecclesiastical government. It is first of all a metaphysical term, referring to the harmonious ontological structure of the created universe, whereby the fulfillment of each being depends on a mutually enriching relation of participation and generosity with other beings. Dionysius defines it as “a sacred order, knowledge and activity that is assimilated, so far as it is possible, to the divine, and which is led up towards the imitation of God in proportion to the illumination granted to it by God.”⁷ It was this metaphysical aspect of the Dionysian doctrine of hierarchy that most deeply affected the thought of Aquinas, for whom “[e]ach level of being, at its highest peak, participates after a manner in its superior, possessing in rudimentary form and incipient mode the perfection of the level that surpasses it.”⁸ To think of the universe as a hierarchy is to perceive in it an intrinsic harmony and profound solidarity within which each being, in a manner in keeping with the measure of its nature and aspirations, is dynamically ordered to its perfection in God.

The second and related sense Dionysius gives to the word “hierarchy” has to do with it being a means of spiritual illumination by which God communicates knowledge of the world and of himself via the symbols, ranks, and ordered sets of relationships he has set in place in the cosmos and in the Church. Understood in this way, hierarchy is a vital medium of communication and spiritual enrichment. The third meaning of the term understands hierarchy as an activity, and specifically, as an effect of love, which is a unifying power. Thus hierarchy is the living and effective means of bringing creatures into union with God. As Dionysius states, its ultimate goal “is, so far as possible, assimilation to God and union with him” (*aphomoiōsis te kai henōsis*).⁹

Dionysius’s Letter 8

Dionysius’s Letter 8 was ostensibly composed to admonish a monk who, by presuming to correct a priest, had usurped his God-given station. It opens by recalling Miriam and Aaron’s rebellion against Moses, who was “more humble than anyone else on the face of the earth” (Nm 12:3). Moving

⁷ *Celestial Hierarchy* III.1 (*Patrologia Graeca* [PG] 3.164D). I have in the main used the translation by Luibheid, *Pseudo-Dionysius: The Complete Works*, occasionally making my own amendments from the Greek. For ease of reference for readers I have maintained Migne’s column numeration throughout. However, for Letter 8 I have studied the critical text by Gunter Heil and Adolph Martin Ritter, eds., *Corpus Dionysiacum II* (*Patristische Texte und Studien* 36; Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991), 171–92.

⁸ O’Rourke, *Pseudo-Dionysius and the Metaphysics of Aquinas*, 264.

⁹ *Celestial Hierarchy* III.2 (PG 3.165A).

through other biblical examples to Christ, Dionysius argues for the propriety of keeping to one's rank or station as assigned by God, who mysteriously accords greater place to those who more closely embody divine humility. In studying this letter, we shall see how Dionysius's conception of hierarchy reveals an understanding of ecclesial ranks not as a system of manipulation or control, but as a means of perfecting holiness and harmony.

For a start, many scholars have noted the significance of the placement of Letter 8 in the Dionysian epistolary corpus. Of Dionysius's ten letters, each is addressed to a person of subsequently higher office. Letters 1–4 are addressed to a monk, the highest of the “lay” orders. Letter 5 is addressed to a deacon; Letter 6 to a priest; Letter 7 to a hierarch (bishop). At this point, however, the order is broken by Letter 8 addressed to the monk Demophilus, who by his behavior has also broken rank. Letter 9 to a hierarch resumes the pattern, with Letter 10 addressed to “John the theologian, apostle and evangelist.”

In the letter, which in the view of Hans Urs von Balthasar “surely reflects a historical occurrence,”¹⁰ Dionysius assumes the persona of a bishop responding to a pastoral crisis that has come to his attention. Dionysius had become aware of the crisis only by “happening” across a letter penned by Demophilus the monk himself, and upon reading it reports his shock at the contents.¹¹ In it Demophilus had told how, in the middle of the eucharistic *synaxis*, he had taken exception when a penitent sinner, claiming to have “come solely to find healing for his evil ways,” had thrown himself at the mercy of the presiding priest. At that time in Syrian churches it was customary for the monks, of whom there were thousands in the region, to be situated just outside the doors or iconostasis separating the nave from the “holy of holies,” “not as guards, but so that they may keep their proper order and may be aware of their closer proximity to the laity than to the priests.”¹² When the priest looked to take pity on the penitent, Demophilus stepped in and tried to eject the priest, and then, with the aid of fellow monks, forcibly entered the sanctuary and stormed the altar, in his view “providentially” rescuing the sacramental elements from possible defilement.

