INTRODUCTION

COMPANIONS IN CONVERSATION: HIMES' PERSPECTIVE

Few needs are as pressing and as often go unmet in our world as the need for a place to converse. We all require somewhere, some circle of companions, where and with whom we can enter into the demanding task of trying to say what we experience and to understand what others say in response. There may be many places and opportunities for "passing the time of day," "shooting the breeze," "pleasant chat," although I suspect that for many such places and occasions are also becoming rare, but circles of conversation are precious, indeed. Such places may be libraries, for frequently the most valuable, far-ranging and transformative conversations are with people who are not present and do not happen to be living any longer. Thank God for books! If we did not have them, we would be forced to talk only to nearby contemporaries. Conversation, whether with those around us or those separated from us in space and time or, ideally, both, is necessary for thinking. How would we ever know what we do and feel and experience if we did not talk about our actions and feelings and experiences with others? This is true for everyone and it is certainly true for theologians.

While teaching at the University of Notre Dame, I was privileged to be part of several circles of conversation, one of the most fruitful of which was at the Center for Social Concerns, a particularly bright jewel in Notre Dame's crown. Thanks to the welcome and support of the Center's always gracious staff, I had many opportunities to talk with students, alumni and alumnae, and others engaged in discerning how the Christian call to service with one's neighbor can be lived out in a world where marriages are formed, children raised, mortgages paid and careers pursued. Through many conversations we talked about who God is, about relationships and what Christianity is about, and how we might reimagine our lives and our world in light of what we believe about God in the Christian tradition.

Don McNeill, C.S.C., Andrea Shappell and other members of the Center's staff urged that some of these conversations be made available to those not present there and then (again, thank God for books!). I was initially reluctant, both because I doubted whether what I said in the relaxed atmosphere of these conversations would be of interest to those who had not been present and because of the difficulty in recalling comments made on numerous occasions over the course of several years. Ah, but the ever-resourceful folks at the Center had an answer for those worries. They had been taping–and taping and taping and taping, and it appeared that scarcely had an unrecorded word fallen from my lips. Don McNeill suggested that a group of people go through these hours and hours of audio and video-tape and select points to be transcribed which they thought others might find helpful in thinking through their experience of living Christianity. With extraordinary patience and industry this was done. They also transcribed some audio tapes from a few presentations given outside the Center for Social Concerns and from some classroom sessions with students at Notre Dame. Of course, prose-to-be-heard differs greatly from prose-to-be-read, and so I extensively edited and rearranged the material.

At the urging of the group of colleagues who had selected the material from the tapes, I have preserved the informal, conversational tone of the originals. What we were not able to preserve, however, was the context of the conversation, the back-and-forth exchange, the questions or objections which led to clarifications and restatements. In order to allow other voices than mine to be heard, seven chapters have a comment, response or expansion from the experience of someone else or a few persons. These are followed by questions by Stacy Hennessy to prompt further personal or group conversation. It is my hope that the book which has resulted carries some of the flavor of those conversation circles which I so much appreciated at the Center for Social Concerns.

I suppose every writer has some imaginary reader in mind for a book. I have had the great advantage of not having to imagine a reader–or, more accurately, a hearer. For I recall with gratitude those who engaged in these conversations with me from 1987 to 1993, and I think of the readers of this book as being people like them. This is a book, therefore, for people who do not want their religious life to be partitioned off from the rest of their experience, men and women who will not allow water-tight bulkheads to be erected between the deepest levels of their experience and questions like how to choose a job, make a living, pay taxes, vote, and live with neighbors. The reader may be young (like most of those who were part of the original conversations) or not so young (like, alas, the writer). The reader may be engaged full-time in service-work or exploring how the call to love and service can be combined with supporting a family and pursuing a career. What the reader will be is someone who insists that what he or she believes makes a difference in fact, that theology not be an imposition on experience but an explication of it, that truth is not only what one believes but what one does. I have been gifted with such companions in conversation and am happy that other such readers join us.

COMPANIONS IN CONVERSATION: CENTER FOR SOCIAL CONCERNS PERSPECTIVE

The six of us, Don, Andrea, Jan, Stacy, Katie, and Sarah, engaged in the educational mission of the Center for Social Concerns at Notre Dame, have benefited from our ongoing conversation with Michael Himes since he joined the Department of Theology in the fall of 1987. As Michael mentions above, we began taping his responses to student questions emerging from their social concerns involvement. We also transcribed his presentations which led to conversations from a variety of contexts: continuing formation in ministry; religious education groups; human rights groups; homilies; responses to questions from parishes; preparation and "follow up" sessions for students in service learning experiences.

The Center encourages conversation which is interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and intergenerational. We soon discovered that Himes' thoughts enabled and evoked conversations which were lively, animated, and transcended the usual communication barriers. We compiled his thoughts in such a way that we hope you and other readers will be drawn closer in thought and experience to God, others, and yourselves. We believe that his ideas lead to fresh discoveries of the mystery of God, Christ, and our participation in a restless search for truth.

The six of us who spent the weekend with Michael to finalize the book in April of 1994 tried to have all of you in mind. It was for this reason that we invited Regina Weissert, Michael Barkasy, Bob Elmer, Ron White, Lou Nanni, and Maria Teresa Gaston-Witchger to share responses from their personal experience to some of the chapters, in addition to our own. We hope their conversation with the insights of Michael will engage you to reflect your own personal story and faith journey.

We believe that your life experiences with joy and sorrow will bring you to each chapter with enthusiasm and passionate inquiry. We have come to this book from a variety of work and life situations, and thus we present a number of different starting points from which the importance of writing this book emerged.

- **Continuing education for life**—*Don McNeill, C.S.C., and Andrea Smith Shappell*

As educators whose primary role is one of facilitating small group discussion, we have seen many students who are raising deep questions about their faith find new insights and perspectives in discussion with Michael Himes. Our work at the Center for Social Concerns, our awareness of students' and alumni's restless desire to discover God in experiences of service and compassion, is very apparent in all facets of the Center's programs. Our hope is that this book allows students of all ages to reflect on the integration of faith and experience, whether they be persons raising children, grandparents, university students, or simply anyone who is open to exploring dimensions of faith.

- **Pastoral, campus, and social ministries**—*Jan Pilarski and Stacy Hennessy*

In our experiences in one or more of the ministries of campus minister, community organizer, theologian, and diocesan social ministry coordinator, we found Michael Himes' insights into God's self-revelation refreshing for the variety of persons with whom we work. The insights on issues such as service, experience, and sacrament help us all to reflect more deeply on life's journey, and to appreciate how much there is to gain by sharing with each other our questions, experiences, and challenges. Through these discussions we are led to deeper relationships with one another and, in doing so, come closer and closer to God.

- **Students and young adults in service**—*Katie Bergin and Sarah Keyes*

Participating in this book has really been a blessing. To be engaged with others in a conversation about love, God, truth, and service—topics many of us probably do not openly talk about enough—is a gift. We just graduated from Notre Dame and are entering service experiences in the Holy Cross Associates, Sarah domestically, and Katie in Chile. The ideas and content of this book as well as the wonderful people connected with it continue to shape our thinking as we enter our time of service and our open future. We are excited by the hope that this book will expose those who are burning with questions, those whose experiences have left them confused and searching, to deeper insights that lead to further action for a more just and humane world.

From this variety of starting points we now invite Michael Himes to present an overview of the book and its challenge for our conversations about doing the truth in love.

THE INVITATION TO RISK CONTINUING THE CONVERSATION

Any conversation requires taking risks. The greatest risk is that of being changed by what one hears the conversation partner say and, perhaps even more, by what one hears oneself say. Another risk is that the conversation may go nowhere. You have every right to demand that you have some notice in advance that these conversations go somewhere. And, ever careful as I am of the reader's rights, I will tell you what we shall be talking about.

No word is more central to theology than "God," and yet I doubt that there is any word more often misunderstood by Christians. We begin by trying to clarify what we mean by that all-important, much misused word, and I suggest in chapter 1 that it is least wrongly understood as the name of a very particular relationship. Having spoken about God, we turn to us, that is, to God's creatures, and in chapter 2 I maintain that the most fundamental of all religious statements is that I am not God and that this is a good thing. Chapter 3 then takes up what I firmly believe to be the truest statement ever made about human beings, that we are all dissatisfied, and asks how we can live with our restlessness.

