The Sacramental Mediation of Divine Friendship and Communion

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Part One: Sacramental Mediation: Why Do We Need It?

I. THE MEDIATION OF DIVINE TRUTH

AN: THE IMAGE OF GOD.” THUS BEGINS PART THREE OF THE CATECHISM OF THE Catholic Church. We are reminded of the vocation of man created ad imaginem Dei. The promise of eternal life given to each of us at Baptism initiates what the Church calls the “theological life,” the way of faith, hope, and charity, a path that leads to beatific communion with the Blessed Trinity. When we ponder the extraordinary fulfillment that the gift of everlasting life offers to the human race, we can only be grieved to consider the vast number of our contemporaries who live without faith, hope, and charity. Many people remain without fruitful entry into the mediations that enable them to know why God made them, the love that He bears them, and the Truth that sets them free. Even certain sons and daughters of the Church seem to have forgotten the universal importance and significance of the wise and well-known counsel offered by Leon Bloy to the young Jacques Maritain: the only true tragedy in life is not to become a saint.

Into a world that of itself can only approach, and this unsurely, the ultimate questions that treat man’s final destiny, the Lord enters as the one who bears the gift of divine Truth. The 1990 “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian” (Donum veritatis) summarizes the relationship of truth to the one order of sacramental mediation that finds its center in the Incarnate Son: “When God gives Himself to man as friend, man becomes free, in accordance with the Lord’s word: ‘No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you’ (Jn 15:15). Man’s deliverance from the alienation of sin and death comes about when Christ, the Truth, becomes the ‘way’ for him” (cf. Jn 14:6). This outpouring of divine grace, which Saint Thomas Aquinas calls the “capital grace” of Christ, remains ordered to establishing the communion of friendship we call the Church.

If we look at things from the point of view of natures, every sacramental mediation that God offers to the world begins with the gift of His Truth. Indeed, this Truth appears preemminently in the Person of Jesus Christ, who Himself embodies divine Truth itself. The preaching of our blessed Savior therefore constitutes a privileged moment in the communication of this Truth. The munus petrinum, which is the gift given directly by Christ to Peter, establishes the concrete link between Christ and the Apostle Peter and his Successors. From the moment that Christ confides to Peter the special grace that belongs to him alone in the Church, an order is established, one that is meant to continue until Christ comes again. The order is one of mediation. When asked whether Christ should have put his teaching into writing, Aquinas replied, predictably, in the negative. Aquinas discovers one reason to explain the fact that Christ left no writings pertains immediately to priests, consecrated persons, and those laity involved in evangelization. Christ,
St. Thomas says, left no writings “so that his teaching might reach everyone in an orderly manner: namely, that he himself teach his disciples immediately, and that they subsequently teach others by speaking and writing. If, however, he himself had written, his teaching would have reached everyone immediately.”

Evangelization comes built-in, as it were, with the divine plan. And since this divine plan has ordained that the teaching of Christ reach out mediately to the world, we should reflect on the implications of this divinely ordained mediation for the work of the Church.

The twenty-fifth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel sets before us an enactment of the last judgment: “When the Son of Man comes in his glory…” (See Mt 25:31-46). If one were to enumerate the ways that form the basis for the divine judgment of the world (hungry, thirsty, stranger, naked, etc.), the list would include all the services that the human community provides for its members. For the developed world, these services have been variously taken up into the modern welfare state. Even recognizing a relative autonomy in the secular order, chapter twenty-five of the Gospel of Matthew makes it plain that the human community needs the “theological life.” Indeed, our eternal happiness depends on it. In other words, we should not underestimate the difficulty of the ages for keeping alive the Christian message. In other words, we should not underestimate the difficulty of the ages for keeping alive the Christian message.

If, however, he himself had written, his teaching would have reached everyone immediately, and that he himself teach his disciples immediately, and that they subsequently teach others by speaking and writing. One could enlarge the list. How much do people need to know in order to fulfill their obligations? It would provide an interesting exercise to ponder how much each of these endeavors requires a direction that only the Church can provide. The mediation of divine Truth stands at the heart of the Church’s mission. To cite but one text: the 1993 encyclical letter Veritatis splendor, #31, introduces a long meditation on the words of the Fourth Gospel: “You will know the truth, and the truth will make you free,” (Jn 8:32) and fixes our attention on “the fundamental dependence of freedom upon truth.”

We are returned to the convertibility of the transcendentals, of the one, the true, and the good. Where there is truth, there is unity; where there is unity, there is the good. The “theological life” comprises Christian faith and Christian love.

The publication of the “Instruction” Dominus Jesus in 2000 reminded the whole Church of the central confessions of the Christian religion: The Blessed Trinity and the Incarnation. It is a distinguishing characteristic of Catholic doctrine to recognize that the One Mediator does not eliminate the need for many other mediations within the unique outpouring of divine grace that the hypostatic union effects in the world. The picture that results is grand in scope; indeed it is breathtaking. We behold one attempt to capture the momentousness of the mediations at work in the Church in the art and architecture of the Catholic baroque period, with its many representations exhibited in the Eternal City and elsewhere in Europe. The mediations include the Sacred Humanity of Christ, which may be compared to what Aristotle said of the hand of a human person, namely, that it constitutes the instrument of instruments. Every other concrete medium through which divine grace is communicated to men depends on the humanity of the Son of God. Obviously, the seven sacraments of the Church come first of all to mind. But the tradition obliges us to consider broadly the mediations that flow from the Incarnation.

It is sometimes difficult to impress on persons who are excessively conditioned by historical understanding that there exists anything in the world that possesses its identity without reference to historical accident or occurrence. Unfortunately, many Catholics consider the divinely authenticated mediations of the Church as so many strategies that have been developed over the course of the ages for keeping alive the Christian message. In other words, we should not underestimate the difficulty that the people of our generation, especially in the West, experience when they come face to face with claims that are absolute. Take as two contemporary examples the dominical institution of the sacraments and the con-
fiding to Peter of his special munus. The 1995 encyclical letter *Fides et ratio* has provided us all with the opportunity to consider the reasons for this retreat from the absolute, and also alludes to the difficulties that such an intellectual climate brings to the practice of the Christian religion. But the remedy at hand is not philosophical, but theological. The answer remains faith and the pondering that continues the assent of theological faith. The prayer that best sustains this “theological life” is contemplative prayer. Saint Teresa of Avila provides the Catechism’s definition: “Contemplative prayer [oración mental] in my opinion,” she wrote, “is nothing else than a close sharing between friends, it means taking the time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us.” We return to the theme of friendship and truth. “When God gives Himself to man as friend, man becomes free, in accordance with the Lord’s word:

No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15). Man’s deliverance from the alienation of sin and death comes about when Christ, the Truth, becomes the ‘way’ for him” (cf. Jn 14:6).

