

Mercy “Twice Blest”

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DIVES IN MISERICORDIA (1980) is John Paul II's second encyclical. He explains in the introduction that *Redemptor Hominis* (1979), his first, leads from man to Christ, where alone the complete truth about man is to be found. This encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, leads from Christ to the Father, where the truth about Christ is to be found.¹ We will know ourselves, and the Church will know herself, only in this final context of divine paternity, beyond which there is no further horizon. This Fatherhood is the final horizon of our understanding only under a definite description, however. God is our Father only as Father of mercy, whose mercy is incarnate in Christ.² Mercy is the greatest attribute of God and the Redeemer, the Holy Father tells us, and God just is infinite mercy.³ The truth about us in Christ is therefore a truth about a sinful, but mercifully redeemed, humanity. Moreover, just as the Holy Father found warrant for *Redemptor Hominis* in the programmatic §22 of *Gaudium et Spes*—"Christ the new Adam fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his lofty calling"—so also does he find warrant for *Dives in Misericordia* in this same place. For the passage goes on to explain that this revelation of man occurs "in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love."⁴ And

¹ *Dives in Misericordia* (Rich in Mercy), §1.

² *Ibid.*, §2; cf. §13.

³ *Ibid.*, §13.

⁴ It is worth noting that in 1965, in an intervention preparatory to the Second Vatican Council's Decree *Presbyterorum ordinis*, Karol Wojtyła, as Archbishop of Cracow, had expressed the desire to see priests in the light of the ministry of mercy: "Est enim sacerdos quasi praeco misericordiae divinae: praedicatio autem misericordiae eiusque ministerium in mundo hodierno maximi est momenti. . ." (*Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Vaticani II* [Rome: Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1970–], IV/5, 519).

mercy, John Paul will explain later, is love's "second name," the form it takes when directed to sinful and suffering humanity.⁵

At the outset of the letter, the Holy Father notes a "problem of major importance," that of "the meaning of terms and the content of concepts."⁶ What does mercy mean? One of the goals of the letter is in fact nothing more than to address this problem of meaning, and rescue "mercy" from several false understandings. That is the focus of this essay.

He proposes to find the meaning of mercy primarily by a reading of Sacred Scripture. As we have learned to be typical of the Holy Father's proceeding, rather than simply piling up individual citations, he finds some exemplary, emblematic passage of Scripture, a patient and "thick" reading of which will reveal to us the matter at hand. For *Dives in Misericordia*, this is the parable of the Prodigal Son. First, however, he directs us to Christ in the synagogue at Nazareth in Luke 4 and the Baptist's deputation in Luke 8, in order to point out that mercy may justly be said to be the content of the mission of Christ, and second, he makes a sort of canvass of the Old Testament. Most but not all of the work of clarifying the meaning of mercy is accomplished in the sections dealing with the Old Testament and the Prodigal Son (Parts III and IV, §§4–6). The delimitation of the meaning of mercy is finished only at the cross, by the Paschal Mystery, which is the heart of the letter. Thence the Holy Father proceeds to the special urgency of a deployment of mercy today, and last to the Church's mission in this deployment. The mercy that we deploy as Christians, it is important to observe, is very much a supernatural mercy: It is the mercy of God, revealed fully and exercised perfectly by Christ, commended to the Church, which we in our turn individually are called to practice.

In what follows, I first summarize some of the material of *Dives in Misericordia*. Next, after recalling Aristotle's description of pity, St. Thomas will help us appreciate by contrast the properly divine and supernatural character of Christian mercy. Last, Rousseau's reduction of mercy to a form of self-love, and Nietzsche's indictment of pity as the first movement of nihilism, will help us see how even human pity needs Christian mercy to survive in the modern world.

Mercy as Delimited in *Dives in Misericordia*

We begin with a summary of §§4–6, the paragraphs that deal with the Old Testament and the Prodigal. The Holy Father proceeds descriptively,

⁵ *Dives in misericordia*, §7.

⁶ *Ibid.*, §3.

and *Dives in Misericordia* might almost be considered an essay in what Robert Sokolowski calls the "theology of disclosure"—phenomenological theology. The resources of this theology as practiced by John Paul are principally the economy of salvation as read off in Sacred Scripture,⁷ and secondarily and taking account of the dative to whom he wants to manifest the content of mercy, a description of the needs of the present moment in the light of that economy.⁸

*From the Holy Father's Reading of the Old Testament,
Five Points Emerge*

1. First, divine mercy extends to all suffering and evil, both the suffering of physical evil and the guilt of moral evil. "Both physical and moral evil, namely sin, cause the sons and daughters of Israel to turn to the Lord and beseech his mercy."⁹ Again, "The Old Testament encourages people suffering from misfortune, especially those weighed down by sin—as also the whole of Israel, which had entered into the covenant with God—to appeal for mercy, and enables them to count upon it."¹⁰ Esther, Nehemiah, and Tobit are examples of the confident invocation of God's mercy, and David shows us that mercy is to be invoked even for sin, one's own sin and the misery it entails. This comprehensiveness of mercy, embracing both "evil suffered" and "evil done," in Herbert McCabe's words, is insisted on it throughout the letter.¹¹
2. The revelation of mercy precisely upon the unfaithfulness of Israel to the covenant is especially revealing of the character or nature of God, and, in the second place, the Holy Father sees this in the very language the Old Testament typically uses to speak of God's mercy. *Hesed* names the covenant relation, and is grace, love, loving kindness, loyalty, and also mercy. In mercy as *hesed*, the Holy Father notes that in being merciful, the Lord is being true to the covenant established with Israel, and this means that in being faithful to

⁷ That Scripture really is the primary source is evident from his citations: 5 to *Gaudium et Spes*; 2 to Paul VI; 2 to the liturgy; 1 to the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed; 133 to Sacred Scripture, including two extended remarks on the Old Testament vocabulary of mercy.

⁸ See *Dives in Misericordia*, §10 and 11 on the modern world in which the Church is situated.

⁹ *Ibid.*, §4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, §4.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, §3, 6, 8, 13.

Israel in mercy, he is being true to himself, faithful to his own self as good, faithful, to be counted on.¹² Of course the covenant is freely entered into, but in being freely adopted, and carried out, it shows something of the very being and nature of the Lord.

3. Third, also from the Old Testament vocabulary of mercy, mercy as *rahamim* suggests we see in the mercy of God a gratuity of love, like that of a mother for the child of her womb (*rehem*).¹³ God may be faithful to himself in being merciful, but radically, mercy is unowed, and is not something we merit.
4. Fourth, there is the relation of mercy to justice. From the Psalms, the Holy Father perceives that mercy is something “deeper” than justice. Mercy bespeaks the love that is more fundamental than justice, more original because resting in the mystery of creation.¹⁴ The Holy Father quotes the book of Wisdom (11:24): “‘You hold nothing of what you have made in abhorrence,” which points us to the mystery of creation as the first place to discern God’s relation to what he has made, a relation more original than justice, the relation of love.

