

The Christian Humanism of Karol Wojtyła and Thomas Aquinas

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KAROL WOJTYŁA AND THOMAS AQUINAS are separated by seven hundred years. One was a twentieth-century diocesan priest and bishop, the other a thirteenth-century Dominican friar. One came of age in the maelstrom of one of the darkest periods of recorded history, caught between the pincers of two maliciously anti-Christian totalitarianisms, the other in a conflicted but still relatively stable Christian culture. One entered into the philosophical conversation as the modern world was giving way to the postmodern, while the other dialogued and debated in an unambiguously premodern context. Despite these significant differences, the two thinkers can illumine one another precisely because of the overwhelmingly important thing that they had in common, that is, their faith in the God/man Jesus Christ. Both believed that the mystery of creation and the mystery of God are most richly disclosed in the Incarnation and hence both took that event as the lens through which all of reality is properly surveyed.

In this article, I will concentrate on the Christian humanism that emerges in the writings of Wojtyła and Aquinas, a perspective that is a thoroughgoing paradox. For both thinkers, the human being is fully alive precisely in the measure that he conforms himself to the radical obedience of Jesus Christ, which is to say, Jesus' utter surrender in love to the Father. For both, authentic human freedom is had in an act of self-forgetting and self-abandonment. What makes this a paradox and not a contradiction is the oddness of the person to whom the surrender is offered: a God whose entire being is a being for the other, a God who is nothing but the giver of gifts. I will develop this insight in two basic stages. First, I shall examine some key texts of Thomas Aquinas dealing with Incarnation, Creation, and

the nature of God, in the hopes of explicating Thomas's understanding of God as non-competitively and non-contrastively transcendent to the world. Next, against this background, I shall examine some themes in the theological ethics of Karol Wojtyła, endeavoring to show that, for him, robust human flourishing is possible only through a Christ-like abandonment to God, or to state it more abstractly, that freedom is most itself when it is placed in correlation to the truth.

The Distinction in Thomas Aquinas

In his dismissive assessment of Thomas Aquinas, Bertrand Russell said that Thomas was a competent commentator on Aristotle, but no more, and that this modest achievement was out of all proportion to his enormous reputation. Such a construal is possible only for someone who read Aquinas inattentively, for what makes Thomas so interesting is precisely the way he twists and turns Aristotle's language, struggling to make it speak a truth that Aristotle himself never envisioned. Thomas Pruffer said that Aquinas spoke "a fractured Aristotlese," implying that, when Aquinas employed it, the rhetoric of the Philosopher broke under the weight of something it couldn't quite bear, viz. the Incarnation of God. It is my contention that the entire theology of Thomas—especially as he articulates it in the second *Summa*—is conditioned by this great fact and hence becomes unintelligible apart from it. Therefore, if we want to understand his view of God, cosmos, and the human, we must turn first to the texts on the enfleshment of the Son of God.

The opening question of the third part of the *Summa theologiae* is this: whether it is *conueniens* (fitting) that God become a creature. After entertaining objections on both metaphysical and aesthetic grounds, Thomas answers that the Incarnation was supremely fitting because God is the ultimate good and the good, as the pseudo-Dionysius argued, is *diffisivum sui* (diffusive of itself), and there could be no greater self-gift than that God would become a creature out of love. In a word, the Incarnation was fitting because it was peculiarly characteristic of the one whose very nature is self-offering. Now, to press the matter a bit, this act on the part of God could be seen as good only in the measure that it benefited the one who received it. In so many of the ancient mythologies, gods and goddesses "become" human, but this takes place in an invasive and manipulative way. What stands behind Thomas's discussion, of course, is the great anti-pagan formulation of the Council of Chalcedon, that the Incarnation takes place through the hypostatic joining of two natures, divine and human, that remain, even in the union, distinct and integral. This means that God "becomes" a creature without ceasing to be God or

violating the integrity of the creature he becomes. The closeness of God does not undermine humanity, but rather enhances it.