Providence has ordained that the Latin verb *substire* enter into the vocabulary of the Church. We know the significance that it has for expounding the doctrine of the Incarnation. The Church believes that everything that His human nature requires for its personal realization, though without combining the divine esse with the created nature of Jesus Christ, depends, in a way that perhaps defies an exhaustive theological explanation, on the Eternal Word. Thus we confess that the human nature of Christ subsists in the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity. So also the Church of Christ subsists in the Church gathered around the Successor of Peter. “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy” (Lev 19:1). In the Book of Leviticus, we find the divine subsistence associated with the commands that God enjoins upon Moses to speak to the children of Israel. Again and again, the universal call to holiness is punctuated by the announcement, “I am the Lord.” The mediation of divine truth that the Church enacts throughout the world points to God whose Being not only causes but also sustains everything that exists. This explains why the worst evil that can befal any rational creature is error. Ignorance never helps the human person achieve the perfection of his nature. Error moves us away from being. What distinguishes education from indoctrination is the simple reality that truthful persons have experienced in their lives: the truth fits. Because it is the same God who established the heavens and the earth and who created man, divine truth communicates whatever is required for the free human being to achieve the perfection of his created being or nature. In the final analysis, the message God speaks in Leviticus holds good: “Be holy, for I, the Lord, your God, am holy” (Lev 19:1).

At the end of his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, the Holy Father reminds us that the philosopher’s task leads him to the arms of the Blessed Virgin Mary. *Philosophari in Maria*. Why does a specifically human enterprise like philosophy find its perfection in a woman whose dignity no philosopher can fully uncover, but which only faith reveals? The answer of course ultimately is found in her Son, the Incarnate Wisdom of God. But in a special way the Virgin Mother of God helps us to embrace her Son’s Truth. It is significant that the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which has been devoutly held in one form or another from the earliest centuries of the Church—even Aquinas in his later years revealed a deep sympathy for the prerogative, as if he had come to realize that Mary’s grace outstrips rational accounts of how she obtains it—only came into formal prominence at the end of the nineteenth century. Think of the shrine at Lourdes. I believe that this development of doctrinal explicitness has something to do with the overpowering difficulties that burden people in modern life. The challenges that sin creates for modern man, who, for whatever reason, is less likely to find a flight from the world attractive, indeed possible, points to the need for a special divine assistance. When God through the Church reveals in an infallible way that the Mother of his Son has been preserved from all stain of sin, even from the first moment of her conception, he reveals a new dimension of her maternal mediation. She is the one in whom we can find refuge from all manner of sin and darkness.

II. THE MEDIATION OF THE HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

“For just as from the heavens the rain and snow come down ... So shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth” (Is 55:10,11). Divine Truth is effective. God not only speaks the Highest Truth; He is the Highest
Truth. As the scholastic theologians were accustomed to say about the object of theological faith, God is First Truth in Being (in essendo) and First Truth in Speaking (in loquendo). It is of course God himself who communicates to the objects of divine faith their saving power and efficacy. (The objects are the propositions that communicate the reality of the divine.) The gift of truth communicated by Christ through the Apostle Peter to the Church not only provides instruction about God and the things that pertain to God, it also creates a world of divinely authenticated mediations that constitute the Church in Her historical existence. It is a special sign of this divine strategy that the faithful throughout the world are accustomed on Sundays and feast days to join the Holy Father for the recitation of the Angelus. For from the moment that the Word becomes flesh in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary, there exists in the world a new creation whose “fullness of grace” is entrusted to the Catholic Church.

We return to the important connection between substiterea, used of the Incarnation, and substiterea, used of the Church. The image of rain and snow watering the earth, making it fertile and fruitful, manifests a unified plan of divine action that is universal in its application. Nowhere in the world where people depend on vegetation for their sustenance can one maintain a sufficient supply of plant life without the regular rhythms of waterfall that ensure the earth’s fructification. “It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:11).

Blessed Pio Nono marks an important moment in the designs of divine Providence for this period of human history. Moved by the Holy Spirit, Blessed Pope Pius IX responded to the rapidly changing political circumstances of the modern period, and some forty years before the treacherous battles of the First World War would discredit the existing secular authorities on both sides of the conflict, he clarified the unique status of the Roman Pontiff and his specific grace, the munus petrinum. In the modern period, Pio Nono made it possible for the faithful to recognize clearly the munus petrinum as a divine grace and not a fixture of any political organization. And while the Holy See rightfully retains its political status among the nations, complete with the indispensable adornment of a diplomatic corps and formal exchanges with the nation states, the fact remains that the administrative departments of the Holy See formally exist as mediations of divine grace. One may recall the “body and soul” metaphor that Pope Pius XI employed at the time of signing the 1929 Lateran Treaty: the Holy See’s insertion into the political order is sufficient enough to ensure that the Church can breathe into the world of human affairs the life-giving grace of divine truth. Think how much the present Holy Father has done to give back to a weary world its “soul.”

The Holy See offers a model for the work of the particular Churches. Catholic believers must expend every effort to overcome the opposition that remains so manifest in the secular order between political exigencies and the demands of truth. Certain tensions are inevitable as long as the Church sojourns here below, and every power and principality has not yet been turned over to the Father of Lights. Still, the text of Isaiah about God’s “word,” quoted above, holds true: “It shall not return to me void, but shall do my will, achieving the end for which I sent it” (Is 55:11). One Bishop recounts that shortly after he had appeared on the eleven o’clock evening news to comment on the cloning of the Scottish sheep Dolly, which had been announced earlier the same day, a Protestant pastor-friend called him and said, “You Catholics are lucky to have a Magisterium. I know nothing about cloning, and I suspect neither did you before tonight.”

The Magisterium is not just an information service available to devout Catholics. The hierarchical structure of the Church serves above all to spread the grace of adoptive sonship throughout the world. This story comes from a pastor of a large, typical Catholic community on the East Coast: “[The little girl] burst into tears, and startled her father. He stood, confused and somewhat embarrassed in the front pew of the church. What’s wrong, he asked, as the rest of the congregation prayed the Lord’s Prayer. ‘I know this prayer, but I can’t keep up. They’re going too fast.’ We still learn from what comes out of the mouths of babes. Each day at Mass, the Liturgy places before us the prayer that Christ confided to His Church. It is the unique prayer of Christian revelation, and so no matter how many times we have recited the Lord’s Prayer, we should never succumb to the temptation of quickly repeating only the words. This is the prayer of our inheritance. Only those persons whom God has renewed in His Son Jesus Christ possess a claim to sharing in beatific communion with Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. From the moment that Christ addresses God as Father, the main outlines of the salvation that He will win by His life-giving Passion and saving death appear. The salvation that God offers the world is marked by a deeply relational structure that images the inner life of God Himself. The seventeenth-century English poet...
John Donne, though not a Catholic author, captures this mystery in his sonnet:

Batter my heart, three person’d God; for, you
As yet but knocke, breathe, shine, and seeke to
mend; That I may
rise, and stand, o’erthrow mee, and bend Your
force, to breake,
blowe, bum and make me new. (Holy Sonnet X;
Poems 1633)

We know that the world remains like an usurped town that struggles to resist the captivating energies of the Trinitarian dynamism. At the same time, because grace perfects but never destroys nature, including political nature, this same world stands ready to be enthralled, indeed ravished, by God-Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

More can be said about the hierarchical structure of the Church and the distinctive mediation of Trinitarian grace that it communicates, especially through the exercise of the episcopal munera: the summa of the sacred ministry. Because the Bishops of the Church are “the principal stewards of the mysteries of God,” the tasks of teaching the truth, sanctifying the people, and governing the Church of God belong to them in a preeminent way. It is important to emphasize in our present circumstances that the great promises, captured summarily in Gaudium et spes, #22, reach the whole human race only through the mediation of the Church: Reapse nonnisi in mysterio Verbi incarnati mysterium hominis clarescit. Where else than in the Church of Christ can the human person discover Christ, in Whom man beholds who man is? Indeed, everything that the Bishop does finds its meaning in this central text of the Second Vatican Council: “It is not therefore to be wondered at that it is in Christ that the truths stated here find their source and reach their fulfillment.”