It seems Demophilus had written his letter in response to allegations that he had acted insubordinately. He ultimately tries to defend his actions by asking whether priests are beyond correction. Having studied the account, Dionysius in turn writes to Demophilus with a stinging

¹⁰ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, ii. *Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. Andrew Louth et al. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1984), 150.

¹¹ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1096A).

¹² *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1088D).

rebuke, couched within a framework that addresses two main concerns: the need to maintain God-given order,¹³ and the primacy of God-like kindness.¹⁴ The abandonment of one leads inexorably to the breakdown of the other. The letter affords a very concrete view of how Dionysius sees hierarchy at work, what its goal is, and how its principles are to be applied to a pastorally sensitive situation.

Opening with an exposition of Moses as the prototypical holy man and servant of God (*therapôn Theou*), who became worthy of the vision of God “by virtue of his great humility” (*dia pollên praotêta*), Dionysius apparently draws upon an ancient sapiential tradition in which sanctification is said to have been granted to Moses by means of his faithful humility (Sir 45:4).¹⁵ Hereby Dionysius paves the way for elaborating a vision of an order of ecclesial vocations graded by increasing humility or gentleness (*praotês*). These vocations in turn become the vehicle of divine kindness (*chrêstotês*) or goodness (*agathotês*). In this scheme, hierarchy or sacred order clearly cannot simply mean a top-down structure of clerical authority. Rather, as Andrew Louth rightly observes, it is, within a network of interdependent relationships, “the outreach of God’s love,”¹⁶ or in the words of Dom Denys Rutledge, the order “by which God communicates himself to man, and man, on his side, is gradually assimilated to God.”¹⁷ Humility—the deliberate, voluntary acceptance of one’s God-given situation and the opposite of aggressive self-assertion—is the virtue essential to the preservation of sacred order, apart from which such vocational inequalities decay into a system of political coercion.¹⁸ Goodness—the extension of mercy to one’s neighbors and antagonists in imitation of God—is the

¹³ Ep. 8 (PG 3.1088C–1093C).

¹⁴ Ep. 8 (PG 3.1093D–1097A). Later mss. include these two concerns in the title: *peri idiopragias kai chrêstotêtos* (concerning one’s proper work, and kindness).

¹⁵ *Apostolic Constitutions* VI.3 (4th c.) also unites these virtues in the figure of Moses and exhibits similar concerns. Moses’ title as *therapôn* is closely related to the word Dionysius uses for monk: *therapeutês*. While Moses is typically presented as a bishop (*Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* 5 [PG 3.501C]), and elsewhere Dionysius uses also the word *monachos* for monk, in the letters he uses only *therapeutês*, which came into common usage from Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* VI.1.3, who in turn took it from Philo’s description of a group of Jewish ascetic contemplatives resident in Egypt (see Philo, *On the Contemplative Life*, 90). Louth suggests that in Ep. 8 “it is the idea of service, implicit in that word, that governs his [Dionysius’s] presentation of the monastic life in that epistle” (Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 69).

¹⁶ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 41.

¹⁷ Denys Rutledge, *Cosmic Theology: The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of Pseudo-Denys: An Introduction* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1964), 49.

¹⁸ On the necessity of *praotês* in bishops, see Ignatius, *Letter to the Trallians* 3.2; 4.2; *Letter to Polycarp* 2.1; 6.2; *Didache* 15.1.

virtue for the sake of which hierarchy exists and which it is intended to cultivate and preserve. Both are manifest typologically in Moses' various responses to rebellion recorded in Numbers 12 and 16:

When these people rose up against him, castigated and threatened him over what had happened, and when they were already at the point of doing violence to him, this meek man (*ho praios*) called on the Good for salvation and with great mildness made it clear that he was not to blame for all the evils that had befallen his subjects.¹⁹

Dionysius's message to Demophilus is clear: in setting himself against a priest, in abandoning his vocational station, he has transgressed the biblical norm for all whose *raison d'être* is participation by imitation in the one and only Good.

Extending the example from Moses to include David, Job, Joseph, and Abel who, "in conformity with God . . . did good to those who wronged them and extended to them their own abundant goodness so as to bring them gently around to behaving in like manner,"²⁰ Dionysius next invites Demophilus and his fellow readers to lift up their eyes to "receive the beneficent rays of the truly good, the transcendently good Christ." Here Dionysius exploits the ancient word play, first applied by Justin Martyr, between *Christos* and *chrēstos* to depict Christ as the visible paradigm of divine humility and goodness. With images drawn chiefly from Christ's intercession on the cross and the parable of the prodigal son, we notice how Dionysius's appeal to Demophilus embeds his exposition within the liturgical context:

Does [Christ] not come lovingly to those who have turned away from him? Does he not contend with them and beg them not to spurn his love? Does he not support his accusers and plead on their behalf? He even promises to be concerned for them and when they are far away from him they have only to make a backward turn and there he is, hastening to meet them. He receives them with completely open arms and greets them with the kiss of peace. He does not recriminate over what has happened. Now that they have returned, he pours his kindly love over them. He prepares a feast and summons his good friends so that the house may be full of rejoicers.²¹

Keeping to One's Station

All this stands as "a just reproach" to Demophilus, and Dionysius has only just begun. From here the letter splits into two parts in which Dionysius

¹⁹ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1085AB).