Robert Sokolowski has pointed out with great insistence that such a state of affairs could hold only if there is an absolutely basic distinction between God and the world. Were God in any sense a creaturely or finite nature, a being *in* the world, he could not become a creature without some sort of compromising either of his own being or that of the thing that he becomes.¹ This is true because there is a mutual exclusivity at the ontological level between any two finite natures: An antelope “becomes” a lion only by being devoured, and a house becomes ash only by being destroyed. But since in Christ God enters into creation in the most intimate sense without undermining creaturely integrity, without ontological violence, God must be utterly unlike that which he enters. Were he of the same type as a worldly nature, he couldn’t establish the closeness to a worldly nature that is described in the doctrine of the Incarnation. Here we begin to sense the high paradox of the central Christian claim. This divine otherness that we have been describing cannot be construed simply and one-sidedly as “transcendence,” as though God were, in Karl Barth’s phrase, a distant planet or a Greek philosophical idol.² Were God simply “spatially” or even “quantitatively” other—a highest or supreme being among many—he would still be a worldly nature and still therefore incapable of affecting the Incarnation. The God of Jesus Christ must be qualitatively other, not so much somewhere else, but *somehow* else, this peculiar otherness allowing him to establish an unheard of intimacy with that which he is not.

Kathryn Tanner has expanded upon Sokolowski’s formula by speaking of God’s non-competitive and non-contrastive transcendence to the world. She implies that God is other but precisely not the way that one worldly nature is contrastively over and against another.³ God’s to-be does not facedown the to-be of a creature, competing with it for time, space, or ontological primacy. God differs from the world to be sure, but he differs differently than creatures differ from one another. When in the *Proslogion*, St. Anselm “defines” God as “that than which no greater can be thought,” he is giving voice to this same paradox.⁴ If God were a being in

¹ Robert Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 34–39.

² Karl Barth, *The Humanity of God*.

³ Kathryn Tanner, *Jesus, Humanity, and the Trinity: A Brief Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 1–8.

⁴ Anselm of Canterbury, *Proslogion*, in *St. Anselm: Basic Writings*, trans. S. N. Deane (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1974), 7.

or alongside of the world (like a classical god or goddess), he would not be that than which no greater can be thought, since he plus the rest of the world would be greater than he alone.⁵ God must exist in such a way that the universe's existence neither adds to nor subtracts from his own being; while retaining his complete otherness, he must be, in Nicholas of Cusa's phrase, the *non Aliud*. And this is why, furthermore, Thomas Aquinas rarely used the phrase *ens summum* (highest being) when speaking of God, preferring instead the more mysterious *ipsum esse subsistens* (the sheer act of to-be itself). The unreceived energy of existence is, obviously, radically unlike any existing thing, even as it enters "by essence, presence, and power" into all existing things, from archangels to atoms.

What Sokolowski calls "the Christian distinction" is especially on display in Aquinas's doctrine of creation. In the mythologies and cosmologies of the ancient world, the universe comes into being through some act of primordial violence, one god defeating another, or a divine principle wrestling some recalcitrant force into submission. The rational cosmologies of Plato and Aristotle retain a good deal of this mythic quality. Plato holds that matter is shaped by the Demiurge in accord with the patterns of the forms, and Aristotle argues that prime matter is drawn into form through the attractive power of the prime mover. In both cases, the divine influence is aggressive and external: Something that stands over and against God is brought into order through divine action. There is none of this in Aquinas. Following the Church Fathers, Thomas speaks of *creatio ex nihilo*, the bringing of the universe in its entirety into being from nothing. Creation in the proper sense is not the shaping of matter (since prime matter is itself a creature); it is not a spatial event (since space is a creature); and it does not take place in time (since time itself is the result of creation). There is, quite literally, nothing "outside" of God that would be ontologically capable of receiving the act of creation. In the third question of the *De potentia*—where Thomas develops this counter-intuitive notion most thoroughly—we find a remark that is paradoxical to an almost Zen-like degree: "[T]hat which receives the creative act is created by that which it receives."⁶ In a word, absolutely everything that exists in the world derives its being completely, and in every aspect, from the creative power of God. This means, on the one hand, that the creature is utterly dependent on God, but it entails, on the other hand, that there is absolutely nothing in the creative act that is violent, aggressive, or invasive. The world in its totality is from

⁵ Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason*, 8.

⁶ Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestio disputata de potentia Dei*, q. 3, a. 3 in *Quaestiones disputatae*, Vol. II (Turin: Marietti, 1965), 43.

