

The Truth of Our Destiny: Fragility, Ideals, and Redemption

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Fragility has become a commonplace in today's philosophy and theology. The fragility of human life is part of its unique beauty. At the same time, it can easily become an excuse to mediocrity and, paradoxically, an obstacle to become truly human. American campuses, for example, promote "safe spaces" where every "no" or "you are wrong" is refrained. In ecclesiastical reviews, fragility is invoked as the justification of evil actions. In these pages, we will discuss the truth of human destiny. We will address our fragility and ideals from the perspective of redemption.

The Ulysses of Dante's *Inferno* manifested the permanent tension of the human being toward greatness: "Consider well the seed that gave you birth: you were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of virtue and knowledge" (canto 26, lines 118–20; trans. mine). Crossing the Pillars of Hercules, and thus going beyond the known and tamed world, he tried to satisfy his desire for the infinite.

"Is it not written in your law, *I said, you are gods?*" Defending himself from the Jews, who wanted to stone him, Jesus revealed the vocation of the human being: "You shall be like gods" (cf. John 10:34; Ps 82:6). Not only is he the Son of God, but he calls his disciples to become partakers of his divine nature. This was the journey he proposed to them: From clay to man; from man to God. The Son of God became son of man, so that the son of man would become son of God. The desire of God for humanity is its deification. Nothing less.

In the human desire expressed by Ulysses, and in the intriguing words of

Jesus, we see great expectations. But is this not a confusion? On one hand, human desire led Ulysses and his men to destruction. On the other hand, the enigmatic words of the Lord can easily be misunderstood, as they were first pronounced by the evil one in paradise, leading Adam and Eve to sin (Gen 3:5). Does not this manifest an excess, some kind of hubris? The truth of our destiny seems to be more concrete and humbler. We read in the Psalms: “Lord, my heart is not proud; nor are my eyes haughty. I do not busy myself with great matters, with things too sublime for me. Rather, I have stilled my soul. Like a weaned child with its mother, weaned is my soul” (131:1–2). Such sobriety seems necessary because “our years end like a sigh. Seventy is the sum of our years, or eighty, if we are strong; most of them are toil and sorrow; they pass quickly, and we are gone” (Ps 90:9–10).

Fragility needs to be taken into account. Jesus considered it, and accepted sinners among his disciples. Prostitutes and publicans followed him. The question—and the accusation—we face is whether the Catholic Church has forgotten the fragility of the human condition, and is offering an elitist proposal for a few, the “perfect,” leaving out the vast majority of the faithful. As we consider our fragility, should we not request more sobriety, humility, and meekness and less epic speeches and calls to greatness too sublime for us? The broader questions behind this pastoral question are: *What is the truth of our destiny? What is the relationship between the fragility of our human loves and relationships and divine redemption, between our enduring weakness and our desire for the infinite and the work of virtues and grace in us?* In other words: What are the concrete possibilities of man redeemed by Christ?

My proposal is that only the perspective of the truth of love—with its strong metaphysics and theology—is able to properly integrate fragility within the destiny and vocation of the human person. A truth without love or a love without truth will not be able to offer an answer faithful to the Gospel. Only the *Theology of the Body* of John Paul II, enriched by Benedict XVI’s Theology of Love and Pope Francis’s pedagogy of love, with its attention to human frailty, can offer an answer. This seems to be the pedagogy of Jesus with the Samaritan woman. He addressed her desire for true love and her frailty (see *Amoris Laetitia* [2016] §294). He did not deny the gravity of her situation, nor did he reduce the expectations for her life. Rather, he regenerated her as a moral subject, and he made her capable of a new kind of action, in the synergy of grace and virtue.

We will start by considering (1) the challenge and accusation against the teaching of the Church manifested in the theory of the gradualness of the law. Behind the revival of this proposal, we find (2) an individualistic anthropology which develops into what we can call the “neo-Pelagianism of

fragility.” To overcome this reductive view, we will need to distinguish the (3) different dimensions and levels of human fragility, and we will reconsider (4) the connection among fragility, vulnerability, and human excellence. From this anthropological foundation, we will see how Jesus Christ has embraced our fragility and has transformed it through (5) the gift of himself in the Paschal mystery. This will allow us to address (6) the problem of the gradualness of the law and the concrete possibilities of the man redeemed by Christ.

The Accusation: Ignoring Our Fragility

Is the Church tying up heavy burdens too hard to carry and laying them on people’s shoulders? (See Matt 23:4.) We could think this has been the case at least for the last five decades, since the turmoil before and after Pope Paul VI’s 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, the discussions about abortion and politics, the synods about the indissolubility of marriage, and more recently the discussion about the blessing of same sex couples, as well as the current controversy in America about Eucharistic coherence. Christianity seems to be indicating an ideal that is too high to reach. This generates the logical resentment, frustration, and abandonment of the faith.

In order to make sense of our weakness, some may think it would be more intelligent to accept the unavoidable compromises with our fragility and our vices. Rigidity, obsession with sexuality, and the use of the sacraments as a reward for the perfect will not help. Since we cannot ignore our fragility, it would seem urgent to have the “courage” to embrace its challenges and the maturity to reduce our expectations and make some compromises.

In the last years we have witnessed a revival of the proposal of the gradualness of the law, presented as a reasonable pedagogy regarding fragility.¹ The theory of the “gradualness of the law” was developed after the impact of the prophetic *Humanae Vitae*, and tried to offer a new interpretation of the relationship between conscience and law. Its point of departure was the impossibility of fulfilling the moral law of the Church (specifically about contraception and periodic abstinence; today it would apply to many other expressions of fragility). According to this position, there is an abyss between the official moral doctrine and the personal conscience, between abstract perfection and our concrete possibilities. Such separation can be saved only by adapting the moral law to the particular situation. The law establishes an

¹ For example, see Antonio Spadaro, “*Amoris Laetitia*: Struttura e significato dell’Esortazione apostolica post-sinodale di Papa Francesco,” *La civiltà cattolica*, April 23, 2016 (quaderno 3980, vol. 2), 105–28. Cf. *Amoris Laetitia* §§293–303.

ideal, which is good and holy, desirable but unattainable in the present. It needs to be adapted to the concrete situation and conscience. The norms adapt the law to our personal and concrete level. Thus, there should be “different degrees or forms of precept in God’s law for different individuals and situation” (as John Paul II characterized the claim in *Familiaris Consortio* [1981] §34).

