

Solitude, Communion, and Ecstasy

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Distinctness cut off from a deeper union becomes simply separation, then opposition, then alienation, and finally isolation.

The following article proposes to reflect on what revelation teaches us about the ecstatic nature of the human person as created by God and the tendency of this nature to fall into a solipsism which, if pursued to its logical end, destroys not only community but the individual as well. Hans Urs von Balthasar once wrote that the modern world "vacillates between the emancipation of the micro-ego in anarchic sovereignty and the emancipation of a 'we,' a macro-ego, in a collective tyranny that absorbs the freedom of the individual; both claim universality, but what they portray is only a personal *apartheid* or a collective *party*."¹ In the end, I hope to have laid the groundwork for understanding how this vacillation became a dominant feature of modernity and how, if at all, it is to be overcome.

¹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 44.

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I. *Original communion, fallen solitude, and the imago Dei*

Man's perfection consists in an intimate union of love with the worthiest beloved, and his true self-love is to love God more than self, going out of himself to God and finding his true identity *in* God, the transcendent Other, who is "more myself than I." Duns Scotus states that the divine self-knowledge "is identical with that [divine] nature, for nothing is loved unless it is known. Hence it follows that just as this self-love exists necessarily in virtue of itself, so also this self-knowledge."² Because God *is* His self-knowledge and self-love, we who are created *ad suam imaginem* know and love ourselves in imitation of the unity of nature and interior activity in God. Our true self-love participates in God's love for Himself, our true self-knowledge participates in God's knowledge of Himself. The source and ultimate content of our self-knowledge is God's self-knowledge, which means that our self-knowledge, as creatures or images, is necessarily ecstatic: in knowing the self one knows something of God knowing Himself. To be perfectly interior, to be most myself, *is* to be ecstatic or perfectly "exterior," returning all to God who is the reason we are and the end we are for. The same holds true for love: the origin and goal of our self-love is God's self-love. Undistorted or virtuous self-love, as an effect of God's love, must therefore be ecstatic: when we love ourselves properly we love our participation in the fullness of God's eternal love.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that the ecstatic character of human nature emerges fundamentally from the side of the creature, as though it were merely an expression of creaturely dependency. At the core of our faith we confess the impenetrable mystery of a God whose very essence—whose one eternal activity of self-knowledge and self-love—takes the form of ceaseless giving and receiving within perfect unity. The absolutely simple God is tripersonal *extasis*. A being created to the image and likeness of God analogously reflects and manifests *in itself* the ineffable loving abandonment and mutual possession of the divine Persons in their Triunity. The ecstatic nature of the human person is therefore ultimately rooted in the mystery of the inwardly self-giving Trinity. As Father and Son are for each other in the unity of the Holy Spirit, the human person is always a "being for," not a being established in and unto himself. The

²*Philosophical Writings of Duns Scotus*, trans. Allan Wolter, O.F.M. (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 58.

divine image in man is woven with a *telos*: to be for the God in whom his being and fulfillment consist. One notices how closely this truth about the person parallels Catholic teaching about freedom. Perfect freedom is not a freedom *from*, but a freedom *towards*.³ The Other who is God, and the other who is neighbor, lay claim to man's heart and, accepted as its proper boundaries, shape his self-love as a love which, both in extension and in intensity, encloses more than self for the sake of something better than self—a love which continually breaks itself open or allows itself to be opened from without in order to let the beloved into the heart, where the lover has prepared a place of welcome.

The first man was created in a communion of love with God and then with Eve (observing the order of the Other and the other, *ens infinitum* and *ens finitum*), and this is man's *natural state*, an ecstatic condition of self-bestowing union, a standing outside of the bare or barren ego. St. Thomas expands the word *extasis* into *extra se ponitur*, to be "placed outside oneself," carrying the sense of a continuous *motion* out of oneself.⁴ Because this *extasis* is natural to man as he was created, the naked self cannot be ashamed of its nakedness, since it is thinking only of the other and of loving the other through the gift of itself. This love fills the person's heart and makes him unaware of the emptiness or nakedness he would discover if he turned his gaze upon a self cut off from communion. For communion is fruitful when the communicants are naked, that is, transparent, open, given to each other as they truly are, without artifice or cloak. Good self-love is precisely to love the *other qua other* as one's own good, to enlarge one's good to include the other within love's comprehensive embrace. To be "naked," in a state of grace, is to be stripped of the bad self-love which gives first place to one's own good conceived of as a pre-ecstatic whole to which the other is made to submit, as if the self and not God were the measure of love. The fall is a fall out of communion into solitude. Soul falls out of harmony with flesh and becomes aware of physical nakedness as a cause of shame, a cause of estrangement rather than unification. Bodily nakedness provokes shame because it is the external image of an internal self-consciousness of the ego's nakedness. It is this inner

³See Peter Kwasniewski, "The Inseparability of Freedom, Goodness, and Final End in Saint Thomas," *The Aquinas Review* 5, no. 1 (1998): 50–69.

⁴*Summa Theologiae* 1a-2ae.28.3, corp. See Peter Kwasniewski, "St. Thomas, *Extasis*, and the Union of Lover and Beloved," *The Thomist* 61, no. 4 (1997): 587–603.

poverty, the being stripped of one's proper communal identity, that produces a feeling of otherness as divisive and scrutinizing rather than invitational and unifying.