The young French cure Eugene de Mazenod exemplified the permanent character of the Church’s missionary mandate. The instruction of the founder of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate—go wherever the people are the poorest—still inspires and motivates the Church. The Church goes wherever the people are the poorest. In the nineteenth century, to be poor mainly meant being materially poor. Today we realize that the great expectations of modern learning that were only beginning to manifest themselves in the Europe of the 1830s possess less promise than had been envisaged by many enlightened persons of the nineteenth century. Some have argued that the today’s culture of death comprises the last phase of the European Enlightenment. The sacramental mediation of the Church itself works to alleviate the poverty of the culture. It would be wrong, of course, to think of the Church’s work in exclusively clerical terms. What matters most is that every member of the Church accomplish Her work among all peoples. When priests and Bishops fulfill their mandates in the Church, they are helping the People of God become all that God has ordained them to be.

The ecumenical work of the Church may be seen in the light of the one sacramental mediation that flows from the Church of Christ. Dominus Jesus helped the Catholics of the world comprehend that ecumenical outreach is not the same as accommodation to the distortions that have entered, for a variety of reasons, into the Christian tradition. For causes that remain complex, the period after the Second Vatican Council has resulted in a transmutation of what the Council had taught about the Church’s outreach to the ecclesial communions. In a country like the United States this process of mutation has been abetted by the dominance of the institutions of a liberal, procedural democracy. As one American Cardinal observed in the face of the immediate dissatisfaction expressed by many with the “Declaration,” “It is not a question of style but of substance.” Many Catholics had come to believe that ecumenism could only be advanced by promoting avenues of convergence among the various dialogue partners. We know now that ecumenical dialogue succeeds only to the extent that it remains rooted in the Truth once and for all con-
fided to Peter, “a perpetual and visible principle and foundation for the unity of faith and communion.”

Each new day brings time for renewal. Since Christ alone manifests man to himself, we know that this renewal can never be achieved without the grace of Christ. Christ reveals man to himself in the sense of not only speaking to us who we are but also making us to be what we must become. This grace which observes the bipolarity of the Hebrew word of creation (dabar) remains the promise that Christ has given to the Church. He will never leave us. We must have confidence to return to Christ again and again because, in brief, there exists no alternative for the Christian but to turn to Jesus Christ. As Saint Therese of Lisieux was fond of teaching her novices, no matter how grievous a sin she were to commit, she would always maintain confidence in the merciful love of God, and turn to Jesus. Every other solution to sin fails because it seeks its energy in something other than the mercy of God made manifest in Christ.

This brief advertence to the act of conversion suitably concludes our consideration of the hierarchical structure of the Church and the way that it communicates divine grace to the world. The theologians of the conciliar period remind us that all that the Church will become already exists in the Blessed Virgin Mary. At the close of each day, the Christian people turn to the Mother of God as to their mother, and confide themselves to her maternal care. The Salve Regina represents not only a final salute to the Mother of God but a plea for the clemency, the piety, and the sweetness that Mary brings in a uniquely personal way to the tired soul. We know that those who have forgotten about the place of the Mother of Christ in the Christian life are frequently those who have the most difficult time receiving the sacramental mediation of the Church as something willed by God for the salvation of the human race. Each Christian believer should turn with great devotion to Mary, and place themselves in her company. There, they will discover in ways that are new and refreshing the extraordinary importance of the Church’s hierarchical structure and appreciate with a new seriousness the part that each one plays in keeping it alive in the world.

III. THE MEDIATION OF THE SACRAMENTS, ESPECIALLY OF THE BLESSED EUCHARIST

Among the specific mediations that Jesus Christ has instituted for the work of salvation stand the seven sacraments of the new dispensation. The Second Vatican Council has restored for us an appreciation of the larger context of divine liturgy in which each of the sacraments is set. We can draw benefit from the summary of the conciliar teaching that is found in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Still, the tradition of the Church, especially as developed by the Fathers and also by the scholastic doctors, points us to consider each of the sacraments according to their individual sacramentality. It is helpful to recall the schema put forth by Saint Thomas Aquinas, who organized the sacraments so as to make them correspond to the various moments and stages of human life. He thereby illustrated his prior theological conviction that grace perfects nature (gratia perfectit naturam). The sacramental economy reminds us that the objectivity of the sacraments is something that requires careful oversight by the Church. The categories of licitness and validity, beyond their juridical significance, reveal that these sacred actions depend directly on Christ for their efficaciousness. They belong to no other person, individual or corporate: indeed, the sacraments are confided to the Church’s care.

The sacraments constitute privileged moments in the life of the Church. No day would be complete without a renewal of our own participation in the sacraments of new life. In what follows I can only highlight certain key aspects of the individual sacraments. First, we should be thankful for the grace of our Baptism and Confirmation. The Church knows no other way in which the new life that Christ brings is communicated to the human person. Baptism evokes repentance from those who seek it not because of the threat of punishment but because of the promise of gifts that come to those who are renewed in the waters of the font. In these two enactments of divine judgment, we see the difference between the old law of fear and the new law of mercy and forgiveness clearly exposed before our eyes. Baptism brings new life. We therefore may ask ourselves why so many Catholics, at least in the industrialized countries, are given to forget the urgency of being released from the wickedness of
the present age. The revised baptismal ritual places less emphasis on the fact that Baptism releases a child from original sin and its punishment, and prefers rather to stress the newness of life in Christ Jesus that Baptism bestows. This incorporation into the Body of Christ brings with it redemption. We have been bought back. The alternative to life in Christ remains life in ourselves, and given the weight of original sin in the world, the chances that a person can sustain a life of charity outside the sacramental structures of the Church are slim. “When we made our first profession of faith while receiving the holy Baptism that cleansed us, the forgiveness we received then was so full and complete that there remained in us absolutely nothing left to efface, neither original sin nor offenses committed by our own will, nor was there left any penalty to suffer in order to expiate them...” Thus the Roman Catechism (as cited in the Catechism of the Catholic Church) tells us. This great grace, whether received as an infant or as an adult, requires careful shepherding.