Mercy, therefore, is not opposed to justice, but as he says toward the end of the letter, is rather “the most profound source of justice.”¹⁵ Justice can be said to be the goal of forgiveness.¹⁶ On the other hand, “love . . . conditions justice and, in the final analysis, justice serves love.”¹⁷ Love comes before and goes after justice; if it is for it, the further *telos* of justice is once again love (mercy).

5. Fifth, love (mercy) goes deeper than justice, past things owed to the person who owes. “The equality brought by justice is limited to the realm of objective and extrinsic goods, while love and mercy bring it about that people meet one another in that value which is man himself, with the dignity proper to him.”¹⁸ Mercy is not an unjust relaxation of justice, but regards what the other person should be, a justice that is directed to what the person wants to be, what the person in good condition looks like.¹⁹

¹² Ibid., §4, note 52.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., §4.

¹⁵ Ibid., §14.

¹⁶ Ibid., §14.

¹⁷ Ibid., §4.

¹⁸ Ibid., §14.

¹⁹ Ibid.

Justice apart from love, and therefore from mercy, would be insufficient to foster human relationships and human society.²⁰

The Parable of the Prodigal Son

Two more things are to be added from the Holy Father's reading of the parable of the Prodigal Son.

6. In the sixth place and developing the last point, there is the issue of the distance between the one who is merciful and the one on whom mercy is bestowed. The Holy Father thinks it a mistake to imagine the one who is merciful as high above and far removed from the one to whom mercy is given. Rather, the "relationship of mercy is based on the common experience of that good which is man, on the common experience of the dignity that is proper to him."²¹ Moreover, he says toward the end of the letter that one who is merciful can imagine himself needing mercy.²²
7. Seventh, also with respect to the same issue of dignity, mercy not only recognizes common dignity, but restores lost dignity. The Holy Father thinks it a mistake to suppose that mercy demeans, or denigrates, or belittles. Rather does mercy restore dignity, and this we see in a striking way in the parable, as the Holy Father points out to us the marks of dignity and respect with which the father receives his wayward son.²³ This is the case, it is to be noted, even when dignity has been lost by fault of the one to whom mercy is given. Mercy looks to the person as he could and should be. It is what justice is for.

Mercy and the Paschal Mystery

That substantially concludes the descriptive account of mercy the Holy Father offers in *Dives in Misericordia*. There is only one more thing, but an extraordinary thing, to mention. As we should expect him to say, the divine mercy is most notably displayed, in the Paschal Mystery. Here, we behold the one who was always merciful receiving no mercy from us; precisely in this, he becomes the way of God's mercy for us.²⁴ Moreover,

²⁰ Ibid. This does not mean that justice in the form of reparation is not a condition of asking for forgiveness; see the discussion of compensation and satisfaction.

²¹ Ibid., §6.

²² Ibid., §14.

²³ Ibid., §6.

²⁴ Ibid., §7.

the mercy of the cross fulfills, and does not oppose justice;²⁵ it shows us in a way not to be surpassed that mercy is love's "second name," since it is the revelation of love in a sinful and suffering world.²⁶ We learn that, eschatologically, mercy will be revealed as love; here, within the present aeon, love is revealed as mercy.²⁷ In sum, "The paschal Christ is the definitive incarnation of mercy."²⁸ All of this we might expect.

8. More remarkably, however, the Holy Father says that the one on whom Christ has mercy by his cross, has mercy on Christ in accepting it, in being restored to freedom and freely accepting his restored dignity in Christ.²⁹ I pick this out as an eighth mark of John Paul II's description of mercy: In being merciful, we not only restore the dignity of the one who has mercy shown him, but do ourselves grow in dignity. This is verified in a premier way in Christ. But the Holy Father also says it of us, too, quite explicitly: Mercy always redounds to the giver; and in giving mercy, we receive it from the one to whom we give it.³⁰ This is a function of the mutuality of love. It is a function of humility.³¹ The Holy Father was not first to make this point.

The quality of mercy is not strain'd,
It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven
Upon the place beneath: it is twice blest;
It blesseth him that gives and him that takes:

—*The Merchant of Venice*, Act IV, scene 1

It blesses both giver and taker, also in the "instance" of Christ: so, "twice blest."

Pity in Aristotle

According as we live and move and have our being in the Church, it is hard for us to see how extraordinary this point is, indeed, the whole description of mercy that comes from the Holy Father, that comes from Scripture, that comes from God. Aristotle can help us see this.

²⁵ *ibid.*, §7 and 8.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, §7.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, §8.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*, §14.

³¹ *Ibid.*

In Book II of the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle teaches the speaker how to put his hearers in a frame of mind receptive to his argument. For this, the speaker must know the moral affections of his hearers—the moral affections of man. Chapter 8 discusses pity (*eleos*):

a feeling of pain
caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful,
which befalls one who does not deserve it,
and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours
and moreover to befall us soon.³²

Taking the elements in order: First, John Paul's mercy is not defined as a feeling, since it must be able to be thought of as an attribute of the God who cannot suffer alteration or decay. Second, yes, mercy and pity are caused by the knowledge of some destructive or painful evil befalling another. Third, for Aristotle, this evil is undeserved. This is contrary to the comprehensiveness of the divine mercy, which includes mercy for sinners (no.1, above). There is a contrast also with the gratuity of mercy: For Aristotle, the suffering of the one pitied must be undeserved; for John Paul, it is the unmerited character of mercy that is emphasized (no. 3). Aristotle's account seems to be of a pity that it is suitably given, as it were, something just and objectively befitting the undeserved suffering of the good man. Fourth, for Aristotle, the one who pities must be close to the one whom evil has befallen, and must be able to imagine himself in the same evil spot, and almost as it were anticipate it. This is similar to one of the elements of the Holy Father's position we have picked out: The merciful share a common dignity with the suffering (no. 6). But then, this gives occasion for thought. While this may be true of men who pity men, how can we think God to have a common dignity with us?

On the other hand, there are elements in John Paul's mercy not included by Aristotle. First, there is the assumption that mercy has hands, that as an affective response in men or the attribute it is in God, it is a ground of action for the alleviation of suffering. If this is in Aristotle, it is only touched on remotely, insofar as we can suppose the speaker, in a forensic setting, to be trying to move a jury to the redress of the undeserved suffering of his client. In this case, pity would be a font of justice just as is mercy according to the Holy Father. Second, Aristotle does not make explicit the issue of dignity, common dignity, or restoration of dignity. The common dignity of the pitied and the pitying seems to be

³² *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), II, 8, 1385b1214.

rather folded into the requirement of similarity of position and condition of life. Third, there is nothing in Aristotle to the effect that pity, if it moves to the alleviation of suffering, also ennobles the one who so acts.

Summing up, we can say that the most salient differences have to do, first, with the desert of the suffering that moves to pity, second, with the reciprocal issue of the unmerited quality of mercy, third, with the closeness or similarity of the pitied and the one who pities, if we are thinking of the divine mercy, and fourth, with the benefit that accrues to the one who is merciful.