Corruption is thus to remain within or retreat into oneself alone, in the manner of Rousseau's savage or Descartes's *ego cogitum*, and to be satisfied with this self, by itself, for itself. Fallen man is solitary man, and solitary man—through his fictitious identification of self and reality—is man enslaved or reduced to vacuous objectivity. The *person*, who is infinitely open to the Other, collapses into the *ego*, and into this ego is drawn the totality of other beings, now interpreted from the falsely universal, deceptively objective vantage of a detached perceiver. "Egocentricity is an illusory, distorted universalism," writes Berdyaev. "It sets the world and every reality in the world in a false perspective, it is the loss of capacity for the true reception of reality. Egocentricity is under the power of objectivization, which it seeks to turn into an instrument of self-affirmation: it is the most dependent of existences and is in eternal slavery."⁵ In sinning against the Other, man falls into *himself* and becomes his own prison. Florovsky echoes Berdyaev: "The human fall consists precisely in the fact that man limits himself to himself, that man falls, as it were, in love with himself. And through this concentration on himself man separated himself from God and broke the spiritual and free contact with God. It was a kind of delirium, a self-erotic obsession, a spiritual narcissism."⁶

Fallen into himself, man falls from communion with the other—in whom alone he can find his own perfect being and see himself with unclouded vision—to a state of isolation in which he finds nothing but an empty chamber darkened by the other's absence, or rather, by the simulacrum of an other who is no longer known and loved for his own sake. Charles Williams remarks that Adam and Eve, having refused the co-inherence of the original creation, became incoherent in their suffering.⁷ The first man, his heart inverted from ecstasy to enstasy, can no longer speak familiarly with God in the garden nor remain in the element of naked equality with his spouse, part of whose punishment was to have to submit to the enstatic dominion of the man.

⁵N. Berdyaev, *Slavery and Freedom*, trans. R. M. French (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 132.

⁶G. Florovsky, *Collected Works*, vol. 3 (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1976), 85.

⁷Mary McDermott Shideler, *The Theology of Romantic Love: A Study in the Writings of Charles Williams* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1962), 62.

In the unfallen state there is hierarchy without domination; in the fallen state, homage of love is replaced by imposition of command. In this connection it is important to recall what was said a moment ago about bad self-love, which eviscerates communion by giving priority to the unecstatic self, demanding submission to an individual or idiomatic measure. Marcel speaks of the "illusion, infinitely persistent it is true,"

that I am possessed of unquestionable privileges which make me the centre of my universe, while other people are either mere obstructions to be removed or circumvented, or else those echoing amplifiers, whose purpose is to foster my self-complacency. . . . In fact, just as any notions we may have of cosmography do not rid us from the immediate impression that the sun and stars go round the earth, so it is not possible for us to escape completely here below from the preconceived idea which makes each one tend to establish himself as the centre around which all the rest have no other function but to gravitate.⁸

The contrast with Christian marriage could not be more striking. As spouses become holier, more imbued with divine love, they become more equal, they approach closer to that original unity or community of paradise and find their greatest good and pleasure in loving each other for the sake of God. Neither person is the other's exclusive center of gravitation; both are drawn alike to God, whom they make their absolute center in common. The daily shared oblation of self to God, which sustains the solemn vow and the common life patterned after it, is the essence of purity of heart in marriage. "A pure heart is not a free heart in this sense"—free because it belongs solely to oneself and one retains ownership of it even when giving it to another—"since a pure heart is first and last a *bound heart*," writes Kierkegaard.

A bound heart, yes, in the deepest sense a bound heart—no ship riding with all its anchors out is as bound as the heart must be that is to be pure—namely, the heart must be bound to God. No king who bound himself by the strictest coronation charter, and no individual who bound himself by the heaviest obligation, and no day laborer who bound himself to work every day, and no private teacher who bound himself to giving lessons by the hour is as bound, since every such person can still say to what extent he is bound; but the heart, if it is to be pure, must without limit be bound to God. No power is able to bind in this way; the king can die and be released from the charter, the master can die and then the day laborer's obligation ends, and

⁸G. Marcel, "The Ego and Its Relation to Others," in *Homo Viator*, trans. Emma Craufurd (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1951), 19.

the time of instruction can be over—but God does not die, and the bond that binds is never broken.⁹

Every love worthy of the name is a *vinculum*, a binding of hearts, whereby freedom is made the servant of consecration. This binding or consecrating of both hearts to God, and through Him to one another, is the goal of Christian matrimony and the reason it sacramentally signifies the eternal union of Christ and the Church, between whom the *koinonia* is perfect: union without confusion, distinction without separation. As Henri de Lubac notes, “the more you separate, the less do you really *distinguish*.”¹⁰ Because God created man and woman for each other, their very distinctness emerges and is perfected only in their union, which fosters those differences that have the potential to increase unity.¹¹ For difference is intelligible only in the context of a higher unity from which the difference acquires its relative meaning. Distinctness cut off from a deeper union becomes simply separation, then opposition, then alienation, and finally isolation.

The lesson of the creation of man as narrated in Genesis is that the human person, having come from God’s love, must return to God in love. Man needs divine love, for it is the food upon which he was made to be nourished, or rather, it is the living chalice into which he is meant to pour his being. He is created in the image and likeness of the God who is *extasis* in Himself—ecstatic in eternal Filiation and Spiration, ecstatic in the missions of the Son and Holy Spirit. To *be* himself, man must therefore *go out of himself*. In its inmost activity, his heart is essentially and passionately other-going, other-directed, self-spilling, self-losing. If he does not know and love God, if he does

⁹S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard Hong and Edna Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 148–49.

¹⁰H. de Lubac, *Catholicism: Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard and Sr. Elizabeth Englund, O.C.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 313.