Chapter 4 follows from what we say about God and about human beings as "the image of God" and so asks the question which the first hearers of the gospel asked: "What then must we do?" (Acts 2:37) And the answer, I suggest, is that we must do what God is. But we cannot pretend that any of this is immediately obvious in a world marked by suffering, pain, and death. No one has the right to talk about the deepest issues of human experience and brush lightly by the mystery of evil, and so we must face that mystery in chapter 5.

The next chapter asks a question which will certainly have occurred to you, intelligent and perceptive reader that you are, by that point if not long before: Why are you bothering to read this book at all? That question may take heightened form if you have agreed with me through the earlier chapters that Christianity is first of all about *doing* the truth. Why then are we *thinking* and *talking* about it instead? Chapter 6 addresses the point of theology and its enrichment by ordinary experience.

Chapter 7 brings us a key contribution of the Catholic theological tradition, sacramentality. But we shall not be talking about the seven great ritual celebrations which we designate by the term "sacraments." I shall suggest that sacramentality is a way—a very specifically Catholic way—of seeing the whole world and everyone and everything in it. Chapter 8 turns attention to the eucharist as the revelation of who we are

and what we are meant for. In a sense, it restates everything we will have said to that point and validates it through the eucharist. And finally chapter 9 asks us to reflect on what (I hope) the whole conversation has been doing: expanding our imagination.

Now, I have every hope that this description of where we will go and what we will be talking about is sufficiently cryptic that you are wondering, "Whatever is Himes going on about?" And that is an excellent starting point for any conversation.

1 EXPLORING THE MYSTERY OF GOD IN RELATIONSHIPS

Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est.

Wherever there is charity and love, there is God.

I. UNDERSTANDING GOD AS MYSTERY

The mystery of God is an enormous topic. First of all, let us center on the word "mystery." This word is often used when we speak of God, but we have not perhaps taken it seriously enough. When we speak of God as the "ultimate" or "deepest" or "richest" or "most profound mystery," what do we mean? What does it mean to say that God is a mystery?

There are two meanings to the word "mystery." One is the way in which we use the term when we talk about an Agatha Christie mystery, a murder mystery, where the problem is that there are missing clues. If we could only get our hands on the missing pieces and organize them in the right way, we would see the solution. We would know that the butler did it, and the mystery would be solved.

But that is not what we mean when we talk about God as a mystery. Then we are using "mystery" in a quite different sense—in what I refer to as the Caterpillar sense of mystery. Think of one of the truly profound books of the nineteenth century, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Do you remember the passage in which Alice, who is very small at that point in the story, encounters the Caterpillar seated on a mushroom smoking a waterpipe? The conversation begins with the Caterpillar asking Alice the question, "Who are *you*?" Alice replies that, because of all the strange transformations which she has passed through so far that day, she is no longer sure who she is. "Explain yourself!" the Caterpillar demands. "I can't explain *myself*, I'm afraid, Sir," said Alice, "because I am not myself, you see." The Caterpillar replies that he does not see, and Alice tries to explain that the extraordinary things that have happened to her, especially her shifts in size, have left her confused. She says that she is

sure that the Caterpillar would feel the same had such things happened to him. The Caterpillar insists that he would not fail to know who he is, and when Alice responds that it all feels very strange "to *me*," he returns to his original question: "You!" said the Caterpillar contemptuously. "Who are *you*?"

The Caterpillar's question is, in fact, the rigorously logical question to ask, because every one of Alice's questions or replies returns to the pronoun "I." And the Caterpillar, who like everyone in Wonderland is a rigorous logician, insists that Alice define her terms. Before he can answer her questions, she has to explain who this "I" is to whom she keeps referring. Alice's frustration in the conversation comes from the fact that there is no answer to the Caterpillar's question. I grant you, if you stop at a gas station to ask for directions, you don't expect metaphysical argument, and so one can understand Alice's frustration. But the Caterpillar's question is not an idle one. It is a very important question, indeed: "Who are *you*?" The difficulty is that none of us has a good answer. Notice: we are not asked for a description. Don't answer with a name, because we English speakers know on excellent authority that "a rose by any other name would smell as sweet." Don't answer by telling where you live, or what your work is, or where you went to school, or who your parents are. Don't answer with your age or your social security number. All of that is description. And the Caterpillar's question does not ask for a description but for a definition.

"Who are *you*?" The problem is that we don't know. It is a question without an answer. It is mystery in a very rich sense, the sense in which all of us are mysteries to ourselves. One of the greatest theological minds the Christian tradition has yet seen, St. Augustine, wrote his *Confessions* in part as an exploration of the mystery, "Who is Augustine?" He knew that he could not answer the question because the moment he did, he became more than he had said in his answer and so made the answer false. If I could tell you in one wonderful, flashing, brilliantly insightful statement that this is who I am, the very act of making the statement makes me more than who I was, and so the answer is no longer right. The very attempt to answer the question pushes me past any answer I can give to the question.

That is what we mean when we talk about God as mystery. We are talking about something so closely interwoven into who we are that it becomes impossible to answer. God is mystery not because God is so distant but because God is so terribly close; understanding who God is is so tied up with understanding who I am and why I am that the question "Who is God?" becomes as impossible to answer as the question "Who am I?"

It is of great importance that we recognize this, for it requires us constantly to attempt to purify our consciousness of God, to remind ourselves that in talking about God we are talking about absolute mystery. Blasphemy is always the danger in preaching, in theology, in catechesis, because we can so easily begin to identify our best images of God with *God*.

The story is told of a distinguished theologian that, when addressing new students for the first time, he would enter the lecture hall, proceed to the podium, and begin by saying, "God." Then he would pause dramatically during the hush while the students waited to find out what he had to say about God. He would then tell the students, "Whatever came into your head when I said the word 'God,' is not God." And that is exactly correct. The first and most important thing to know in theology is that whatever you think of when you hear the word "God" is not God. However deep, however rich, however noble, however powerful, however loving, however scripturally-based or traditionally-sanctioned, whatever the image is, it is not God because God remains mystery. We must take that very seriously.

And so we need to recognize that the word "God" is not a proper name. It is not the name of some great big person somewhere "out there." The word "God" functions like *x* in algebra. It is the stand-in for the mystery, just as, when someone works out an algebraic equation, all the attention focuses on *x* which designates that which is unknown. So, too, the word "God" functions as a handy bit of shorthand for the absolute mystery which grounds and supports all that exists. Now, I grant you that it becomes awkward to talk about "the absolute mystery that grounds and supports all that exists," so we just say "God." One could just as well call it "Charlie" or "Mary Ann," but traditionally we have used "God." The word is a stand-in for absolute mystery.

But, acknowledging that there is no final and fully correct way of imaging or speaking about God, is there any way less hopelessly inadequate than every other way? The great western religious traditions have at their cores claims about how one might least wrongly think and speak about God. And so, of course, has Christianity.

II. UNDERSTANDING GOD AS *AGAPE*

What the Christian tradition maintains is the least inadequate expression for God finds its clearest, sharpest, simplest statement in one of the last-written documents of the collection of early Christian documents which we call the New Testament, the first letter of John.

There we read that "God is love" (1 Jn 4:8 and 16). But the love which is offered as the least wrong way to think and speak about God is of a very peculiar sort: *agape*. *Agape* is a Greek word meaning love which is purely other-directed, love which seeks no return, love which does not want anything back. Perhaps, so as not to confuse it with the many other meanings which we attach to the word "love" in English, we might translate *agape* as "pure self-gift."

One of the most astonishing statements in the New Testament is found in the section of Matthew's gospel which we call the sermon on the mount (Mt 5–7). In some ways we could say that it functions as a kind of constitution for the kingdom of God. The very fact that Jesus' sermon takes place on a mountain recalls Moses coming down the mountain to proclaim the laws of God. And as Moses began his address to Israel with a kind of summary statement of what followed—we call the summary the ten commandments—so Jesus begins with a summary, the beatitudes.

The middle of the sermon consists of a number of comparisons between the Mosaic law and the new law of the kingdom, in which Jesus keeps "upping the ante" on the statements with which his hearers would have been so familiar: "You have heard it said to you that...but I say to you..." (Mt 5:21–47). You have heard it said that you shall not kill, but I tell you that you must not act or speak in anger. You have heard it said that you shall not commit adultery, but I tell you that you must not think lustfully. You have heard it said that you must not divorce except under certain circumstances, but I tell you that divorce is never permissible. You have heard it said that you must not swear falsely, but I tell you that you must not swear at all. These comparisons climax with "You have heard it said that you shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy. But I tell you that you must love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Mt 5:43–44).