In other words, since we all make mistakes in our life and we have knots that cannot be undone, we need to be offered a “fresh start.” According to the proponents of the “gradualness of the law,” the work of the good shepherd should be to adapt, proportion, and graduate the law of the Church “to the concrete possibilities of the human being, according to a balancing of the different goods at stake.”² Those concrete possibilities are established by looking at “reality,” that is, at the sociological and statistical data of the faithful.

We may find one of the sources of this proposal in Karl Rahner’s distinction between the existential level of the concrete action and the objective moral norm.³ According to this, a faithful could know of the existence of an official moral teaching but, in his conscience, reject it as valid and normative *for him*, perhaps because he is not sufficiently mature. In that case, there would be no subjective guilt in the faithful because the existential (categorical) level of the action is richer than the objective (transcendental) norm.

Bernard Häring presented two models of moral theology. The first one was based upon commandments that limit and forbid (*Grenzgebote*). In this case, norm and freedom were opposed to each other. The second model of moral theology encouraged the conscience to aspire to high ideals, without the imposition of the law. Here the commandments did not forbid, but set the goal (*Zielgebote*). In this situation, the teaching of the Church was supposed to guide toward high ideals, but not be normative.⁴ Human conscience should prevail over the norms. But we can ask ourselves: Was this the way Jesus treated the Samaritan woman at the well or the adulterous woman about to be stoned?

² John Paul II answered to this challenge already in a March 1, 1984, Speech to Priests participating at a Seminar on Responsible Procreation, quoted in *Veritatis Splendor* (1993) §103.

³ Cf. Karl Rahner, “On the Question of a Formal Existential Ethics,” in *Theological Writings*, vol. 2, *Man in the Church* (Baltimore, MD: Helicon, 1963), 217–34; cf. J. Larrú, “Gradualità e maturazione,” in *Dizionario su sesso, amore e fecondità*, ed. José Noriega, René Ecochard, and Isabelle Ecochard (Siena, Italy: Cantagalli, 2019), 442–50.

⁴ A more recently development of the law of gradualness is found in A. You, *La loi de gradualité: une nouveauté en morale? Fondements théologiques et applications* (Paris: Lethielleux, 1991).

The “Neo-Pelagianism of Fragility”: Canonizing Fragility?

The recent revival of the gradualness of the law is deeply connected with what *Placuit Deo* (the 2018 letter from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to all Catholic Bishops “On Certain Aspects of Christian Salvation”) described as a new form of Pelagianism spreading in our days. Such neo-Pelagianism sees the individual as radically autonomous and able to save itself, “without recognizing that, at the deepest level of being, he or she derives from God and from others” (§3). From this point of view, salvation depends on the strength of the individual or on purely human structures. Such individualism defaces the confession of faith in Christ as universal Savior. The figure of Jesus appears as a model that inspires generous actions, rather than as the one who transforms the entire human family. His grace does not bring radical healing or the regeneration of freedom (see note 9 in *Placuit Deo*).

Once we count exclusively on the limited strength of the individual, we can conclude that the Church is offering a goal that is too high for the human being. The salvation that God offers us is to be achieved with our own individual efforts alone (see *Placuit Deo* §12). The evangelical ideal needs to be adapted to our fragility. This is what we can call the “neo-Pelagianism of fragility,”⁵ a powerful and counterintuitive expression. Usually we would relate Pelagianism to asceticism and great expectations achieved through our own efforts. Neo-Pelagianism combines the radical isolation of the autonomous individual and the reduction of human expectations. Fragility, not grace, becomes the new criteria to determine our concrete possibilities.

By limiting the human concrete possibilities and expectations, the neo-Pelagianism of fragility also reduces the divine plan for humanity. Divinization, friendship with God, and perfection in charity are dismissed as empty and impossible ideals for the self-righteous. In this way, the power of divine grace is underestimated.

In addition to that, such “canonization of mediocrity” ignores the paradox of the human desire, highlighted by Maurice Blondel. Between our desires (the objects desired) and our Desire (the dynamism of our desire) there is a distance. When we try to satisfy all our desires, our Desire is not extinguished, but rather it intensifies. This is the enigma of the human being, who has a natural desire for the divine that he cannot fulfill by himself. The surrender to human fragility and the canonization of mediocrity not only leave this paradox unsolved, but worsen it.

⁵ See thesis 10 of the *Veritas Amoris* Project (veritasamoris.org/the-12-theses/).

As a result, through the rejection of the human desire for the infinite and the limitation of divine grace, human existence loses its *telos*, and therefore its dimension of vocation and journey. The life of the autonomous individual is limited to a succession of isolated episodes and events without unity and narrative.

What can we learn from this first approach? Human fragility is not properly integrated through its canonization. By reducing the expectations and accepting mediocrity as a given, both the human desire and the divine project are betrayed, and transcendence is lost. The rejection of excellence is not the true way of embracing fragility, but rather an attempt to find security in isolation and self-sufficiency. Ironically, the canonization of fragility becomes the rejection of dependence and vulnerability.

Some Key Distinctions

Some distinctions are essential if we want to properly understand human fragility.⁶ Martha Nussbaum's discussion of the Greek tragedians represents a first and most evident dimension of risk in human life.⁷ In our bodily and temporal existence, we are not in control. We are fragile. Accidents, disappointments, the loss of external goods, disasters, diseases—all can affect us and break our plans. This is the unavoidable dimension of *tuché*, or luck, expressed by Pindar. Our life is necessarily one susceptible to the capricious world.