¹¹Concerning difference, Hegel comments: “The lover who takes is not thereby made richer than the other; he is enriched indeed, but only so much as the other is. So too the giver does not make himself poorer; by giving to the other he has at the same time and to the same extent enhanced his own treasure. . . . This wealth of life love acquires in the exchange of every thought, every variety of inner experience, for it seeks out differences and devises unifications ad infinitum” (*Early Theological Writings*, trans. T. M. Knox [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948], 307).

not know the God who is love (and one cannot love what one does not know), then he will seek, or fashion for himself, surrogate gods who afford him at least a momentary experience of going out of himself to some ultimate beauty or goodness, a glimpse of the absolute in which true meaning is found.

Human spirit perforce goes outwards and upwards, seeking a god to worship. No created heart can satisfy man's infinite neediness, only the Heart of God in whom the soul is born and to whom it longs to return. The need to give oneself is a need to give the whole self wholly to its Giver (a living image seeking its artist), the one Giver who can truly *receive* the total gift of oneself. St. Thomas has written: "Nothing attracts but for some likeness to God."¹² All idols originate in a falsely-valued *extasis*, and all idolatrous worship is sustained by an ecstatic experience of one kind or another—for example, belonging to a group of *illuminati* guarding a secret power, or undergoing soul-sundering pleasures in which the ego briefly forgets itself. In ecstasy we encounter God, the Other, as through a veil, and taking the veil for the thing itself is the illusion called idolatry.¹³ Thus, idolatry is *not* the loving of earthly or carnal things, even if exaggerated sensuality is a form it often takes. The essence of idolatry is the removal of God from the center of human experience and relationships, the pursuit of earthly ends or exultation in earthly beauty as determined in reference to oneself, outside of the embrace of God in worship. When the true God, the transcendent reference and foundation of all things, is thus displaced, some inferior phenomenon is made into a false god, a projected Other, a pseudo-reference for reality. Adam and Eve were placed in the Garden to cultivate and revel in it, to love and exult in one another. In doing so for His sake, they would have served God with a perfect heart. The sin of our first parents consisted not merely in the violating of an external commandment, but in the choosing of an inferior human order over the divine order which sustains and governs it. Their sin was not that they loved earthly things too much. They loved too little what God had made by loving it in the wrong way, choosing to ignore that all beauty in things rests upon their having been created by the all-good God in an *order* which must be respected even when this order cannot be fully understood. God alone is the author of the beautiful, and

¹²*Summa Theologiae* 1a.44.4.ad 3.

¹³See Peter Kwasniewski, "Wise and Foolish Virgins," *Parabola* 23, no. 2 (1998): 22–28.

by loving His works with a pure heart we return, we remain bound, to Him.

Hence man, to the extent that he lives within himself (that is, to the extent that he is fallen from the grace or gift of communion), is corrupt, whether he be "savage" or "civilized"; whereas the Christian who lives ecstatically, finding himself in and through loving others, is the perfect man. As St. Thomas says: "love is said to make one in ecstasy, and to burn, since that which burns rises outside itself and exhales."¹⁴ With a burning heart, Jesus exhaled his last breath in love's total surrender to the Father. The perfect man has the full stature of the New Man, Christ, whose entire being, life, and mission are an outpouring of divine love for Other and others, for his Father, for his brethren. So infinite is the Son's love for the Father and the Father's for the Son that it constitutes, in their relation, a Person who is the hypostasis of their very love. And so strong is Christ's love for man that it generates an immortal society, the Church, which extends in time the Incarnation of the Word—the perfect expression of loving communion—and which fulfills the mission of the Incarnation, since the Church forms one body with Christ, her head. The Church as *koinonia* reveals the communion of love for which man was created and from which he has fallen into *idiomata*. The love revealed in Jesus, therefore, is the *koine* or common tongue of the Gospel, the animating principle of the Church, the paradigm of human nature, removing man from the ego's idiom and transposing him into the kingdom of *agape* where there is "neither Jew nor Greek, freeman nor bondservant, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28).

Modern reductionism, attempting to hand down pure reason's judgment upon love and in the process forcing it into legalistic categories, fails to see that there is only one way to come to a knowledge of love, namely, by *living in* its element.¹⁵ "Love cannot be argued about in its absence, for there is no reflex, no

¹⁴St. Thomas Aquinas, *Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 3.27.1.1.ad 4.

¹⁵We do not mean to imply that reasoning about love is a doomed endeavor; obviously the great masters of Christian doctrine have reasoned about it more than any others, and with far greater success (one need only think of Dionysius or Maximus, Bonaventure or Thomas). The crucial difference is that these Christian teachers speak of a love they have *experienced*. Their inexhaustible supply of reasoned-out knowledge voices the structure of an erotic encounter with the ineffable Presence of the One who gives meaning to words about love.

symbol of it near enough to the fact of it, to admit of just treatment by the algebra of reason or imagination."¹⁶ By standing off from love and dissecting it, one takes apart a dead thing; it can only be observed from within, where its life consists in activity. Love's kingdom stands open only to the subjects in love, not to the quantifying outsider, the "neutral observer," whose aim of *objectifying* requires that the living essence be embalmed and dismembered, to the destruction of its holistic and scientifically inaccessible life.¹⁷ As Marcel remarks concerning any theory of man which attempts to comprehend its subject by compiling data: "because this philosophy continually stresses the activity of verification, it ends by ignoring *presence*—the inward realization of presence through love which infinitely transcends all possible verification because it exists in an immediacy beyond all conceivable mediation."¹⁸

The egoist, laboring "under the power of objectification" (Berdyaeu), reduces love's rich embodiment in life to a mere physical system, and in the process distorts, not to say annihilates, the mystery which lovers alone can perceive from within.¹⁹

¹⁶George MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons* (Whitethorn, CA: Johannesen, 1997), Second Series, 136–37.

