

Mary as the Exemplar of the Body's Poverty

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Recent Mariology

Following the trajectory of Mariology and Marian devotion for the last century or so is enough to give one whiplash. On the one hand, the declaration of the doctrine of Mary's Assumption in 1950 by Pope Pius XII represents a strand of Mariology that emphasizes her divinely granted prerogatives and glory. In popular piety, this dogmatic emphasis was mirrored by devotional practices that stressed Mary's mediatorial power.¹ On the other hand, many theologians were concerned that such teaching and practice obscured the centrality of Christ, the Church, and the liturgy in Christian life.² One could see the placing of Mary within chapter 8 of *Lumen Gentium* less than fifteen years after the declaration of the Assumption as a rebalancing of Mariology. *Lumen Gentium* (LG) resituated Mary within the doctrine of the Church, echoing patristic equations of Our Lady with the Church.³ One unintended effect of the conciliar move, however, was to make devotion to Mary seem unnecessary, despite the efforts of

¹ For a pre-modern example, one can cite Rupert of Deutz (†1130): Mary vis-à-vis the Church is "the most exalted, the greatest, the preeminent part, the most elect part" (*Commentaria in Apocalypsim* 1.8.12, quoted in Mauro Gagliardi, *Truth Is a Synthesis: Catholic Dogmatic Theology* [Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Academic, 2020], 483n4).

² For memories of such reactions among his seminary teachers in the 1940s and 1950s, see Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927 – 1977*, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 58–59.

³ The fathers of the Second Vatican Council were able to utilize the work of Hugo Rahner on this question, in *Our Lady and the Church* (1961), which has since been translated into English by Sebastian Bullough, O.P. (Providence, RI: Cluny Media, 2019).

post-conciliar popes to encourage Marian piety—in particular, John Paul II, with his Marian motto *Totus Tuus*.

John Paul II is in many ways an exemplar of conciliar Marian devotion. His Mariology integrates Mary into ecclesiology by emphasizing her role as the paradigmatic follower of Christ.⁴ This discipleship is, he is careful to say, due to her maternal role and the extraordinary graces that followed from it.⁵ But these graces did not eliminate her need to follow her son closely; rather, they made such discipleship possible.

This interplay between Mary's need and the unique graces granted to meet that need is perhaps clearest in John Paul II's presentation of Mary's faith.⁶ This attitude of faith is "central" to John Paul II's presentation of Mary in the encyclical *Redemptoris Mater* (*RM*), according to Joseph Ratzinger.⁷ Because of her faith, which is based on the prior action of God in her life (§38, quoting *LG* §60), she is due "a wealth of praise" that "is more than ever necessary today" (*RM* §34). In John Paul II, the seeming either–or of twentieth-century Mariology is dissolved, but through the introduction of a causal relationship between the two. In other words,

⁴ John Paul II, General Audience of August 6, 1997, §4: "After saying that Mary is a 'type of the Church,' the Council adds that she is her 'outstanding model,' an example of perfection to be followed and imitated. Indeed, Mary is an 'outstanding model' because her perfection surpasses that of all the other members of the Church" (quoted in Gagliardi, *Truth Is a Synthesis*, 490n16).

⁵ Thus he maintains both a "Christotypical" and "ecclesiotypical" Mariology (see Gagliardi, *Truth Is a Synthesis*, 482, especially the long footnote 2, and 529). See John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Life of the Pilgrim Church *Redemptoris Mater* (1987), §4: Vatican II presents Mary as "the Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and of the Church." See Manfred Hauke, *Introduction to Mariology*, trans. Richard Chonak (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 116–21, on the mostly discarded search for a foundational principle of Mariology. For a recollection of the conciliar debates, see Joseph Ratzinger, "Thoughts on the Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety in Faith and Theology as a Whole," in Hans Urs von Balthasar and Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 19–36.

⁶ He cites as a "clear summary of the Church's doctrine" the statement from *Lumen Gentium* §58: Mary "advanced in her pilgrimage of faith, and loyally persevered in her union with her Son unto the Cross" (*RM* §6).

⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, "The Sign of the Woman," trans. Lothar Krauth, in *Mary: God's Yes to Man; John Paul's Encyclical Redemptoris Mater* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 7–40, at 24. Faith is "a kind of 'key' which unlocks for us the innermost reality of Mary," John Paul II himself says (*RM* §19; emphasis original). Hans Urs von Balthasar comments: "Perhaps never before in Mariology has [Mary's faith been made prominent] with such decisiveness" ("Commentary," trans. Lothar Krauth, in *Mary: God's Yes to Man*, 159–79, at 165).

Mary's poverty—her need for and receptivity to God—is what makes her able to be rich, to be worthy of a wealth of praise.

Perhaps surprisingly, John Paul II's presentation of Mary as transparent to the mystery of Christ echoes his theology of the body. There, he repeats a hylomorphic maxim: "The body reveals the person." In this revelation, the poverty and the wealth of the body coincide. The body is of great dignity: it can reveal the person. But it is also poor, because it does not reveal itself but rather is transparent to the inner personal mystery. In this, it resembles Mary.

This essay will pick up the trail laid down by John Paul II by examining Mary under the rubric of her poverty. Her poverty, I will argue, is exemplary for the poverty of the body, and neither Mary nor the body can be understood properly without understanding poverty. In this essay, I will explore these topics by looking at the Mariology of John Paul II and Hans Urs von Balthasar, before turning to what this Mariology means for the body and for creation in general.

Mary's Poverty

Redemptoris Mater presents Mary as a model of pilgrim faith, one who "goes before" us on the pilgrimage (*RM* §§5–6 and 25–28). Mary's reliance upon faith places her among the *anawim*, the poor of the Lord. John Paul II quotes §55 of *Lumen Gentium* to note that Mary "stands out among the poor and humble of the Lord, who confidently await and receive salvation from him" (*RM* §§8 and 11). As the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Joseph Ratzinger wrote around the time of the Marian encyclical, she is "totally dependent upon God and completely directed towards him, and at the side of her Son, she is the most perfect image of freedom and of the liberation of humanity and of the universe."⁸

Thus, both John Paul II and Ratzinger equate Mary's poverty with her dependency on God, a dependency that is simultaneously humanity's true liberation. The Ignatian tradition describes this kind of human poverty as "indifference" or "disponibility." It is detachment from the things of the world, to be sure, but for a positive reason: a readiness to be an instrument of God's will. Balthasar writes: "Faith as lived by Mary is total, trusting self-surrender of mind and body to God; it is absence of understanding; it is uncalculating obedience; it is self-effacing, living humility; but it is

⁸ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986), §97, quoted in *RM* §37.

also acceptance of responsibility to do God's bidding."⁹ This disponibility prepares her for the concrete contours of her poverty, which consists of a *fiat* stance. Mary's soul magnifies nothing but the Lord—certainly not herself. For this reason, Gerard Manley Hopkins could compare Mary to "the air we breathe," who "this one work has to do— / Let all God's glory through."¹⁰ Mary is transparent to God in a way analogous to how air is transparent to light. Her fundamental attitude is to let God's will be done in her.