This has been made even more startlingly concrete in the preceding verses: "If someone slaps you on the right cheek, offer him the other cheek as well. If someone wants to take you to law to get your coat, give him your shirt as well. If someone demands that you go one mile, go two miles with him." But, one might well ask, on what possible grounds should we act in such an unheard-of fashion? After all, what if the person has slapped us unjustly? What if he or she has no right to my coat, let alone my shirt? What if he or she has no basis for expecting me to go a single mile, no less two? It is here that Matthew's gospel offers its astounding claim. Perhaps, as with so many other statements of the New Testament, we have heard it so often that it no longer shocks us. But it should, for in answer to the obvious question, "Why should we act in such a strange and unaccountable way?" Jesus responds that we must do so in order to "be children of your Father in heaven who makes the sun shine on the wicked as well as the good and sends rain to fall on the just as well as the unjust" (Mt 5:45).

This is an absolutely shocking claim. We wouldn't get away with saying this sort of thing in most pulpits today, let me tell you. Why should we act in the peculiar fashion which Jesus has described? Because we are God's children and ought to act like our parent. And that parent makes the sun shine on the good and the wicked, makes the rain fall on the just and the unjust. Please notice that what Jesus maintains is that our Father in heaven finds ethics very dull. Our Father in heaven finds moral theology a bit of a yawn. Our Father in heaven doesn't especially care whether you are good or wicked or whether you are just or unjust. Your Father in heaven simply loves you. There are no bounds to God's love, so do not put any bounds to yours. "Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect" (Mt 5:48). You may not love your Father in heaven, but your Father in heaven still loves you. So you be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect: love those who hate you; do good to those who persecute you.

Let's explore this amazing claim a bit. It lies at the root of the whole Christian way of understanding what we mean by "God" and therefore also of understanding what it is to be a human being. It is said again and again in the parables of Jesus. Many of the parables are problematic to us, which is why we often tend to water them down when we preach or talk about them. Take, for example, the prodigal son (Lk 15:11–32), a parable which we have frequently distorted. Often we turn it into a story about repentance, when in fact the parable is at pains to exclude any element of repentance. Approach the story fresh, as though you have never heard it before. And keep in mind two points, both of which are necessary in order to understand the relationship of the three main figures in the story, the father and his two sons. First, remember how patriarchal the organization of ancient near eastern society was. One's social, economic, even religious standing depended on one's relation to the head of the household. Second, recall that in Jesus' time, inheritance was governed by primogeniture, i.e. all property went to the eldest son; daughters and younger sons inherited nothing.

And so the story begins: once there was a man who had two sons. The younger one came to him and said, "Dad, why should I hang around until you finally die? Give me my share of the inheritance now." The opening of the story should shock the hearer right off the bat. How could any son say such a thing to his father? We find it reprehensible, and we are by no means as respectful of parents as was the society in which Jesus taught and in which the author of Luke's gospel wrote. Note, too, that whether the father is alive or dead, this impertinent son inherits nothing. The

whole estate should go to his older brother. The younger boy has no share. His demand is not only cruel in its form but nonsensical in its import. So what should the response of a respectable, upright, just, and God-fearing father have been? Probably a good slap. Presumably Jesus' hearers would have agreed that the proper response for the father in the story would be to tell the disrespectful twerp to mind his manners. But instead what we hear is that the father divided up the estate, turned half of it into cash and gave it to the younger son. So, at the outset of the parable, we know two things: the younger son is thoughtless and self-centered, and the father is a hopelessly irresponsible parent. This is not a story about good parenting techniques.

The younger son went off to a far country and wasted his money on wine, women and song. Then a great famine descended on the land where he was living and he was reduced to tending pigs. He was so hungry that he envied the slop thrown to the pigs. That detail is a wonderful touch. It is, after all, a Jewish story. The son has ended up envying non-kosher animals, a graphic ancient Jewish equivalent to having hit the bottom of the barrel. Eventually the younger son came to his senses and said to himself, "At home, even the servants eat better than I am. I know what I will do. I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned before heaven and against you. I am not worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired hands'" (Lk 15:17–19). And he set off for home.

Please notice: only one motive is given in the story for the son's return home—he can eat better there. There is not a syllable of regret for how badly he has treated his father or for the fact that he is alienated from his family. The sole motive is that he is hungry and can get a good meal at home. Indeed, to underscore the point, the story has the younger son concoct a prepared statement. He puts together his little speech to tug at the father's heartstrings and heads home.

The father saw him coming from a great distance and ran out to meet him. And as we might anticipate from this irresponsible parent, the father does not ask the obvious questions: "Where have you been? What have you been doing? Why are you dressed so badly? What happened to all the money I gave you?" Nor does he wait to discover if the son has learned his lesson. When the son launches into his prepared text, "Father, I have sinned before heaven and against you," etc., and before he even reaches the last line, "Treat me as one of your hired hands," the father turns to the servants and commands that they get a ring for the son's finger, sandals for his feet, and a robe to put on him, and that they slay the fatted calf for the welcoming feast. And so the father scoops the son up, takes him into the house, and the party begins.

Where are we at this point in the story? This is the last time we see the younger son in the story, and so far as we know, he has not changed in the least from what he was at the outset. He was a selfish egoist at the beginning and he's a selfish egoist to the end. There has been no conversion, no repentance. We also know that the father is a hopelessly irresponsible parent. Indeed, we might well wonder if the reason the son is impossible is that the father is so inept.

And now enters the much injured older brother. After working all day in the fields (I must admit that the story lays it on a bit thick here), this faithful and hard-working son comes home to discover a party in progress. He asks one of the servants what is going on and, when he learns that it is a welcome-home party for his wastrel younger brother, refuses to go in to dinner. At this point, the older son should have had our sympathies, since he has been clearly the wronged party. But to refuse to break bread with his father, no matter who else is at the table! In our far less family-oriented world, we would find it a bit much for a child to refuse to eat with his or her parents because of a fight with a brother or sister who is at the table. In the ancient near east, such behavior would have been unpardonable. And once again, the father responds in precisely the way we have come to expect: he comes out to plead with him. And now we hear the wonderful final conversation which is what the whole story has been leading up to.

Remember, in Luke's gospel Jesus tells this story to the scribes and Pharisees who have been complaining that he welcomes sinners and is even willing to sit down at table with them (Lk 15:1–3). Hear the conversation between the father and his older son which concludes the parable in terms of that unsympathetic audience to whom the story was first told. The older son complains to the father, "I have worked and slaved for you constantly and you have given me nothing, not so much as a kid goat to have a party with my friends. But when this wastrel comes home, you throw this big party for him. It's wrong! It's unjust!" And the father's response is, "Son, everything that I have is yours"—which may be true, save that there is fifty percent less, thanks to the younger son; we should not lose sight of the fact that the older son really has been wronged. "Everything I have is yours," the father continues, "but the one who was lost is found. The one who was dead is alive. We had to rejoice." End of story.

Clearly, this is not a story about repentance. What is it about? I suggest to you that it is about the incomprehensibility of the love and mystery of God. The climax of the story is that final conversation. The older son's argument is that the father's behavior is absurd and, what is more, unjust. And note that the father does not dispute the justice of the older

son's complaints; he simply regards them as irrelevant. For the father isn't concerned with justice. The father is concerned with *agape*, absolute unconditional self-gift. The older son can argue, "Look, he demanded money he had no right to and he lost it. He has never shown the least regard for you or for this family. He doesn't deserve the party which you are giving him. This is unjust." And, given the older son's perspective, he is quite right. The father can reply, "But the young man was lost; now he's found. He was dead; now he's alive." What is the obvious response? Have a party. And the father is right, given the father's perspective.

The parable's point is to underscore that there are two different perspectives, each understandable in itself and each incomprehensible to the other. God does not see as human beings see, as the gospel reminds us again and again. If you find yourself saying, "I simply don't understand how God can act that way," then you may very well have gotten the point of the parable. Presumably the scribes and the Pharisees who first heard the story could not figure it out either. If you start with the conviction that our primary relationship to God is one of justice, then, Jesus seems to insist, you will certainly misunderstand God.