²⁰ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1085BC).

²¹ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1088A).

first treats the question of due order, or keeping to one's station. Demophilus, we remember, had justified his actions by asserting that even priests need to be corrected. In reply, Dionysius acknowledges this fact, but denounces the idea that this is a monk's prerogative:

It is not permitted that a priest should be corrected by the deacons, who are your superiors, or by the monks, who are of the same rank as you, and this is so even if it would seem that he had in some way misused divine things and even if it could be shown that he had violated some other regulation. Even if disorder and confusion (*akosmia kai ataxia*) should undermine the most divine ordinances and regulations, that still gives no right, even on God's behalf, to overturn the order which God himself has established.²²

Dionysius then goes on to reassert the propriety of the traditional ecclesial arrangement (*diakosmêsis*): hierarchs (who as the sacred initiators have immediate access to the holy things), priests (who are messengers and interpreters of the divine judgements), and deacons (who are mediators of illumination to the monks, and responsible for admitting them to tonsure). This order is confirmed for Dionysius by a number of analogous ontological and churchly structures. First, by liturgical topography—the proximity of the various orders to the holy altar. “The position of [the clerical ranks] at the divine altar symbolizes the rank they hold. They see and hear clearly the divine things which are manifested to them. Generously they then come out to those outside the divine veils.”²³ Next the order is expounded in more metaphysical, conceptual terms: God is at the center, like a radiating light. Surrounding him in ever-widening circles are the respective ecclesial ranks. Those closest to the center are those who are most receptive to the divine light, and therefore most transparent to it and able to pass it on.²⁴ Later still the order is expounded in psychological, moral terms: Demophilus breaks from his ecclesial station because he has allowed disorder to prevail in his own soul. Anger and desire have usurped the place of reason, which properly ought to “prevail over the inferior things by virtue of its priority.” Ancient thought had long related this distinction in terms of the vertical configuration of the human body: head (*logos*/reason), heart (*thymos*/anger) and belly (*epithymia*/desire). “How can we avoid shame when we witness reason

²² *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1088C). Dionysius often defines sin and evil in terms of *ataxia* or “an inordinate confusion of lawless elements.” See *Divine Names* IV.31 (PG 3.732B); VIII.9 (PG 3.897B); XI.1 (PG 3.949A).

²³ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1089A).

²⁴ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1092B).

harmed by anger and desire, when we see it driven from the authority given to it by God so that in an unholy and unjust manner trouble, discord, and disorder are stirred up in us? That is why our blessed and God-given lawmaker proclaimed that anyone who has not put his own house in order is unfit to hold authority in the Church of God.”²⁵

Dionysius anticipates Demophilus’s response to all this. What if the action itself was still necessary? What if the priest really was in the wrong? Dionysius’s answer is a careful combination of biblical theology and moral philosophy. An intended act of justice, if it takes place outside the legitimate hierarchical order, is only apparently just. Uzziah seemed to be doing right when he burned incense to God; Saul when he offered sacrifice; the demons when they confessed Jesus’ divinity. “But the word of God expels anyone who usurps the functions of another. It teaches that everyone must remain in the order of his ministry.”²⁶ Citing numerous biblical examples—King Uzziah (2 Chr 26:16–21), Miriam (Nm 12:10), the sons of Sceva (Acts 19:11–17), and the false disciples (Mt 7:22)—he continues:

Hence it is not permitted, according to the words of Scripture, to perform what may even be a work of justice, except in an appropriate manner (*kat’ axian*). Everyone must look to himself and, without thinking of more exalted or more profound tasks, he must attend only to what has appropriately (*kat’ axian*) been assigned to him in his place.²⁷

In short, there is a fine line between faith and presumption.²⁸

Beneath this rationale lies a principle which for us appears to carry a distinctly Donatist ring; only the holy can communicate the holy, only the illuminated can themselves give illumination. Dionysius defines this “divine arrangement” elsewhere: “For one of the divine judgements has laid down that the gifts of God should be duly given to those worthy to receive them, through the mediation of those who are worthy to impart them.”²⁹ Yet scholars defend Dionysius from the charge of Donatism since, unlike the situation forced in the Western Church, he did not separate the traditional expectation that a priest be holy from “the formal question of the source of his sacramental efficacy. . . . [T]he correlation between the worth of the priest and the dignity of his office is imperative.”³⁰ Balthasar likewise

²⁵ Ep. 8 (PG 3.1093AB).