¹⁷Along these lines Ratzinger writes: "history is marked by the confrontation between love and the inability to love, that devastation of the soul that comes when the only values man is able to recognize at all as values and realities are quantifiable values. The capacity to love, that is, the capacity to wait in patience for what is not under one's own control and to let oneself receive this as a gift, is suffocated by the speedy fulfillments in which I am dependent on no one but in which I am never obliged to emerge from my own self and thus never find the path into my own self. This destruction of the capacity to love gives birth to lethal boredom. It is the poisoning of man" (J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, trans. Brian McNeil, C.R.V. [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994], 175–76).

¹⁸G. Marcel, "On the Ontological Mystery," in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. Many Harari (New York: Carol Publishing, 1991), 15. In this remark Marcel helps us to see the paradoxical connection between the loss of the richness of experiential inwardness and the tendency of modern thought to be preoccupied with the method of experimental verification and the goal of epistemic certainty.

¹⁹S. Kierkegaard: "Falling in love is a qualification of pure, immediate inwardness. It has no other dialectic than inwardness's own dialectic; it has no dialectical qualification outside itself; it is the immediate identity of the subjective and the objective. Erotic love does not exist as something objective but only comes into existence each time someone falls in love and exists only

Interpreting love as a stark contraposition of one subject against another is a fruitless endeavor, for it belongs to the essence of love that I do not frame my thoughts in terms of myself but rather in terms of the other to whom I am given, finding myself in the giving. The experience of love refuses to be epitomized as confrontation or antagonism; it is far more the progressive intersubjectivity of persons who are not already completed selves but selves-in-process, on the way to subjectivity, on the path to a fuller realization of who and what they are as gained through their loving of each other.²⁰ All the more is this true of the continual activity, the most fundamental of all, whereby the self is created in relation to God. "It may be said at once that this [divine] reality gives *me* to myself insofar as I give myself to it; it is through the mediation of the act in which I center myself on it that I truly become a subject. I repeat, *that I truly become a subject*: the fatal error of a certain species of idealism really consists in a failure to see that being a subject is not a fact nor a point of departure, but a conquest and a goal."²¹

in the lover; not only does it exist only *for* the lover, but it exists only *in* the lover" (*The Book on Adler*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna Hong [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998], 117).

²⁰Hegel: "Love means in general terms the consciousness of my unity with another, so that I am not in selfish isolation but win my self-consciousness only as the renunciation of my independence and through knowing myself as the unity of myself with another and of the other with me. Love, therefore, is the most tremendous contradiction; the Understanding cannot resolve it since there is nothing more stubborn than this point of self-consciousness which is negated and which nevertheless I ought to possess as affirmative. Love is at once the propounding and the resolving of this contradiction" (*Philosophy of Right*, 261–62). Jaspers makes much the same point: "I experience myself in communication: I am never more certain that I am myself than when I am completely disposable with respect to the other, so that I become myself because the other, in the course of a struggle for self-revelation, also becomes himself" (*Philosophie*, vol. 1 [Berlin: Springer, 1932], 16, quoted by G. Marcel, "The Fundamental and the Ultimate Situation in Karl Jaspers," in *Creative Fidelity*, trans. Robert Rosthal [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1964], 227).

²¹G. Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 182–83. The birth of true individuality in communion, where lovers must shape themselves in response to one another's subjectivity, will be accompanied by the pangs of labor: "Here lies the whole mystery of conversion. An unknown element (X) that I make no attempt for the moment to qualify imposes on me a sort of preliminary disarticulation of myself and it is for that reason that to love is in a sense inevitably to suffer" (G. Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. Bernard Wall

Even as the ego's insistence on a vantage of scientific universalism culminates in the most degrading slavery to *idiomata*, the positing of radical subjectivity—when the self, in other words, is taken for a completed product—sterilizes the fecundity of love. In Marcel's words, I can

oppose everything, confront everything including my own being with an astonishing, empty attitude of independence. Hence I affirm my solitude, my absolute insularity with respect to the world. Strictly speaking, I am no longer concerned with anything, and instead contemplate everything as an object of cognition, the latter becoming my only support. I am in this case no more than a will to knowledge construed in its universality. Nothing but an eye, a look.²²

If experience is construed according to this model, there is no way in which categorical oppositions such as "my body–your body," "my freedom–your freedom" can be dissolved or mitigated. Woman is thought to be in permanent conflict with man, soul chafes against body, autogenetic self hammers at a resistant world. In contradiction to such categorical oppositions, Kierkegaard more truthfully describes the feeling of lovers who lose, and want to lose, themselves in each other:

A noble man has said of love: "It takes everything and it gives everything." Who indeed received more than the one who received a person's love; and who gave more than the one who gave a person his love! . . . But love can penetrate to the innermost being and can strip a person in such a way that he possesses nothing, nothing, so that he himself admits that he possesses nothing, nothing, nothing. Wonderful! . . . love can take everything in such a way that the person himself says, "I possess nothing at all."²³

The foregoing gives us another insight into why Christ is called the Bridegroom and his Church the Bride. As this Bride lives with her Bridegroom through the vast span of history, she comes to know him more and more intimately, she learns who he is, why he has married her, and what he would have her do, even though the who, the why, and the what were fully present from the beginning, as the whole human race was contained in the seed of Adam and the womb of Eve. Matrimony, whether physical or spiritual, human or divine, is an organic self-manifestation of inner life, first in simple potency, then increasingly in fullness of form. Love in hope becomes love in possession by "reflecting"

[Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952], 233–34).

²²G. Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, 236.