Perhaps the reason the Pharisees are given so much attention in the synoptic gospels is not only their historical importance but because the writers recognized that Pharisaism is a possibility for Christians. The problem with the Pharisees as they are depicted in the New Testament is that they think they know who and what God is and how God acts. God is the law-giver, and God's concern is that the law be observed, and, therefore, not to keep the law is *ipso facto* to put oneself outside the love of God. Imagine how they had to respond to an itinerant rabbi from Galilee who told them shocking parables in which he claimed their relationship with God was not one of justice or of keeping laws. For, as the parable we have been considering maintains, the younger son doesn't deserve anything, but God loves him in any event. After all, what is it to you if God is generous? Tax collectors and prostitutes are wicked and unjust, but God makes the sun shine on the good and the wicked and the rain fall on the just and the unjust. Your concern should simply be to be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. No wonder such a message drove the Pharisees crazy. We had to be cautioned about Pharisaism precisely because it would always remain an option for us as Christian believers. When they actually hear it, the gospel drives a lot of Christians crazy, too.

Of course, the question of punishment, i.e. of hell and damnation, will arise in many people's minds, and quite rightly. But damnation does not mean that God ceases to love the one damned. If that were true, then the sinner would be more powerful than God, since the sinner would have the power to make God, who is love, *agape*, something less than God. No, God's love is constant, unchanging and perfect. Damnation means that the sinner refuses finally and absolutely to accept being loved and to love in response. The damned may not love God, but God continues to love the damned. After all, the love of God is what holds us in existence. If God does not love you, you're not damned. You simply aren't. What supports our existence and holds us in being is God's love. We exist by the fact that God gives God's self to us at every moment. Therefore, of course, God loves the damned. God loves everything that exists just because it exists. Indeed, that is what makes it exist: God loves it into being.

Let me give you an image which comes from Gregory of Nyssa at the end of the fourth century. The difference between heaven and hell is described in this story he tells: Picture yourself walking out on a bright sunny day with healthy eyes. You will experience the sunlight as something wonderful and pleasant and beneficent. Now, picture yourself walking out on exactly the same bright sunny day, but with a diseased eye. You will now experience the sunlight as something terrible and painful and awful, something to shy away from. Well, the sun didn't change. You did.

That is the point about heaven and hell. Heaven and hell are exactly the same thing: the love of God. If you have always wanted the love of God, congratulations, you got heaven. If you don't want the love of God, too bad, you are stuck for all eternity. God remains God. God makes the sun shine on the just and the unjust, the rain fall on the good and the wicked. If you don't want rain or sun, too bad, you are still going to get them. The question is not that God changes in response to us. It is that we are judged by our response to the absoluteness of God's self gift.

If, then, you are willing to accept that the Christian tradition holds that the least wrong way to think and speak about the absolute mystery which is God is as pure and perfect self-gift, *agape*, you can begin to perceive the richest and deepest insight of the Christian tradition into the doctrine of God. It is a doctrine which we have managed in the course of nineteen centuries to dilute almost to the point of irrelevance. Please notice that the Christian tradition holds that God is *agape*, i.e. love in the sense of self-gift, *not* that God is a lover. The tradition, e.g. 1 John 4:8 and 16, says that God is *love*, not that God is *one who loves*. "Love" is not the name of a person. "Love" is the name of a relationship between persons. That, I suggest to you, is the single richest insight into the mystery of God that the Christian tradition has to offer.

III. UNDERSTANDING GOD AS RELATIONSHIP

This seems to imply that we should first think of God not as a person but as a relationship between persons. "Now," you may say to yourself, "what a weird, silly statement! Who in heaven's name has ever thought of God like that?" Well, you have—at least, you have if you meant what you said when you professed the Nicene Creed or, even more commonly, when you began your prayer "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." When we say those words, are we not claiming that God is a person but is the relationship between three? That is the whole point of the doctrine of the Trinity, is it not? The word "God" is the name of a kind of communal relationship. God is not the one, God is the relatedness of the three. This idea is precisely what lies at the heart of the great Christian claim about the meaning of the word "God," that the least hopelessly wrong way of understanding God is to think of God as a relationship even before thinking of God as a person.

Now, of course, there is a problem with this. When was the last time you heard a decent homily or conversation on the Trinity? In practice, most of our fellow believers do not find that the doctrine of the Trinity makes any difference to the concrete understanding of their lives: how they pray, how they live out their marriages, how they bring up their children, why they are part of the church, how they relate to their neighbors, how they spend their money, or how they vote. The doctrine of the Trinity seems simply irrelevant to these concerns.

The great American philosopher, William James, held that if something is true, it makes a difference, and if it makes no difference, it is not true. The great problem with the doctrine of the Trinity is that for most people it makes no difference. Most people understand it as very strange information about God, but of no particular importance to them. I have often remarked that, if this Sunday all the clergy stood up in their pulpits and told the parishioners, "We have a letter from the pope announcing that God is not three, but four," most people would simply groan, "Oh, will these changes never stop?" But aside from having to figure out how to fit the fourth one in when making the sign of the cross, the news would make no difference to anyone because it has become concretely irrelevant to people.

And yet the Trinity is not just one doctrine among others in the creed, it is the central Christian doctrine. If this is so, then what a shocking thing that it makes no difference. Notice the way in which the creed has traditionally been organized. We do not actually say that we believe in the Trinity. Rather, the whole creed is a trinitarian statement. "We believe in God the Father who...," followed by the doctrines of creation

and providence. "And in God the Son who...," followed by the doctrines of the incarnation, redemption, and resurrection. "And in God the Spirit who...," followed by statements of belief in scripture, the church, sacraments, and eschatology. The Trinity is not one doctrine among others; it is the shape of all doctrine. The whole profession of the Christian faith is a profession of faith in the Trinity.

Our usual language for talking about the Trinity sometimes is not very helpful. The language of "Father," "Son," and "Spirit" is scripturally based, to be sure (Mt 28:19), but it is not the only language which has been used in the course of the church's tradition. For example, St. Augustine suggested a number of alternative ways of thinking and speaking about the Trinity, one of which was "Lover," "Beloved," and the "Love" between them. I think that this language penetrates deeply into what the tradition is really expressing in the doctrine of the Trinity. What is meant by the word "God" is an eternal outpouring of self, a continual giving which is accepted and returned in continual giving, and the Spirit, that which unites the Lover and the Beloved, is agape. And so, I suggest to you that we must recapture an understanding of God as the ultimate mystery, least wrongly approached as the relationship of perfect self-gift.

We have all heard statements in scripture which provide insight into that claim. For example, we have all heard a thousand times: "Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in their midst" (Mt 18:20). We tend to reduce that statement too easily to "I shall be with you in spirit," with a small "s" on spirit. It is the kind of thing we say when apologizing for not being able to accept an invitation or attend an event. But let us take Jesus' words seriously. Might it not then mean, "Where two or three come together in genuine agape, true mutual self-gift, there I am"?

At the eucharist of the Lord's supper on Holy Thursday, during the re-enactment of the washing of the disciples' feet, the traditional text which the church has sung for centuries is, *Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est*, "Wherever there is charity and love, there is God." Take that seriously! If God is least wrongly thought of as *agape*, then wherever you see charity and love, there's God. If the word "God" is least wrongly understood as a particular kind of relationship, then wherever you see that relationship genuinely lived out, wherever you see charity and love, you see the presence of God.

In John's gospel, immediately after Jesus washes his disciples' feet at the start of the last supper (Jn 13:2–16), he says to them: "I give you one new commandment: love one another. You must love one another as I have loved you. By your love for one another all will know that you are my

disciples" (Jn 13:34–35). The whole last supper discourse in John's gospel (chapters 13–17) is a magnificent reflection on love and communion. And, astonishingly, not once does Jesus ever tell his disciples to love God, although we are repeatedly told to love one another. For God is not the object of love; in a sense, God is not even the subject of love. God is simply the love. What happens when you serve your brother or sister is that you are enacting the meaning of the word "God." One could say that "God" is closer to being a verb than a noun. "God" is what is done, not the one who does it, nor the one to whom it is done. God is the doing, the loving. That extraordinary metaphor in 1 John 4:8 and 16, "God is *agape*," self-giving love, is what lies at the heart of the doctrine of the Trinity.

For, you see, we Christians do not believe in a "supreme being" out there someplace who creates the universe and whom we are supposed to love in return. That is not what Christianity is about at all. We do not claim that there is a being "out there." We maintain that if you want to know what we mean by "God," you start with the agapic love which is shed abroad in our hearts here. The notion of a supreme being belittles God. Calling someone or something the supreme being presumes that there is a class of things, beings, and that one of those beings is the number one being in the class, the supreme one. But that is, of course, precisely what Christianity denies about God: God is not a member of any class. God is not one being among many beings, not even the supreme one. St. Thomas Aquinas taught that God is the power of being, being itself (*esse*), but not a being (*ens*), supreme or otherwise. Thomas made "God" more like a verb than a noun. And so did the first letter of John, in that case, the verb being "love."