God, and God, in the most radical sense, lets the world be. What comes forth from God is utterly of God, yet, as finite and created, it is infinitely other than God, so that the integrity of creation is a function of its absolute dependency upon the Creator. Admittedly, none of this makes sense in the context of our ordinary speech about worldly things. If a person came too close to me, I would accuse him of being domineering and manipulative; if a woman were utterly dependent upon a man (or vice versa), we would properly describe their relationship as dysfunctional. But once more, it is just this sort of over-and-againstness and mutual exclusivity that is being denied in the doctrine of *creation ex nihilo*. It is not despite the divine closeness, but rather precisely because of it, that the creature can be itself.

Correlative to the doctrine of creation from nothing is the doctrine of the *analogia entis*. For Thomas, God cannot be construed, as we have seen, as one being among many; rather he must be conceived as the act of being which is otherly other than the realm of beings. God and creatures are not—as in Duns Scotus—beings categorized as varying types in the genus “existence.” Rather, created things are participants in the primordial act of existence and hence are beings in only a mitigated and analogical sense. None of this implies pantheism of course, but it does mean that all of finite existence, while retaining its creaturely integrity, shares here and now in the to-be of God. Furthermore, the analogical conception of being entails the connectedness of all finite things to one another through God. Since all created realities come into being through a continual act of creation, they are all, despite their enormous differences at the surface level, linked together at the deepest ground of their existence. When St. Francis spoke of “brother sun and sister moon,” he was using language that was, at the same time, poetically evocative and metaphysically exact. To be sure, creaturely connections can never be utterly non-competitive or non-contrastive, but when they are affected at the level of *creatio ex nihilo*, they participate in something of God’s way of relating. This is why Augustine could remark that one person loves another more and better when he loves him “in God.” As I have argued elsewhere, the gothic rose windows—composed of the many medallions arranged in interconnected harmony around the central image of Christ—are symbolic expressions of this participation metaphysics.⁷

Now what does this Incarnational ontology have to do with Thomas’s understanding of human flourishing? In a word, everything. Like all creatures, human beings are most integrally themselves in the measure that they are totally dependent upon the non-competitive God. The difference

⁷ Robert Barron, *Heaven in Stone and Glass* (New York: Crossroad, 2000), 33–34.

is that human beings can consciously and freely either affirm or deny this ontological paradox; they can co-operate with the non-contrastive transcendence of God, or they can resist it. At the heart of the moral life, for Thomas Aquinas, is the realization of our freedom (our choice for the good) in surrender to the God who not only transcends all earthly values, but whose very goodness consists in a letting-be of the other. Our freedom is properly correlated to the truth of things (organic interconnection) and to the Truth who is God (non-competitive transcendence).

The Compromise of the Distinction

What we have been describing is the extremely subtle equilibrium that characterizes the Christian worldview. Because the relationships between God and the universe and among created things are so “delicate” in their metaphysical structure, it is quite easy to misconstrue them. It required the graced genius of an Aquinas to articulate them with even relative adequacy. In both Protestantism and its secular counterpart, philosophical modernity, we witness a fudging of *the* distinction and a concomitant misunderstanding of the rapport between the divine and the non-divine, a mistake that has had far-reaching theoretical and practical consequences. Before turning to the writings of Karol Wojtyła, it is necessary at least to sketch the contours of this dissolution, since his humanism is in many ways a response to it.

It is commonly remarked that Martin Luther placed great stress on the transcendence of God, but it is less often appreciated how his particular interpretation of that transcendence flowed from his reading of the two-natures doctrine of Chalcedon. As we saw, the classical tradition—very much including Aquinas—stressed the non-competitiveness of the natures joined in the one person of Christ, but Luther construed the natures in a much more contrastive manner, so that the divinity of Jesus threatened to swallow up his humanity. This led to the dichotomization between Creator and creature that can be seen throughout Luther’s theology: For God to get all of the glory, humanity and the cosmos as a whole must be stripped of glory. God is placed by Luther in a transcendent realm almost as a gesture of protection, as though any closer contact with the world would compromise him. This distantiation was made possible, furthermore, through the univocal conception of being introduced by Scotus and given fuller expression by Ockham and his nominalist successors who in turn helped to shape Luther’s philosophical vision.⁸

⁸ Colin Gunton, *The One, the Three, and the Many: God, Creation, and the Culture of Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 56–58.