²⁶ Ep. 8 (PG 3.1089C).

²⁷ Ep. 8 (PG 3.1092A). On the special meaning of *axia* in Dionysius, see Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 171–72, esp. n. 78.

²⁸ See *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* II.3.3 (PG 3.400AB).

²⁹ *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy* VII.3.6 (PG 3.561B).

³⁰ Louth, *Denys the Areopagite*, 66.

comments: "The ontological worthiness connected with rank always includes the ethical self-realisation of the being that has received such worthiness."³¹ "If Denys affirms the principle of Tertullian and the Donatists that only he can mediate who himself possesses, . . . then this is said from no sectarian zeal, but from the ideal of his theological perspective, from which he refuses to stray. The priest and theologian who does not live out the grace of his office departs from the law of being which demands the unity of essential and moral 'worth.'"³²

Thus for Dionysius, a priest who really is unworthy of his office automatically loses the illuminating power essential to the carrying out of that office. "A man thus deprived is, in my view, insolent if he muscles in on priestly functions, when, without fear or shame, he unworthily pursues the divine things. He thinks God knows nothing of what is going on within him. He imagines he can deceive the one he falsely calls 'Father.' He dares to be like Christ and utter over the divine symbols not anything that I would call prayers but, rather, unholy blasphemies. This is no priest."³³ In this Dionysius follows traditional Greek patristic teaching going back as far as Origen, who wrote, "Where a bishop does not in fact fulfil his spiritual duties, he stands spiritually among the laity whom he ought to lead, and often a layman is a bishop in the eyes of God, even though he has never been made a bishop by any human consecration."³⁴ No priest or bishop has an unqualified authority, but his authority is contingent upon both his moral fidelity and his unbroken fellowship with the Apostolic communion of truth and love.

In this way, God himself deals with the faithless priest. "No law grants Demophilus the right to correct such things." Justice must be pursued "justly," that is, each must render to another what accords with the dignity of his station. Which means only those of equal or superior rank may render correction. Monks are to be subject to deacons, deacons to priests, and priests to hierarchs, who in turn are subject to the apostles and their successors. "And should one of the hierarchs fail in his duty then let him be set right by his sacred peers. In this way no order will be disturbed and each person will remain in his own order and in his own ministry."³⁵

³¹ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 171.

³² *Ibid.*, 175.

³³ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1092BC).

³⁴ Quoted in Hans von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. J. A. Baker (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1969), 256.

³⁵ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1093C). There is no mention here, where we might expect it, of the subjection of the hierarchs to a single arch-hierarchy, such as we find in the Petrine office.

Exercising Divine Kindness

Having dealt with the problem of Demophilus's insubordination, Dionysius now turns to treat his failure to exercise due God-like kindness toward the penitent and priest concerned. Here he again addresses Demophilus in a strongly worded personal tone:

I would never have believed that Demophilus could have so little awareness of God's goodness and of his love for humanity, that he could forget how much he himself needed a merciful Saviour, that he could take it upon himself to reject the priests who are made worthy, out of goodness, and out of a sense of their own frailty, to bear the errors (*ta agnoēmata*) of the people.³⁶

Dionysius had already spoken of the priest's function in christological terms, as one who "justifies the ungodly" (Rom 4:4).³⁷ Now with numerous scriptural allusions he consolidates this connection between Christ and the priestly office. As high priest, Christ was set apart from sinners, yet "he made the merciful shepherding of his sheep the proof of love for himself" (Jn 21:15–17). He asked the Father to pardon those who mistreated him, and he rebuked those who withheld pity from others (Mt 18:32–33; Lk 9:52–55). Able to sympathize with our weaknesses, Christ "is both blameless and merciful." Justice and kindness are perfectly united in him. Demophilus's attempts to cite the zeal of Phineas or Elijah won't do:

For when the disciples who were without a share in gentleness and a good spirit (*tou praeos kai agathou pneumatos ametochoi*) adduced these examples, Jesus was not persuaded. And indeed this is the way our most divine teacher with gentleness instructs those who oppose the doctrine of God [2 Tim 2:25]. For those who do not know must be taught, not punished, just as we do not beat the blind, but lead them by the hand.³⁸

This whole section swims with compounds of the word "good." The quest to be like God implies increasing ethical participation in his goodness, manifest primarily in showing mercy to those who do not deserve it, indeed, in actively pursuing them with a view to reconciliation and harmony.