About the first and third issues, Aristotle is quite clear. We feel pity only for the good, the innocent, especially for the noble innocent.³³ We must “believe in the goodness of at least some people; if you think nobody good, you will believe that everybody deserves evil fortune.”³⁴ And in the *Poetics*, c. 13, speaking of a bad man falling into misfortune: “[S]uch a story may arouse the human feeling in us, but it will not move us to either pity or fear; pity is occasioned by undeserved misfortune, and fear by that of one like ourselves.”³⁵ The opposite of pity, moreover, is indignation, which is pain at the unmerited good fortune of another.³⁶

As to the common condition of the pitied and the pitying, there should be similarity of circumstance and position (age, character, social standing, birth).³⁷ Also, pity is not felt by ruined men or by the immensely fortunate: There must be the likeness both of having something to lose (unlike the ruined man) and of being able to lose it (unlike, in his own estimation, the very fortunate man).³⁸ On the other hand, the one whom we pity must not be too close to us, else we feel for the one who suffers as we do for ourselves, in which case we experience terror, not pity.³⁹

Both of these differences can seem to make trouble for John Paul II's view. From Aristotle's perspective, it can seem as if the pope was countenancing a mercy that is indifferent to good and evil, a sort of evenhanded good will that makes the sun to shine on the good and the evil, and sends rain to both just and unjust (cf. Mt 5:45). Is such a mercy, and is therefore such a God, good? If God's mercy is unmerited, is it capricious? Just as Aristotle cannot imagine that there be friendship between gods and

³³ Ibid., II, 8, 1386b5–7.

³⁴ Ibid., II, 8, 1385b35–1386a1.

³⁵ *Poetics*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 13, 1453a4–5.

³⁶ *Rhetoric*, II, 9, 1386b9–10.

³⁷ Ibid., II, 8, 1386a25.

³⁸ Ibid., II, 8, 1385b16–24.

³⁹ Ibid., II, 8, 1386a1822.

men, since friendship supposes some equality, and there is none between the divine and the human,⁴⁰ so and for the same reason it would be hard to imagine him conceiving it really possible for the gods to take pity on men: There is not sufficient commonality between them. A god could not imagine himself subject to the misfortunes that befall mortals. For Aristotle's metaphysical theology, remember, we cannot conceive that the gods even know the misfortune of men. Particularly inappropriate would be to think that a god is being faithful to himself, or even showing himself more godlike in pitying men in their misfortunes.

St. Thomas

Aristotle helps us appreciate the novelty of the Christian conception of divine mercy, the astonishing features of God's revelation of himself as the merciful God, "visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children to the third and the fourth generation" of those who hate him, "but showing steadfast love [hesed]" to thousands of generations of those who love him (Ex 20:5b–6). But Aristotle's account also raises awkward questions. If we wish to mediate between these two truths about mercy, the human and the divine, we shall need a metaphysical resource. The Holy Father invited us to this sort of mediation in *Fides et Ratio* (§83):

A theology without a metaphysical horizon could not move beyond an analysis of religious experience, nor would it allow the *intellectus fidei* to give a coherent account of the universal and transcendent value of revealed truth.

Without a metaphysical horizon, human experience philosophically clarified and religious experience faithfully described do not know how to take the measure of each other, or—to stay more closely within the Holy Father's metaphor—how to locate themselves relative to one another. We turn to St. Thomas.

Mercy for Sinners

When St. Thomas takes up mercy as a virtue in the *Secunda secundae* of the great *Summa*, it can seem that he hoes pretty much in Aristotle's furrow. To be sure, although mercy is an interior effect of supernatural charity and so itself a supernatural virtue, it must be that Aristotle's nature helps us to understand supernature.⁴¹ Even so, the very context of the Aristotelian texts

⁴⁰ *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W.D. Ross, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), VIII, 7, 1158b35–36.

⁴¹ *ST* II–II, q. 28, introduction.

intimates to us the gulf there will be between human pity and divine mercy. St. Thomas must repair to the *Rhetoric* and not the *Ethics* to find the relevant material in Aristotle. There is no discussion of mercy in the *Ethics*.⁴² Mercy seems no important part of the repertoire of the virtuous man for Aristotle, and the account of pity migrates toward a discussion of political and poetic things. It is noteworthy that the discussion of the *Rhetoric* is from the point of view of the legislator or lawyer, and not from the point of view of the one who is merciful. In the *Secunda secundae*, on the other hand, St. Thomas is assembling the arms of the soldier of Christ, mercy among them.

Article 1 of Question 30 asks whether evil is the proper motive of mercy. In the corpus of the article, St. Thomas lists three desires corresponding to three motives of mercy. There is the desire to be and to live; there is the desire pertaining to deliberated choice; and there is the desire for a thing, not in itself, but in its cause. These are correlated with material from Aristotle's *Rhetoric*, rather more systematically than we might expect from Aristotle's text, and according to which we have: mercy for evils corruptive of what we desire naturally, such as to be and to live;⁴³ mercy for the more pitiable evils that befall us accidentally and contrary to what we had expected of our choice; and mercy for the most pitiable evils, undeserved evils that are entirely contrary to the will. To the first and second desires, notice, there correspond two kinds of evil when the desires are thwarted. The third kind of evil, however, is correlated with the absence of the third desire, desire for something in its cause: The innocent man does not desire evil even in its cause.

The first desire is desire for things wanted naturally as ends; the second, elective desire is desire for something that pertains to an end. The third desire is the interesting one. It is an indirect desire for things. It desires them neither as ends nor as means—else it is not distinct from one of the first two; it is a desire for things neither naturally wanted nor deliberately chosen. It is a desire for things wanted in wanting their causes, as for instance in the example St. Thomas provides, we in fact want to be sick if we directly want to eat what is not good for us.

What St. Thomas does not do is answer the question whether or not the evil of punishment, deserved evil, can be a motive of mercy. He opens up a space for this question, however. We know that undeserved evil is a motive of mercy, and in that we stand with Aristotle. It is most pitiable. But what of punishment? Is it pitiable at all? That is, what of the sinner, who can be said to want the evil of punishment only in that he has

⁴² There is a brief discussion of envy at II.7.1108a35–1108b6.

⁴³ And we could add such things also as to live in society and to know the truth about God—see *ST* I–II, q. 94, a. 2.

wanted its cause—his misdeed? Can we suitably feel mercy for a man who is miserable because justly punished?

St. Thomas addresses this question in the answer to the first objection by addressing the even more difficult question of whether the evil of guilt itself can be a motive of mercy. Here, he takes as implicit from the corpus that we can pity a man for his justly deserved stripes, since after all there is something contrary to the will in suffering them (they were not directly willed). On that basis, he answers the more difficult question whether we can pity a man for his guilt.

Because guilt can sometimes be a punishment, insofar as it has something joined to it that is against the will of the sinner, in that way it enters into the idea of the miserable. And on this account we are sorry and have compassion for sinners: just as St. Gregory says in one of his homilies, that "true justice is not disdainful"—that is, of sinners, "but has compassion for them." And Matthew 9:36 says: "seeing the crowd, Jesus was sorry for them, because they were troubled and lay about like sheep without a shepherd."⁴⁴

Now guilt (*culpa*) or sin can be said to be punishment for sin, and therefore contrary to the will, either because one sin causes another, or because the act of sin, interiorly and exteriorly, is painful.⁴⁵ A fortiori, we can be sorry for those who suffer the lesser punishment of the privation of the goods of the body or of exterior goods. We therefore do, and ought to do, what Aristotle does not have us do, namely, be sorry for sinners.