This Protestant misinterpretation of the God/world relationship was bequeathed to the secular philosophers of modernity, who in various ways, sought to resolve the tension between humanity and a fundamentally competitive God. Descartes, Berkeley, and the Deists rendered God a somewhat distant and diffident justification for the essentially secular projects of politics and science. Spinoza solved the problem by simply dissolving the distinction between God and the world altogether: *Deus sive natura*. And most dramatically, Hobbes, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Marx, and Sartre saw that a competitive God had to be eliminated if humanity is to reach full political, social, and personal flourishing. Nowhere is this principle more clearly stated than in Sartre's pithy syllogism: "[I]f God exists, I cannot be free; but I am free. Therefore God does not exist."⁹ If Luther separated God and humans in order to protect God, the atheists did so in order to protect us. Michael Buckley has shown that as modernity unfolded, the competitive God took on more and more the features of the devil, the ancient "enemy of the human race."¹⁰

It has been central to the project of Louis Dupré to demonstrate that modernity involved the unweaving of the intertwined tapestry of God, world, and self that classical Christianity had maintained.¹¹ As we saw, when God is understood as the sheer act of being itself, then cosmos and soul find their integral meaning in relation to the divine. But when God is demonized, world and psyche lose their ontological moorings and hence their connection to God and to one another. The loss of objective meaning is correlative to the characteristically modern positing of the subject as source of meaning. Dupré has shown that it was not subjectivism itself that marks the modern—for a kind of turn to the subject can be found in Plato, Plotinus, Augustine, and Bonaventure—but rather the view that the subject creates value rather than recognizing it. Sartre's existentialism is therefore but the explicitation of what was implicit in modernity from Descartes on.

Karol Wojtyła and the Problem of Freedom

As a twentieth-century son of Poland, Karol Wojtyła was perhaps uniquely positioned to survey and understand the tension between the

⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Paris: Les Editions de Nagel, 1970), 21.

¹⁰ Michael Buckley, "Modernity and the Satanic Face of God" in *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity: The Thought of Louis Dupré* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 101.

¹¹ Louis Dupré, *Passage to Modernity: An Essay in the Hermeneutics of Nature and Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 93–105.

systems we have been describing. As a young man, in the twenties and thirties of the last century, Wojtyła took in through every pore a vibrantly Catholic culture. In the liturgy, public devotions, poetry and drama, personal prayer, and the political/social life itself, the young man witnessed a world permeated by the Catholic attitude and spirit. Then commencing in the late 1930s and continuing through the 1940s, 50s, and 60s, Wojtyła found himself caught between two ideological systems—Nazism and Communism—that were made possible by the breakdown of the Catholic synthesis.¹² As he wrestled with these especially fierce outgrowths of modernity, both of which claimed to be an authentic humanism, he felt compelled to articulate why the true friend of humanity was precisely the incarnational Christianity that both Nazism and Communism repudiated.

The Catholicism that Wojtyła asorbed viscerally through prayer and aesthetically through drama came to him in a more intellectual form during his studies in Rome. There under the inspiration of Garrigou-Lagrange and others at the Angelicum, Wojtyła studied the philosophy and theology of Aquinas, as well as the mysticism of John of the Cross. Upon his return to Poland as a priest, he did pastoral work for a brief period and then, at the prompting of the Cardinal Archbishop of Cracow, Adam Sapieha, he began studies for a second, civilly recognized doctorate.¹³ The topic he chose for his research was the phenomenological ethics of Max Scheler, one of the most gifted and spiritually alert disciples of Husserl. In the prologue to his major work *The Acting Person*, Wojtyła admitted that, despite his disagreements with him, Scheler has remained perhaps the profoundest influence on his own work.¹⁴ Therefore, to understand precisely how he sought to engage modernity philosophically, it is important for us to explore Wojtyła's relationship to the Schelerian project.

What Wojtyła immediately appreciated in phenomenology was what attracted figures such as Dietrich von Hildebrand and Edith Stein to the discipline, viz. its robust objectivism. Over and against the tired Kantianism of his time, Husserl had famously cried *zu den Sachen selbst* (to the things themselves). The Kantian distinction between noumenon and

¹² See George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II* (New York: Harper Collins, 1999), especially 44–87.

¹³ Jarosław Kupczak, OP, *Destined for Liberty: The Human Person in the Philosophy of Karol Wojtyła/John Paul II* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2000), 6–7.