Where, then, does the doctrine of God lead us? It leads us to community. For obviously we cannot talk about God meaningfully in the Christian tradition unless in some way we attempt to live in a community where genuine *agape* is realized. Only by participating in self-gift can one come to know what we are trying to designate by the word "God." If you want to know who God is, give yourself away.

To explore this idea further, think of another familiar parable told in Luke's gospel, the story of the good Samaritan (Lk 10:29–37). Recall that the parable is attached to the discussion of the two great commandments (Lk 10:25–28). A scribe, i.e. someone learned in the Mosaic law, wants to show Jesus up as lacking the credentials to be a rabbi. So he asks Jesus what is necessary for eternal life. Jesus responds by asking what the scribe has read in the scriptures. The scribe answers, "Love God with all your heart and all your soul and all your strength and all your mind, and love your neighbor as yourself." And Jesus assents,

"Right, do that and you will have life." But the scribe, not wanting to let Jesus off the hook, persists by asking, "And who is my neighbor?" This then leads Jesus to tell the parable. Please note: the parable is a clarification of the conversation about the two great commandments, and what it says about those two commandments is very striking, indeed.

A certain man on his way down from Jerusalem to Jericho was set upon by robbers who beat him and left him for dead on the side of the road. A priest came along, saw the man lying there bloodied, crossed to the other side of the road and passed by. A Levite, i.e. an official in the temple, a sort of sacristan, also came along, saw the wounded man, crossed to the opposite side of the road and continued on. Then a Samaritan, i.e. a half-breed Jew at odds with other Jews both racially and religiously, came along the road and was moved with compassion when he saw the wounded man. So he stopped to help him, brought him to an inn, and paid for the care of the injured man. "Now," Jesus asks the scribe, "who do you think was the neighbor to the man who was attacked by the robbers?" Of course, the scribe replies that the neighbor is the one who helped him, and he is told by Jesus to go and act in the same way.

What is the parable about? Clearly, its primary point is that everyone is the neighbor, including those who are separated by racial, ethnic, and religious differences. But if that is the sole point, then why, in a story so lacking in details, bother to mention that the first two passers-by were a priest and a Levite? If the only point to be made is that everyone is called upon to be neighbor to everyone else, all that is needed in the story is two Jews. Why a priest and a Levite? Also, why include the detail that the priest and Levite not only passed the wounded man by, but did so by crossing over to the other side of the road? On the road between Jerusalem and Jericho, where would one expect a priest and a Levite to be going or coming from? The temple. And what would they do in the temple? Offer worship to God. And why do they not assist the wounded man? Because he is bloodied, and touching anything bloody would render them unclean, non-kosher, and so incapable of participation in the rites in the temple. That is why they carefully cross on the other side—so that no blood will touch them. But the Samaritan does not worship in the temple; he does not care about the question of ritual impurity. And so he stops to help the injured man. Undoubtedly, the story is about how marvelous it is that an enemy, a Samaritan, would help a Jew—that being neighbor knows no boundaries.

But there is another element which we ought not miss in the parable. After all, remember that it flows from a discussion of the two great commandments, to love God with one's whole being and to love one's

neighbor. And the story makes the point that anyone who thinks that loving your neighbor might interfere with loving God simply does not know what loving God means. One can only love God with one's whole heart, soul, strength and mind if one also loves the neighbor. That is what the priest and the Levite missed. They were so concerned about worshiping God that they could not help a neighbor lest it get in the way of their worship. Jesus' point to the scribe is that anything which prevents you from helping your neighbor is certainly not the worship or love of God.

How can one square that with one's religious duties if one is a Pharisee? If you are worried about Jesus and his disciples not washing their hands before lunch (Lk 11:38 and Mt 15:1–2), how can you possibly deal with this parable? It seems designed to raise the eyebrows of precisely good, solid, religiously inclined people. But we must not forget that it was the good, solid, religiously inclined who decided that the sort of person who went about telling such parables had to be killed.

This is why, ultimately, orthopraxis always precedes orthodoxy. Before our tradition was called "Christianity," it was simply referred to as "the Way" (Acts 9:2). First of all, it is a way of life. One has to *do* the doctrine before one can understand the doctrine. One does not know and then do. After all, if you had to understand the doctrine and mystery of the eucharist correctly before you celebrated and participated in it, which one of us would ever have received our first communions? Long before I was taught religion lessons, I was taught to pray. And that is just as it should be. Practice precedes doctrine.

So, we maintain that in the person of Jesus of Nazareth we have the embodiment of what we mean by the word "God." Jesus is God in human terms, so if you want to know what we mean by the word "God," look at Jesus of Nazareth. Although we recognize many modes of Jesus' continuing presence with us, we have frequently talked about the eucharist as the "real presence." In the eucharist we find Jesus of Nazareth, and in Jesus we find God incarnate. But consider the eucharist. It is something that is eaten so that people have life, something that is drunk so that people are refreshed. What a profound symbolic act revealing the great Christian insight: if you seek to know who God is, look at Jesus of Nazareth; if you seek to know who Jesus is, he is the one who is eaten so that we may be nourished. The eucharist is the great acting-out of who Jesus, the self-revelation of God in human terms, is: the one who gives himself away fully and without reserve. So if you wish to find God, give yourself away. When we celebrate the eucharist, we enact what we mean by the word "God."

The fundamental Christian insight is that God is *agape*, that of all of

the possible ways to think about God, no one of which is sufficient in and of itself, the least inadequate one is to think of God as pure and perfect self-gift, as the relationship of agapic love, and so as an action of service for the good of the other. We are called to participate in the very acting out of the life of God. That is what we mean when we say that the Spirit of God dwells in us. We are familiar with the image of Christians as "temples of the Holy Spirit." This is a rich image in many ways, but it can be misleading if it is heard statically, i.e. as a statement that the Spirit resides in us. Rather, the Spirit moves through us; the Spirit is within us to lead us to act. The Spirit does not dwell in us as in a box or a container. The Spirit energizes, the Spirit is what activates. Ultimately, the Spirit leads us to act out the meaning of the word "God."

But talking about "God" as the ultimate mystery obviously implies that I am not God. And if there is God and I am not God, then in some way I am dependent upon that ultimate mystery—or, in the terms of the Jewish and Christian traditions, I am a creature. And that is the not especially comfortable notion to which we must now turn in Chapter 2.

Questions

1. Explain how God can be more accurately thought of as a verb rather than as a noun.

2. If God is not some "supreme being out there," then what or who is God? How do we comunicate with God? Describe our relationship with God.

3. How have you previously understood the Trinity? How do you understand it now?

4. If God equally loves the just and the unjust, then how should we understand the rewards and punishments of saints and sinners? What does this understanding of God as lover of all do to our understanding of salvation?

Journal Questions

5. Describe God in your journal as though you were describing God to your best friend.

6. Reflect on the times in your life when you have felt most loved by

God by a) loving others and b) being loved. Tell each story in some detail and describe what it is you learned about God through these experiences.

7. Reflect on how it is sometimes difficult to love our enemies. Write about one person whom you find difficult to love. Why is it difficult? How can the God who is *agape* assist us in loving in a purely selfless way?

8. Write a parable in which you illustrate the limitless love of God.

2
EXPERIENCING THE MYSTERY OF NOT BEING GOD

The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation.
–Henry David Thoreau

His state was divine, yet he did not cling to his equality
with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a servant,
becoming human as all other human beings.
–Philippians 2:6–7

Consider what is, from the perspective of the Christian tradition, the deepest and most basic fact about us: we are creatures. What does being a creature mean? Certainly, it is a deeply important, perhaps shattering statement to say that the foundation of one's own existence is not in one's self, that the purpose and meaning of one's life are not determined by one's self, that our being and our meaning are given to us. If you can say that without being frightened, it is a fair bet that you don't understand what you've said.

I. THE GOODNESS OF BEING CREATURE

No one is ever completely secure. I am not a person of very adventurous disposition. I think that trying a new toothpaste is one of life's great explorations. I like to know what I'm going to be doing two years from Thursday. I am the sort of person who fusses about the precise arrangement of my desk drawers. I like my life carefully organized. I like security. But again and again I confront the fact that ultimately there is no absolute security in my life, no point at which I can say, "Everything is settled, everything is accomplished, finished, nailed down tight." And to know that is very, very frightening.

Being a creature is a scary business, which is why most of us spend so much time and energy denying that we are one. We try to cover over the fact of being a creature by achievement, by organization of our lives, by attempting to rest secure on something that we know we control. But all

these efforts finally fail us, and when they do, we are plunged back into deeper and deeper nervousness or anxiety about being a creature.