From this basic experience, we understand a deeper philosophical truth. Human existence is contingent and dependent. We are not necessary, and it is possible for us to not exist. We are creatures. This “ontological poverty” entails dependence on every level of being: the various powers a man may employ are themselves given and held in existence by Someone else. Like the plants and the animals, “we do not independently possess the ‘means’ to begin to exist or to continue in existence.”⁸

In addition to the experience of ontological fragility, we have a dimension

⁶ It is necessary to distinguish the many different dimensions involved in human fragility. *Fragility* is the quality of being easily broken or damaged. *Frailty* is the condition of being weak or delicate. More negative is *infirmity*, a mental or physical weakness. *Vulnerability* is the quality or state of being exposed to the possibility of being attacked, harmed, or wounded. *Fallibility* is the possibility of being wrong or of making mistakes.

⁷ Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986)

⁸ See Susan Selner-Wright, “Ontological Poverty and Our Attitude toward the Dependent and Disabled,” presented at the Catholic Women’s Forum Symposium, March 30–31, 2017.

which is unique to the human being: moral fragility. There is something worse than suffering what is unexpected and unjust. By committing an injustice, we ourselves become unjust. Here we enter in the realm of a deeper source of fragility. As free beings, we determine ourselves, choosing between good or evil. Because of our limited freedom, we can sin, we can destroy ourselves.⁹ This fallibility is the possibility of fulfilling or ruining one's life, a sign of both greatness and fragility, which plants and animals lack.

At this point, fallibility introduces us in a deeper dimension of human fragility. Evil is not only a possibility because of our limited freedom, but a reality and an internal force within man. The Second Vatican Council relates: "Examining his heart, man finds that he has an inclination toward evil too, and is engulfed by manifold ills which cannot proceed from his Creator, who is good" (*Gaudium et Spes* §13). Man is split within himself and feels as though he is bound by chains. He finds that by himself he is incapable of battling the assaults of evil. We have been wounded and we are now inclined toward evil and submerged in a multitude of evils. In every action, he experiences the influence and the real possibility of sin. Concupiscence, an inclination toward evil (*fomes peccati*), remains in us even after baptism, for the fight (*ad agonem*).¹⁰

The bondage of sin diminishes man and blocks his path to fulfillment. The development of this slavery and darkness leads us to consider another dimension of moral fragility. In the life of a person, evil decisions can generate vices and addictions, wounding and entangling human relationships. In some cases, personal sins can become persistent and even structural to the point of "solidifying" sin. "Fragility" can express the situation of human bonds forged against the good of the person and the plan of God and having become structural, established as a state of life. We may think of someone who has divorced and has entered in a civil union, or cohabitation, premarital relationships, or even a civil union with someone of the same sex. In different ways, fragility becomes permanent through a way of living. Far from being a place of human flourishing, these bonds become knots, more or less permanent obstacles to happiness, and to the truth of love. Through them human fragility—understood here as disordered affections, sin, and vice—becomes stable and socially acceptable.

⁹ See Livio Melina, José Noriega Bastos, and Juan José Pérez-Soba, *Caminar a la luz del amor* (Madrid: Palabra, 2007), 251.

¹⁰ See Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning: A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, trans. Boniface Ramsey, O.P. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990); G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908; repr. San Francisco: Ignatius, 1995), 18–34 (ch. 2: "The Maniac").

As we have seen, there are many different dimensions and levels of our fragility: uncertainties of life, permanent ontological dependence, sickness and death, moral fragility, our interior inclination toward evil, structures of sin. All these elements manifest the tragedy of human life and its lack of unity and meaning. Fragility seems to be the invincible enemy of human life, and therefore our existence looks like a random succession of events leading to a definitive and unavoidable defeat.

Fragility, Excellence, and Intimacy: Embracing Vulnerability

Nussbaum's brilliant *The Fragility of Goodness* offers a different and enlightening approach to human fragility. Comparing the Greek tragedians with Plato, Nussbaum explains that human life exists between *tuché* and *techné*, that is, between luck and work (or technique). Human life is neither of gods nor of animals. On one hand, for the tragedian Pindar, we are like a young plant, a sapling, growing, slender and fragile, in constant need of food from without. We live in a capricious world where we are subjected to *tuché*. We can control some dimensions of our life in the world, but the beauty and mystery of the cosmos come from its distance, from its separateness, and sometimes even from its hostility to our intentions. On the other hand, for Plato, the task of philosophy is to help us grow in moral virtue so that we are not affected by the world. Like Socrates, through the immutability of our character we can become strong like stones, and we can turn others into stone. For Aristotle, through virtue and friendship, we can overcome vulnerability and become happy.

How, then, can we integrate human fragility? Nussbaum states that "part of the peculiar beauty of *human* excellence is its vulnerability."¹¹ Vulnerability is not an excuse for mediocrity, but rather the opposite: It manifests the unique beauty of virtue. The relationship between fragility and human destiny is not one of opposition, but of integration. Therefore, we are dealing not with an obstacle to development, but with an essential human dimension that allows for the establishment of relationships, for enrichment, and for growth in connection with the environment and with others. In other words, the vulnerability of our affections is the root of our moral experience.¹² This fragility is not mere impotence or lack of energy, but rather the ability of being touched, harmed, but also enriched. Its opposite is not power, but self-sufficiency. By living in a body, the human being is closer

¹¹ Nussbaum, *Fragility of Goodness*, 2.

¹² See Melina et al., *Caminar*, 248.

to a plant than to a stone. The rock is harder, but it lacks vulnerability, and therefore it cannot grow. It is less perfect. The vulnerability proper to human excellence is related to the unpredictable passion of love. "Love is a dangerous hole in the self."¹³ Love is always open to the possibility of destruction, of the love, the self, and the other self.

Therefore, the neo-Pelagianism of fragility, by isolating the human being and limiting his strength to his own self-perception, betrays the truth and greatness written in human vulnerability. Such reduction ends up promoting self-reliance and mediocrity, which are the very opposites of our human vocation. Instead, the wound of human fragility leads to dependence and human vulnerability, and thus becomes the possibility of growth and excellence. Far from being a threat or an obstacle to development, vulnerability represents the necessary condition for growth. It is the place and the opportunity for excellence.

We can consider the great difference between an infant just born and other animals. A fawn, for example, is born with the eyes open and with some teeth, and it will be able to stand in a few minutes and to walk in a few hours. A human baby will take months and years to develop similar abilities, and later, when completely developed, the human being will not have the protections, strengths and talents (speed, sight, smell, strength) of the other animals.