In using St. Gregory to blind-side Aristotle, St. Thomas does not tell us exactly what he is doing; in fact, he lets the truth of Aristotle remain, but only within the larger framework of the gospel. The suffering of the malefactor is found in some way to be contrary to his will, and so can be shoehorned into the category of the miserable—what can be sorrowed over, what can be pitied. Even so, he does not call it "undeserved."

The larger framework has been erected earlier in the *Summa*, in q. 21 of the *Prima pars*, on the justice and mercy of God. Article 3 argues that God is merciful not as feeling the passion of sorrow but as most powerfully remedying defect and alleviating suffering. For defects are not removed

⁴⁴ ST II–II, q. 30, a. 1, ad 1: [Q]uia culpa potest esse aliquod modo poena, in quantum scilicet habet aliquid annexum quod est contra voluntatem peccantis, secundum hoc potest habere rationem miserabilis. Et secundum hoc miseremur et compatimur peccantibus: sicut Gregorius dicit, in quadam homilia, quod *vera iustitia non habet indignationem*, scilicet ad peccatores, *sed compassionem*. Et Matth. 9 [36] dicitur: *videns Iesus turbas misertus est eis: quia erant vexati et iacentes sicut oves non habentes pastorem*.

⁴⁵ ST I–II, q. 87, a. 2.

except by some perfection, and God is infinitely perfect.⁴⁶ The reply to the second objection addresses the question of mercy for sinners, and has it that mercy for sinners is not unjust, but goes beyond justice by way of a gift given: “qui enim aliquid remittit, quodammodo donat illud,” just as Ephesians 4:32: “give to one another”—that is, “forgive one another,”—“just as Christ as forgiven you.” In this way, mercy is the fullness of justice, and as James 2:13 says, “mercy triumphs over (*superexaltat*) justice.” Article 4, in turn, roots mercy as gift most firmly in the fundamental relation of creature to God, that of creation. Divine justice, St. Thomas says, presupposes the divine mercy. That something be due to a creature in justice supposes something in the creature, as hands are due to the rational nature of man; but that the creature be at all cannot be something due: Prior to creation, there is no creature to owe anything to. Creation is purely an act of generosity and love, and in this sense, mercy—a form of love—always goes before justice. The Holy Father’s thought at no. 4 of *Dives in Misericordia* finds here a more complete articulation.

The context of creation lets us appreciate the difference between pagan pity and Christian mercy. It is not just that the creator is powerful, all-powerful, and so can do things a pagan or even a pagan god cannot. There is also more basically a different sense of what sorts of things must be in the world, and a different sense of how things must end, a different sense of the necessity and so of the finality of evil. It is this difference that brings with it a different sense of what can and cannot be changed. We follow here in the path laid out by Robert Sokolowski.⁴⁷

For the Greeks, evil, including moral evil, is something terminal; it is a part and a necessary part of the universe. It cannot be the case that all men become virtuous, just as it cannot be the case that all acorns become healthy oaks. Moreover, there cannot be the beautiful without the ugly, or the fine without the base. As to human things and human destinies, therefore, there is an aspect of the universe that is tragic. In the face of this tragedy, one can only behold, and tremble.⁴⁸ There is nothing to do, nothing no agent whatsoever can do, to change it. It must be that men suffer; and it must be that men suffer from their own actions. Moreover, while Aristotle is alive to evil influence on the production of character, still, he makes men responsible for their character.⁴⁹ The character of a man, settled and abiding, is not an object of manipulation by another man.

⁴⁶ ST I, q. 6, a. 4.

⁴⁷ *The God of Faith and Reason* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 93–95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴⁹ *Nicomachean Ethics* III, 5.

The Christian God, on the other hand, can pluck out the heart of stone and insert a heart of flesh. For Christians, it could have been that there was no evil of natural defect, had God not created the material universe. Even more thought provoking, it could have been that even in a world such as ours, where there does and must exist the evil of natural defect—it could have been that there was no sin, had God not permitted it. For Christians, the goodness of God surpasses all, and it is not necessarily bound up with evil and defect as are the goods of the world. He can be thought of, in undiminished splendor and goodness, without necessarily thinking in addition any blemish or evil. And since every perfection is found in him, there is a remedy for every defect, of the natural or voluntary order. As the *Catechism* says (§298):

Since God could create everything out of nothing, he can also, through the Holy Spirit, give spiritual life to sinners by creating a pure heart in them and bodily life to the dead through the Resurrection.

Mercy is nothing but the original generosity whence the world proceeds in the first place reexpressed in a world where sin is permitted. It is a gift in keeping with the prior gift of creation.

Mercy Gratuitous

The question of the gratuity of divine mercy can now be met more directly. The reply to the first objection of question 21, article 4, directs us to the work of justification. As a work of justice, justification means God forgives sins because of the love the sinner has for him. As a work of mercy, justification, which includes the forgiveness of sins, supposes that the love of the sinner is God's unmerited gift to the sinner. Here we have the reason for the Holy Father's confidence, following the Old Testament, that our prayer for God's mercy is always answered.⁵⁰ We are sure to receive mercy, since the very prayer in which we ask for it is already his grace. In answering this prayer, God answers a request he has elicited. So to speak, he completes a motion he himself has started.

As the beginning, so the end of the motion is gratuitous. Divine mercy is unmerited because divine love is unmerited. By desert, the sinner merits punishment rather than mercy. In this way, Thomas has it, the work of justification is greater than the work of glorification, because of their differing points of departure.⁵¹ Glory follows the harvest of grace, but the grace of conversion makes a garden out of wilderness. Further, mercy

⁵⁰ *Dives in Misericordia*, §4 and 10.

⁵¹ *ST* I-II, q. 113, a. 9.

restores us not to ourselves, but to God, and in that respect surpasses the work of creation. Creation brings a finite good from nothing, but grace and glory terminate in the divine goodness.

The key, therefore, is the divine love. If it is gratuitous, then mercy must be also. And it must be, for unlike our love, which responds to an existing good, God's love is creative of the good. This has been explained long before in question 20, article 2, of the *Prima pars*. God's love cannot be owed to what it creates, since apart from God it is nothing; so also it must be that his mercy, which is a love directed to remedy a defect, is gratuitous. This will be so for mercy directed to both kinds of evils. The good order of created things that produces the evil of natural defect is a greater good than that destroyed by such evil, and so the mercy that restores to an individual the good lost by natural defect is a gift beyond the gift establishing the greater good of the material universe as a whole. Much more is the restoration of lost innocence, the reparation of voluntary evil, gratuitous.

Therefore is the quality of mercy always "unstrained," and that is the meaning of the phrase. When Portia says: "[T]hen must the Jew be merciful," Shylock asks: "On what compulsion must I? Tell me that." He does not understand the necessity of gratuity. Hence, Portia: "[T]he quality of mercy is not strain'd; It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven." Uncompelled, unmerited, unstrained.