²³S. Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, 176.

on itself, by internalizing what was given externally. In just this way, a ring, or the nuptial embrace, can become the symbol of an entire life, the promise and fulfillment of redemption from isolation. Knowledge is the fruit of love; knowledge is love's consciousness of itself. Man and woman, bridegroom and bride, reveal themselves to each other in their love, the work of a lifetime devoted to living out one irrevocable vow. God reveals himself to mankind, according to his covenant with the chosen people of Israel; he reveals himself to the Church, in accordance with the final vow given by Jesus to the Apostles: "I will be with you always, even to the consummation of the world." Presence has the purpose of self-revelation: Jesus makes himself *present* to the Church in order to reveal himself to her. There can be no manifestation without acts of friendship, which are performed *in person*. And this being "in person" is nothing other than to manifest oneself *in the presence of* the other, to remain in the other's presence and to find one's own "presence," one's identity, in being present to the other.

This presence can be construed in a social way, so that for one person to be present to another means that they are together in the same room, in the *agora*, etc., conversing and sharing what is on their minds or rendering assistance to one another.²⁴ But there is a profounder sense in which the lover can be present to the one loved: the spiritual presence of *imago* to *imago*, united in the God who is their ultimate common good. That love is founded upon presence, and presence in turn upon the *imago Dei*, is evident when we ask what human presence means. To be present or make oneself present to another is to give oneself to the other; and insofar as man must *give* himself in order to *be* himself, his presence (which is an activity as much as a state) is a reflection of the self-giving of the Trinity within the one divine nature. It is only because man is created in the image of this self-communicating, eternally communitarian nature that he has the wherewithal to share himself, the imperative to make and to be himself in a communion of love with others made in this same image. For as the Trinity is ontologically one, human persons giving themselves to one another become analogically one in virtue of drawing ever

²⁴ Aristotle seems to have this understanding of presence in his treatment of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

closer to the font of their unity and difference, their difference-in-unity.²⁵

An anonymous medieval monk beautifully expresses this truth:

When you are at prayer you are in my presence, and I am in yours. Do not be surprised because I say presence; for if you love me, and it is because I am the image of God that you love me, I am as much in your presence as you are in your own. . . . So he who seeks in himself the image of God seeks there his neighbor as well as himself; and he who finds it in himself in seeking it there, knows it as it is in every man. . . . If then you see yourself, you see me, for I am not different from you; and if you love the image of God, you love me as the image of God; and I, in my turn, loving God, love you. So seeking the same thing, tending toward the same thing, we are ever in one another's presence, in God, in whom we love each other.²⁶

In this passage we see how closely linked are presence, love, and the image of God. Because man *is* nothing other than the *imago Dei*, he is really present to others only to the extent that he recognizes and loves, reveres, this image of God, the same in all men; and this God, being eternally one, keeps lovers in a time-transcending communion of presence with one another.²⁷ Alterity points to unity—"I" am in the other, in some way *am* the other, and both of us are united in God, the source of our presence-in-being and the unchanging exemplar of our love. As a "moving image of eternity," friendship founded upon God dissolves the metaphysical dilemma of individual separateness. By seeking within to sound the depths of the divine image, I find the *other* who is within me as I am within him.

The monk understood well Augustine's precept that we may find God, the supreme Beloved, by turning *ad interiora*, withdrawing into the heart. But this is certainly not a Cartesian turn inward, where the lone self tries to deduce its place on the map of reality in the isolation of frigid thought. Turning "inward" to a free-floating network of thought-moments is really a

²⁵Moreover, an image itself, as a participation in the original, has already the presence of *another* within, so that by its very nature an image is a presence in a presence.

²⁶Quoted in H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 81.

²⁷"That image of God, the image of the Word, which the incarnate Word restores and gives back to its glory, is 'I myself'; it is also the other, every other. It is that aspect of *me* in which I coincide with every other man, it is the hallmark of our common origin and the summons to our common destiny" (H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 340).

turn towards non-being, inasmuch as it prescind from the prior communion of all being in God that pulsates within the heart and resonates in the world. "The [fallen] man thinks his consciousness is himself; whereas his life consisteth in the inbreathing of God, and the consciousness of the universe of truth," we read in a sermon of George MacDonald.

To have himself, to know himself, to enjoy himself, he calls life; whereas, if he would forget himself, tenfold would be his life in God and his neighbours. The region of man's life is a spiritual region. God, his friends, his neighbours, his brothers all, is the wide world in which alone his spirit can find room. Himself is his dungeon. . . . His life is not in knowing that he lives, but in loving all forms of life. He is made for the All, for God, who is the All, is his life. And the essential joy of his life lies abroad in the liberty of the All. His delights, like those of the Ideal Wisdom, are with the sons of men. His health is in the body of which the Son of Man is the head. The whole region of life is open to him—nay, he must live in it or perish.²⁸

The world of experience, above all the more intimate world made up of the persons we love, is the foundation for what is in the soul; it is the ontological correlate to the psychological movement of self-knowledge. The inner is conditioned, determined as inner and mine, by the outer, just as the self must include relation to the other in its definition. Without denying its innate dignity apart from all particular relations, we must say that personhood is *known* only in communion, where it reaches teleological fruition. Man is not a tightly-wound bundle of rights or a pre-molded lump of values; he is a vital organism of longings which bear him out of himself towards others from whom his self over time acquires its dimensions, its lines and folds. It is only through otherness, the path of going out to the other, that identity ripens and fructifies. Thus by the reality of communion, with its complex interplay of hearts, the dignity and full measure of the person is discovered. A turn inwards to who I really am—a servant of God, a gift to others—would at the same time imply, and seek translation into, the most self-emptying outward mission.