The Sacrament of Baptism forgives original sin, but does not remove the concupiscence that original sin leaves in us. Saint Thomas Aquinas recapitulates the rich teaching of the early Church Fathers about the wisdom that illuminates this disposition of divine providence. He points out that there are many reasons why the defects of the present life remain even in those who have been baptized. The most important reason, however, points to the need for each Christian to maintain a life fortified by spiritual exercises—he even uses the phrase “spiritual exercises.” The struggle that the life of faith imposes on the one who takes up his cross is a cause for consolation, not despair. How many persons make a mistake about this crucial point of Christian life, and give up without recognizing that on the other side of the struggle stands Jesus? “Knowledge of God without that of our misery equals pride,” wrote Pascal. “Knowledge of our misery without that of God equals despair. Knowledge of Jesus Christ strikes the balance, since in him we find both God and our misery.”

Second, Penance. The 1984 Post-Synodal Exhortation “On Reconciliation and Penance” merits more attention that it has received. In many places throughout the Christian world, its words of encouragement and sound doctrine continue to prompt in many frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In the United States, while there are signs of renewal of sacramental practice, there are also indications that people confess their sins less frequently than their spiritual state may require. It should be observed as well that the decline in the number of available confessors also contributes to the decline in the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance. For many persons, the confession of venial sins can serve as an important source of grace for spiritual growth—for the “spiritual exercises” that Aquinas says we need to accomplish are part of the divine plan that leaves even the baptized with the fomes peccati, the broad concupiscence of sin.

Third, the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. This sacrament is among the most important sacramental mediations that can assist the Christian faithful to resist the culture of death. We can never meditate enough on the power of the risen Christ. He is the Lord of life and death. The healing that comes with the Sacrament of the Sick offers special consolation: we have it on the authority of the apostle James that the one who receives this anointing, “if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven” (Jas 5:15). Baptism, Confirmation, the Eucharist, Penance, and the Anointing of the Sick are the sacraments that mark the beginning, the middle, and the end of the Christian life. Because of the unique intervention of the risen Christ and the power of the Holy Spirit, these sacramental mediations are more than symbolic expressions of religious convictions or public demonstrations of graces that have already been received without mediation. They are true sacraments of the new law, and they do something specific. They constitute efficacious instruments of the supreme grace confided to the Church. Without them it is difficult to imagine the “theological life.” Sacramental mediations are open only to the eyes of faith. We know that the Eucharist is a mystery of faith because it is revealed only to “the eyes of faith,” as Saint Thomas Aquinas has impressed on the Christian imagination. Taste, touch, sight, hearing—none of the senses avails when it comes to recognizing under the appearances of bread and wine the body, blood, soul, and divinity of Christ, really, truly, and substantially present in this Holy Sacrament. Only the heart that assents to this mystery as expressed, preserved, reverenced, and cherished by the Church founded on the Apostles is able to open up to the reality of the Eucharistic Lord. Mystrium Fidei. The Holy Father has acknowledged that one text of the Second Vatican Council forms a leitmotiv of
his post-conciliar Magisterium. He refers to the paragraphs of the “Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the World of Today” in *Gaudium et spes* #22. The paragraphs bear the heading, *De Christo novo homine—About Christ the New Man*. We learn there that it is only in the mystery of the Incarnate Word that light is shed on the mystery of what it means to be human. The following comprises a central portion of this conciliar document: “He who is ‘the image of the invisible God’ (Col 1:15) is the perfect man who has restored to the offspring of Adam the divine likeness which had been deformed since the first sin.”

No wonder the Holy Father draws us back again and again to this foundational formulation of the Christian message. Into a world that has been deformed by human sinfulness, and deformed as a result of our own wrongdoing, not God’s, comes by God’s gracious and paternal benevolence. One like ourselves but without sin who restores to the human creature not something alien to what it means to be human, but what is most connatural to being human, indeed what from the beginning had been willed for the creature made in the divine image, namely, a life of friendship and intimacy with God. The Incarnation is not magic, and the work of divine grace throughout the long history—now two millennia—of the Christian Gospel adopts a rhythm of continual transformation. Herein lies one reason for suffering in the world. To create the new, the old must be broken. Yet even as it renews the face of the earth, the Eucharist consoles.

_Gaudium et spes_, #22 also refers to the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross: “Suffering for us, Christ not only set us an example to follow in his footsteps, but he also opened for us a way in which life and death are sanctified and given a fresh significance.” One of the most familiar anthems known to the Christian people is the prayer composed for the Office of Corpus Christi: *O sacrum convivium in quo Christus sumitur, recolitur memoria passionis eius, mens implectur gratia, et future gloriae nobis pignus datur.* It sings of course of the Eucharist, Bread of Life that establishes the “new man,” and a new world. The Eucharist is a sacred banquet, where the Bread of Life and of the Angels becomes food for a pilgrim people inclined to sin. A wonderful exchange occurs. As Saint Augustine once and for all stamped on the Church’s understanding, we do not consume this heavenly food, but rather this food consumes us in the fire of charity and unites us in the bond of unity. The anthem, *O Sacrum convivium*, re-calls that the Eucharist is a living memorial of Christ’s own Passion on Calvary. Every time that the priest eucharistizes the bread and wine, every time that he says, “This is my body, This is my blood,” he reenacts in an unbloody manner the same sacrifice of the Calvary that _Gaudium et spes_, #22 tells us is the source of our new life in Christ. The anthem, *O Sacrum convivium*, announces that this new humanity, the human soul (that is, the whole body-person, the whole man, the human creature), is filled with divine grace, the source of new life in us and of our union in friendship with God. Only the mystery of the Incarnate Word reveals—in the strong sense of manifests and effects—the mystery of man. If Godless and graceless strategies for perfecting the human race were able to answer the deepest aspirations of the human heart, then they surely would have succeeded better than they have over the course of the centuries. Strictly speaking, there is no human cure for atheism, but there are many indications that it remains an ideology without a future. The Eucharist points to the future, to a completion that is not limited by the constraints of fallen nature—where every tear will be wiped away—and that is promised as a time not of suffering but of glory: “There we hope to enjoy the vision of your glory.” No longer a Mysterium Fidei, no longer an assent of the heart to that which the mind can barely glimpse, and now through a glass darkly, but a beholding.

The thought of the pledge of future glory, a future vision of glory, that the Eucharist offers transports us to an island that holds an important place in the spread of the Christian Gospel, a symbol of the islands of evangelization that exist throughout the world of today. I refer to the Island of Patmos in the Aegean Sea (southeast Greece), where we are told that Saint John the Evangelist found himself in exile.

Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband; and I heard a great voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling of God with men. He will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. (Rev 21:1-4).
This is the vision of the new world that the Eucharist creates in us, and in this present world signals the end term of the Church’s sacramental mediation. God knew that once such a vision of blessedness was revealed to the human race in Christ, we would want to partake of the blessedness now, and not have to wait until after death. That is why Christ gave us Himself in the Eucharist, for in this sacrament we taste the joy-O Bread of Life!-that rejoices with the blessed in heaven, even as we journey along our way to join them.