¹⁴ Rocco Buttiglione, *Karol Wojtyła: The Thought of the Man Who Became John Paul II* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1997), 118.

phenomenon Husserl took to be wrong-headed and counter-productive, and he accordingly encouraged his disciples to describe the objectively real as it appeared to a properly intentional consciousness. Max Scheler applied this method to the problems of ethics, arguing that morality flows ultimately from certain basic intuitions of objective value (*Wert*). The suspicion of Kant that Scheler inherited from Husserl took an even more pointed form in the context of this ethical analysis. Kant had driven a wedge between the interior and purely formal realm of the categorical imperative and the exterior dimension of feeling and inclination, insisting that the former was alone the ground for proper moral deliberation. Scheler reacted strongly against this excessive rationalism and formalism and held that moral intuition is largely affective, embodied in nature, a feeling with the values that show themselves.¹⁵ This Schelerian stress on bodiliness and passion would exert a powerful influence on Wojtyła's moral thinking. Another feature of the Kantian moral system that Scheler found unpalatable was the element of autonomous self-regard. The claim that "the only thing that can be described as unambiguously good is a good will" led, Scheler felt, to a sort of Pharisaism, a fussily introspective obsession with the integrity of the will itself. Better for the moral subject to lose himself in the intuition of objective value.¹⁶

Wojtyła's analysis of Scheler touched on both of these reactions to Kant. Though he revered the importance of the body in moral assessment, Wojtyła held that feelings as such could never ground the ethical life. He was convinced that values had to be apprehended primarily by intellect, lest one devolve into an unstable and relativizing subjectivism. He thought that the Kantian autonomy, rightly understood, was not Pharisaism but rather a gathering or creation of self that was indispensable to the moral project. As he reflected further, he came to see that Kant and Scheler situated themselves on opposing sides of a whole series of unhealthy dualisms: between duty and inclination, autonomy and passivity, freedom and truth. His own project then took shape as a bridging of these divides, especially the last. As a phenomenologist, Scheler stood, however inadequately, for the great classical value of objective truth, while Kant stood for the central modern value of freedom and self-determination. What they lacked was the integrating Catholic worldview that would allow for the co-existence of both values.

Wojtyła's mature thought came to expression in two texts, *Love and Responsibility*, essentially lectures from his Lublin course on the morality

¹⁵ Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty*, 34–36.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11–12.

of marriage and sexuality, and *The Acting Person*, an extremely dense philosophical meditation on freedom and action, which he penned while attending the sessions of the Second Vatican Council. The very difficulty of the prose in *The Acting Person*—even seasoned philosophers often found it impenetrable—led some to speculate that Wojtyła was trying to keep his deepest intentions hidden from Communist censors. Then again, perhaps it was simply the result of blending the two quite disparate philosophical systems of Thomism and phenomenology.

The best way to get at Wojtyła's argument in *The Acting Person* is to revisit the classical Thomistic distinction between an *actus humanus* and an *actus hominis*.¹⁷ The latter, of course, is something that a man happens to do, like sneezing or reacting instinctively upon being startled, whereas the former is an act that proceeds from the deliberation of intellect and the choice of will. An *actus hominis* is accidental to the person, whereas an *actus humanus* is the product of the gathered and responsible self. Against this Thomistic background and in accord with his Schelerian training, Wojtyła endeavored to analyze more precisely the nature of such an act. On the one hand, a properly human act is a response to an objective value that appears in the world, to some good that is consciously appreciated as desirable. Here Wojtyła thinks that Scheler's phenomenology is more correct than Kant's deontology. On the other hand, a truly human act is also supremely subjective in the measure that it contributes to the process of self-creation. Here Kant's characteristically modern stress on autonomy is more correct than Scheler's insistence on passivity before the world of value.

We have to proceed with some care at this point, for it is quite easy to misconstrue Wojtyła's language in an almost Pelagian direction. What he means is that there are two objects—one direct and the other indirect—to every deliberate moral act. First, the good to be sought—food, shelter, fame, friendship—is desired, but secondly, the good of the self, the excellence of the moral subject as such, is simultaneously sought. In moral choice, one is always desiring a particular end and choosing the kind of person one wants to be, so that the subject itself is treated quasi-objectively. Wojtyła went so far as to say that the person, as efficient cause of his own deliberate action, is at the same time, the efficient cause of his own self.¹⁸ The debt to Aristotle's theory of habit and character formation should be clear here, but Wojtyła radicalized Aristotle in light of modernity's stress on freedom and autonomy. The will's active shaping of character "adds to the world a perfection no one else can add," a new *kind*

¹⁷ Karol Wojtyła, *The Acting Person*, trans. and ed. Andrzej Potocki and Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979), xiii–xiv.