We recall that Aristotle lists chance as one of the causes of the evil eliciting pity, the chance that makes a man friendless or mutilated or deformed.⁵² For St. Thomas, on the contrary, every indirectly willed instance of bodily evil, every permitted sin, as also every production of every good, and every remedy of every defect, is owing to the originating love or the mercy of God, whose providence embraces all things, and for whom there is no chance. For those who love God, all things, including natural defect and past sin, work to the good (Rom 8:32). That is, God works them so.

In the question on mercy in the *Secunda*, article 4 hails mercy is as the chief of the virtues, taking precedence over every other, "for it belongs to mercy to pour out good on others and to take away their defects." This belongs to a superior, St. Thomas says, and most all therefore to God.

'Tis mightiest in the mightiest; it becomes
The throned monarch better than his crown;
...
it is an attribute of God himself;

⁵² Aristotle, *Rhetoric* II, 4, 13869–16.

As for those who are in Christ, charity is a greater thing for us than mercy insofar as it unites us to God, but as relating us to our neighbor, mercy is greatest. Therefore, we can say that while charity likens us to God in our affection, mercy likens us to God in our works⁵³ and is therefore "the sum total" of the Christian religion as to exterior works.⁵⁴ It is a sacrifice more acceptable to God than our worship of him, since in mercy we help others, while our worship does not profit him but rather us.⁵⁵

And earthly power doeth then show likest God's
When mercy seasons justice.

Closeness, Similarity

On our closeness to the one in trouble, on the similarity of our position and circumstance, rests the possibility of imagining ourselves in same situation, and so being moved to compassion. For us to do or suffer evil, we must be both fallible and passible. God is neither. He cannot see himself suffering the evils we do. When St. Thomas picks up the issue of the commonality or likeness between the pitied and the one who pities in the second article of question 30, therefore, although he repeats the teaching of the *Rhetoric* to the effect that we pity those who are like us, he adds that we also pity those who are joined to us in love. Because God joins us to himself in love, and regards us as his own, he has mercy for us, notwithstanding the fact that it is impossible he suffer as the one whom he pities does.⁵⁶ This love is not the love of a creator, only, but the love of charity, whereby God gives us to have the same end as himself, namely himself.⁵⁷ He makes us like to him in giving us a real ordination to himself as our true last end possessed in the very way in knowledge and love that he possesses himself.

Therefore, while the questions of desert and gratuity are to be resolved in the metaphysics of creation and creative love, the question of the similarity between the pitied and the one who pities can be resolved in the likeness established by supernatural friendship with God. It is patient also of a Christological resolution. Moreover, we want someone whose mercy we can believe because we see that he is like us, identifies with us, as Christ, like us in all things but sin (Heb 4:15; cf. 2:17).

⁵³ *ST* II-II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 3.

⁵⁴ *ST* II-II, q. 30, a. 4, ad 2.

⁵⁵ *ST* III, q. 30, a. 4, ad 1.

⁵⁶ Love depends on likeness, *ST* I-II, q. 27, a. 3; but while creatures are like God, God is not like creatures, *SCG* I, ch. 29.

⁵⁷ *ST* II-II, q. 23, a. 1.

In commenting on the Letter to the Hebrews, St. Thomas notes that temptation is threefold. First, there is sinful temptation, where the flesh desires against the spirit. "But there is another temptation proceeding from the enemy and the world. And this in two ways, either by enticing us with happy things or by terrifying us with adverse things. And in these two ways Christ was tempted."⁵⁸ He is tested in the first way by the temptations of the devil, touching on the desires of the flesh, the desire of the eyes, and the pride of life, and in the second way by the plots of the Pharisees.

Therefore, he was tempted so that in all things both worldly and otherwise, sin only excepted, he might be like us. For if he had been without temptation, he would not have been tried by them, and so he would have been without compassion for them. On the other hand, had he sinned, he would not have been able to help us but would rather have been in need of help.⁵⁹

In this way, Aristotle's condition is fulfilled and more than fulfilled. As it were, Christ is more like us in our temptations than we are, for sin obscures the mind.⁶⁰ Christ, however, is sinless. Therefore does he know more perfectly, more perfectly also experientially than we, what temptation is?⁶¹ Had he sinned, he could neither have compassion for us as well nor offer us the example we need—not how to fall, but how to stand.

It is true that we have compassion for the sinner because we can, all of us, imagine ourselves being, because we remember ourselves to have been, sinners. But our compassion comes not from sin, but from the love that comes from the grace that has restored us to friendship with God. Just as such, sin closes, isolates, and makes pity and mercy impossible. Our Lord's greater compassion is a function of his greatest love, and of the greatest human knowledge of temptation and sin this love makes possible.

⁵⁸ *Lectura in epist. ad Hebraeos*, ch. 4, lect. 3, no. 236: "Alia est tentatio ab hoste et a mundo, et hoc dupliciter: Vel alliciendo per prospera, vel terrendo per adversa. Et his duobus modis fuit tentatus Christus."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, no. 237: "Ideo tentatus est, ut per omnia tam in temporalibus quam in omnibus aliis, nisi in solo peccato, similis esset nobis. Si enim fuisset sine tentationibus, non fuisset eas expertus, et sic not compateretur. Si vero habuisset peccatum, non potuisset nos iuvare, sed magis indignuisset adiutorio."

⁶⁰ *Lectura super Epistolam ad Rom.*, ch. 1, lect. 7, no. 130 (at 1:21).

⁶¹ And not simply in virtue of his human mind's immediate vision of God, whence he would share in the perfect knowledge of evil God possesses in the divine nature; cf. *ST I*, q. 14, a. 10.

Rousseau

Our attention to Aristotle was introduced with the remark that, according as we live and think in the Church, it can be hard to us to appreciate the novelty of certain of the features of divine, revealed mercy. Of course, we do not live and think only in the Church, but in a post-Christian era, an era constructed quite self-consciously in opposition to Christianity and a Christian ethos. Aristotle helps us focus things Christian, and in part because he represents a sort of indeterminacy of reason relative to revelation, of knowledge to faith. Moderns, on the other hand, expressly deny what Christ taught and offer alternative accounts of things not only Christian but simply human. We may take Rousseau's account of pity to begin, and Nietzsche's to end, the modern period.

Allan Bloom summarizes "the psychic mechanism" of pity (*pitié*) according to Rousseau as follows.⁶² First, once our imagination is developed enough to suppose ourselves in another's place, we naturally feel pain upon beholding the sufferings of others. This fact gives rise to the "first maxim" of compassion for Rousseau: "One pities in others only those ills from which one does not feel oneself exempt."⁶³ This is familiar enough territory. Rousseau also preserves the idea that it is only undeserved suffering that properly excites pity.⁶⁴ The second moment of the psychic mechanism, however, is not familiar to us, and it is this: Past the first pain, the reflection that it is, after all, the other and not myself that is in misery produces pleasure. As Rousseau says, "pity is sweet because, in putting ourselves in the place of one who suffers, we nevertheless feel the pleasure of not suffering as he does."⁶⁵ And again, "he shares the sufferings of his fellows; but this sharing is voluntary and sweet."⁶⁶ There is further enjoyment, in the third place, because, if he who pities knows he can help the suffering, there is satisfaction in one's strength and in showing one's strength.⁶⁷ Last, there is satisfaction, too, in knowing that one is a good fellow in feeling sorry for others and helping them.