Part Two: The Theologal Life: What is It?

On 22 November 2000, John Paul II spoke these words during the general audience held in St. Peter's Square:

Faith, hope and charity are like three stars that light up in the sky of our spiritual life to guide us toward God. They are the ‘theological’ virtues par excellence: they place us in communion with God and lead us to him. They are a triptych that has its summit in charity, agape, sung excellently by Paul in a hymn of the first Letter to the Corinthians, which is sealed with the following declaration: ‘So faith, hope and love remain, these three; but the greatest of these is love’ (I Cor 13:13).

The Catechism of the Catholic Church calls a life lived according to the theological virtues the “theologal” life. The objective of the second part of this essay is to examine the ways that this divinely bestowed theologal life flourishes in the communion of the Church. We have already examined the dynamics of the sacramental mediation that communicates the participated divine life to men and women. We now turn to examine how those who are members of the Church exhibit the graces that they have received.

First, however, we must establish the proper context for envisaging the concrete exercise of the theological virtues. Three theological coordinates govern a theological presentation of these divine virtues. The first is the threefold grace of Christ. Because “the one subject which operates in the two natures, human and divine, is the single Person of the Word,” theologians have distinguished three graces that belong to Christ: the grace of the hypostatic union (the grace of the “single Person of the Word”), the grace resident in human nature (Christ’s own sanctifying or habitual grace), and the grace that overflows into the members of Christ (the capital or ecclesial grace or the grace of Headship). Second, because “the human virtues are rooted in the theological virtues, which adapt man’s faculties for participation in the divine nature,” one must recall the form and dynamics of created grace: “for the theological virtues relate directly to God.” Some theologians have construed man’s capacity for God in an inclusive way; in their account, grace and nature are so intertwined as to make it difficult to speak about the “dynamics” of an uplifted life of supernatural grace. The Thomist commentatorial tradition takes full account of the claim that the theological virtues “dispose Christians to live in a relationship with the Holy Trinity,” and so are willing to talk about what is disposed. This leads to the third coordinate. Recall what has been said in part one about the doctrine of the imago Dei, man made in the image of God. The dynamism of the imago points toward God. Still, because man remains free under the movement of divine grace, it is possible to frustrate the inbuilt dynamic of the imago. Creation is not redemption. In a word, the imago Dei can be actualized or frustrated depending on how we fulfill God’s will for us. Directly related to this fundamental Christian tenet is the claim: “It must therefore be firmly believed as a truth of Catholic faith that the universal salvific will of the One and Triune God is offered and accomplished once for all in the mystery of the incarnation, death, and resurrection of the Son of God.” The life of faith, hope, and charity establishes the believer in the communion of the Church. There he or she may dwell in one of three circles of ecclesial communion. We now turn to consider how these diverse vocations mediate the theologal life.

I. THE MEDIATION OF THE THEOLOGAL LIFE BY PRIESTS

As we turn to consider the mediation of the vocations that distinguish the Church, we recognize that there are three circles of ecclesial communion that exist within the one communion of the Church: the presbyterate of the priests, the fraternity of the consecrated, and the family of the laity. Because of their indispensable and irreplaceable ministry to the mediation of the theologal life, we consider first priests, especially diocesan priests. The priests of today receive great encouragement from Pope John Paul II through, for example, his Holy Thursday, his substantial reflections on fifty years of priesthood in 1996, and the 1992 Apostolic Exhortation Pastores dabo vobis. The renewal of the priesthood that we hear about in many places in the world derives no doubt from this exquisite fulfillment of the
Petrine office. These documents help us to examine the way in which men exercise the sacred ministry confided to them at the time of their ordination. We need to reflect on the way in which priests live out the qualities of Head and Shepherd that distinguish the priest from other members of the Church.

It would be less than frank not to observe that in the United States the decline in the number of ordained ministers constitutes one of the most serious threats to the successful implementation of the New Evangelization. It is outside the scope of this essay to attempt a scientific analysis of the reasons for this circumstance. The adverse cultural factors that dominate in Western culture obviously have a great deal to do with the decline in vocations, not only to the priesthood, but to all forms of special consecration and dedication in the Church. There also exist intra-ecclesial factors that contribute to making the priesthood a less clear, and perhaps less desirable, vocation. I suggest that the major factor in this latter category remains the functionalization of the priesthood. To the extent that the theologians continue to speak about ministry in the Church as if it were one homogeneous action performed by a class of generic ministers, the priestly office will be reduced to a “doing” without a “being.”

It should be pointed out that a fairly thorough-going functionalism governs the thought of many Catholics. In some presentations, the priest emerges as one minister among many ministers, and Catholics are left to conclude that the non-ordained or permanent deacon can substitute for the priest. It is reported moreover that some persons in the Church even favor an increased use of deacons and lay ministers to help meet the needs of Catholics in a time of fewer priests, and, what is more astonishing, that younger Catholics are least likely to say that they have noticed or have been affected by the decline in the number of priests. In many places, there exists a tremendous urgency to provide priests for the pastoral care of the faithful and to cultivate priestly vocations by promoting the specific ecclesial identity of the priest. At the same time, certain voices express the view that the decline in the number of priests is a cultural given, and that the Bishops should discover solutions which neither blatantly contravene canonical regulations nor depend upon the ministry of priests. Well did the 1997 Interdioceserial Instruction specifically warn against initiatives that “encourage a reduction in vocations to the (ministerial) priesthood and obscure the specific purpose of seminaries as places of formation for the ordained ministry.”

Promotion of vocations to the priesthood must inform every baptized person’s outlook on the Church.

The mediation of the priest is required in order for the Christian people to learn the dynamics of the theologal life. Look back at the great movements within the Church that rescued whole segments of the population from the disastrous cultural alternatives to accepting the Gospel, whether in uncivilized lands, such as the Jesuit missionaries to the North American frontier in the seventeenth century, or in highly refined and advanced civilizations or societies, such as the spiritual renewal movements that started in Brittany and Normandy during the same period and extended into the eighteenth century. At the heart of such initiatives, one always discovers holy priests. To cite but one example, there is the French priest Louis Grignon de Montfort, whose spiritual instruction about and ardent devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary remains a constant source of inspiration for the Church. We need more priests moved with the fire and spirit of this Missionary Apostolic, as Pope Clement XI designated him in 1706. De Montfort’s theology has become associated with a robust Marian piety, but scholarly studies have shown that the saint’s intuition encompassed the whole relationship between the Creator and the creature—the plan of divine Wisdom—and the special way in which the mediations that center on Christ and His Mother make it possible for the human creature to regain his proper status in the universe. In other words, de Montfort promoted the theologal life.