Mary lets it be done to her in a threefold way, according to Balthasar: she is given away to Joseph, she is given away to the Spirit, and she is barren. First, she is given away to Joseph. Rather than giving herself to God "by any autonomous gesture of self-dedication," she is handed over to a human spouse in a moment that anticipates the handing-over of Jesus to his spouse the Church in his Paschal mystery. Second, she is given over to the Spirit, which is, Balthasar writes, "a natural self-giving arising from a long-accepted availability."¹¹

The third poverty might surprise us: Mary's barrenness. Strictly speaking, we cannot know the physical state of Mary's fertility, but Balthasar surmises from the other scriptural instances of miraculous conceptions that Mary is the type to the antitypes of Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth. Mary "is poor because she is fruitless, unfecundate"—barren. "And, into this thrice-poor womb," Balthasar concludes, "God, through his Spirit, placed the seed of his Word, so that Mary would fulfill all the paradoxical promises that assert that 'the barren woman has borne seven' (I Sam 2:5f.; Is 54:1; Ps 113:9)."¹² Indeed, for Balthasar, Mary's barrenness outstrips theirs because her *fiat* outstrips theirs. "Mary's virginity, which goes beyond the sterility of those Old Testament women who were made fruitful by the power of God, is of such poverty that it takes the 'last place,' behind the sterility and barrenness of all sin."¹³

Mary does this, nevertheless, only through the creaturely instruments she has been given: a soul, a womb. She has, like all human beings, been given the gifts that pertain to humanity. Further, she has been given the extraordinary graces she needs for her mission, beginning with the grace

⁹ Balthasar, "Commentary," 168.

¹⁰ Gerard Manley Hopkins, "The Virgin Mary Compared to the Air We Breathe" (1883), hopkinspoetry.com/poem/the-blessed-virgin/.

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4, *The Action* [TD4], trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 358.

¹² Balthasar, TD4, 358.

¹³ Balthasar, TD4, 360.

of the Immaculate Conception. Mary's poverty comes about in seeing all these gifts as precisely that, gifts that she has been given by her gracious Lord.¹⁴ The Immaculate Conception highlights this truth, for what would she be without that greatest gift at the very beginning of her life? And what did she do to "deserve" it, when she did not even exist outside of the loving knowledge of God? Mary's exclamation of gratitude in Luke 1:47 to God, her savior, is pregnant with her recognition of her own lowliness (1:48) and the greatness of God in raising such a lowly, hungry servant (1:52–54) to such improbable heights.¹⁵

Mary's threefold poverty at the time of the Annunciation is not the end of her poverty, but rather the beginning of it. Her poverty deepens in proportion to the fullness of what she has received: the mysterious time of the hidden life, ten elevenths (if tradition can be trusted) of Jesus's earthly life. We can only imagine the intimacy within the Holy Family's home between husband, mother, and son. And yet it is an intimacy that preserves the mystery of Jesus's person. We see this in the few moments that are revealed to us, the presentation of Jesus in the temple and his being found there some twelve years later. In both accounts, Mary is given access to a mystery that she can only contemplate, not comprehend: the mystery of the sword and the sign of contradiction (2:34–35), and the mystery of Jesus's belonging more to his heavenly Father than to her (2:49). In the latter case, we are told explicitly that Mary and Joseph "did not understand" (2:50). This difficulty in understanding is compared by John Paul II to "a sort of 'night of faith' . . . a kind of 'veil' through which one has to draw near to the Invisible One and to live in intimacy with the mystery" (*RM* §17). And such, he argues here, was the experience of the hidden years: intimacy with mystery, full of joy, and yet at a certain necessary remove from the theandric core of her son.

This existential poverty of being "kept at a distance," as Balthasar says, is deepened when the Son leaves Nazareth definitively.¹⁶ He did not become incarnate to stay with Mary, but to be handed over to sinners. "And what shall I say? 'Father, save me from this hour?' But it was for this that I came to this hour" (John 12:27; cf. 18:37). In a move of mutual self-abnegation, he leaves Mary, the human person most disposed to understand him. She

¹⁴ See *RM* §§7–12, esp. §9: "She is and remains perfectly open to this 'gift from above' (cf. James 1:17)." Later he calls the "gift from above" a "new self-giving of God" (§36).

¹⁵ Unless otherwise noted, all biblical translations are from the NRSV.

¹⁶ Balthasar, *TD*4, 358. See also *RM* §20: "Now, when Jesus left Nazareth and began his public life throughout Palestine, *he was completely and exclusively 'concerned with his Father's business'* (cf. Lk 2:49)" (emphasis original).

is not one of his inner circle of twelve, but one who must stand outside, begging for scraps of his attention, merged into the crowd.

While he was still speaking to the crowds, his mother and his brothers were standing outside, wanting to speak to him. Someone told him, "Look, your mother and your brothers are standing outside, wanting to speak to you." But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, "Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?" And pointing to his disciples, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother." (Matt 12:46–50; cf. parallel in Luke 11:28)

Catholic apologists have pointed out, and rightly so, that Matthew 12:50 returns Mary to her maternal position, as the one who most completely spoke *fiat* in response to God. But this defense can also miss the degree to which Jesus has deliberately put her, along with her natural maternal prerogatives, at a remove, just as all natural human relations (good as they are) are relativized by him (parallel in Luke 14:26). From Mary's perspective, the practice of handing over her child to the Father, ritualized in the presentation in the temple, is now enacted in earnest, as she must release her son into his public life, death, and resurrection. He belongs not to her but to sinners (Matt 9:13; Rom 8:32; 1 Tim 1:15)—or, rather, he belongs to her only insofar as she was saved from sin utterly gratuitously, from the first moment of her existence. Thus she must release him out of Nazareth into Capernaum and Calvary: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt 10:8). Balthasar calls this "the poverty of the dispossessed womb."¹⁷ John Paul II refers to it, especially the experience of Calvary, as "perhaps the deepest '*kenosis*' of *faith* in human history" (*RM* §18; emphasis original).

At this point, we must pause and take stock of an objection. Does Mary's poverty really function as a model for Christians? Or is Mary's poverty simply an example of a misogynistic ecclesial agenda that elevates women only when they are pliable, powerless, and poor?¹⁸ Such complaints, while

¹⁷ Balthasar, *TD4*, 358.