All of this indicates the falsehood of a Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau who would treat human beings as atoms, independent somethings prior to their existence as social beings related to one another in community; whereas Aristotle, with his gift for seizing upon first principles, had the right view that man, as *speaker* and *thinker*, is a dialogical being whose fulfillment is rooted in community and friendship, to which he is ordered by his very

²⁸G. MacDonald, *Unspoken Sermons*, 145–46.

nature. Man is born into a dialogue, that of the family; to be in community is the first and perpetual qualification of his identity. There is no need for an argument to establish that the "other" exists or deserves my attention, since my own self unfolds and in a certain sense must be defined always *with respect to* other selves, or more generally, other things which are constantly involved in this dialogue according to their various roles or stations as subjects and objects. In our experience of the world, however, only other human beings don and remove masks, only they can be *actors* in the drama instead of mere metaphysical agents. These actors impinge upon my acting self in virtue of our common personation or self-presentation, thus making the life of man in the world first and foremost an encounter of persons, participants in the dialogue of self-revelation. The fulfillment of the *persona* is precisely to remove the mask of guarded otherness and return to spiritual nakedness, so far as can be done.

"The lover," writes St. Thomas, "is not satisfied with a superficial apprehension of the beloved, but strives to know through and through everything pertaining to him, so as to enter into his very soul [*ad interiora eius*]." ²⁹ The lover longs to know the beloved completely and to be wholly united with the beloved, becoming as it were *one form*, just as in marriage the two shall become one flesh: "and because all that is effected by the form of anything is made one with it, so through love the lover becomes one with the beloved because *the latter is made the form of the lover*." ³⁰ This *conformitas* is the basis of *communio*. "For from the fact that love [in this way] transforms the lover into the beloved, it makes the lover enter into the interior of the beloved, and conversely, in order that nothing of the beloved remain not united to the lover." ³¹ But participation of divinity is what constitutes the person as such; there can be nothing "of" the beloved which is not, by the very fact of creation, a sharing in the divine. ³² To know the beloved requires that one know what is

²⁹*Summa Theologiae*, 1a-2ae.28.2, corp. In the same place Thomas tells us that love cannot "rest in any outward or superficial possession or enjoyment of the beloved, but seeks to hold the beloved perfectly, by going, as it were, all the way into what is most intimate in him."

³⁰*Scriptum super Sententiis*, lib. 3.27.1.1, corp. (my emphasis).

³¹*Ibid.*

³²To love another person for his own sake is to love the participation in divinity which constitutes the other's innermost self. For we are in God, and God is in us, by our participation in Him; we share in His beauty, His

most truly the beloved, or rather, that one know who the beloved truly is, a unique *imago Dei*. Because the soul is created *ad imaginem Dei*, human lovers will never truly love one another, their love cannot be true to who they are, until they love God in and through each other.³³ To be united to the beloved even to the very interior is to be united to God who is the Being of the beloved's being, the Life of the beloved's life. Hence the union of lover and beloved, when brought into the sanctuary of divine participation, is a prelude to or foretaste of beatitude itself, the vision of God whose Presence makes the lover, the beloved, and their love a similitude of the oneness of the triune Persons who are Lover, Beloved, and Love.³⁴ Like the eternal blessedness

goodness, His truth, which the intellectual creature possesses as its most precious inheritance, the foundation and finality of its essence and personhood. To speak with Augustine: we *are* because God is given to us. Our being, *a fortiori* our life, intelligence, loving, all exist and exist truly *in us* solely because God is continually bestowing them upon us as images of Him. Since God is His own being, life, intelligence, loving, the creature who resembles God must have its *own* being (and the rest), even though only the uncreated infinite God could be identical to His own existence, whereas the creature's being must be from another, of another source.

³³This loving of God "in and through" each other must not be understood instrumentally, as a misreading of the Augustinian contrast of *uti/frui* might suggest, but exemplarily, that is to say, loving God *in* the image of God, not for the sake of God "alone" but for the sake of God's *offspring* as well. The *imago Dei* is not imaginary; it is the presence of God in another modality, a god within God, as Christ reminds the Pharisees: "Is it not written in your law, 'I said, you are gods?'" (Jn 10:34; Ps 82:6) and St. Paul reminds the Athenians: "As even some of your poets have said: 'For we are indeed his offspring'" (Acts 17:28).

³⁴"Their love," too, because it is not enough for the lover and beloved to *be*, or to be *with* each other; they must *love* one another and this love, a spiration from both hearts, *is* the binding together, the perfect union, they desire and enjoy. The love itself is no mere "accidental modification" of mental substance by which each apprehends the other's essence in a kind of mutual intellectual reverie—for then each would in fact remain alone and his or her *being* would not go out to the other. But love is precisely the overcoming of enstatic cognition, and that is why love is truly the bridge between lover and beloved, one love born of both hearts, identical in each because its very function is unitive, its essence union, its activity to gather all other activities into the *vis unitiva*. Thus the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity is truly reflected, or better, re-presented, in human love, by a similitude that is not an empty metaphor but a real participation in the sanctifying and communifactive life of the Holy Spirit.

touched in Holy Communion, or the completion of the Law in the revelation of Christ, union of lover and beloved does not vanish in the beatifying vision: it is fulfilled and shown its own face, its own essence, which it could not behold prior to the unveiling. Just as the Eucharistic Christ of the Church militant gives way to the Christ in glory of the Church triumphant while remaining one and the same Christ, human love in its earthly limitations, its passibility and unclarity, yields to human love divinized and immortalized in the communion of saints. This participated love is finally experienced *as eternal*, co-eternal with divine love, because at last it is revealed to itself as abiding within the Heart of God.