Special concern envelops the diocesan priest, who embodies in a prima facie way the ideal of priestly service inasmuch as he finds himself immediately dependent on the Bishop of the particular Church and collaborates with him in the priestly office. Among the responsibilities that the priest receives by delegation from the Bishop is the authority to preach. Evangelization is a task that belongs to the whole Church, but preaching is reserved to those who participate in the “sacred power” of the
priesthood, communicated through a valid Episcopate with Apostolic Succession. Preaching is a sacred action. Because it communicates to the world truths on which the world has no claim, the preacher must rely on what has been handed over to him. How else, as the Apostle reminds us, can one preach unless he has been commissioned? “And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?” (Rom 10: 14,15). We can return to the example of Saint Louis Grignon de Montfort: “The term ‘apostolic’ was a key word for Montfort. It properly described his ‘missionary path.’ Linked with the word ‘missionary,’ and having the etymological meaning of being ‘sent,’ it expressed something essential for St. Louie Marie.”23 We should also observe that “commission” meant a great deal to our saint. He walked from Northwest France to Rome in order to receive from the Successor of Peter the designation and therefore the authority to undertake his missions.

What Louie de Montfort did at the beginning of the eighteenth century, a Spanish priest had done at the start of the thirteenth century. Dominic de Guzman also traveled to the Successor of Peter, and received a similar mandate from Pope Honorious III to participate in the tasks that belong by divine right to the Bishops of the Church. It would be impossible to enumerate all of the other holy priests who have in one way or another taken up with seriousness the role of apostolic missionary. We learn from the spirit of Saint Dominic that preaching issues forth best from a heart that is given over to praise and benediction: *laudare, benedicere, praedicare*. He reminds the priests of God’s Church that if one is to communicate with enthusiasm and exactitude the truth of the Catholic religion, there exists no substitute for holiness of life. The spiritual adage, *nemo potest dare quod non habet*, captures the essence of this crucial truth. Priestly mediation is needed in the Church more than ever during a period when people have been distracted from the important truths that define their creaturehood and thus their relation to God. How much of what transpires in the culture of death, the consumer society, the new paganism of especially Western culture, shrouds a profound absence of what it means to be a creature? When we forget what it means to be a creature, then we ignore the urgency of the theological life. Only the Christian priest who stands between God and men as a mediator can restore, I would argue, the orders of nature and grace. To accomplish this task, he must become a father, a head, a shepherd, but never remain just another religious functionary.24

The conciliar decree on priestly life and ministry stipulates that priests are obliged to “share the truth of the Gospel” and, further, that the virtue of the priest, pastoral charity, be exercised by “accepting and putting into effect in a spirit of faith whatever is enjoined or recommended by the Supreme Pontiff and their own bishops.”25 Number sixteen of the same document sets forth what the Second Vatican Council teaches about the value of clerical celibacy: fuller consecration to Christ to whom priests are especially conformed; greater freedom to pursue the ministry of the Church, specifically, “to accept a wider fatherhood in Christ”; and the highest form of spousal love which is that discovered in the communion of the Church with God. *Pastores dabo vobis* especially develops the theme of spousal love and links it to the identity and virtue of the priest, again, pastoral charity. The “Oath of Fidelity,” which is considered an official document of faith, asks pastors (and all clerics) to unite themselves with Bishops “as authentic doctors and teachers of the faith.” It also enjoins that apostolic activity, especially preaching, which flows from the Church, not the individual, be carried out “in the communion of the same Church.”26 Without this view of the ministry of the diocesan priest, it would be impossible to envisage a life of faith, which requires instruction, of hope, which requires encouragement, and of charity, which requires the exercise of Headship. In other words, without the ministry of priests, it is impossible to sustain and develop the theological life.

II. THE WITNESS TO THE THEOLOGAL LIFE BY CONSECRATED PERSONS

The fraternity of consecrated life offers a refreshing alternative to the isolation that envelops the modern individual, whose monad-like existence is oddly prefigured in the way that the eighteenth-century thinker Leibnitz imagined the concursus of human and divine freedom. The paradox of individualism is perhaps most realized in the culture that the United States has spawned since the end of the Second World War. The more that people strive to guarantee individual liberties, the more
they find themselves isolated and alone, and thus inclined to substitute ersatz forms of being together for true community. Same-sex unions afford the most striking example, but there are others as well. Consecrated persons must remind a generation of lost individuals that truth and friendship are the only goods that perfect the human person. The *communio* of the Church offers the only authentic form of inclusiveness, to use the neologism that dominates so much of our public rhetoric. Within the *communio* of the Church, there exists a special form of communion whose intensity best represents the original coming together in the upper room, where the Apostles, united with Mary, the Mother of Jesus, received the parted tongues of fire that signaled a divine renewal of the whole face of the earth.

The witness of the evangelical counsels offers to the Church a constant reminder of the radical nature of Christian conversion. One can adapt to our present circumstances the way that the classical authors explained the perennial significance of the vows of religion. We can say that poverty opposes everything that is corrupt in the culture of consumption, chastity, everything that is disordered in the culture of permissiveness, and obedience, everything that is distorted in the assumption (which goes unchallenged in the politics of secular liberalism) that power is the only reality. It is a source of consolation for the Church that there are a large number of new initiatives throughout the world. Many of these new initiatives, moreover, prove the thesis that Europe, especially France, is still a fecund source of renewal in the Church. A recent gift from France to the United States is Our Lady of Clear Creek, the new American daughter house of the French Abbey of Fontgombault-of the Solemn Congregation. The new monastery is located outside Tulsa, Oklahoma.

It is interesting to observe that twentieth-century North American Catholicism, especially after the Second World War, when expansion to the suburbs proceeded at a rapid pace, may be the first time in the history of Christianity when the members of the Church have had to survive without some proximity to a monastery. For reasons that can be traced to historical occurrences in Europe (when hostilities against the Church prevailed) as well as to the need of the immigrant Catholic community, this circumstance was not so apparent in the nineteenth century: witness the Franciscan missions in California and especially the great Benedictine monasteries that grew up along side the pioneer Church in the Midwest and Northwest. Today, however, only a very small percentage of American Catholics enjoy any experience of monastic life, and indeed of any formal representation of religious life such as was provided for them in the great urban centers of the Northeast by Redemptorists, Passionists, and Franciscans. Without a monastery—and now I use the term in the broad and analogical sense—we should ask ourselves to what extent the Church can protect herself against the adverse influences of a secular culture. How can the theological life flourish without the witness of a true monastery?

The monk encourages people to trust in the paternal providence of God. Perhaps no more compelling analogy comes from the lips of our Blessed Savior than what he speaks in the Gospel of Matthew: “If you, with all your sins, know how to give your children what is good, how much more will your heavenly Father give good things to anyone who asks him!” (Mt 7:12). Confidence in the providence of God forms the foundation for the everyday living out of Christian faith. In the period after the Council, some theologians began to interpret the value of evangelical obedience in terms of creating a disposition in the members of religious institutes for a more effective deployment of their corporate talents. These theorists missed the point of what religious profession or consecration accomplishes in the Church. The religious observes a life of obedience because obedience is foundational to the way of every Christian vocation. It is symptomatic, perhaps, of the kind of spiritual renewal needed in the Church today that the documents that come forth from the Roman Curia have found it opportune repeatedly to stress the “obedience of faith” (Rom 1:5), which is how the Apostle Paul defines his own ministry: “Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations . . .” (Rom 1:4,5).