¹⁸ See, e.g., Katie M. Grimes, "Theology of Whose Body? Sexual Complementarity, Intersex Conditions, and La Virgen de Guadalupe," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 32, no. 1 (2016): 75–93. Grimes's point concerning Our Lady of Guadalupe's assertive action vis-à-vis Juan Diego as manifesting atypical gender roles is well-taken. Grimes does not, however, adequately defend the idea that John Paul II would forbid culturally atypical gender roles on principle, nor does the picture of Our Lady of Guadalupe

understandable, overlook the Christological model for Mary's poverty, about which I will speak shortly. For now, it is important to remember that Mary's poverty is an openness to be filled up by God alone. Here Mary's virginity becomes especially important.¹⁹ When her poverty is seen in light of her virginity, its lesson cannot be a literal argument for a female poverty with no recourse but to look to male wealth for relief. Indeed, it is a measure of her greatness and superiority that Joseph was not accorded such a comprehensive participation in Jesus's poverty as Mary.²⁰ This truth emphasizes the greater degree of faith that was asked of Mary.

Thus, while Mary's poverty is comprehensive, this is not a denigration, but an elevation, for her reliance upon God is all the greater. Although the Virgin certainly also relied upon Joseph, her soul magnified the Lord (Luke 1:46)—not Joseph. In this way, Mary's poverty is truly exemplary for all Christians who submit their wills to God and reciprocally to one another. "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph 5:21; 1 Cor 7:4).

Christ's Poverty

Of course, Jesus does not ask anything of his mother that he does not himself carry out. "Though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8:9). Jesus too is dispossessed of tribe, home, and family in order to carry out his universal saving mission. He is rejected by his hometown (Luke 4:24, 28–30) and his own people ("Crucify him!"; parallel in John 18:40). He has nowhere to lay his head (Matt 8:20). He lives off his prayer to the Father (Matt 4:4; John 4:32, 34). His apostles misunderstand him more often than not, and the religious authorities are overtly hostile.

The distancing of Mary reaches its height on Golgotha, where Jesus redirects her maternal love toward John (John 19:26–27), and though him, toward the entire Church, made up of sinners.²¹ Much as he rejects the relief proffered in the wine, he refuses to receive the solace of family

appear inconsistent with what is revealed in Scripture about Mary, as I describe it here.

¹⁹ RM §39: "It can be said that this *consent to motherhood* is above all a *result of her total self-giving to God in virginity*" (emphasis original).

²⁰ For example, his likely early death meant that he could not participate in Jesus's crucifixion to the degree that Mary did. Further, according to Scripture, Joseph was accorded three angelic visitations (albeit all in dreams: Matt 1:20; 2:13; 2:19), while we only know of one to Mary (Luke 1:26–38).

²¹ The beloved disciple "took her into his own" (*eis ta idia*), as John Paul II emphasizes in RM §45n130; see John 1:11. Ratzinger also interprets this handing-over as a participation in Christ's rejection (Ratzinger, "Place of Marian Doctrine and Piety," 35).

love. He dies motherless and seemingly Father-less ("My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" [Matt 27:46]), tasting not the drugged wine but the bitter draught of sin's alienation as we experience it. Mary's participation in this is to watch her beloved child die while unable to relieve his suffering. They both are handed over to sinners and to suffering.²²

This reality of handing-over (*traditio* in Latin) expresses the totality of Jesus's saving mission (1 Cor 11:23), where passivity and activity meet. In his Passion and Eucharist, the Son's activity is especially expressed in a disponible and seemingly "total *passivity* of the Servant."²³ But this passivity is the result of the prior free decision to make "an *asham* sacrifice" of his body, the "sacrifice" or "offering for sin" of the Suffering Servant (Isa 53:10; Heb 10:10).²⁴ The acceptance of the passivity of the Passion shows Jesus free choice to be poor and helpless.

Yet Jesus's poverty has an eternal model that points to poverty's positive reality: a disponibility to the Father's will, a disponibility that constitutes his kingdom, on earth as in heaven (Matt 6:10). "Through him the will of the Lord shall prosper" (Isa 53:10). Thus, this "poverty," expressed most jarringly and profoundly in the merciless stripping of his beaten body at the time of crucifixion, is also his "glory," as the Gospel of John tirelessly proclaims (17:4–5; see also Isa 52:13; Rom 5:3; 8:17; Eph 3:13; Rev 5:12).²⁵

The coincidence of poverty and wealth (glory) transcends the economic sphere. The Son's economic *traditio* is the expression of the eternal *traditio*—"God's primordial tradition," as Balthasar puts it—of the Father to the Son: "All things have been handed over to me by my Father" (Matt 11:27).²⁶ The economic translation of this eternal *traditio* becomes

²² RM §18: "Through this faith Mary is perfectly united with Christ in his self-emptying."

²³ Jean-Pierre Batut, "The Kenotic Decision of the Son and the Filial Obedience of the Christian," *Communio* 42, no. 3 (2015): 363–80, at 364 (emphasis original).

²⁴ See Batut, "Kenotic Decision," 364, 369–70. Of readiness, Balthasar writes that it is "no pure passivity but rather is that readiness that goes beyond active and passive," as seen in both Mary's and Christ's Eucharistic surrender ("Spirit and Institution," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 4, *Spirit and Institution*, trans. Edward T. Oakes, S.J. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995], 209–44, at 225–26; cf. "Beyond Contemplation and Action?," 299–307 in the same volume).

²⁵ See RM §41, on Mary's queenship: "She fully obtained that 'state of royal freedom' proper to Christ's disciples: to serve means to reign!" He continues by noting the "glory" of Christ's obedience unto death and resurrection.

²⁶ See Hans Urs von Balthasar, "Tradition," in *Explorations in Theology*, vol. 5, *Man is Created*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2014), 356–73, at 364. I develop this point in "Liquidity: Man, the Triune God, and the Eucharistic Christ,"

crucifixion, in such a way that the Son's mission to save entails a *traditio* into the hands of sinners (Luke 9:24). The divine Son is eternal and subsisting filial receptivity, pointing beyond the earthly negativity of poverty to its divine and fully actual basis. I will discuss this point further below.

At this point, we can conclude that Mary's poverty is normative for all Christians because it is rooted in Christ's poverty. Because of his own "absolute" poverty and vulnerability, he can do what "is humanly speaking irresponsible: he can make others dependent exclusively upon himself, and thereby expose them to complete poverty, in order to give them in return the absolute promise of God as responding gift and guarantee (Mt 19:29, par.)."²⁷ Thus, Mary's poverty is not a feminine aberration, but rather exemplary for Christian life.

But what does any of this have to do with the body? Let us turn to that topic now.

The Body's Marian Poverty

Ratzinger notes that the apocryphal second-century Gospel of the Egyptians puts these words into Jesus's mouth: "I have come to abolish the works of woman."²⁸ Ratzinger explains: "Gnostic exegesis is characterized by its identification of everything female with all that is mere matter, negative, worthless, and therefore not admissible into the salvific message of the Bible."²⁹ While extreme, Gnosticism did not invent the linking of the female with the material and their mutual downgrading; we see it in both

Communio 46, no. 3–4 (2019): 585–619.

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord*, vol. 7: *Theology: The New Covenant*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R. V., ed. John Riches (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989), 133–34.