This apparent poverty was explained by the Greek mythology in the tale of Prometheus and Epimetheus, who were given the task of endowing the different creatures with special gifts so that they could survive and thrive. Epimetheus was very liberal distributing the talents (claws, fur, wings), to the point that they ran out of gifts before offering something to man. Out of pity, Prometheus decided to steal the fire from the workshop of Hephaistos and Athena on Mount Olympus and give it to man, teaching him to do metalwork.

From a philosophical point of view, Aristotle explained that nature, which does nothing in vain, has given to the human being what he needs. Man has not been endowed with wings, claws, sharp teeth, the smell of a dog, or the sight of an eagle. However, he has received a special sense of touch and the unique gift of the word. On one hand, the Philosopher states in *De anima* that:

¹³ See Martha Nussbaum, "Serpents in the Soul: Love and Anger in Seneca's *Medea*," presented at the 1988 annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion.

While in respect to all the other senses we fall below many species of animals, in respect of touch we far excel all other species in exactness of discrimination. That is why man is the most intelligent of all animals.¹⁴

On the other hand, in his *Politics* he describes the human condition in relationship to speech:

Now, that man is more of a political animal than bees or any other gregarious animals is evident. Nature, as we often say, makes nothing in vain, and man is the only animal whom she has endowed with the gift of speech. And whereas mere voice is but an indication of pleasure or pain, and is therefore found in other animals (for their nature attains to the perception of pleasure and pain and the intimation of them to one another, and no further), the power of speech is intended to set forth the expedient and inexpedient, and therefore likewise the just and the unjust. And it is a characteristic of man that he alone has any sense of good and evil, of just and unjust, and the like, and the association of living beings who have this sense makes a family and a state.¹⁵

The greater vulnerability of the human being comes with a superior sense of touch and with the power of speech (the word). Human hand and mouth manifest a special penetration of the world. Because of his excellent touch, he is the most intelligent of all animals, and because of his word, he can grasp good and evil, and is able to build a family and a state. Through his touch he has a closer relationship with the world, and through his word, he can name the essence of the things. These unique gifts are not a compensation for his vulnerability, as if offsetting shortcomings. Rather, they are a consequence of this original dependence and openness to experience the world in his body. The excellence of the sense of touch implies the possibility of being wounded and the opportunity for a deeper connection with the world.

This special indigence is also manifested in the interior indetermination of man, and the necessity of virtues. Unlike the other animals, the human being is not determined *ad unum* by nature. Our instincts are not determinations, but inclinations toward basic goods. Between those general attractions and the very concrete action, between who we are and who we are called to be, there is a gap that needs to be filled through virtuous dispositions, a second

¹⁴ Aristotle, *De anima* 2.9.421, trans. B. Jowett (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1885), vol.1.

¹⁵ Aristotle, *Politics* 1.1.

nature. This hiatus requires the answer of freedom and implies the possibility of a failure in what most matters in life. At the same time, it becomes the opportunity of a new fulfillment. By our own decisions, “we are in a certain way our own parents” (*Veritatis Splendor* §71, quoting St. Gregory of Nyssa, *De vita Moysis* 2.2–3). Therefore, the indetermination proper to the human being is the possibility of greater development and growth. The apparently greater poverty of man compared to the animals becomes the source for a deeper wealth. We choose to act, and we become who we have chosen.

These philosophical reflections help us understand that vulnerability is not an enemy to be conquered, but an opportunity for excellence. Human vulnerability is connected to a unique way of experiencing the body, the place of our encounter with reality, and the seat of our affections and desires. Living in the body, we are radically open to the world and to others in a unique way. Animals experience some level of vulnerability in their life. Unlike the rocks, animals (and to some extent also plants) experience the pain and the pleasure of the world and they react to it. Stones have an inside (*intus*) and an outside, but animals have an interior organism (*interior*, comparative adjective of *intus*) which reacts to the world. They move toward the river and run away from the fire. They are more vulnerable, and therefore more perfect and richer than inert beings. The human being also reacts to the exterior world with attraction and rejection, like the other animals. However, because of the way he lives in his body, he is capable of something else. Not only has he both an inside and an outside and an interior organism, but he is also capable of establishing a deeper relationship with the world, with others and with himself, a relationship which we can call “intimacy” (*intimus*, superlative of *intus*).¹⁶ Through knowledge and love, the human being enters into a unique relationship with the world, with the others, and with himself. Through intelligence he can grasp the essence of reality and the whole world can be within him. Through love, he is affected by the world and by others, and he can keep within him the presence of the beloved that moves him to act.

We can define “intimacy” as that space opened in the heart of the person where the others and the world can enter and dwell. Intimacy is possible through the experience of the passion of love, that is, the interior presence of the beloved in the lover. The first affection is not desire, but love, which precedes us and requires an answer. “Love has an ontological priority over desire and every other passion, such that love is the primary and common

¹⁶ See Luis Granados, *Imaginativos en la acción* (Burgos, Spain: Didaskalos, 2014), 306.

root of every action.”¹⁷ We desire because we love. *Amor praecedit desiderium*. This original love is not just natural love (the metaphysical principle of the movement of all creatures toward the perfect Good), but a uniting and binding force that is comprehensible only in an interpersonal context.

It is important to insist in this point: Love precedes desire. The beginning is not an emptiness that needs to be satisfied. We desire because we love, and we love because we have been loved by others. Born from others, we find our name and our destination only by living from, with, and for others. As the poet John Donne put it, “no man is an island,” that is an “I-land.” By being affected by others, by being loved in advance, our human identity is formed.

The original experience of love is the key to integrate all the dimensions of our human fragility. Our dependence and limitation are not just a lack or a defect seeking satisfaction, but rather the ability of being affected, the possibility of growing, of being enriched—and yes, also harmed. Vulnerability is not an obstacle, but an opportunity to walk toward our destiny: building the communion of persons with the beloved. The newness of love overcomes the tension between *tuché* and *techné*, between luck and character. As a gift and a task, love transforms both. All the dimensions of our life that have not been chosen by us are not a matter of fate or luck, but a gift from the beloved. On the other hand, the building of character and virtue does not lead us to autonomy, but to greater gratitude and dependence. Luck and character cannot explain man. Only the experience of love is able to bring light to his mystery. As John Paul II incisively relates: “Man cannot live without love. He remains a being that is incomprehensible for himself, his life is senseless, if love is not revealed to him, if he does not encounter love, if he does not experience it and make it his own, if he does not participate intimately in it” (*Redemptor Hominis* [1979] §10).