What we had thought to be the most purely other-regarding sentiment proves to be no such thing. Our regard for the other is no more than a way station in returning to ourselves. We love to pity because we love ourselves, and it is pleasant to know ourselves as not suffering; it is

⁶² See Bloom's Introduction to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Emile or On Education*, trans. with notes by Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1979), 18.

⁶³ Rousseau, *Emile*, 224.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 225, 244, 253.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 221.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 229.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*

pleasant to know ourselves strong to help, if we choose, those who are suffering; and it is pleasant to contemplate ourselves as sensitive, beneficent, good-natured. Pity does regard others, but not, so to speak, terminally. It goes through the other to end in my own self-satisfaction.

For Rousseau, things must be so. It is not just that human pity is no longer charged with supernatural charity. In addition, the foundational passion and first appetite of man has been reconceived. True, he makes love the foundational passion underlying all others, and in this Rousseau sounds classical.⁶⁸ However, it is not love simply speaking, but love of self, *amour de soi*, that is at the bottom of all our passions, and this makes Rousseau modern. Now, *amour de soi* becomes *amour propre* upon comparing ourselves to other men. If we compare ourselves to those who are stronger, richer, happier, than we, our love of self will make us miserable. If we compare ourselves to those weaker and poorer than we, those who are miserable, we pity them and are pleased at our advantage. Jean-Jacques takes care that Emile's first comparison of himself with others is of the second kind.⁶⁹

In this way, Rousseau thinks to make men who can come together into a stable and peaceful political community. For there is no natural linkage of one man to another; all our bonds to one another are artificial.⁷⁰ Sexuality binds us, it is true, but in itself, not permanently, and not as men but only as animals. For Rousseau, according to Bloom, compassion is the first sublimation of sexual desire, and (romantic) love the second. It is pity that is to be regularized and made into our first thought when thinking of other men. It serves as the glue that holds the modern egalitarian democratic state together, so much so that it is a requirement for high office.⁷¹ In that it has to be instilled in Emile from the outside by Jean-Jacques, it is an artificial glue. On the other hand, its installation is a matter of shaping *amour de soi*. Since it involves comparison with other men, it is a form of *amour propre*. But it is a form that, in due amounts, redounds to the good of society and not to its demise, as would self-love become pride, arrogance, and the desire for domination.

The social utility of compassion, in fact, sets it off most strikingly from Christian charity. Charity regards the neighbor here, present, wounded, hungry, naked. Rousseau's compassion finds its privileged and wanted object, however, not in the neighbor, but in "mankind."

⁶⁸ Cf., e.g., *ST* I–II, q. 25, aa. 1 and 2.

⁶⁹ Bloom, Introduction, 17.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 15. And see Pierre Manent, "On Modern Individualism," in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents*, ed. and trans. Daniel J. Mahoney and Paul Seaton (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1998), 153.

⁷¹ Bloom, Introduction, 15–16.

To prevent pity from degenerating into weakness, it must therefore, be generalized and extended to the whole of mankind. Then one yields to it only insofar as it accords with justice, because of all the virtues justice is the one that contributes most to the common good of men. For the sake of reason, for the sake of love of ourselves, we must have pity for our species still more than for our neighbor, and pity for the wicked is a very great cruelty to men.⁷²

This pity is evidently an instrument of my own good, and so is expressly distinguished from the Christian love of neighbor, of the actual living and breathing human being next to one in need. Is it an altogether different thing from charity? Not completely. It is hard to be exact here. Part of the contestation is over the first things, the first human things, the very data of our moral life. We might say that Rousseau is speaking of Aristotle's sadness for evil befalling another allied and necessarily so because of our fundamental *amour de soi* with the pleasure that evil is not befalling me. Christianity, on the other hand, speaks of Aristotle's sadness for the evil of another allied with both natural benevolence and supernatural charity. For Rousseau, benevolence cannot be anything real over and above what he calls pity.

The pleasure of pity, and so our continued practice of it, depends very much on our knowing of our own power and strength relative to one pitied. The height I occupy and from which I stoop to give aid is formal to the transaction of Rousseau's mercy. It is this in particular that the Holy Father wishes to reprove as a faulty idea of mercy. For the Holy Father, one imagines oneself the same as (close to) the man in misery in order to come close, first to realize a common dignity and second to restore it where it has been wounded. For Rousseau, one imagines oneself the same as (close to) the man in misery in order to enjoy a real difference (distance), and another's suffering is the occasion of my pleasure. On Rousseau's account, mercy is not twice blest. The one who suffers is an occasion of my beholding of myself and enjoyment of myself as high and mighty. But I do not truly receive from him. What Aristotle is silent about, mercy's twice blest character, Rousseau must deny. The miserable may be clothed and fed, and society may be preserved from too-great disparity of estate, but I am not really ennobled by mercy (though it be part of the plan of the one who constructs modern society that I think I am).

With Rousseau, we have not only forsaken divine pity, but evacuated human pity of its original meaning and force. Denying supernature, nature is deformed. This is, as it were, a description of the Fall. Also, it is

⁷² Rousseau, *Emile*, 253.

a description of the Enlightenment. That is, it is Pierre Manent's description of the Enlightenment: Just in order to drive out supernatural, the moderns drive out nature as well.⁷³ For if nature remains, we shall still be taught to appreciate, desire, pursue supernatural goods on the basis of knowing them as something better even than natural perfections. So, if we appreciate human pity, and if human mercy is something admirable, we shall be led to adore the surpassing mercy of Christ and want to imitate it.

It would be possible to contest the modern view in the first place, therefore, by criticizing Rousseau's psychology. Rousseau turns what is in fact good for me—the exercise of mercy as a virtue—into something I enjoy if not choose as my good, and indeed, as nothing more than a good of pleasure. That I want your good in mercy is in fact good for me; but that is not why I want it, and if I did, it would not be good for me: I would not in fact be attaining to the good of the transcending character of love. As it were, Rousseau's account invites us to turn all *amor amicitiae* into *amor concupiscentiae* on the ground that *amor amicitiae* is good for us. What presents itself as the love of friendship must be a form of concupiscence, because nothing by nature sublime can exist in the scientifically explicable universe he inhabits. He thinks sublimation real, but it is hard to see it as anything but self-deception.⁷⁴

If he really has deformed the data, therefore, then it might be sufficient to ask whether it is plausible to say that the father of the prodigal is pleased at comparing his happiness to his son's wretchedness. It would perhaps be sufficient to examine the quality of mercy displayed in the life of St. Vincent de Paul or St. Philip Neri or St. Benedict the Moor.

On the other hand, perhaps it is wasted energy to try to refocus human pity and reinvigorate our purchase on human nature. It is, moreover, no accident that the really splendid examples of mercy are Christian ones. What ancient hero is celebrated for the quality of his mercy? It may be best to confront the modern view more directly and efficaciously on the field of Christology. Issues of closeness and distance, resolved for both divine and human pity, are clearest in Christ. Rather than asking after the father of the prodigal son, we will ask whether it be plausible that the Christ of the gospels takes pleasure at seeing the people as sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9:36).