²⁸ Ratzinger, "Sign of the Woman," 14, quoting from E. Hennecke and W. Schneemelcher, *Neutestamentliche Apokryphen*, vol. 1, *Evangelien* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1959), 109–17, at 109. He adds: "In modern times, and for different reasons, there evolved a less radical, yet not less effective, elimination of everything female from the Bible's message" (17).

²⁹ Ratzinger, "Sign of the Woman," 16. Elsewhere, Ratzinger laments that, "in today's intellectual climate, only the masculine principle counts," which principle he equates with "relying . . . solely on one's own abilities" ("My Word Shall Not Return to Me Empty!," in Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 13–18, at 16).

Plato and Aristotle.³⁰ And the negative valence of matter is also found, in differing ways, in these and most other ancient and late-antique thinkers. Matter, the body, potency, and the female are on the one side, in contrast to the superior realities of form, the soul, actuality, and the male on the other side.

But with Christianity, as John Paul II says, “the body entered theology, . . . I would say, through the main door.”³¹ The Christian revolution in thought and life upset the established cosmic hierarchies, although it did not simply reject them. The truth of the equality of all humanity from the perspective of salvation (neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female [Gal 3:28]) was accepted by all who remained within Christian orthodoxy. This democratization of salvation had a leveling effect on anthropology, even if it did not eliminate misogyny.³²

The much more recent discovery of the equal genetic contribution of mother and father to their offspring showed the Aristotelian biology of a purely passive maternal principle in generation to be faulty. Thus, we can conclude that any straightforward identification of the female with potency is false. Today a renewed Aristotelian anthropology, based on better biology than Aristotle’s own, has affirmed the equal agency of both man and woman, grounded in the equal possession of the human (and

³⁰ For Plato, see *Timeaeus* 48e–53c (where the universal and maternal receptacle of form is understood by analogy to the gold that receives different forms; see 50a–b). For Aristotle, see *On the Generation of Animals* 1.2.716a5–7. See also 1.2.716a14–16: “In the macrocosm also, men think of the earth as female and a mother, but address heaven and the sun and other like entities as progenitors and fathers” (trans. A. Platt in *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, vol. 1, Bollingen Series 71/2 [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984], 1111–218, at 1112). For commentary, see Prudence Allen, R.S.M., *The Concept of Woman*, vol. 1, *The Aristotelian Revolution, 750 BC – AD 1250* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1985), 57–60 and 83–103.

³¹ John Paul II’s theology of the body audience talks are taken from *Man and Woman He Created Them: A Theology of the Body* [*ToB*], ed. Michael Waldstein with introduction (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 2006), 23.4, 221 (for *ToB*, the first number is that assigned in the volume to the particular audience, the second is the section within it, and the third is Waldstein’s p. number[s]).

³² See, generally, Allen, *The Concept of Woman*, 1:213–412. For Augustine, as representative of patristic thinking, see David Vincent Meconi, S.J., “Gender’s Divine Dignity in Saint Augustine’s Theological Anthropology,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 19, no. 2 (2021): 587–612.

unsexed) faculties of intellect and will.³³ In this sense, men and women are equally "actual."³⁴

Yet it is nevertheless unsurprising that the connection between potency and the female was made. Philosopher and playwright Fabrice Hadjadj speaks of the ordinary miracle that is the female body:

Why the feminine? The masculine can be understood: it is a body full of itself, that makes things with its hands outside of itself. But

³³ Diverse examples include: John Finley, "The Metaphysics of Gender: A Thomistic Approach," *The Thomist* 79, no. 4 (2015): 585–614; Timothy Fortin, "Finding Form: Defining Human Sexual Difference," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 15, no. 2 (2017): 397–431; Melissa Moschella, "Personal Identity and Gender: A Revised Aristotelian Approach," in *Gender Identities in a Globalized World*, ed. A. M. González and V. J. Seidler (New York: Humanity Books, 2008), 75–108; Sarah Borden Sharkey, *An Aristotelian Feminism* (New York: Springer, 2016).

³⁴ The consistency of this conviction has been called into question by critics, in particular those criticizing Balthasar's theology of man and woman, a theology that argues both for the equality of men and women and also for an active–receptive distinction. A summary is given in Michele M. Schumacher, *A Trinitarian Anthropology: Adrienne von Speyr and Hans Urs von Balthasar in Dialogue with Thomas Aquinas* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2014), 250–62, using Corinne Crammer, "One Sex or Two? Balthasar's Theology of the Sexes," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hans Urs von Balthasar*, ed. Edward T. Oakes and David Moss (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 93–112; Tina Beattie, "A Man and Three Women—Hans, Adrienne, Mary and Luce," *New Blackfriars* 79, no. 927 (1998): 97–105; David Moss and Lucy Gardner, "Difference—the Immaculate Concept? The Laws of Sexual Difference in the Theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 377–401; Moss and Gardner, "Something Like Time; Something Like the Sexes: An Essay in Reception," in *Balthasar at the End of Modernity*, ed. Lucy Gardner, David Moss, Benjamin Quash, and Graham Ward (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 69–137 (among others). In addition to the texts she mentions, there can be added Linn Marie Tonstead, "Sexual Difference and Trinitarian Death: Cross, Kenosis, and Hierarchy in the *Theo-Drama*," *Modern Theology* 26, no. 4 (2010): 603–31. Schumacher notes that the comparison of a feminine and/or Marian principle to the Church long predates twentieth-century thought, as Hugo Rahner had demonstrated (see n. 3 above); she cites Scriptural examples and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§757, 766, and 772 (256n60). In addition to Schumacher's response, there can be mentioned that by Aristotle Papanikolaou, "Person, Kenosis, and Abuse: Hans Urs von Balthasar and Feminist Theologies in Conversation," *Modern Theology* 19, no. 1 (2003): 41–65 (also concerning the wider feminist discussion on kenosis), and Jennifer Newsome Martin, "The 'Whence' and 'Whither' of Balthasar's Gendered Theology: Rehabilitating Kenosis for Feminist Theology," *Modern Theology* 31, no. 2 (2015): 211–34. A Wojtylian defense of man and woman as a Trinitarian image is in Michael Maria Waldstein, *Glory of the Logos in the Flesh: Saint John Paul's Theology of the Body* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 594–671.

the feminine is a body that is naturally surrendered, with its hollow in the middle, a hollow inside of which is engendered . . . not something but someone, obscurely, without needing one's hands.³⁵

The feminine hollow, the abiding presence of an absence, is deeply mysterious. By its very mystery, which is a simple truth of nature, it hints of the goodness of all the other aspects that go along with the traditionally female side of the cosmic line: matter, the body, potency. The reevaluation of such humble realities springs from the Christian incarnational impulse: again, through the Incarnation, the body entered theology through the main door. "Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven" (Matt 18:4).³⁶