When I was a graduate student at the University of Chicago, I had an experience which was a great shock. I realized I hadn't the foggiest notion why I should pray. I don't mean that I had "a crisis of faith." It was more a crisis of usefulness. I wasn't sure why I should pray, what purpose it served. If God already knew everything–all my hopes and fears and needs–then God did not need to hear about them from me. So why should I bore God and myself by telling God what God already knew? What could I say in prayer that was necessary or even important to say?

It occurred to me that if I were going to find out what prayer is about, I should look first to the classic Christian prayer, the prayer the Lord taught his disciples. And so for several months I prayed nothing but the Lord's Prayer. I must have prayed it a hundred times some days. Day after day after day, I prayed those words trying to come to some insight into what the words mean. Why is it that Jesus thought that this prayer was what his disciples ought to say to his Father? Gradually I came to see that the Lord's Prayer really comes down to two statements repeated in a number of parallel ways. The first half of the prayer, when we pray that God's name be hallowed, that God's kingdom come, and that God's will be done in heaven and on earth, is simply the petition that God be everything God is: *may God be God*. The second half of the prayer, when we pray for physical sustenance, for forgiveness, and to be preserved from temptation and delivered from evil, is simply the request that I may be what I am: *may I be your creature*. The Lord's Prayer may be paraphrased, I think, "May God be God, and may I be a creature."

The more I thought about this, the more I recognized that the great petition of all Christian prayer is that everything be what it is. We pray that God be the fullness of God, and that we may be what it is to be creatures, i.e. fully dependent upon God. And that is the purpose of prayer: to celebrate the goodness, the rightness of precisely what we find so frightening–being a creature. We must come to the point of accepting that we are creatures, and prayer is the celebration of the fact.

let it be

In Genesis the very first thing we are told about being a creature is that God regards our creatureliness as good (Gen 1:31). That is immensely important in the Jewish and Christian traditions: God's judgment on what God has created is that it is good. In the wonderfully dramatic story of the beginning of all things in Genesis 1–the story of the six days of creation and God's sabbath rest–we are told again and again that God sees that creation is good (Gen 1:4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25 and 31). In that story, for the first five and a half days of the week of creation, the pattern

is, "God said, 'Let there be...,' and there was..., and God saw that it was good." The emphasis is on God's utter sovereignty over creation.

Creating costs God no effort; God can knock off a firmament and separate dry land from the seas and bring into being all manner of living things without breaking a sweat–just "Let it be," and it is. But there is a break in the pattern when, on the afternoon of the sixth day, God comes to create human beings. For the first time, the story depicts God deliberating about what and how to create. And for the first time, God uses a blueprint. That blueprint is God's self: "Let us make the human being in our image and likeness" (Gen 1:26). What an extraordinary claim about the value of human beings, that we are modeled on God. And then, on the afternoon of the sixth day, at the climax of creation, Genesis tells us that God looked at all that had been made and saw, as the Hebrew text puts it, "that it was very, very good." To be a creature, and especially to be a human creature, is quite wonderful indeed, if Genesis is to be believed.

II. THE TEMPTATION TO DENY THE GOODNESS OF BEING CREATURE

I suggest that this story in Genesis 1 provides the context for understanding the story in Genesis 3, the story of the entry of evil into creation. What appears in chapter 3 is anxiety about the value of being a creature and rejection of the goodness of human beings. Recall the first temptation (Gen 3:5), "Eat this and you will be like God." Granted, Adam and Eve did not have the advantage of having read chapter 1. Had they, presumably they would have noticed that they are like God, that they had been created in the divine image and likeness. But enter the serpent who tells them, in effect, "You're not like God."

Being human is a wretched business: barely born when you start the pain of teething and learning to walk and talk, being subject to parents and teachers, going through the labor of study and learning, the awkwardness and embarrassment of adolescence, trying to discern a vocation, taking on the burdens of marriage and parenthood and making a living, worrying about the children and having them grow up and leave home, aging and losing friends, eyes getting weak and teeth falling out and hair disappearing, body getting frail and memory slipping away and, at long last, death. And this is supposed to be good! Being a creature is frightful. Be like God! Being God is good, and being a creature is not. The essence of the first temptation is to reject the goodness of creatureliness: be God or don't be at all! And, alas, we fall for that temptation.

According to Genesis 3, the root of evil in our world is the inability of our world to accept itself for what it is. Evil enters through the refusal of creatures to be creatures. Evil arises from the decision that, unless we are God, we are trash. There has been a good deal in the Christian tradition over the centuries about the last judgment. But since God is unchanging and eternal, I suspect that the last judgment will prove to be a repetition of the first judgement, which was, you recall, that God, having reviewed all creation, judged that it was very, very good. The refusal to accept and celebrate the goodness of being a creature is the rejection of the first judgement of God. The difference between the first judgment and the last is that, at the end of salvation history, we will finally accept and assent to the First Judgment. It is very, very good to be a creature, but we still find it immensely difficult to accept that goodness; being creatures makes us nervous.

We are nervous because we do not like being limited–in strength, in knowledge, in wisdom, in talent and, ultimately, in time–and we do not like being dependent. And however hard we try, however much we distract our attention and divert our minds, we cannot deny that finally we are not in control of our own lives. And we are frightened by that. All too often, we move in one of two directions. Either we try desperately to make ourselves independent, we take the serpent's suggestion and make a mad dash to be God, or we admit that we are not God and hate it. We deny the goodness of creatureliness and live lives of quiet desperation and sometimes of clamorous and destructive desperation. Coming to grips with the rightness of our own finite being, I suggest, lies at the very heart of what the Christian tradition means by salvation, reconciliation, and holiness.

From this perspective, the whole scriptural story is the revelation of the mystery hidden from all generations but now revealed (Col 1:26). What is that mystery, the great surprise of God's will? The mystery of God's purpose is that while ever since the entry of sin, we have been in a mad dash to become God, God has decided to become human. While we reject being limited, finite, creatures, i.e. being human, the one whose state was divine, in the words of the hymn which St. Paul quoted in Philippians, "did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a servant, becoming human as all other human beings" (Phil 2:6–7). No wonder Paul thought the mystery breathtaking!

The claim that being human is so deeply good, so astonishingly precious, that God has chosen to take on humanity, is the ultimate affirmation that God looks at creation and sees that it is very, very good.

God thinks being human is so good, God has chosen to be human, too. And who am I to dispute the divine taste?

Every year the church begins its annual communal retreat, the season of Lent, by asking us to consider on the First Sunday of Lent the synoptic gospels' stories of the temptations of the Lord. Those stories are a replaying of Genesis 3. Scripture allows the devil only one good line, and the old serpent tries it again and again and again: "Eat this and be like God." It is evil's one great plot, but it is a devastatingly effective one. And the devil plays it one more time in the stories in Matthew's and Luke's gospels about the Lord's temptations. Having fasted forty days and nights in the desert, Jesus is hungry (Mt 4:2; Lk 4:2). And at that moment of creaturely weakness, the tempter offers his usual pitch: "If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become bread" (Mt 4:3; Lk 4:3), i.e. "If you are not merely human, if you are equal to God, then snap your fingers and turn stones into bread. Creatures, finite human beings, they might have to go hungry in the desert, but not you. Why ever would you want to be hungry? Come, come, let's not be foolish: if you are the Son of God, act like the Son of God." Do you hear the echo of the serpent in Eden? Being God is good; being human is not. Reject your humanity, your creatureliness, and be God. But, unlike what happened in Genesis 3, this time the temptation is rejected. "It is written: 'Not by bread alone does a human being live'" (Lk 4:4; Mt 4:4). Notice the emphasis on humanity and Jesus' identification of himself as human.

The second temptation, at least in Matthew's account (the gospel of Luke inverts the order of the second and third temptations of Matthew's version), finds the tempter bringing Jesus to the top of the temple in Jerusalem: "If you are the Son of God, leap off; for it is written, 'He will commit you to angels' care,' and 'They will bear you up on their hands, lest you strike your foot on a stone'" (Mt 4:6; Lk 4:9–11). "So, you want to identify with human beings, eh? You want to communicate to creatures your message? You'll have to tramp up and down dusty roads in Galilee and Judea, talk and persuade and cajole and come up with parables and snappy examples. And then some will get it and some won't. Some will buy it, some will reject it. Some will accept it initially and then fall away. Some may even end up denying you or betraying you. Why not manifest your divinity: jump off the roof of the temple, and angels will bear you up. You'll WOW Jerusalem. Everyone will rush to hear what you have to say. If you are the Son of God, act like the Son of God. Don't try dealing with them as creature to creatures. Act like God, and overwhelm these poor little creatures. In the long run, it will make your mission more effective, for you will find that they really don't want a fellow creature; they want God." And Jesus refuses, for "you shall not put the Lord your

God to the test" (Mt 4:7; Lk 4:12). Once again, notice that Jesus insists on living by faith, like other human beings.