To answer Rousseau expressly, we look to St. Thomas's evocation of Christ on the cross. The magnitude of his suffering, St. Thomas says, is in part a function of his perfect knowledge of the causes of sadness, the sin of

⁷³ Pierre Manent, "Christianity and Democracy," in *Modern Liberty and Its Discontents*, 101–3.

⁷⁴ See Bloom, Introduction, 15–16, 21, on sublimation in Rousseau.

mankind prominent among them.⁷⁵ If we think Christ pities us most of all on the cross, however, then we cannot follow Rousseau. "When one is suffering one pities only oneself," he says.⁷⁶ In which case, Christ's words to the Good Thief, and indeed, the Good Thief's observations about the innocent suffering of Christ, give the lie to the modern account. Christ's compassion for us in our sin and his interior sorrow are not, in fact, to be separated. Christ's sorrow (*dolor*) was the greatest among all the sorrows of this life, and as to the interior sorrow he experienced, this was a function of its cause, sin, in fact, all the sins of the human race, "for which he satisfied by suffering, whence he ascribed them as to himself."⁷⁷ He "ascribed them as to himself." We arrive at *Salvifici Doloris* (§18), according to which Christ "perceives in a humanly inexpressible way this suffering [of sin] which is the separation, the rejection by the Father, the estrangement from God." Moreover, Christ perceives this, the Holy Father says, precisely because of "the divine depth of his filial union with the Father." This is very exact. It is not the suffering of the sinner that Christ shares, but a greater suffering. For the sinner, darkened in mind by sin, cannot have perfect awareness of his misery. Christ, illumined in mind by the depth of his filial union with the Father, knows this evil through and through, and suffers accordingly. This suffering, moreover, just is the suffering that mercy is. It is pity for the other, and in that very pity the remedy for the plight of the other. I return to this remarkable concentration of the features and facets of mercy shortly.

The convincing answer to Rousseau's construction of pity takes us to the cross, the cross as understood by St. Thomas and the Holy Father. In this way, Christ's pity is the guardian and guarantor of human pity in the modern world. In the same way, revelation guards reason and theology philosophy according to the Holy Father in *Fides et Ratio*.⁷⁸ In this light, it is astonishing to realize how little we have traveled from *Gaudium et Spes* §22.

Nietzsche

The difficulty of speaking exactly about the divine mercy is illustrated well by an article of some years back by Michael Dodds.⁷⁹ I set aside the

⁷⁵ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 6; and on the causes of Christ's suffering, a. 5.

⁷⁶ *Emile*, 229.

⁷⁷ *ST* III, q. 46, a. 6: "[P]ro quibus satisfaciebatur patiendo: unde ea (peccata) quasi sibi adscribit."

⁷⁸ *Fides et Ratio*, §48, 81–83.

⁷⁹ "Thomas Aquinas, Human Suffering, and the Unchanging God of Love," *Theological Studies* 52 (1991): 330–44.

host of those who immediately and straightforwardly make the divine mercy a principle of divine suffering, and who admit frankly that they think the transcendence and infinity of God does not imply impassibility.⁸⁰ Dodds is important precisely because his gesture toward the modern sensibility seems so slight.

Dodds makes prominent use of St. Thomas's reply to the second objection of article 1 of Question 30, the opening article of the question on the virtue of mercy we visited above. Here, speaking of human mercy and pity, St. Thomas explains that mercy is properly directed to the evil of others, while sorrow (*dolor*) regards our own suffering. Therefore, if someone is closely related to us, belongs to us, we do not pity them so much as suffer "sicut in vulneribus propriis." We suffer "as in our own wounds." Now, "between human beings and God there is the most perfect sort of love, the most intimate kind of unity," Dodds writes, which is true enough.⁸¹ It follows that God compassionates us, although this is a matter, not of affection, but of will, God's effective will to alleviate suffering, and this too is true enough.⁸² Further, Dodds thinks, because one closely related to one who suffers suffers as in his own wounds, we can say that our suffering is God's suffering.⁸³ And this is not well said. The application of this text to God, where one suffers for another as in one's own wounds, is problematic. It seems to depend on the idea that God could have "his own wounds." But if he cannot have his own wounds, then we ought not to say, and even granted the qualifications Dodds makes, that our suffering is God's suffering. It is true indeed that we who suffer belong to God, and that he loves us more intimately than one human being another. Even so, that we who suffer are God's is one thing; that our suffering is God's suffering is another.

The issue here is not only one of metaphysical coherence, but of not falling into the arms of Nietzsche, our second exponent of the modern sensibility about pity. If we say that our sufferings are God's, then we begin to make of Christianity the religion of pity in the way that Nietzsche says it is, and its god after having grown "old and soft and mellow and compassionate, more like a grandfather than a father, most like a tottery old grandmother," will one day die, "suffocated through his excessive pity."⁸⁴

⁸⁰ For a good brief introduction to this issue, see Thomas Weinandy, "Does God Suffer?," *First Things* 117 (November 2001): 35–41.

⁸¹ Dodds, 337.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 338.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 336, 340.

⁸⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1961), IV, "Retired from Service," 273.

In this way lies the collapse of the distinction between the creature and the Creator, and in this way lies the collapse of our hope from a God who is powerful to save and whose mercy endures forever just because his love is changeless and everlasting, and just because his joy knows no shadow of alteration or decay. His capacity to wipe away all tears is strictly one with his inhabitation of a place, a place we long to go to, where there are no tears to be wiped away.

Where Rousseau recommends pity, Nietzsche attacks it, and they therefore stand very differently toward it. But they stand toward the same thing. They both make a self-regarding comparison something essential to pity.⁸⁵ Nietzsche hates pity because it makes the strong soft and the bold hesitant.⁸⁶ Rousseau likes it for the same reason and thinks it necessary for modern post-Christian polity. So it is, and for that reason it is to be despised according to Nietzsche. Moreover, too much pity would be a bad thing for Rousseau, too. Too much of this societal glue, and the springs of action cannot move; too much attention to dirt and disease, and the capacity of the healthy to be happy is enervated. This is Nietzsche's fear. While the noble man might enjoy his strength in alleviating the suffering of some wretch,⁸⁷ too much pity exhausts energy, saps strength, kills. Pity puts us on the path to nihilism, for the weak make the strong feel bad, guilty, for their strength.⁸⁸ God dies from too much pity.

What Rousseau prepares for as replacement of Christendom, the modern democratic state, Nietzsche hates as its logical consequence, the last unfolding of Christianity—something softer and more effeminate than even Christianity.

Let us sum up for Nietzsche. Far from twice blessed, mercy is twice cursed. To attempt to elicit pity is the stratagem of the poor and the weak, the servile and the base; succumbing to it, the noble and strong debase themselves and exhaust their substance.

If we escape Rousseau by looking to the genuineness of the suffering of Christ over our sin and suffering, we have not for all that done with Nietzsche. Is Christ then brought down? If we leave things there, at the cross, then it would be difficult to avoid characterizing mercy as twice cursed, in a cosmic way cursed. We shall only have eroticized suffering,

⁸⁵ They both speak of its object as "mankind" rather than the neighbor, too; see Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1966), no. 82, 81. It is as if, absent Christ, we can no longer have a neighbor.