From the point of view of love, fragility takes the shape of vulnerability. It is not conceived as a lack but as an ability, a potential. Human vulnerability belongs to the peculiar beauty of *human* excellence. To be more vulnerable manifests a richer presence in the world, greater knowledge, deeper interactions, and larger possibilities. Certainly, this intimate openness to someone who is not under our control includes the risk of delusion and betrayal, and wounds. But only in this way—through love—can man discover a new horizon in his life. Because of love, man is present in the world in a new way: dwelling in it. He enters the inner reality of another person by establishing

¹⁷ Livio Melina, *The Epiphany of Love* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), 11.

an intimate relationship.¹⁸ Instead of the fragmented limitations of his existence, he discovers a narrative, a story of love that brings unity and meaning.

These different levels of fragility make clear that man is ontologically a beggar. There is a lack of proportion between his desires and his reality. Nicholas Cabasilas, a fourteenth-century Byzantine theologian, expressed beautifully the wound of love present in us: "When men have a longing so great that it surpasses human nature and eagerly desire and are able to accomplish things beyond human thought, it is the Bridegroom who has smitten them with this longing. It is he who has sent a ray of his beauty into their eyes. The greatness of the wound already shows the arrow which has struck home, the longing indicates who has inflicted the wound."¹⁹

The longing that surpasses human nature is the work of the Bridegroom, Christ. This wound of love precedes original sin and calls for an answer. We are called to beatitude and divinization, but we are completely incapable of it. We experience a paradox (not a contradiction) within ourselves. Between our poor origin and our desired destiny, between conception and beatitude, there is an infinite gap. Man finds within himself a desire for the infinite that he can reach only through a gift.

Therefore, an analysis of our vulnerability manifests the need for a redeemer. Our receptivity accompanies us in every moment of our life, in every action and relationship. It is unavoidable, and it cannot be reduced to mere frailty destined to mediocrity. It is not something we can "get rid of." It is not "curable," but it can be integrated and purified through love. In other words, our desire cannot be extinguished. Rather it needs to be saved from mediocrity and idolatry. It demands a *logos*, an explanation of its origin and goal, a clarification about its intimacy and its transcendence. We find this *logos* in the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery of our Lord. Only in him will our desire be purified, integrated, and saved.

The Truth of Our Destiny: Redeemed and Divinized Fragility

In Jesus Christ, our fragility has been embraced by God himself. By completely embracing it as a perfect man and perfect God, the Lord started a

¹⁸ See J. Marías, *La felicidad humana* (Madrid: Alianza, 1998), 332.

¹⁹ Nicholas Cabasilas, *Life in Christ* 2.15. Cabasilas embraces Plato's experience of nostalgia and transforms it by the new Christian experience. Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "The Feeling of Things, the Contemplation of Beauty," Message of Cardinal Ratzinger to the Communion and Liberation Meeting at Rimini, Italy, August 24–30, 2002. In this regard, see also John Paul II's and Benedict XVI's *Letters to the Artists*.

journey of growth in “virtues and knowledge,” and he was perfected in his humanity. He embraced the heart of our vulnerability: everything that belongs to our human condition. In his body and relationships, he became vulnerable, affected by passions and desires. As *homo viator*, he embraced our journey and the need for growth and time in order to develop virtue. Unlike us, he was not fallible: he could not sin, he did not sin, and he was not inclined to sin.

In the life of Christ, we see the gift of fragility transformed into dependence and gratitude. It was fitting that precisely the Son of God would become a vulnerable human being in order to open up to us the path of filial adoption. The receptivity present in our affectivity and corporal reality finds echo and is fulfilled in the relationship of dependence, gratitude, and trust of Jesus toward the Father. Therefore, the fragility he assumed is not an obstacle to his mission, but actually its place and path. The “gracious act of our Lord Jesus Christ” is this: for our sake he became poor although he was rich, so that by his poverty we might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). St. Paul makes it clear that we become rich “by his poverty,” not just by his richness. His poverty, that is, his human vulnerability and dependence, are the means for our enrichment. This admirable exchange implies a new way of looking at the weak, the sick, the elderly, the disabled in our society. From this perspective, the disabled are not just a problem to solve, the object of our care and attention. Rather, they become a light for the human path, a reminder of both our original and our future dependence. As Alasdair MacIntyre puts it: children, elderly, and the disabled play a fundamental role in human communities. They generate mercy, the virtue that sustains networks of giving and receiving, which are the standard for proper human relationships in our society.²⁰

Christ saves our fragility by embracing it from within, and to the end. He did not limit himself to teaching a doctrine and to showing us the way to encounter God. Rather, he opened for us the door of freedom by becoming the Way. He is our Savior, inasmuch as he assumed the entirety of our humanity and lived a fully human life in communion with the Father and with others. In this sense, Savior and salvation cannot be separated.²¹ His person and his mission are inseparable. “He is at the same time Savior and Salvation” (*Placuit Deo* §11).

The salvation of our flesh and fragility is not just something that Christ

²⁰ Regarding the value of dependence and the virtues related to it, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *Rational Dependent Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago: Open Court, 1999).

²¹ Cf. Ladaria, *Jesus Christ, Salvation of All*, 76.

gives to us, but something he himself is. This is possible because he is the Son, whose flesh has been anointed with the Holy Spirit. "Salvation, then, consists in our incorporation into his life, receiving his Spirit" (*Placuit Deo* §11). The work of the Holy Spirit in Christ continues in our flesh generating the same virtues and knowledge. This union has brought about a "new order of relationships with the Father and among human persons" (§4). Therefore, the salvation of our fragility does not consist in isolation or self-realization, but "in being incorporated into a communion of persons that participates in the communion of the Trinity" (§12). The salvation of our desire strengthens and fulfills our desire for salvation.