What does this reevaluation tell us? It is not as though Christianity simply upended the hierarchies to elevate matter over soul and potency over act. That overturning has been attempted in post-Christian materialism, but it has led only to an unbalanced primacy of the body and of matter that neither can bear. (I will speak more about this shortly.) The Christian faith retains the priority of soul over body and, in Catholic *philosophia perennis* at least, of act over potency. What the Christian reevaluation shows us, nevertheless, is the relative goodness of matter, the body, and potency in God's creative design. In all of these realities, there is, metaphorically speaking, a "hollow in the middle"—a hollow that is a space prepared for fruitfulness.³⁷

Matter, in Thomistic metaphysics, is not a thing that exists. Nor is it, however, absolute non-being. Nor should matter's non-being be understood in terms of pure privation. Matter, on its own, does lack form, and hence actuality, which is certainly a privation. For a rigidly neo-Platonic metaphysics, the lack of actuality was enough to condemn it to being equivalent to evil.³⁸ Rigid neo-Platonism succumbs to the Parmenidean

³⁵ Fabrice Hadjadj, *The Resurrection: Experience Life in the Risen Christ*, trans. Michael J. Miller (New York: Magnificat, 2016), 56.

³⁶ See also Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] III, q. 40, a. 3, ad 3, on the connection between poverty and humility.

³⁷ This is true, therefore, also of the male human being. John Paul II emphasizes that the second creation story shows us that Adam had a special responsibility to *receive* the gift of the woman (*TòB*, 17:6, 197; 33:2, 261). His original solitude constituted the poverty that was the "basis" of his reception of her as a gift (*TòB*, 9:3, 164; see also 5:5, 149).

³⁸ E.g., Plotinus, *Enneads* 1.8, trans. George Boys-Stones, et. al., ed. Lloyd P. Gerson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 108–23. Thomas expresses this Platonic/Parmenidean conviction as an objection in *ST* I, q. 5, a. 3, obj. 3. For an interpretation of Plotinus that brings him closer to the Aristotelian tradition I am

temptation to equate form with being and being with goodness, and so to identify matter with absolute non-being, and hence evil. Thomas's evaluation of this temptation, by contrast, led him to postulate the *relative* (not absolute) non-being of matter.³⁹ Matter, then, should not be viewed as the pure privation of being and of goodness.⁴⁰

But what can we say about matter if the language of pure privation is inadequate? What does matter have that is "positive," if it, by definition, is not actual? The language of *potency*, rather than that of *pure privation*, provides the necessary reorientation.⁴¹ Matter is in potency to form. It is not merely a lack of form; it is not like a stone that lacks humanity. No amount of form-ation can turn the stone into a child (outside of divine creativity; see Matt 3:9), because the stone is not in potency to being a child. Matter, however, is in potency to form, meaning that it has the receptive capacity for form-ation.⁴² Indeed, matter *is* nothing other than this receptive capacity for form. Rachel Coleman puts it poetically by saying that matter is "pure desire"—that is, "pure receptivity"—for form and actuality. Here she echoes Thomas: prime matter "does participate to a certain extent in goodness, viz. by its relation to, or aptitude for, goodness. Consequently, *to be desirable* is not its property, but rather *to desire*."⁴³ Matter is, in other words, pure desire or receptivity for the Good.⁴⁴

describing, see Christian Schäfer, "Matter in Plotinus's Normative Ontology," *Phronesis* 49, no. 3 (2004): 266–294.

³⁹ See John F. Wippel, *The Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas: From Finite Being to Uncreated Being*, Monographs of the Society for Medieval and Renaissance Philosophy 1 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 177–96, 309–11. See also the enlightening commentary on Wippel and on other Thomistic scholars by Rachel M. Coleman, "Matter as an Image of the Good: Ferdinand Ulrich's Metaphysics of Creation" (PhD diss., The Pontifical John Paul II Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at the Catholic University of America, 2019), 17–70.

⁴⁰ Hence, as Adrian J. Walker notes: "Indeed, for Thomas, matter is in a state of privation only relatively to some determinate form that it could have and, in fact, will have once the relevant process of change has taken place. Privation, in this context, is not a lamentable defect, but the good emptiness entailed by a positive readiness to receive" (personal communication, 10/13/2021).

⁴¹ As Wippel explains, prime matter is neither "sheer nothingness" nor "reducible to privation. On the contrary, it is a real intrinsic principle [of pure potency] which must be present in every corporeal being" (*Metaphysical Thought of Thomas Aquinas*, 317).

⁴² Of course, the stone's lack of humanity is due to its formation as a particular substance that is stony, not human. Prime matter, which is not a substance, lacks any form.

⁴³ *ST* I, q. 5, a. 3, ad 3, English Dominican Fathers trans., at newadvent.org/summa (modified and emphasis added).

⁴⁴ Coleman, *Matter as an Image of the Good*, 194.

This receptivity for the Good is a quality shared by all created being. First, all creatures are a mixture of potency and act, so the receptive element of potency is present among all.⁴⁵ Further, creation is a relation to the Creator that simultaneously establishes the creature.⁴⁶ Receptivity to God's creative wisdom and power is part of our creaturely structure.⁴⁷ Unlike God, who *is* his existence, created being (*esse commune*) does not subsist.⁴⁸ Individual substances (things) subsist, but not being, which exists only in things. Contrary to the fears of some philosophers and theologians such as Martin Heidegger and Karl Barth, the *esse commune* shared by creatures can never be on par with God, who is subsisting being.

Ferdinand Ulrich argues that this fundamental non-divine quality of created being's non-subsistence—that is, its poverty—is precisely also a wealth that reflects the Creator's liberality.⁴⁹ Because *esse commune* is not God (it does not subsist), it has been created as truly other than God. This fact shows the Creator's generosity: out of love, he creates something truly new: creatures that are not an extension of himself but rather realities that exist with a certain limited autonomy—or, as John Paul II put it, a “participated theonomy.”⁵⁰ This genuine otherness simultaneously gives creation the capacity to reflect God; an image can be an image only if it is distinct from the original. Thus, creation's mirroring capacity is due to

⁴⁵ This is true of all creatures, including angels, which are immaterial; thus, potency is a broader category than matter. See *ST* I, q. 50, a. 2, ad 3.

⁴⁶ See Thomas Aquinas, *De potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 3, resp. (creation as a relation to the Creator) and ad 3 (qua being, this relation is subsequent to the created subject as an accident, but qua God's act, the relation is prior to the subject as constituting the latter). See also: John Paul II, *ToB*, 13:2–4, 182–83 (creation as giving that entails a giver, a receiver, the relation between them, and the gift); Coleman, “Matter as an Image of the Good,” 166–67; Kenneth Schmitz, *The Gift: Creation*, The Aquinas Lecture, 1982 (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1982), esp. 31–35.