⁸⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, no. 62, 75; no. 202, 116; no. 206, 126.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, no. 260, 205.

⁸⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1969), Preface, no. 5, 19.

dabbled in a sort of mysticism of pain and trouble, and envisioned a tragic universe, one more tragic than Aristotle's.

The solution is not just a simple invocation of the resurrection, though it certainly depends on the shout of Easter Alleluias. We must in the first place recover the sense of the cross as a deed, and not just a display. True, it is a display of the compassion of God. God's mercy, the mercy shared by the three Persons, is manifested in the obedience of the Son unto death, displayed in his human sorrow for our sin. We see human mercy as the vehicle of divine mercy. Because it is a human mercy, it is an effective communication of divine mercy than which none greater can be imagined. Also, the cross is a deed, a work; it changes things; it changes, not God, but our relation to God because it is satisfaction for sin.⁸⁹ Let us hear St. Thomas again: "The cause of his interior suffering was, in the first place, all the sins of the human race, for which he was satisfying by suffering."⁹⁰ The very sorrowing of Christ is his satisfying for sin. Christ's compassion is therefore the heart of the atonement psychologically grasped. His sorrow for sin, which is his pity on us, pleases the Father more than our sins displease him. Here, sorrow is the effective remedy of our plight, as stated above, for it is something created, economic, that outweighs the created, economic evil of sin. Here there is established the "superabundance" of the justice of the cross the Holy Father refers to in *Dives in Misericordia*.⁹¹ At the same time, this human compassion of Christ, because it is the compassion of a divine person and the vehicle of divine mercy, is a mercy in both its object, including sin, and its efficacy, powerful for a new creation, beyond any purely human mercy. It is a human mercy than which no greater can be conceived; it is a divine mercy than which no greater can be received.

In the second place, the solution depends also on what we take the person to be. It is therefore a matter of seeing what the person of Christ is. To paraphrase the Holy Father, the love that is displayed in the cross is a love that not only fixes trouble, but connects persons together in such a way that they become more personal. Especially, with the person of Christ, what is manifested is the expansiveness of the divinized humanity of Christ, an instrument whereby all are included, all invited to the wedding feast of the Lamb. What we behold in the fullness of the Paschal

⁸⁹ For the cross as deed and not just display, see David S. Yeago, "Crucified Also for Us under Pontius Pilate," in *Nicene Christianity: The Future for a New Ecumenism*, ed. Christopher R. Seitz (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 87–105.

⁹⁰ ST III, q. 46, a. 6: "Doloris autem interioris causa fuit, primo quidem, omnia peccata humani generis, pro quibus satisfacibat patiendo."

⁹¹ *Dives in Misericordia*, §7.

Mystery is the completion of the incarnate person of Christ by his inclusion of other persons in his own mission, and the perfection of our persons in being so included.⁹² It is at this personal level that the Holy Father directs us to the twice blest character of mercy.

Of course St. Thomas understands that mercy is twice blest, redounding to the good also of the one who is merciful since, after all, he counts it as a virtue, and the virtues are perfections of the one who exercises them. But does he have a sense of the precise Christological point that is being made by the Holy Father? He seems, perhaps, to have gone beyond St. Thomas as St. Thomas has gone beyond Aristotle. Of course, we may look to Thomas's commentaries on Colossians 1:24, where our satisfaction fills out Christ's because enabled by Christ, and Ephesians 1:23, where we find the reality of Christ as Head dependent on the Body. Even so, we do not find so stark a statement as this, when, speaking of the love elicited by Christ's mercy in us, the Holy Father says of it that it is "a kind of 'mercy' shown by each one of us to the Son of the eternal Father." He adds: "... could man's dignity be more highly respected and ennobled, for, in obtaining mercy, he is in a sense the one who at the same time 'shows mercy'?"⁹³ He does not want to say only that dignity is restored when the heart of stone is plucked out and the heart of flesh inserted, nor even also to advert to our share in the sufferings of Christ. The strength of the Holy Father was his aliveness to the truly personal level, where we interact with Christ the Lord face to face.

The history of Jesus, the unfolding of his humanity in his human perceptions, insights, evaluations, choices, actions are the revelation of a divine person. And this is so in a context where he cannot perceive, see, choose, act by himself alone, in isolation. He cannot be alone because it is a human context, and human beings are political animals, finding their proper perfection because enabled fully to act only in the company of other men. So, other persons necessarily enter into display of his person and the accomplishment of his mission: which is a matter of the human dignity of a divine person. This is why the contemplation of the Lord includes and is furthered by the contemplation of Peter, and John, of the

⁹² Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama*, vol. 4: *The Action*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), 456: "In concrete terms, Christ only exists together with the community of saints united in the Immaculata, together with the communion of the ministerial office visibly united in Peter and his successors. . . ." This is the obverse of the truth that we derive our theological "persons" from Christ, for which see, e.g., *Theo-Drama*, vol. 3: *Dramatis Personae: Persons in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1992), 246–49, 270–71.

⁹³ *Dives in Misericordia*, §8.

Syrophoenician woman, of the man born blind, of the man let down on a pallet, of the lepers, and all those who come in his way. We cannot fully contemplate him and know him apart from also knowing them. All these are sinners. Never more do we know him, therefore, than when we behold them as targets of his love, which in a sinful world is to say targets of his mercy. So, they enable to the Lord to be the Lord; they let the Son show himself and in that way be who he is in the economy of salvation.

Not everything has been inscribed in St. Thomas. We can allow the Holy Father to say something St. Thomas did not. Even so, I seem to hear the Common Doctor speak to this topic, too:

Christ by his humanity wanted to manifest his divinity. And therefore by living with men, which is proper to man, he showed his divinity to all by preaching and by doing miracles, and by living innocently and justly among men.⁹⁴

Apart from conversation and commerce with men, his mission could not be accomplished.

Let us end as the Holy Father was wont to end so many of his writings. If we never know Christ except in knowing his mercy and so in contemplating his relation to sinner, we must add that this contemplation is itself aided by contemplating him in his relation with Mary. Because of her sinlessness, Mary becomes all the more important for our knowledge of her son. We need to see him interact with human beings who are sinners, but also, just so we can judge that the more nicely, also we need to see him interact with a human person who is not a sinner. We need to see that human person who is not a sinner interact with us on the strength of his prior love. Our appreciation of Mary as the Mother of Mercy is a part of our appreciation of Mercy Incarnate who drew his flesh from her—perhaps, never more than in contemplating him in his relation to Mary, the mother of mercy. This, too, the Holy Father knew.⁹⁵ NEV

⁹⁴ ST III, q. 40, a. 1, ad 1: “Christus per humanitatem suam voluit manifestare divinitatem. Et ideo, conversando cum hominibus, quod est proprium hominis, manifestavit omnibus suam divinitatem, praedicando et miracula faciendo, et innocenter et iuste inter homines conversando.”

⁹⁵ *Dives in Misericordia*, §9.