¹⁸ Buttiglione, 129–40.

of value. Borrowing from the Kantian tradition, he speaks of this capacity to stand over and freely shape the moral self as “transcendental.” In this emphasis on self-determination, Wojtyla sounds like Kant, Jefferson, and Rousseau and does in fact push beyond the insufficiently dynamic anthropology of Aquinas.¹⁹ What makes all the difference—and here we come to the heart of it—is that this act of self-creation does not proceed from the dynamism of the will itself nor from an arbitrary choice, but from the always concomitantly chosen objective good. The objective transcendentals—the good, the true, and the beautiful—ground and make possible the subjective “transcendentalism” that Wojtyla described. This is the same dovetailing of freedom and truth that stood at the very heart of Aquinas’s Christian humanist project.

Jesus Christ as Subjective and Objective Norm

To this point, we have seen how Karol Wojtyla reconciled, through his own version of transcendental anthropology, the modern concern for autonomy and the classical concern for truth, but we haven’t yet considered the rapport between freedom and the truth of God, especially as that truth has been made manifest in Jesus Christ. This relationship, which, for reasons both methodological and prudential, was relatively muted in Wojtyla’s philosophical writings, came to rich and explicit expression in the encyclical letters that he would write as Pope John Paul II. As many commentators have noted, the passage from *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 22—“it is only in the mystery of the Word Incarnate that light is shed on the mystery of man”—has served as a *leitmotif* and hermeneutical key for John Paul II.²⁰ The adoption of this theme has extremely important methodological implications, for it reverses the momentum of so much liberal theological speculation that has tended to read (and hence misread) Christ in light of man instead of vice versa. But for John Paul, it has a more substantive meaning as well, viz. that Jesus Christ is the truth about humanity in both the objective and subjective sense, that is to say, he is the goal that the will seeks and he is the proper structure of the autonomous person. In the last section of this essay, I will sketch the outlines of this Christocentric anthropology.

The opening chapter of John Paul’s 1993 encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* is an analysis of Matthew’s account of the conversation between Jesus and the rich young man. Found in all three of the synoptic Gospels, this scene has been identified by N. T. Wright as a turning-point and hinge in the

¹⁹ Kupczak, *Destined for Liberty*, 57.

²⁰ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 169.

Gospel narrative, and for John Paul as well it is a key text. For the pope, to grasp the meaning of this story is to understand the central dynamic of the New Testament, the free response to Jesus' offer of eternal life. Stanley Hauerwas has exulted that this major statement of Catholic moral theology commences, not with philosophical abstractions, but with Jesus. Though it certainly represents a departure from more standard accounts, the Christocentrism of *Veritatis Splendor* should not be surprising to the attentive student of Karol Wojtyła's thought, for what is on explicit display here, I maintain, is the Christianity that had, from the beginning, characterized all of Wojtyła's moral philosophy, even in its most abstruse expressions. The truth to which subjective freedom is oriented has always been ultimately the truth who is the person of Christ.

In Matthew's telling, a young man comes to Jesus and asks, "Teacher, what good must I do to have eternal life?" For the pope, this honest and searching question symbolized the universal longing of the human being for moral integrity.²¹ As such, it is not primarily a question regarding rules, commandments, and prohibitions, but a quest for "the full meaning of life." Jesus' initial response is the somewhat enigmatic: "Why do you ask me about what is good? There is only one who is good" (Mt. 19:17). In fact, this cuts to the heart of the matter. The greatest mistake that the moral searcher can make is to presume that the goal of his quest can be found in any good or truth other than God. One of the most insistently repeated themes of the Bible is that, since we are made according to God's image, we will not find fulfillment in anything other than God, or in any simulacrum of divinity. This insight is repeated by practically every major figure in our tradition, most famously and poetically by Augustine ("our hearts are restless until they rest in thee), more rationally but just as clearly by Thomas Aquinas in the opening questions of the *Prima secundae*.