The flourishing of consecrated life in the Church, as well as the various ways in which the classical forms of religious consecration have been adapted to suit the needs of the present time, remind us of the importance of conversion of life. Without *conversio*, there is no theological life. The desert fathers introduced the conversiomorum into the vocabulary of their disciples. These
stressed how much what is of the world needs to be left behind when one comes into the school of discipleship that the Lord has established for the members of his Church. We have subsequently developed our understanding of how the Church abides at the heart of the world, and how everything She does aims to draw all men into the center of the Church. At the same time, a misplaced emphasis on secularity has prompted a decreased appreciation for the values attached to retreat from the world. This phenomenon exemplifies one of the unforeseen but nonetheless undesirable effects of the emphasis that the Second Vatican Council-or, to be more precise, those who interpreted the Council’s teaching, especially in the mass media—put on the notion of secularity. The decline in so many religious institutes of women in the United States surely finds part of its explanation in this mistaken interpretation of what the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council had hoped to communicate about the “perfection of charity.”

Consecrated chastity possesses its own objective in the communion of the Church. Religious, and especially religious women, and among them, most especially cloistered religious women, reveal the character of the Church as Sponsa Verbi. It may be difficult to formulate a mental picture of some religious—for example, the dog-sledding missionaries in the Arctic region of North America as “Brides.” And yet by their wholehearted commitment to the work of evangelization, even these men of gnarled and leathery complexion demonstrate what it means for the Church to commit everything to prepare for the coming of the Lord. Saint Paul, we know, appreciated virginity for the sake of the Kingdom because it allowed the Christian to do completely the one thing that is necessary: “I mean, brethren, the appointed time has grown very short” (I Cor 7:29). To this injunction, we should also add the accumulated wisdom of the Church which Saint Thomas Aquinas repeats: “sexual pleasure withdraws the soul from that perfect disposition of tending toward God.” 328 In the Church, the witness of consecrated religious, especially the women who give themselves night and day to the worship of God, to prayer, and to cultivating the divine friendship, reminds each baptized person that he or she must remain clean of heart, with a mind fully centered on the Lord whose Church we inhabit in charity. The theological life finds its eminent expression in consecrated, especially contemplative, life. In a word, there we find hearts transformed by the Lord. No wonder that the Holy Father places consecrated persons on Mount Tabor, the Mount of the Transfiguration.

III. CHRIST’S LAY FAITHFUL AND THE WORK OF EVANGELIZATION: SPREAD OF THE THEOLOGAL LIFE

We have reflected on the “special activism” of priests and the unique vocation that consecrated persons embody in the task of the New Evangelization. We now turn to ponder the important and specific charge that the Second Vatican Council has given to Christ’s lay faithful. While the distinction is a well-known one, it is also the case that some serious misunderstandings about the place of the laity in the Church exist, especially in the countries dominated by some recent German and Anglo-American theology. In certain places, the full recovery of the secular vocation of the laity has not been achieved, and a great deal depends on this happening. Many have observed the ways in which an elision is made between receiving certain tasks, such as teaching and liturgical duties, and becoming personally identified as a Catholic who performs such and such a task. The philosophical explanation lies, in my judgment, in the cultural proclivity to replace office (munus) and personal identity with a self-definition based on role and task. Because there exists no pre-Enlightenment culture in the United States, there is very little to remind a citizen of this country of his “status,” which is such an indispensable part of Christian revelation about who we are.

Members of the Church must appropriate for themselves the teaching of the Council, and resist the Protestantization of the Church that four centuries after the Reform of the sixteenth century once again threatens to undermine the sanctifying, teaching, and governing mission of the Church. The fruits of the Catholic Reform of the post-Tridentine period still remind us of the need to provide for the People of God clear and accurate guidance about how they sanctify the world. The list of tasks is too long to enumerate, and opportunities emerge as needs require. Still, it is imperative to impress on Christ’s lay faithful their obligation to transform and sanctify the saeculum.

The People of God must live according to the spirit of the new dispensation. Saint Matthew, whose account of the Sermon on the Mount has left its impression on the moral instruction given in the Church, exemplifies the apostle of interiority. External conformity only realizes half the grace of the Holy Spirit. Such observance never exhausts the theological life. The full power of the new dispensation, of what Jesus introduced through the
Paschal Mystery informs every fiber of the human being. The “new man,” of which Christian revelation speaks, is the person transformed from the inside out (see Eph 2:15). Without this kind of transformation, which may be summarized in the phrase “the moral conscience,” there is little hope that the People of God will be able to do all that their distinctive vocation in the Church requires of them.

I found encouragement in the Jubilee Pentecost assembly held at Saint Peter’s. The lay ecclesial movements, which like all new stirrings of the Holy Spirit require time to find their precise point of insertion into the Church’s hierarchical structure, offer to the People of God significant opportunities to live out their vocations. It is important for us to recall that each of these movements provides a structured and organized program for spiritual formation. This program extends not only to initial formation, but also permanent formation. We are reminded of the earliest designation for the Christian life, namely, that it is a “Way.” The Pastors of the Church appreciate the spiritual formation that authentic lay movements give to the lay faithful. In my experience, the lay movements provide one of the best sources of authentic Catholic spirituality for Christians today. Sadly, some of what passes for spiritual theology or spirituality, at least in the United States, is not sufficiently informed by Catholic doctrine, and therefore becomes too much informed by secular if not pagan resources. The theological life is defined by the theological virtues, not by ephemeral attempts to rejoice in the human spirit. Interiority cannot be taught unless it is lived. Each person must show to the Church a living proof of the charity and unity that distinguishes the Church of Christ. The theological life flows from the Eucharist. As Saint Paul reminded the Corinthians: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (1 Corinthians 10:17). St. Augustine’s exclamation in his commentary on John’s Gospel becomes for the laity a warrant, a duty to be discharged, a sacred trust to be lived interiorly: “Sacrament of piety, sign of unity, bond of charity!”

Because the Eucharist is the sacrament and source of ecclesial unity, the laity join consecrated persons gathered around the Bishop and his priests in the one communion of the Church. From this experience of Christ’s love, each member of the Body moves out to sanctify, diversely, the world.

Since the Second Vatican Council, we have become accustomed to ponder deeply on the relationship between missio and communio. Pope John Paul II’s 1990 encyclical letter Redemptoris missio has helped the whole Church grasp and deal with the configuration of mission that confronts her in the third Christian millennium. Because the Church is missionary by her nature, I believe that it is fair to say that every member serves the Church’s missionary mandate. The sacramental mediation of the Church achieves a certain transcendence when the Church reaches out as a sacrament of salvation to every human being on the planet. We comprehend the special circumstances that prompted the issuance of the “Declaration” Dominus Jesus in 2000. The truths of Catholic and divine faith that are recalled in that succinct catechism of essential Catholic doctrine possess a special meaning for the “missionary.” No human person should be left to worship God in a way that does not allow for a full and active participation in the Eucharistic synaxis. The theological life is sustained during this moment of participation in the Eucharist.