⁴⁷ See the profound reflections in Adrian J. Walker, “Godlike Instruments: Notes Toward the Regeneration of Science,” *Nova et Vetera* (English) 19, no. 4 (2021): 1345–97.

⁴⁸ *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 1: “*Esse* signifies something complete and simple but not subsisting” (trans. min). This sentence is foundational for the metaphysics of Ferdinand Ulrich in *Homo Abyssus*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2018), esp. 28–30. See also: D. C. Schindler, “The Perfection of Being, Manifest in the Finite Creature,” in *A Companion to Ferdinand Ulrich's Homo Abyssus* (Washington, DC: Humanum Academic Press, 2019), 21–48; Rachel M. Coleman, “Thinking the ‘Nothing’ of Being: Ferdinand Ulrich on Transnihilation,” *Communio* 46, no. 1 (2019): 182–98.

⁴⁹ Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus*, 50.

⁵⁰ See Coleman, “Matter as an Image of the Good,” 176. For “participated theonomy,” see John Paul II, Encyclical Letter regarding Certain Fundamental Questions of the Church's Moral Teaching, *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), §41.

its finitude—that is, its non-divinity.⁵¹ The Marian profile of the Catholic analogical affirmation of the simultaneous poverty and wealth of created being—a similarity with a greater dissimilarity to God—is perhaps what led Erich Przywara to respond as he did to the metaphysical doubter Barth. As Barth reported, “in response to my question he confirmed that instead of *analogia entis* one could possibly . . . say Mary!”⁵²

Let us unpack this further by asking how the poverty of being might resemble God. Recall the active passivity of Christ, exemplified in the Passion. These qualities can be found analogously in the eternal Trinitarian life. In speaking about the subsisting relations of the persons of the Trinity, Thomas Aquinas utilizes the analogy of relations of action.⁵³ As Gilles Emery puts it, “action effectively involves a subject acting plus a terminus for the action, its recipient.”⁵⁴ This terminus is not strictly speaking *passive*, because, as Thomas says, there is no potency or matter in God.⁵⁵ But there is something of which passivity is the analogue: personal receptivity to the divine nature.⁵⁶ This receptivity shapes the Son’s personal action. Emery notes that the “action” within the Trinity is only notionally distinct from

⁵¹ The only other possibility for something to image God is if there is genuine otherness *within* the divine nature. This is, of course, the case, such that the Son is also the perfect Image of the Father. The Son’s divine imaging of the Father is perfect, unlike finite creaturely imaging. Finitude does, however, provide the only other condition for otherness that can image God, namely, genuine otherness *outside* of the divine nature. Further, the multiplicity of creation is the only way the one goodness of God can be expressed by finite things. *ST I*, q. 47, a. 1, is the *locus classicus* for this truth.

⁵² Karl Barth, letter to Eduard Thurneysen, in *Briefwechsel Barth-Thurneysen*, vol. 2 (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1974), 654, cited in John R. Betz, “Translator’s Introduction,” *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics; Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart, Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 1–115, at 22.

⁵³ See *ST I*, q. 28, a. 4, *De pot.*, q. 7, a. 9, and the texts and discussion in Gilles Emery, O.P., *The Trinitarian Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 53–55.

⁵⁴ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 55.

⁵⁵ *De pot.*, q. 1, a. 1; q. 8, a. 1, and throughout.

⁵⁶ This passivity is expressed in the Scholastic language to designate the procession of the Spirit as “passive spiration.” For more on the receptivity of the Son translated into economic “passivity,” see Angela Franks, “The Mission and Person of Christ and the Christian in Hans Urs von Balthasar,” in *The Center is Jesus Christ Himself: Essays on Revelation, Salvation, and Evangelization in Honor of Robert P. Imbelli*, ed. Andrew Meszaros (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 272–99, at 276–85.

the processions or relations that characterize each person.⁵⁷ This signifies that, while the *source* of being and action is the divine essence, the *modes* of being and of action are personal, shaped by each person's respective relations.⁵⁸ We can say of the Son that he "exists in the eternal reception of his being from the Father, and the way he acts conforms to this, that is, he eternally receives his action from the Father."⁵⁹ Or, as expressed by Christ, "I tell you, the Son can do nothing on his own, but only what he sees the Father doing; for whatever the Father does, the Son does likewise" (John 5:19).

Let us sum up. The Son has a filial mode of being, which is fundamentally receptive. This receptivity is economically translated into a kind of poverty, in which he receives all things from the Father. But this poverty is simultaneously the Son's personal wealth: "For were he from himself, he would not be the Son."⁶⁰ The poverty of creaturely being—its non-subsistent and dependent qualities, as well as the potency in material creation—here have a distant echo in the divine. The eternal Trinitarian relations provide the deepest reason for the analogous positivity of creaturely potency and poverty.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 74–75. He quotes *In I sent.*, d. 20, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1: "Generation signifies the relation to the manner of an operation. . . . And it is through one and the same action that the Father begets and the Son is born, but this action finds out two distinct relations in the Father and the Son" (75). He comments: "To be begotten is an action" (75n110). Emery later summarizes: "The modes of action of the Son and Holy Spirit take their distinct stamp from their relationship to the Father" (167; see also 349–55).

⁵⁸ See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa contra gentiles* [SCG] IV, ch. 8: "Since in God to act is the same as to be, and action is identified with essence, as we have proved above, so the Son is said to be unable to act from himself, but to act with the Father, even as he cannot be from himself, but only from the Father" (trans. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., and revised by the Aquinas Institute, in *Summa Contra Gentiles, Books III–IV*, Latin/English Edition of the Works of St. Thomas Aquinas 12 [Steubenville, OH: Aquinas Institute and Emmaus Academic, 2018], 350). For the relations of origin as relations of action and passion: "But in all relations based on action and passion, one of them is always subject and unequal in power, except only in relations of origin [as in the Trinity], where no inferiority is indicated" (SCG IV, ch. 24, [p. 399]).

⁵⁹ Emery, *Trinitarian Theology*, 351.

⁶⁰ SCG IV, ch. 8 [p. 350].

⁶¹ For recent scholarly assessments and critiques of this and related ideas, see: Joshua R. Brotherton, "Trinitarian Suffering and Divine Receptivity after Balthasar," *The Thomist* 82, no. 2 (2018): 189–234; John R. Betz, "The Humility of God: On a Disputed Question in Trinitarian Theology," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 17, no. 3 (2019): 769–810. See also Angela Franks, "Thomistic-Balthasarian Comments on Thomas Joseph White, O.P., *The Incarnate Lord*," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 20, no. 2 (2022): 575–600.