For those who receive Christ, this encounter develops in friendship with him. The work of the Holy Spirit makes the person a participant in the same love that moved Christ to act: the love of charity that is the fruit of the Spirit. Christ's presence to us becomes personal. He is the "wisest and greatest friend."²² The Paraclete works in the heart of the faithful and, with his presence, regenerates the moral subject "so that he or she may live a love that is true and full."²³ It is not mere tolerance in the face of evil, nor an external declaration of justification. Friendship with Christ informs and penetrates the entire human action. Love of charity thus becomes the "form of the virtues" because it orients the human virtues toward a higher goal, which they could never reach by themselves: it allows them to reach God and joins us to him in everyday activity.²⁴ Now we can receive the divine beatitude, "for what we do by means of our friends, is done, in a sense, by ourselves."²⁵ It is not any more a matter of luck (*tuché*) or personal work (*techné*), but a gift of the friend that continues to bear fruit through us.

Jesus Christ, therefore, is at the same time the origin and end of our actions. Christ reveals the destiny of human life as communion with God, which will be fully realized in the kingdom. He saves our fragility, allowing our desires to be fixed on the true good. This implies a path of purification through the Holy Cross, since it is necessary to "crucify the flesh with its passions and desires" (Gal 5:24).

The fulfillment of this fragility is the Paschal mystery, the gift of self of Christ. He accepted the deepest expression of our fragility: suffering and death, as well as the abandonment and betrayal. Through his resurrection, Christ rescued our flesh from the power of death, bringing eternal life and unconditional forgiveness. Our fragility has now a new power to regenerate

²² St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I-II, q. 108, a. 4.

²³ Thesis 6 of the Veritas Amoris Project.

²⁴ Melina, *Epiphany of Love*, 17.

²⁵ ST I-II, q. 5, a. 5, ad 1, quoting Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 3.3.1112b27.

the world. Because of this, St. Paul will be able to rejoice and even boast of his sufferings, sharing both in the afflictions and consolations of Christ (See 2 Cor 1:5; Col 1:24).

It is important to note that, after the resurrection, the wounds of the Lord will remain in his body. They will be transformed, but they will not disappear. Human vulnerability does not disappear. Instead of a sign of indigence and hatred, it becomes the witness of the greatest love. The glorious wounds become now the epiphany of the resurrection in the world.

St. Maximus the Confessor says: "He who penetrates yet further and finds himself initiated into the mystery of the Resurrection, apprehends the end for which God created all things from the beginning."²⁶ This is the goal of the whole life of Christ, of the history of salvation, and of the whole universe. As our Savior and salvation, Christ has not only rescued us from sin and death, but has brought to us, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the divinization of our flesh. This was the plan of God from the beginning of creation. This is the radical transformation announced by Jesus: "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, *You are gods*?' (John 10:34; cf. Gen 3:5 and Ps 82:6)."²⁷ This promise is neither an excessive pretension nor a naïve and superficial consideration of our fragility. Because it comes from the one who, being God, has become one with us in our flesh and has accepted suffering and death, it is able to embrace our fragility and to accept its slow pace of growth.

Fragility and Gradualness

From the perspective of the Paschal mystery, we can now reconsider the problem of the gradualness of the law and the "concrete possibilities" of man.²⁸

The Ideal of a Good Life

First of all, we have to consider the place of the "ideal of a good life" in our life and in our community. Is it still necessary or can we dismiss it? The proposal of making compromises regarding the law and embracing the so-called "gradualness of the law" considers that the "ideal of a good life" is an abstract

²⁶ *Capita theologica et oeconomica* 1.66 (PG 90:1108 A–B).

²⁷ In his controversy with the Jews, he establishes the connection between his own divinity and our vocation to be deified: "If it calls them gods to whom the word of God came, and scripture cannot be set aside, can you say that the one whom the Father has consecrated and sent into the world blasphemes because I said, 'I am the Son of God'?" The reduction of our human destiny is a reduction of Jesus's divinity.

²⁸ See Livio Melina, *Moral, entre la crisis y la renovación* (Barcelona: Eiusa, 1996), 107–36.

projection of human desire that only generates anxiety and resentment. It would be something far from us. However, when we talk about the “ideal of a good life,” we need to remember that, in Christ, the ideal is a gift already present in our lives. This ideal is the real presence of the “good life,” life according to virtue, as directive of our actions, as “vocation,” as already present in our aspiration and imagination. Thanks to it, I can understand that a concrete action can lead me to a good life.

The recent criticism of the law of the Church and of the Gospel as an “ideal” has reduced it to an abstract projection of perfection, and of idealized elections, something too elevated and unattainable. Properly understood, the ideal of good life is the determination of what is happiness in my present life: what is an excellent action.²⁹ Our understanding of human action requires a reference to our life as a whole. The ideal helps by showing how our vocation to greatness becomes concrete and present. Although not completely fulfilled, it is already present in the journey.³⁰ According to this ideal, it is better to die rather than to sin, death is better than an unworthy life—it is better to suffer an injustice rather than commit it. In this way, our actions are not just means for a subsequent happiness (against Kant’s accusation of *eudamonia* as selfishness). Rather, it is precisely by building our actions that we walk in the path of happiness.

This ideal of a good life cannot be understood or lived without the others. It is something shared, something communicated. Friends are necessary for happiness. The presence of the ideal fosters the imitation of our ancestors, heroes, and saints.

Is it possible to fulfill the ideal of the law? As Benedict XVI stated in *Deus Caritas Est* (2005), “love can be ‘commanded’ because it has first been given” (§14). He has loved us first and he continues to do so. He “does not demand of us a feeling which we ourselves are incapable of producing” (§17). Love can blossom as a response within us. Therefore, God gives us the law and the ability to fulfill it. He introduces us into a new measure of love and life. From this perspective, the law is not a burden, nor an idealistic projection, but a gift, an instruction for the journey (*Torah*). As Augustine will say, “Give what you command, and command what you will” — “Da quod iubes, et iube quod vis” (*Confessions* 10.29.40).