So, off to the highest mountain in the world from which all the kingdoms of the earth can be seen. (It is interesting to observe that for the gospel writers the world was flat: if one can get up high enough one can see the edges.) And so, the third temptation (in Matthew, the second in Luke): "All this will I give you if you pay me homage" (Mt 4:9; Lk 4:6–7). "You want to save the world, Jesus? A noble ambition. And from whom do you intend to save it? Me? No need: I'll give it to you. Here it is—a present. Just ask. Simple recognition, that's all I ask. Deal with me as God to demon. Drop this pose of finiteness and go back to being God!" And Jesus refuses because only God is to be worshiped (Mt 4:10; Lk 4:8). Once again, notice that Jesus will do what creatures do, i.e. worship God.

Matthew ends his story there: "The devil left him, and angels came and ministered to him" (Mt 4:11). But Luke concludes his account with a much more ominous line: "And when the devil had exhausted his temptations, he left him until there would be a better opportunity" (Lk 4:13). Luke warns that the devil will be back. The temptations are not over yet in Luke's gospel. The devil has only one card to play, and if it does not work now, then he will play it later in the game at a better time. And Luke clearly signals us when that better time arrives.

The last temptation of Christ in Luke's gospel takes place in Gethsemane just before his arrest. In Matthew's and Mark's gospels, when Jesus arrives at the garden with his disciples, he tells them to be seated while he goes apart to pray (Mt 26:36; Mk 14:32). But in Luke's gospel, he warns them, "Pray so that you may not be tempted" (Lk 22:40), for the hour of the last and greatest temptation has arrived. Then Jesus prays in such anguish that "his sweat became like great drops of blood" (Lk 22:44): "Father, if you will, remove this cup from me" (Lk 22:42). The last temptation is the horror of the ultimate reality of our finiteness, our creatureliness: death. For that is what happens to creatures—we come to an end, we die. "Jesus, you've done a very impressive job. I didn't think you would carry off being human as fully as you have. But now we come to the crunch, the bottom line. Creatures die, Jesus, sometimes all alone and rejected, sometimes in great pain, sometimes in torture. Come now, you don't want to die. And you don't have to: go back to being God and forget this nonsense about being human." But Jesus prays, "Father, let not my will but yours be done" (Lk 22:42). And then an angel comes to minister to him—the sign from Matthew's gospel that temptation has been surmounted. The last temptation is the anxiety of death when Jesus comes face to face with creatureliness.

The gospel of John has no story of Jesus' anguished prayer in

Gethsemane. But the author of the fourth gospel dramatically presents the same struggle of Jesus with death as the ultimate mark of being a creature. The last temptation becomes in John the story of the raising of Lazarus (Jn 11:1–44). In the fourth gospel this story marks the first occasion when Jesus confronts death. In the synoptic gospels, we find earlier stories about Jesus encountering death: the raising of Jairus' daughter and of the son of the widow at Naim, and Jesus' reception of the news of John the Baptist's death. But those stories do not appear in John's gospel. Prior to the Lazarus story, the closest Jesus comes to a direct confrontation with death in the fourth gospel is when he is requested to cure the official's son at Capernaum, who is described as being at the point of death (Jn 4:47). But even that healing is "at a distance," i.e. Jesus does not meet the dying boy himself.

The first time that he directly meets death with its pain and grief and loss is when his friend Lazarus dies. And what is his response? He is "deeply troubled" (Jn 11:33). He is moved to tears (v 35). He sighs from the depths of his being (v 38). I suggest to you that the fourth gospel wants to show us that Jesus is not moved alone because of Martha's and Mary's grief or because of his friend's death, but by death itself, including especially his own death. This is the story in John's gospel of Jesus' confronting what it is to be a creature. The tomb where Lazarus has been buried is described as a cave sealed with a stone, reminiscent of the description of Jesus' own tomb later. As at Gethsemane, Jesus will pray as he stands before this tomb. He has been warned about opening the tomb: "Lord, the stench will be terrible. He's been four days in the tomb." Jesus will be only three days in the tomb. Lazarus' case is made even worse; he is not just dead, he is as dead as you can get, dead and decaying. But even confronting death in all its darkness and dissolution, Jesus remains confident in the Father: "I know you always hear me" (Jn 11:42).

Earlier in the fourth gospel, when the first disciples follow Jesus, they reply to his inquiring what they seek by asking where he dwells; Jesus responds, "Come and see" (Jn 1:38–39). In the Lazarus story, when Jesus asks the mourners where the dead man has been placed, they respond, "Come and see" (Jn 11:34). The balance is pointed: the Lord of life invites us to come and see where he dwells and shows us the fullness of life; we invite the Lord to come and see where we dwell and take him to the tomb. He shows us the glory of God, and we show him what it is like to be a creature. And he chooses to be one, even to death, even to death on a cross.

III. "O HAPPY FAULT"

Lent begins with our being confronted by these stories of Jesus' temptations to abandon creatureliness and reject finiteness, and it ends six weeks later with the members of the community renewing their baptismal promises. For Lent is not first and foremost a period of penance; it is most importantly a communal retreat during which we are asked to consider what our baptism meant and how we are living up to or failing the commitments we made. At the end of Lent we are invited once again to renew those commitments when we renew our baptismal vows. All over the world, the members of the church renew their baptismal vows at the Easter vigil or at the masses on Easter morning. And those vows are our rejection of the temptation against the goodness of being creatures, the temptation which Adam and Eve accepted in the garden and over which Jesus triumphed in the desert.

After we renounce evil and sin, we are asked to make three vows which are phrased as three statements of faith: "Do you believe in God the Father, the maker of heaven and earth? Do you believe in Jesus Christ, God's Son, who became a human being, lived and suffered and died and was raised again by the Father and who now reigns in glory? Do you believe in the holy spirit and in the church?" To hear these questions as requests for assent to matters of fact is to misunderstand them and to misunderstand the importance of our baptism completely. Anyone can agree that these things are so—there is a God, Christ was sent by God, the Spirit is still active in the world. The issue is: What do they mean for us? Why must we make these statements of faith *as promises*?

Consider the first vow. We are asked whether we believe in God who is the creator of all. That means that we are asked whether we believe that there is a maker of all that exists, that existence has a purpose and a meaning, that I have a purpose to my existence, *and that I do not determine what that purpose is*. The world was not made by me; I am not made by me. I am not the meaning-giver and ultimate determiner of my own life. There is a meaning-giver to my life, and I am not it. My life is not for me because I did not originate it nor do I decide what it is for or about. There are many, many, many people who either deny that life has a purpose or assert that they are the ones who determine what their life is for and how it should be lived. And we are asked to affirm that they are wrong, that life's meaning, including our own lives' meaning, is not given by us, that we are creatures and so are not the ultimate controllers, judges, or directors of our lives. Do you believe that? Do you live that way? Can you live that way? Think long and hard before answering "yes."

Consider the second vow. Having announced that we are not meaning-givers in our own lives, we are asked whether we believe that nevertheless what we are is so good that the One who is the meaning-giver, God, has chosen to become what we are. That is the meaning of the incarnation: God has created humanity so wonderfully that God "did not cling to his equality with God but emptied himself to assume the condition of a servant, becoming human as all other human beings" (Phil. 2:6–7). Do you believe that you are of such extraordinary value that God has chosen to become what you are rather than remain in the form of God? And if you do believe that about your humanity and the humanity of every other human being, then must you not treat every human being, including yourself, as of infinite value? Do you believe that? Do you live that way? Can you live that way? Once again, think long and hard before answering "yes."

Consider the third vow. The living God who is the meaning-giver of our lives and who has chosen to be one with us is still present in our world and in our experience; that is what we mean when we affirm that the Holy Spirit of God has been poured into the world. But notice where we say that Spirit is to be found: in the church, i.e. in the community. That means that the Spirit of God now dwells not first and foremost in you or in me but in us. God is to be encountered in our community with others. Can we arch-individualists—for all Americans are arch-individualists—affirm that God is not found first in the depths of my heart but in my life and work and struggle with other people? It is one thing to affirm the existence of God and my need for God; it is quite another to affirm that this means that I need you and her and him and them, and that without all of you I cannot find the Spirit of God. But that is what the third vow asks us to affirm. Do you believe that? Do you live that way? Can you live that way? And still again, think long and hard before answering "yes."