But what does this have to do with the body? What is the wealth of the body? And in what way is it Marian? Let us return to the theology of the body. There John Paul II argues that the body's role in the complex of the person is revelatory: the body reveals the person.⁶² The person is embodied, yet the person can transcend her body (albeit in a provisional way), as the soul that subsists after death reveals.⁶³ So the body, while personal, is not simply the whole reality of the person.⁶⁴ What the human body can do, however—and only the human body, because it is the body of a *person*—is reveal God's eternal triune life. In fact, according to John Paul II, this is the very purpose for which God created the human body. This purpose means that the body functions as a "primordial" sacrament.⁶⁵

Thus, in this [pre-lapsarian] dimension, a primordial *sacrament* is constituted, understood as a *sign that efficaciously transmits in the visible world the invisible mystery hidden in God from eternity*. And this is the mystery of Truth and Love, the mystery of divine life, in which man really participates. . . . The body, in fact, and only the body, is capable of making visible what is invisible: the spiritual and the divine. It has been created to transfer into the visible reality of the world the mystery hidden from eternity in God, and thus to be a sign of it.⁶⁶

John Paul II wishes to emphasize that it is a revelatory fact that the human being acts, in a personal way, through his body. This body, therefore, "permits him to be the author of genuinely human activity."⁶⁷ What is "genuinely human activity," however? He has in mind the activity of a thoughtful and responsible person using his or her spiritual powers. Ultimately, however, what fulfills persons is generosity. As *Gaudium et Spes* states, the human person is fulfilled only through a sincere gift of self (§24).

⁶² John Paul II, *TòB*, 7:2, 154; 9:4, 164

⁶³ *ST* I, q. 75, a. 2.

⁶⁴ Indeed, this fundamentally "aesthetic" quality of the body as the expression of the interior person is common to all material things, which reveal the truth of their substances by means of their exterior accidents.

⁶⁵ See Angela Franks, "Deleuze, Balthasar, and John Paul II on the Aesthetics of the Body," *Theological Studies* 81, no. 3 (2020): 649–670.

⁶⁶ John Paul II, *TòB*, 19:4, 203 (italics original). For more on the philosophical background to this statement, see Angela Franks, "Thinking the Embodied Person with Karol Wojtyła," *Nova et Vetera* (English) 16, no. 1 (2018): 141–71.

⁶⁷ John Paul II, *TòB*, 6:3, 152; 7:2, 154.

Thus, what the natural body speaks, as it speaks the person, is that we are made for self-gift (the “spousal meaning of the body”).⁶⁸

This natural, revelatory reality is raised to be truly revelatory in the incarnate Son, where the corporeal expression of being as wealth and poverty becomes the temporal expression of the Trinitarian archetype. In Christ, the person whom his body reveals is divine. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9). Jesus fulfills the spousal meaning of the body in making a Eucharistic gift of himself to his spouse, the Church, a gift imaged in Christian marriage.⁶⁹ The self-gift latent in the body is fulfilled supernaturally in the resurrected body, when the spousal meaning of the body as self-gift is transformed into a “virginal meaning” of the body as total self-gift to God.⁷⁰ Only Christianity “has found in the flesh, in the mortal, eucharistic, mystical, resurrecting flesh, the unsurpassable end of the ways of God.”⁷¹

To return to our main theme and summarize: the body is poor, because it does not reveal itself. Its revelatory powers are all bent, like a window, or like the air, upon making visible the person. Recall Hopkins’s comparison of Mary to the air: Mary “this one work has to do— / Let all God’s glory through.” Mary is, according to Ratzinger, “the living Veronica’s veil.” She “makes her body, her very self, into the place of God’s presence,”⁷² for the seed that is God’s Word to bear fruit in her womb. “Light is sown for the just” (Ps 97:11; cf. Mark 4:14).⁷³ Analogously, as the human body makes visible the truth and love of a person, it thereby images God in a unique way within the material world through its very being and even more perfectly when the person freely gives himself in love.

Rejoicing in the Marian Poverty of the Body

Since almost the first moments of our existence, we have not rejoiced in our human poverty, but rather have sought to banish it in favor of divine richness. The opposite of Marian poverty is the sinner’s grasping at equality

⁶⁸ John Paul II, *ToB*, 14:5–16.2, 183–91. Balthasar argues similarly that the transitory and generative nature of flesh shows its intrinsic orientation to “self-divestiture” (*Theo-Logic*, vol. 2, *Truth of God* [TL2], trans. Adrian J. Walker [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004], 224–34).

⁶⁹ John Paul II, *ToB*, 89:5–91:4, 474–81; *ToB*, 93:1–102:8, 487–529.

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *ToB*, 66:1–79:9, 387–401.

⁷¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *TL2*, 221.

⁷² Ratzinger, “Sign of the Woman,” 25.

⁷³ Trans. Robert Alter in *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation and Commentary*, vol. 3: *The Writings* (New York: Norton, 2019), 231.

with God.⁷⁴ Yet, as Adam learned, this attempt at self-enrichment was the deepest poverty of all, as it banished him from the riches that had been given to him. Adam negated the grandeur of what he is, the *imago Dei*, in an attempt to be the original rather than the image. By its very definition, filiation can only be received, not forced. Balthasar contrasts the receptive poverty of Mary with the pride of sinful humanity, which attempts “to fructify itself,” and he warns that, ironically, these attempts “are doomed to sterility.”⁷⁵

The body has been particularly caught up in the sinner's fruitless attempts to enrich himself. What is poor claims to be rich and self-created. This dynamic is applied to the body when we try to separate it from its personal core. For this way of thinking, “acts, gestures, the visual body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*.”⁷⁶ This isolation of the body from the person results in confusion, for what is a border absent the land it individuates? I have called the resulting obfuscation a “totemism” of the body, in that the body functions like a totem in Freud's description.⁷⁷ As a totem, the body is taken to *identify* who we are, it *fascinates* us endlessly, it *distracts* us from our real, spiritual problems, and it is *sacrificed* when it does not provide us with the happiness we expect from it. This forgetfulness of the person appears to be an enrichment of the body; yet without its transparency to the person, the body is closed off from its source of wealth.

⁷⁴ See Batut, “Kenotic Decision,” 377–80.

⁷⁵ Balthasar, *TD4*, 361. A few pages earlier he describes Mary's poverty as “open,” and it “embraces and envelops the ‘closed’ and negative poverty of all sinners. She is in solidarity with them all in their poverty, but, behind them and in them, she is the only one able to receive the seed of God, eucharistically multiplied—thousands-fold—in her womb” (358). See also Hans Urs von Balthasar, “The Marian Mold of the Church,” in Balthasar and Ratzinger, *Mary: The Church at the Source*, 125–44, at 126: “Contemporary man secretly, or even avowedly, longs to be an absolute beginning in his own freedom, hence, in the end, to owe no one thanks for himself.” Cf. *TL2*, 230–31, and Joseph Ratzinger, “*In the Beginning . . .*”: *A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P., Ressourcement: Retrieval and Renewal in Catholic Thought (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 64–71.

⁷⁶ Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, ed. Sue-Ellen Case (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 270–82, at 281. See Angela Franks, “A Wojtylian Reading of Performativity and the Self in Judith Butler,” *Christian Bioethics* 26, no. 3 (2020): 221–42.