How is this prime objective value to be sought? Jesus asks the rich young man whether he has followed the commandments—"you shall not murder; you shall not commit adultery; you shall not bear false witness; honor your mother and father . . . love your neighbor as yourself"—and the young man responds affirmatively. Here we are at the first stage of moral development, but the distinctive mark of biblical ethics is already visible. Since the one we seek is himself an act of self-forgetting love, we attain him only to the degree that we become internally conformed to his way of being. Hence all of those egregious violations of love—murder, adultery, hatred of one's neighbor, etc.—must be eliminated in the seeker

²¹ John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, in *The Encyclicals of John Paul II*, ed. J. Michael Miller, CSB. (Huntington, IN: Our Sunday Visitor, 1996), 679.

after God. The pope cites the clearest New Testament affirmation of this principle: "If anyone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love the God whom he has not seen" (1 Jn. 4:20). The reaching of the goal presupposes, in a word, a preliminary gathering of the self around the precepts of love.

But the real drama of this story begins precisely at the point where one might be tempted to say that ethical reflection ends. Somewhat plaintively, the young man says, "I have kept all these; what do I still lack" (Mt. 19:20)? Though we may suspect that it is only someone very young who could claim that he has kept all of the commandments, we still notice something of great importance in his intuition and question. Because the human being is made in God's image, his soul has a kind of infinite *capax*, an expansiveness that corresponds, however imperfectly, to the fullness of the divine reality. Therefore the simple keeping of the fundamental commandments—most of which are negative in character—can never be enough to satisfy the spirit. In Mark's version of the story, Jesus then looks at the man with love and says, "Go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come and follow me" (Mk. 10:21). The look of love, of course, is a marvelous detail, for it signals, not only Jesus' encouragement of the young man and an approval of his question, but also the divine grace that is required for the next step in the moral itinerary. Once the soul has been shaped in the direction of love through the discipline of the commandments, it is now ready for a more complete and dramatic self-emptying. It is ready for the *sequela Christi*, the following of Christ on the path of discipleship. This is a matter, not only of external imitation, but of the deepest inner conformity to Christ, a walking with him in the manner of an apprentice shaping his life in accord with his master's. It goes beyond the commandments, because it involves a total gift of self, even to the point of death, for Christ leads the disciple in one direction, the cross. This "law of the gift," as George Weigel describes it, comes to more explicit expression at the end of *Veritatis Splendor* when the pope analyzes the limit case of Christian martyrdom.²² Though he doesn't court death, the disciple of Jesus accepts death when circumstances are such that there is no other way to bear witness to the holiness of God and the dignity of human life.

A first theme to which we should attend in the story of the rich young man is that of freedom. Of his own free will, the man comes up to Jesus and poses his question. Jesus answers him and then stands open to further

²² Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, 136–37.

dialogue; finally, he invites him to the deepest form of life. At no point in this conversation is there a hint of violence or coercion. Even at the end, when the young man walks away sad, unable to respond to Jesus' demand, the Lord lets him go. The true God, as we have seen, does not compete with freedom; rather he awakens it and directs it. Second, we notice a dovetailing of the inner and outer, of the objective and the subjective, that we remarked in Wojtyła's philosophical treatment of the human act. The choice of the proper object for freedom—viz. God—corresponds at every stage to the choice to be conformed unto Christ. The *sequela Christi* is hence freedom's objective and subjective norm. In choosing Christ, the person opts for his proper end (because Jesus is the God he seeks), and he creates his proper self (for Jesus is the paradigm of a renewed humanity). When Paul says, "it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me," he implies that the fully gathered self is the self that is conformed to the point of identity with the thoughts and desires of Jesus. Thomas Aquinas confirms this intuition in saying that Christ is, simultaneously, the Truth and the Way, the former because he is God and the latter because he is human.

Conclusion

It begins and ends with the law of the gift. Thomas Aquinas thought that the Incarnation was *conveniens* because it corresponds so fully with the kind of reality God is, namely one that is *diffusivum sui*. As God gives himself away, humanity is lifted up. By the same token, Thomas thought that full human flourishing was accomplished in the act of surrender to the ultimate good who is God. Karol Wojtyła, speaking in a more modern idiom, said that human freedom is realized in a surrender to the truth of God; and then he announced that that truth is none other than a God who hands over his life to us. For both thinkers, the most authentic humanism, therefore, consists in a meeting of two ecstasies, divine and human, a dovetailing of two freedoms, a coming-together of an infinite and finite mode of being-for-the-other.

In a word, for both Thomas Aquinas and Karol Wojtyła, authentic humanism *is* Jesus Christ.