²⁹ See Giuseppe Abbà, *Felicidad, vida buena y virtud* (Barcelona: Eiunsa, 1992).

³⁰ See Melina et al., *Caminar*, 219.

The Concrete Possibilities of Man

Secondly, once we have clarified this issue, we can consider what are the concrete possibilities of the human being in Christ. Because the gift precedes us, because Christ has embraced and saved our vulnerability, we can see that the Church is not too demanding and pretentious when, as a loving Mother, she presents the teachings she has received from her Bridegroom. As St. John Paul II notes, here we are not talking any more about the man dominated by lust, but about the man redeemed—truly redeemed—by Christ (*Veritatis Splendor* [1993] §103).

From that perspective, man has always before him a spiritual horizon of hope: “Temptations can be overcome, sins can be avoided, because together with the commandments, the Lord gives us the possibility of keeping them” (§102). John Paul never hid the uncommon sacrifices, the extreme difficulties, and the high price of this path. But, “even amid the gravest of hardships” (§103), the man redeemed by Christ can keep God’s holy law.

It is important to consider that *Veritatis Splendor* §103 is quoting a long paragraph of a 1984 address of John Paul II, the concrete context of which was that of family life and responsible procreation. John Paul II was talking here to a group of priests about the reconciliation between the conscience of the spouses and the truth of their conjugal love. He was talking about the beauty of marriage and openness to life. When the spouses are reconciled with the God of truth and love, not only do they perceive the truth of their conjugal love, but they can also live it. This is possible because Christ has given us the possibility of achieving the full truth of their being.

From Conversion to Conversion

The law of gradualness is related to our journey of following Christ (*sequela Christi*). It belongs to the universal logic of human education. The human person can fulfill the moral good only in a journey, step by step. The gradualness of law, however, is radically different. It pretends to change and accommodate the law according to the possibilities and situation of each person. It tries to make compromises by calling good what is evil.

In order to begin our journey toward the Lord, it is necessary to cross the threshold of conversion, which is the beginning of humanity. This is the sense of the negative absolute norms, which have no gradualness.³¹ They establish a minimum of humanity, which implies an *in* or *out*. The beginning

³¹ See J. Granados, S. Kampowski, and J.-J. Pérez-Soba, *Accompanying, Discerning, Integrating: A Handbook for the Pastoral Care of the Family according to Amoris Laetitia* (Steubenville, OH: Emmaus Road, 2017), 42.

is conversion, radical rupture with sin.³² Here there is no gradualness of the law. Later, in the positive commandments, there is growth in goodness and in the virtues. The reception of the gift of God takes the time of our life.

Meditating on the pedagogy of Jesus with his disciples, Jean-Marie Cardinal Lustiger concludes that the absence of gradualness of the law is the foundation for the law of gradualness. Otherwise, we fall into Pelagianism, where only my energies are considered, and therefore I must adapt the divine law in order to justify myself. We need, first of all, the presence of the moral norm as obligatory, without exceptions and adaptations. Then I can grow in virtues, little by little.³³

The more recent discussion around a confusing section in Francis's *Amoris Laetitia* (§293) has reignited the controversy. The heart of the controversy is not just a matter of terminology, or names that can be redefined according to our convenience. Between "gradualness of law" and "law of gradualness" there is a radical divide and abyss: What is the criterion and the measure of the law: human weakness or divine grace? Who will need to be adapted: us to God or God to us?³⁴ The most recent discussion may have a positive outcome. It may have reminded us that it is necessary to offer a path for those who live in a state of sin. This pastoral care was always present in the approach of John Paul II. The work of the Holy Spirit can help them overcome the affection toward sin and prepare the path toward conversion.

What John Paul II stated continues to be true. All the faithful are called to holiness. They fulfill their vocation answering to the divine commandment with serenity, trusting in the divine grace and in their will.³⁵ They have received enough grace and strength to be able to fulfill the commandments. The law of gradualness can be accepted only if we keep the strength of the law not as an abstract ideal for the future, but as a gift and a command of Christ the Lord to overcome with effort the difficulties. There is no dichotomy between pedagogy and doctrine, faith and concrete life. As St. Augustine put it, "the law was given that grace might be sought; and grace was given, that the law might be fulfilled."³⁶

The moral demands of the Gospel cannot be abandoned just because

³² See John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio* §§9, 34.

³³ See J.-M. Lustiger, "Gradualità e conversione," in *La Familiaris Consortio* (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1982), 31–57. Cf. Melina et al., *Caminar*, 854–56.

³⁴ See Larrú, "Gradualità e maturazione," 449.

³⁵ See John Paul II, Homily at the conclusion of the 5th General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, October 25, 1980.

³⁶ Augustine, *De spiritu et littera* 19.34 (*Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* [CSEL] 60:187); cf. *Veritatis Splendor* §23.

we are fragile. As G. K. Chesterton famously stated: “The Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult, and left untried.”³⁷ Rather, what is necessary is to understand the true depths of our vulnerability and to face the difficulties of moral life with the means offered by the dynamism of grace.

The Concrete Possibilities of Man: Surrender or Defeatism?

What are the concrete possibilities of man redeemed by Christ? What can we do? Jesus addressed the Samaritan woman’s desire for true love. This is our model of attention to frailty. Encountering Christ, she was transformed, purified, and regenerated. Jesus did not choose the false path of making compromises and being condescending. Rather, he listened to her, loved her, challenged her, and offered her the path of true love. Receiving the gift of God, she became an evangelizer and she transformed the culture of her village. In her life we see the truth of *Veritatis Splendor*:

Man always has before him the spiritual horizon of hope, thanks to the help of divine grace and with the cooperation of human freedom. . . . Only in the mystery of Christ’s Redemption do we discover the “concrete” possibilities of man. . . . Christ has redeemed us! This means that he has given us the possibility of realizing the entire truth of our being; he has set our freedom free from the domination of concupiscence. (§103)

As friends of Christ, we can do everything; without him, nothing. With the help of the Lord, through a wonderful synergy, the Holy Spirit make us grow in virtues, ordering our affections and helping us to reject vices. This gives us stability and joy in the good, reducing our fragility. This new life in Christ helps us to overcome the structural fragility of structural bonds, situations, or relationships that perpetuate sin and vice. In this fight, the Holy Spirit is achieving the true formation of the subject according to the heart of Jesus.