⁷⁷ Angela Franks, “The Body as Totem in the Asexual Revolution,” *Church Life Journal* (University of Notre Dame McGrath Institute), January 21, 2021, churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-body-as-totem-in-the-asexual-revolution/.

In contrast, God's wealth is simultaneous with his "poverty." He does not grasp (Phil 2:6), but surrenders his wealth to the other, as does the father in the parable of the prodigal son. "To other creatures he has given relatively small gifts, but to us his inheritance, because we are sons; but 'if sons, then heirs'" (Rom 8:17).⁷⁸ For Balthasar, this economic self-gift is continuous with who God is eternally. God's eternal fatherhood is simultaneous with "the giving away of everything the Father is, including his entire Godhead. . . . It is a giving-away that, in the Father's act of generation—which lasts for all eternity—leaves the latter's womb 'empty': in God, poverty and wealth (that is, wealth of giving) are one and the same (F. Ulrich)."⁷⁹ He is, as Jean-Pierre Batut states, "a Father who *is* everything but *has* nothing."⁸⁰

The Son is the perfect image of this Father, and so too are his adopted sons and daughters meant to be: those who find their wealth in receiving everything the Father has to give—which is his entire self. But this wealth can be found only to the degree that, as Dorothy Day understood, we are "willing to call nothing 'mine,' not even my very rationality and memory and will."⁸¹ The empty and dispossessed womb of Mary can be seen, in this way, as a filial image of the Father's simultaneous poverty and wealth.

While it sounds utterly destructive, this filial poverty is the only path for the human person that does not end in nihilism. As creatures, we are constituted by God's pulling us out of nothingness: the creature "is saved from falling into nothing at each instant precisely by the creative hand of God."⁸² The irony of denying this truth—the irony of "self-creation"—is that we let go of the hand that pulls us up out of the *nihil*. If we instead accept our nothingness, we are capable of receiving the gift of existence and thereby flourishing.

Ulrich plays on the German word for "incarnation" (*Menschwerdung*, literally, "becoming man") by arguing that all men need to *become* what they *are*.⁸³ Christ, who became man through his self-surrender (Phil 2:6), is

⁷⁸ Thomas Aquinas, *Expositio in orationem dominicam* (trans. mine).

⁷⁹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3, *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992), 518.

⁸⁰ Batut, "Kenotic Decision," 376. See also *ST I*, q. 3, and q. 28, a. 2: anything that God "has" is actually identical to his essence, i.e., who he *is*.

⁸¹ As summarized by Larry Chapp, "The Precarity of Love: Dorothy Day on Poverty," *Communio* 42, no. 3 (2015): 381–93, at 389–90.

⁸² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Logic*, vol. 1, *Truth of the World*, trans. Adrian J. Walker (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 251.

⁸³ Augustine could therefore say of the body of Christ to the body of Christ: "Be what you see, and receive what you are!" (Sermon 272; trans. mine, from Latin available at

our model. Analogously, man comes to himself by receiving himself (Matt 16:25 and parallel; Rev 2:17) from God, a truth simultaneous with that of creation.⁸⁴ "Henceforth man no longer has any choice except between the [nihilistic] kenosis into nothingness of self-affirmation and the [filial] kenosis of Christ."⁸⁵ In this process, Mary is, as Adrienne von Speyr says, the "mediatrix of self-surrender."⁸⁶

This play of receptivity and actualization is not unique to man, although only he within the visible world can do so in a rational and free way. I have argued that being itself is marked by a poverty that is simultaneously a wealth. Being can only be received from God. The human body testifies in particular to the truth of the poverty and wealth of creation. Because it does not speak of itself, the body is fully transparent to be the expression of the person and of God's Truth and Love. But the embodied person is made to be an intelligent and free protagonist within the rich poverty, or poor wealth, of being. In this, he or she is an *imago* of the divine *Imago*, the Son (Rom 8:29), whose receptivity to the Father constitutes his person. Hence there is a deep connection, in the divine plan, between the poverty of the body and the Virgin Mother with her disponible *fiat*. The nature of the body, with all its glorious poverty, shines forth most fully in Mary: because she wished only to glorify God, she let all his glory through.⁸⁷

Hopkins describes for us the fruitfulness that continues through Mary in her sons and daughters in the Church.

earlychurchtexts.com/main/augustine/sermon_272_eucharist.shtml).

⁸⁴ See Ferdinand Ulrich, *Atheismus und Menschwerdung*, 2nd ed. (Freiburg: Johannes, 1975), 16–23, trans. Rachel M. Coleman as "The Personal Unity of Glory and Poverty in Freedom as Love," *Communio* 42, no. 3 (2015): 558–63.

⁸⁵ Batut, "Kenotic Decision," 377.

⁸⁶ Adrienne von Speyr, *Handmaid of the Lord*, trans. E. A. Nelson (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1985), 170. See Schumacher, *Trinitarian Anthropology*, 149–56.

⁸⁷ I am indebted to Adrian J. Walker for helping me to formulate these thoughts. A thorough treatment of the topic would note how poverty is closely connected to obedience (the poverty of will) and chastity (the priority of God). When tied to obedience and chastity, poverty can be truly and virginally fruitful. See Balthasar, *TD4*, 361: "Deep down, man's attempt to banish God from finitude in order to avoid receiving (and conceiving) from him, his endeavor to bring forth fruit on his own, is undergirded and sustained by the 'wisdom of the poor,' that wisdom which was 'the first of God's acts' and which, in creation, has always said Yes to being made fruitful by God and his Word, . . . [the] divine-human Son who, by means of his Eucharist, embodies the miracle of divine omnipotence and universal fruitfulness and makes it a reality in the Father's entire creation. Here, finally falling silent, the Word is empowered to make his whole body into God's seed; thus the Word finally and definitively becomes flesh in the Virgin Mother, Mary-Ecclesia."

Of her flesh he took flesh:
 He does take fresh and fresh,
 Though much the mystery how,
 Not flesh but spirit now
 And makes, O marvellous!
 New Nazareths in us,
 Where she shall yet conceive
 Him, morning, noon, and eve;
 New Bethlems, and he born
 There, evening, noon, and morn
 Bethlem or Nazareth,
 Men here may draw like breath
 More Christ and baffle death

The breathing-in of Christ into our emptiness does not destroy our selves, Hopkins sees, but rather fulfills them. Our selves depend upon divine riches to become what they are intended to be. A Christian “who, born so, comes to be / New self and nobler me / In each one and each one / More makes, when all is done, / Both God’s and Mary’s Son.” This Christological enrichment is the goal of Mary’s poverty and the plan of the Creator.⁸⁸

N.V.

⁸⁸ This essay was delivered as the fourteenth annual Theotokos Lecture given at Marquette University on November 30, 2021, and published as *Mary as the Exemplar of the Body’s Poverty* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2021).