We cannot know ourselves perfectly during our pilgrimage because the world affords no untarnished mirror for spiritual being; nor can we know our loved ones perfectly because our own eyes are darkened and the medium of vision is clouded over. Only in heaven, in the vision of God, do we have a mirror for seeing ourselves as we truly are; only there, when our eyes behold the Face of God, is our vision cured of darkness; only there, when we behold the beloved illuminated from within by the light of divinity (the beloved's true loveliness) and united to us with bonds far deeper than those of blood or body, is the cloudy medium between lover and beloved evaporated and the "knowing" of each by the other rendered so transparent and inward that it burns away even the medium and becomes a true *communio personarum*, a union streaming from and returning to the Trinitarian bliss of absolute Unity, two faces, two seeings, unmediatedly *with* each other as if they were one face and one seeing because the souls are now immovably and visibly inhering in the one face and one vision of God. They see each other in God, they see and love one another as gods, their love is in God and of God and God is all in all. Caught up in union with God and seeing his Face, the lover sees his own face and the beloved's for the first time (every in-sight in heaven is the first, every spiritual embrace is virginal, nuptial, fecund). The lover sees, moreover, that these faces in their meaning are one Face, God's, as he gives himself to all that they might *be* and *love* in worship of his being and love, the lover and beloved thereby tasting a joy of union of which every joy they experienced on earth was but a distant intimation, a feeble echo.

If the nature of the human person is communitarian, if salvation is union with the divine Lover and beatitude a friendship of infinite intensity and measureless extent, then it becomes evident that man by himself must be radically incomplete,

unsaved—indeed, that he will “find himself” only by continually *giving* himself to God and neighbor in love. He will know who he is only in the *extasis* of love, in the acting and suffering which, like two hands guided by one providence, lead him to attain the high destiny of his being—a plenitude of joy and glory that cannot be isolated from the beloved, from wife or children, fellow monks or nuns, other Christians, other men, because it is in his *extasis* towards the other that his own self comes to its identity and presence as a “being for.”

II. Divine *latreia* as the cure for egolatry

Idolatrous man can be cured only with the healing aid of divine grace, which comes to us in the Church through worship. The purpose of this section is to shed light on the link between the life of soul formed by and culminating in liturgical-sacramental *latreia*—an activity of which community is the proper context and communion the intended result—and the restoration of the ecstatic nature of the human person.

Fallen man is tempted to elevate himself in *any* act of religion or transcendent love; he is overtaken by the old Adam who wants to get knowledge and power into his own hands rather than confess their divine origin. The coherence of all things in their plenary union in the Word was shattered by the fall, which brings about their fragmentation, the antithesis of unity. The healing of this fragmentation, the reunification of our personhood and our friendships, comes through common worship of the Word.³⁵ In her adoration of the Word *per quem omnia facta sunt*, the Church embraces the world, and tying each man to the Lord of all creation, gives love of neighbor infinite value and urgency. Indeed, it is evident that a dialogical creature who lives in the interpersonal element of speech and thought must be healed through the *principium* of dialogue itself—the *Logos pros ton Theon*. In this eternal relation of *Logos* and *Theos* all true human community and all truthful dialogue is precontained.

The parable of the Pharisee and the publican illustrates the opposition of glories, the one derived from false worship, the

³⁵“There is definitive brotherhood only in a common adoration. *Gloria Dei, vivens homo*; but man will attain to life only by means of the *solī Deo gloria*. That is the universal *Pasch*, the preparation for the City of God” (H. de Lubac, *Catholicism*, 368).

other from truth before God. No wonder Christ speaks hard words about the Pharisee who walked proudly into the Temple, raised his self-esteeming eyes to a self-projected God, and went about his ritual of self-glorification, forgetting that he is as dust before the Almighty. The penitent who beat his breast and said "O God, have mercy on me, a sinner," walked out of the Temple justified. In that moment of abasement he *knew himself*, he saw himself as God saw him, and felt at once the death of sin and the new life of mercy.³⁶ In losing himself, in dying to himself, he gained that very gift back, resurrected, from the Lord who first gave it. "It is up to freedom, come to the point where it accedes to the greatest self-awareness, to liberate itself in some way from itself, I mean by this, from its perverse disposition to affirm its own self-sufficiency. And this liberation is none other than the act of humility by which it immolates itself before grace."³⁷ Detachment from self begins just when human freedom calls out to God in prayer. "If man is ever able, in faith, to forget his human condition, his sins, his cares about existence, it happens when he is at prayer. . . . This much he knows, that he is sharing in something mysterious and that his faith urges him to it and shows him the way—a way of his spirit's obedience to the Holy Spirit, of self-forgetfulness, of a nakedness which is equivalent to perfect poverty before God."³⁸

When we humble ourselves in prayer, we are caught up in the object of our devotion, and for a blessed moment we stand before our Creator with nothing to hide, like Adam before he fell into himself and lost his ecstatic friendship with God. Prayer in Christ before the Father is a pilgrimage from the shame of fallen nature to the glory of redeemed nature, from joyless solipsism to joyful sacrifice. We read in St. Thomas's exposition of Galatians 2:20 ("And I live, now not I, but Christ liveth in me"):

... because the Apostle had set aside his love of self through the cross of Christ, he said that he was dead so far as love of self was concerned, declaring that

³⁶"The religious man recognizes that he can do nothing of himself and that everything comes to him by divine grace. This is the ground of his humility and gratitude; but it must also be remembered that only in divine service does he feel himself to be free" (H. J. Paton, *The Modern Predicament: A Study in the Philosophy of Religion* [London: George Allen & Unwin, 1955], 71).

³⁷G. Marcel, *Problematic Man*, trans. Brian Thompson (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 62–63.