There is a further dimension to consider about our creatureliness, our limitedness, a dimension which is given extraordinary statement at the start of the Easter vigil during which we renew our baptismal vows. In Book 10 of his *Confessions*, St. Augustine raises an interesting question. In the previous nine books he has recounted his life until the time of his mother's death and his conversion, and much of what he has recounted he now regards as sinful. But if he has been wringing his hands for nine whole books about how wicked his earlier life had been, why bother to remember it and, even more, record it? If he has sinned and those sins have now been forgiven by God, as Augustine believes they have, then should they not simply be forgotten? Should they not be put out of mind

as something shameful, something to be rejected? Why lavish such effort on recalling what he now rejects, not to mention such glorious literary skill?

Augustine's answer to the question is immensely insightful. He decides that it is important that he remember his past, including his sin, both because that sin now in recollection provides occasion for glorifying God's mercy and goodness, and because his sin is part of *his* past, a past which has brought him to the point at which he can glorify God. This Augustinian insight has been enshrined in the *Exsultet*, the great proclamation of the joy of the resurrection sung at the Easter vigil on Holy Saturday night: "O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam!" What an odd phrase, "O happy fault." The church seems to celebrate the fall of humanity into sin. But it does so because the meaning of that fall has been forever changed by the action of God in Christ's life, death and destiny.

Now, seen in the light of Easter, we can call our sinfulness a "happy fault" because it gives us the opportunity to celebrate the forgiving love of God and tells us who we are in relation to God. We are the people who are always being forgiven. We are constantly the recipients of mercy. And therefore it is good that we, like Augustine, remember our moral limitedness and our constant dependence on God not only as creatures held in existence by the divine agape but as sinners forgiven by that self-giving love.

Recognizing ourselves as creatures means that we have to come to grips not only with the limits of our physical being but with the defects of our moral goodness. We are not creatures in the abstract; we are creatures with concrete pasts, individually and communally. And those pasts are not histories of pure and perfect agapic love. Frequently, they are dark and sometimes brutal tales of selfishness and hatred and deep despair. And so we must accept the fact that we are all, in one way or another, morally tarnished. That is not to be regarded as an embarrassing and unfortunate flaw. It must be turned into what Augustine saw it could be, an occasion of joyful acceptance of our dependence upon God for forgiveness as well as existence. It brings me back again to the central Christian prayer, which I have suggested can be paraphrased, "May you be God; may I be your creature." The discovery of the goodness of creatureliness does not remove the experience of discomfort in being a creature, however. One classic way of naming that deep discomfort is restlessness. We should talk in Chapter 3 about how we can be both restless and joyful.

The Blessedness of Limits

RESPONSE BY JAN PILARSKI

When Michael talks about the questions of what constitutes security and of how to find purpose and meaning outside one's self, I am moved to reflect on the ways that being a parent forces me to consider my own creatureliness. Like Michael, I too am a person who likes order and the ability to plan and project—those disciplines have always seemed a source of stability and security for me.

But perhaps the first thing a new parent discovers is that the birth of a child removes any semblance of a schedule or routine. Here is this amazing newborn, totally dependent on your care, birthed out of the shared conviction that love and life are indeed good and holy. Yet the rhythms and needs of that baby are so clearly different from our adult priorites and preoccupations. Shortly after the birth seven years ago of my first child, Christopher, I remember being struck by the contrasts and juxtapositions in my life because of now having a child. One week earlier I was organizing tenants outside Washington, D.C. to confront their landlord about sub-standard living conditions; the next week I was nursing Christopher every few hours and providing for all of his other basic needs. How wonderful and yet radically different my life became now that I was a mother!

In giving birth to Christopher and his brothers David and Kevin, I have experienced a sense of expansiveness and joy because of the physical act of giving life, but I have also encountered my limitations in a very profound and humbling way. When Chris was born I rebelled against the fact that my life had changed so much. I struggled with the temptation Michael describes as wanting to remain in control of our lives.

I resented the fact that my husband Jay's life seemed to change so little after Christopher's birth and mine had been turned upside-down. Jay had both his work and his time with Chris, while I felt that continuing to work intensely was draining me of energy and time with my child. I longed for a society where both parents could share equally in raising their children, while respecting the needs for both men and women to be engaged in meaningful activity outside the home as well. At the same time, on an individual level I wanted desperately to acquire some control over all the parts of my life that were no longer exclusively mine. With the insights now provided by Michael, I see that what I wanted then was to turn stones into bread. I wrestled with the temptation to deny my limitations and forget my creatureliness.

3

THE JOURNEY OF RESTLESSNESS: THE SEARCH FOR GOD

You made us for yourself, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
—St. Augustine, *Confessions* 1,1

I. HUMANS ARE FUNDAMENTALLY RESTLESS

My hero is St. Augustine. He is, in my opinion, the most extraordinary mind that the Christian tradition has yet seen. And probably the single most famous, most often quoted line he ever wrote is found at the outset of his *Confessions*. Speaking to God (and the whole of the *Confessions* is addressed to God), he wrote, "You made us for yourself and our hearts are restless until they rest in you." This gets to the heart of what it is to be a human being.

If I were to choose a single characteristic to describe human life, I would pick restlessness. Have you ever found a dog that wanted to be a cat or a cow that wanted to be a tree? But have you ever known a human being who didn't want to be someone or something more—who didn't want to be more, do more, know more, have more, feel more? Every human being is fundamentally restless and dissatisfied. We are always hungry. At the center of our being is an endlessly nagging sense of "Yes, yes, yes, but more." There is never a moment at which we are at rest fully and completely. This is why Augustine's description is so insightful. But the insight is complemented by his great discovery, the recognition that this restlessness is the best thing about us.

Far from being an evil, far from having to conclude that we have to still the restlessness at the core of our being, to let it simmer down so that finally we are at peace, Augustine came to recognize that we must stoke the restlessness. We must keep ourselves restless. We would be absolutely lost if we were not restless. Why? Because our restlessness is what drives us to God at last, if we are faithful to it.

One way to read the *Confessions* is as a book about Augustine's discovery that the restlessness which he thought was a curse is in fact the

great blessing. It was his restless heart which led him to God. Our restlessness is the great blessing because it is what keeps us from becoming idolaters. Once one reaches a point at which he or she can say, "This is it. *Now* I'm satisfied. I want nothing else. I'm finally at peace with this person or thing or idea or experience or place or time. This"—whatever it may be—"is all I need," one has fallen into idolatry. For what one is really saying is, "This person, thing, idea, experience, place, time, has completely satisfied me. It has given my heart peace. I neither need nor want anything else. This"—whatever it may be—"is God." What Augustine saw so brilliantly was that what keeps us from idolatry, what keeps us from "selling out cheap" for something less than God, is the restlessness of our hearts. And so his advice was: by all means, stay restless.

But in various ways all of us try to still the restlessness. We may try to still it with very destructive things—drugs and alcohol and sexual indulgence. We may try to still it with very marvelous things—service to others and knowledge and marriage and children. We may try to still it with prayer and sacrifice and dedication to our vocations. But whatever we try to still our restless hearts with, we must realize that none of them work. None of them ever satisfy the hunger. The hunger, the restlessness drives us on.

Often we attempt to resolve that restlessness once and for all through a deep relationship with some particular person. When I have the opportunity to speak with couples preparing to marry or who are married or who have been married, I suggest to them that one of the most destructive things they can encounter in marriage is the attempt to make one another effectively into God. "She's all I need!" "He's all I want!" No! You need a lot more than her or him. And he or she needs a lot more than you. The moment you say "This one's all I need," you have said, in effect, "This one's God. This person will finally resolve the restlessness of my heart. At long last, I won't feel the need for something else because I've got her or him." That might work if he or she dies on the honeymoon, or if you do, but if the relationship lasts any longer than a very brief honeymoon, you will discover to your dismay that it hasn't worked. You will remain restless and hungry. You will find yourself ruefully admitting that he or she is not all you want. And, alas, that is the moment when so many marriages hit enormous problems. We cannot cast another person in the role no one should try to fill: the role of God. When the other person fails to play the part successfully, we end up feeling betrayed: "Why isn't he what I thought he was?" "Why doesn't she satisfy me?" And the answer is that he or she is not what you expected him or her to be—namely, God.