In this journey, we cannot avoid our fallibility, the permanent possibility of losing ourselves through sin. Until we arrive to our destiny, this fragility remains. In some cases, we cannot avoid circles of vice, or it takes a long time overcome them—even a whole life. In that situation, the fight continues with realism and courage, not by minimizing the fault, nor despairing.

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What’s Wrong with the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1994), pt. 1, ch. 5.

Concupiscence, that inclination toward evil, remains in us *ad agonem*. Its presence is called to work as an antidote against self-sufficiency, as a medicine for greater docility and filial dependence, deeper self-knowledge and awareness of our poverty. This is the admonishment of God: “Do what you can and pray for what you cannot.”³⁸

Our life is a permanent conversion, a journey in which we move forward until we integrate in our whole personal and social life, all the gifts of God and the demands of his definitive and absolute love.³⁹ The truth of our fragility does not lead us to surrender to the fragility of false loves, but to trust in the strength of God’s love. It is true that I can never say: “I am safe. My love is true once and for all.” We do not call anyone just until the end. Trust in God and distrust in myself—confession and conversion are always necessary, until the end.

The strength of the grace of Christ in us does not lead us to self-sufficiency. In his commentary on Aristotle’s *Politics*, Aquinas mentions that all serves to man’s needs: the plants serve the animals, and the animals serve man. But still, even if he receives this service, man needs to receive as a gift what he requires to fulfill his life. God, he explains, “has furnished the other animals with swift foot, with wings, claws, fangs, or horns. But to man he said: ‘Ask, and it shall be given you’ (Matt 7:7). He so made man that he himself should be man’s only strength (*virtus*) that forced by reason of his own weakness he might always have need of his Lord.”⁴⁰ Man is always in need of the Lord, he is always a beggar, in ever greater dependence of the Creator.

Therefore, in human weakness there is a perfection of God’s power: not in our evil actions, but in the repentance and in the grateful confession of his presence. St. Paul rejoiced in his weaknesses, and even boasted about them. They were not the weaknesses of vice but the struggles of persecution and fight against sin. He was content “with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ” (2 Cor 12:7–10). His words manifest the repentant heart of the tax collector, not the self-satisfied conscience of the Pharisee (see *Veritatis Splendor* §105). In this path of docility and fight, we discover the importance of the virtues related to

³⁸ St. Augustine, *De natura et gratia* 43.40 (CSEL 60:270); Council of Trent, session 6, Decree on Justification, ch. 11 (Denzinger-Schönmetzger no. 1536). Cf. *Veritatis Splendor* §102.

³⁹ See Joseph Ratzinger, “Lettera pastorale *Una valutazione globale del sinodo sulla famiglia*,” *Regno* 26 (1981): 161–69, at 163.

⁴⁰ Thomas Aquinas, *Catena aurea in Matthaeum*, ch. 7, lec. 4.

dependence⁴¹ and can bring together humility and magnanimity (which was not possible for Aristotle).

In a sense, vulnerability is not something we overcome. It is always with us. Realism however does not lead to a tragic consideration of life and defeatism, but to an understanding of the drama of human life.⁴² True realism leads to acceptance of oneself as the only possibility of change.⁴³ Against a gnostic and static abandonment, true surrender includes growth in virtue and knowledge that bring stability to our life. Our life is a journey with real, although vulnerable, progress. Even though we should always distrust ourselves, through our transformation in Christ and through the relationships of communion that sustain us, our desire is being “nailed” with Christ’s.⁴⁴ Looking at the story of our life we can discover the work of the Lord and have serene trust in him. It is possible to make the promise of love and to build a house upon the rock. Recognizing ourselves as children, we are able to give ourselves as spouses and to receive the greater gift and responsibility of parenthood.

Conclusion

To recall Dante’s Ulysses: “You were not made to live your lives as brutes, but to be followers of virtue and knowledge.” It was the Bridegroom who had smitten Ulysses with the longing. That desire is purified, transformed, and fulfilled in Christ, who embraced our fragility and transformed it into the place of our greatness. The love of Christ precedes us and transforms us into friends of God, making possible the synergy of grace and virtue.

The recovery of heroism and martyrdom does not mean a revival of self-righteousness. Rather, from the perspective of the truth of love, martyrdom is the antidote to the self-sufficiency and mediocrity of neo-Pelagianism. A martyr is a grateful witness to the giver of all things, to the one who can give life after death. He does not trust in his own virtue or strength. Rather he dares to risk his life because he knows him in whom he trusts and depends.

Between our origin and our destiny, vulnerability is not an obstacle or a justification of our evil, but an opportunity to depend more radically.

⁴¹ See MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals*.

⁴² See Abbá, *Felicidad*, 621–22.

⁴³ See the very interesting reflections of Romano Guardini on the acceptance of oneself in *Die Annahme seiner selbst: Den Menschen erkennt nur, wer von Gott weiss* (Ostfildern: Matthias-Grünewald, 2008).

⁴⁴ St. Maximus Confessor, *Ambigua* 13 (PG 91:1209B), and especially *Ad Thalassium* 49 (*Corpus Christianorum Series Graeca* [CCSG] 7:353 [lns. 32–36]).

Through the dilation of our heart, a greater reception of the gift is made possible. True growth in virtue does not generate independence, but something greater: humility, gratitude, dependence, and responsibility.

St. Ambrose expressed the truth our fragility in the paradox of our situation before God:

How can I stand, if you do not constantly look upon me, to strengthen this clay, so that my strength may proceed from your face? *When you hide your face, all grows weak* (Ps 104:29); if you turn to look at me, woe is me! You have nothing to see in me but the stain of my crimes; there is no gain either in being abandoned or in being seen. . . . God does not reject those he sees, because he purifies those upon whom he gazes. Before him burns a fire capable of consuming our guilt (cf. Joel 2:3). (*De interpellatione David* 4.6.22; quoted in *Veritatis Splendor* §105) N·V