³⁸Adrienne von Speyr, *The Gates of Eternal Life*, trans. Sr. Corona Sharp (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983), 139.

with Christ I am nailed to the cross (2:19b), i.e., through the cross of Christ my own private love has been removed from me. Hence he says *God forbid that I should glory save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ* (6:14). "If one died for all, then all were dead. And Christ died for all, that they also who live may not now live to themselves, but unto him who died for them" (2 Cor 5:14). *And I live, now not I*, i.e., I no longer live as though having any interest in my own good, *but Christ liveth in me*, i.e., I have Christ alone in my affection and Christ himself is my life: "To me, to live is Christ; and to die is gain." (Phil 1:21)³⁹

The fundamental attitude of prayer, which is at the same time the fundamental attitude of the Christian in relation to Christ, is one of self-giving or self-surrendering, the movement of returning my life to the God in whom I live and move and have my being: "to me, to live is Christ; and to die is gain." Prayer is always a breaking free, to some extent, from the ego and its thralldom to the illusion of autogenesis, which it mistakenly identifies with freedom. Prayer is a death for the restless ego—"with Christ I am nailed to the cross"—and a birth for the *imago Dei*: "Christ liveth in me." By emerging into the "universe of truth" (MacDonald), praying man passes over from the desert of self-enclosure to the promised land of God, our genesis and our eschaton; man gives himself to God as first beginning and last end, as the encircling sphere and centermost point of the created person. The core of every true prayer contains an act of total dependence on God, whose sovereign glory we acknowledge in our act of praise and adoration, in our confiding, hoping, pleading, rejoicing, sorrowing, giving thanks.⁴⁰

Since liturgy is the act of prayer *par excellence*, liturgy faithful to its purpose deepens and enlarges what individual

³⁹St. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Galatians*, trans. F. R. Larcher, O.P. (Albany, NY: Magi Books, 1966), c. 2, lect. 6, 62–63.

⁴⁰If, as we have said, man is a "being for," it now becomes clearer that the object of his prepositional *esse* is the *glory of God*. By sharing this glory man becomes who he is, who he is called to be in the unsearchable depths of divine love. Explaining St. Thomas's doctrine of *gloria*, Pieper writes: "To be sure, 'glory before God,' *gloria* in its full sense, is only another name for beatitude itself. Here too, with a precision we are unaccustomed to, the original meaning is taken literally: man's knowledge, even when it is without error, does not affect the being of what is known; God's knowledge, however, creates being. 'We are, in that God sees us,' says Augustine. This accounts for the 'therefore' which links the following two propositions from the *Summa Theologica*: 'The good of man depends upon God's knowledge, and therefore man's happiness depends upon his glory before God' (*STh*, 1–2.2.3)" (J. Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston [New York: Pantheon Books, 1958], 36–37).

prayer haltingly begins to accomplish in the believer's heart. All that the Church does in her liturgy ought to be, before anything else, a response to *God*, in adoration. This self-giving response of adoration is made first and foremost by the Church in her public worship of God *propter magnam gloriam suam*.

The Church understands the needs of man in her prayer; but she also recognizes the glory of God. She has charge of adoration, something which belongs to the whole Church in her unity. This adoration unites the prayers of the Old Covenant with the words of the Son and also with those of the saints and of the entire Church. Such a unity towers above the individual person at prayer and could never be reached by him, even in the most intense and ardent prayer; its ultimate purpose is to draw man along the path to eternal life.⁴¹

The interior pilgrimage from shame to glory, the restoration of the broken image, is thus in a special way the work of liturgical prayer, wherein man is drawn out of himself—out of his idiomatic prayer—into the prayer of the *ekklesia* represented by the priest, himself representing the Word breathed out in obedient sacrifice to the Father. The entire movement of liturgy is ecstatic, always proceeding outwards, upwards, into the Heart of God. There is no room for idiosyncrasy in the sacred domain where the *koine* of Eucharist is spoken, the language of the crucified and risen Lord. It is only because the source of communion comes into him that the Christian can go out of himself, becoming more the communitarian person he was created to be. The Eucharist is supreme *extasis*: by “receiving Holy Communion,” the faithful consume the one who is Himself consumed with the fire of divine love, and in this way are caught up in the everlasting love-offering of the Son to the Father.

In his conversation with the woman of Samaria, Jesus says: “The hour is coming, and now is, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him” (Jn. 4:23). They who worship *cum ecclesia, cum sponsa Christi*, worship in spirit and truth, for she is the perfect servant, the immaculate wife, of her divine Lord and Spouse. In her true inward nature as Mystical Body of Christ, she is *plenum gratiae et veritatis*: the grace and truth of Christ course through her sacramental veins. If we would please God in our love, we must make our love into prayer and strive to embody this prayer in the Church's life of worship, her continual Trinitarian offering of love to the Father who chose her, the Son who betrothed her to himself, and the Holy Spirit who purifies her as the vessel of election. The solemn prayer offered by the Church in

⁴¹A. Von Speyr, *Gates of Eternal Life*, 139–140.

her liturgy, "the prayer which the Son spoke among us and taught to us, and the convergence of all praying hearts upon that one Word which he is and which encompasses the earth's hope,"⁴² is the most perfect, most fruitful, most intimate prayer before God; all human longings are caught up in this, which rises as the one spiritual cry of mankind to heaven. If we wish to serve Jesus Christ, if we truly desire to be bone of his bone and flesh of his flesh, we must enter into the life, the liturgy, the worship of our Holy Mother the Church, and in so doing we shall cleave to our divine Lord now and forever.* □

⁴²*Ibid.*, 140.

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