If to this point Demophilus has not been moved to contrition, the closing paragraphs of the letter unveil Dionysius's true understanding of Christ as mediator between God and man, who fulfils his high office by

³⁶ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1096A).

³⁷ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1088B).

³⁸ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1096C).

descending to the rank of the lost and suffering on their behalf. Here Dionysius recounts the vision of a priest named Carpos, a man so spiritual that he never celebrated the eucharist without experiencing an ecstatic vision. Yet even this formidable saint was subject to ungodly passion. Faced with the grave infidelity of two parishioners, he knew it was his call to pray for their restoration, to intercede, with Christ, for their souls. Instead, one night, overcome with bitterness, he prayed for their just judgment. Suddenly the room in which he was standing split in two. Above the sky unfolded and Jesus appeared in the heavenly court. Below a chasm yawned, with the two parishioners slipping downwards at the edge. "They were trembling and pitiful; bit by bit they were starting to fall in . . . unwillingly and yet willingly as they were gradually ravaged by evil and at the same time persuaded by its charms."

Carpos, gripped by the spirit of raw justice, saw the answer to his prayer. He raised his hand to beat the two men down, to help them into hell. Suddenly, "moved by compassion," Jesus descended from his throne and took the two by the hand, one on each side. Then Jesus spoke to Carpos:

So your hand is now raised. It only remains for you to strike me. Here I am, ready once again to suffer for man's salvation, and I would gladly endure it if in this way I could keep people from sin. Look to yourself. Perhaps you would rather live with the serpents in the pit than with God and with the good angels who are the lovers of men.³⁹

So ends the startling vision, and so ends Dionysius's Letter 8. This image, arguably more than any other, best depicts his theology of hierarchy.

Concluding Remarks

Dionysius's notion of ecclesial hierarchy exhibits an understanding of Christian vocation rooted deeply in a vast and harmonious map of the spiritual world, and in which the chief organizing principles are humility and goodness, with holiness its chief goal. Hierarchy implies a social and spiritual order in which each person, in his or her respective sacred estate, is dependent on others, just as the earthly is dependent on the heavenly, and all things on God, the divine "thearchy" and source of all hierarchy. Each person is called to be enriched and perfected by a twofold relation: to those "above" by humbly submitting to their authority and receiving their ministry, and to those "below" by a generous service and ecstatic self-gift. Here there can be no division between the individual

³⁹ *Ep.* 8 (PG 3.1100CD).

and the communal, the spiritual and the social.⁴⁰ Salvation and sanctity can be found only in community.⁴¹

But community is neither a bland uniformity nor a sheer multiplicity, or else it would lack the promise and order we need to orient our actions of giving and receiving. The ancient Dionysian vision, according to which one can only receive divine holiness through the mediation of other, *unequal* vocations, surely still bears relevance for our contemporary situation. In the assessment of many cultural commentators, we find ourselves in a society marked above all by elimination of difference (in the name of diversity), and the push for absolute equality (in the name of autonomy) in both the civic and the ecclesiastical spheres. In a world where the only accepted reality is the fruit of one's own will-power, it is no wonder, to use the words of Philippe Bénéton, that the image or reality evoked by the word hierarchy seems "naked and cold."⁴² The contemporary person imagines that he "is liberated from every norm and every model; he no longer forms part of an order that transcends him. He enjoys a sovereign independence." But as a result, he ends up being "a stranger in the universe."⁴³

By contrast, the ancient vision we have found exemplified in the theology of Dionysius "justified a spiritual way of viewing tasks, turning them into missions, and thereby engaged the individual quite apart from his will and conferred on him more duties than rights. Each individual found himself bound to a particular place and to a particular task."⁴⁴ In sum, the hierarchy Dionysius proposed did not of itself privilege political tyranny or clerical domination. For him, as for the Fathers in general, it was meant to serve a higher goal: that of participating in God's holiness solely through his goodness, a goodness enacted in Christ's merciful love for sinners and rendered accessible through the holy and harmonious order of the Church.

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⁴⁰ Balthasar, *Glory of the Lord*, 161.

⁴¹ *Celestial Hierarchy* III.2 (PG 3.165A).

⁴² Philippe Bénéton, *Equality by Default: An Essay on Modernity as Confinement*, trans. Ralph C. Hancock (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2004), 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 21.

⁴⁴ Chantal Delsol, *Icarus Fallen: The Search for Meaning in an Uncertain World*, trans. Robin Dick (Wilmington, DE: ISI, 2003), 144.