Our meditation on the sacramental mediation of the Church in the context of the permanent validity of the Church’s missionary mandate—of her missio ad gentes—leads us to reflect on inculturation. We know that the Church’s missionary effort has been helped by a judicious use of findings from the anthropological disciplines. If I understand the history properly, when Emile Durkheim began his classical study of suicide victims, he already intuited that it would be important to examine the records of the civil authorities to determine the religion of those persons who had taken their own lives. This founder of modern statistical sociology supposed that the moral instruction given to Catholics would have had an influence on the statistical frequency of suicide victims. Durkheim’s study, I am told, confirmed a higher statistical frequency of suicide among French Protestants. This anecdote suggests the importance of truth for life. In the culture wars, Christ conquers culture.

There is a similar lesson to be discovered from the more widely known and studied history of the Church’s missionary efforts in China in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Historians interpret the Rites Controversy differently, but the generally accepted view has been to consider the episode a damaging one. The distinguished Lutheran theologian, George Lindbeck, who had been an ecumenical observer at the Second Vatican Council and is himself the son of Protestant missionaries to China, once recounted to me a different explanation of the Church’s purpose. Whereas many thought...
the negative actions of the Holy See had impeded the growth of Christianity in China, it may be argued that the missionary strategy of the Popes of the eighteenth century actually ensured that the authentic Gospel of Christ would flourish among people of every class and station. Those who were well-educated and of the upper class may have been able to recognize Christianity in the proposed adaptations of Christian practices to accommodate the culture of the Chinese, but the rice farmer and the fisherman, the housewife and the spinster may not have been so astute as to recognize Christian truth veiled in Chinese cultural practices. In other words, the sophistication and ingenuity of the proposed adaptations may have made it difficult for ordinary people fully to have recognized that the truths and the mysteries of the Christian religion in fact constitute something entirely “new” (see Eph 2:15). Ordinary people outside of the mandarin or ruling classes may have missed the specific distinctiveness of Christian life and worship—in other words, what makes things “new.” In present-day terms, the People of God would not have recognized the “definitive and complete character of the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

We return to the importance of the sacramental mediation of the Church, and of the definitive form that the theologal life takes within her communion. This form includes Her liturgical rites. Inculturation should neither obscure the truth of the Gospel nor transmogrify the Catholic religion.

The lay person is called to the work of the evangelization. This witness requires a renewal of spirit. One must ask for the grace to enjoy a deeper love of the mysteries of the faith that we celebrate. The members of the Church must do everything to ensure that the Church of faith and sacraments reaches the farthest corners of the globe, and this can happen only to the extent that they live faithfully these gifts of grace. Missionary zeal always characterizes the saints. One thinks first of all of Saint Francis Xavier and the flood of enthusiasm for evangelization that he unleashed, but also of Saint Francis of Assisi and Saint Dominic Guzman, both of whom cherished desires that were never fully realized to carry out the missio ad gentes. The modern period affords examples of men, and especially of women, too numerous to mention, who have taken up this example. The missionary desires of a contemplative like Therese of Lisieux also serve to encourage and strengthen the Church. The bipolarity of monastics and missionaries, to borrow a designation from Hans Urs von Balthasar, will always serve as a mark of the true Church. Within these categories, lay persons will find their place during the new springtime of the Church.

Because Christ remains the unique savior of the world, no one can fulfill the two great commandments of love, love of God and love of neighbor, without experiencing within oneself the desire to make the Lord better known and loved everywhere. Recall Moses’ words to the People of Israel: “You are to be a people peculiarly his own, as he promised you” (Dt 26:16-19). This promise is fulfilled in the Incarnation of the Son of God. The Church can never forget the ordering of the Joyful Mysteries of the Rosary: the Annunciation and the Visitation. The first thing that the embryonic Jesus does is travel, in the womb of his Mother, whose embrace of her cousin Elizabeth establishes Mary forever as the Cause of Our Joy, Causa nostrae laetitiae.

“In a word, you must be perfected as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:48). We are reminded that the Christian Gospel is transformative. Well has Don Luigi Guisanni taught us that the Gospel introduces the believer into a “school of discipleship.” For every member of the Church, growth in discipleship occurs according to the specific vocation that each one has received. We have examined the sacramental mediations that communicate the gift of divine grace to the human race. Only these mediations of the Church ensure that the human person attains beatifying friendship with God. At the same time, these gifts received in freedom even as they transform our freedom, putting everything do entirely at the disposal of the Lord. I have always taken consolation from a foundational principle of Christian discipleship, something that the theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas teaches with special clarity, namely, that God loves us because He is good, not because we are. Since there exists no other motive for God to love anyone other than God’s own goodness, we know that the priority of grace’s transformative power belongs to God alone. Because of the way that the creature is dependent on God, to hold that our goodness belongs first of all to God in no way diminishes the dignity of human freedom. On the contrary, as the saints repeatedly remind us, the one who lives more fully in God becomes who He is, and achieves the freedom that ennobles. It is, as Aquinas again taught the Church, a freedom for excellence. The concrete name for this specifically Christian excellence is the theologal life.

It is difficult to underestimate the importance of the sacred mysteries that God has ordained for the
salvation of the world. In part two, we have reflected on the sacramental mediations from the perspective of the vocations that distinguish the Church. Nothing that happens for good in the Church affects only the one who accomplishes the good deed. The Mystical Body, as we know, is related in such a way that wherever charity increases in one, so charity increases in the other members—ways known only to God, to be sure, but in real and measurable ways, nonetheless. The renewal of all Christ’s members in charity, their own re-dedication to prayer and spiritual discipline, their own re-commitment to the work that is theirs, not only benefits the other members of the Church in the invisible workings of the Mystical Body, but also in the visible workings of the Body which is the Church. Each Christian should expect to be renewed in the transformative power of divine grace and so experience a new urgency to extend and strengthen the sacramental mediations of the Church.

Among the lasting examples that the present Pope has given to the Church is the practice of appealing to the Virgin Mother of God. I suspect that it may become a rare instance of an infallible teaching that will remain unformulated, but continue as a custom that Bishops and others will follow by some filial instinct, which will motivate them to observe and continue this noble and gracious practice. God knew what consolation it would bring to the brothers and sisters of the Lord to learn that the Mother of His Son is immaculately conceived, and so capable of exercising a sinless and perfect instrumentality in the Church. She who gave birth according to the flesh to the Eternal Son of God best understands what it means for the world to be saved by One like us in all things, though free from sin. She who first held in her arms the One Mediator between heaven and earth best understands the sacramental mediations that flow from her Son. She who lifted up the Lord of All for the adoration of Kings who had come from the East best understands the evangelizing task that Christ has confided to the Church. In Mary, understanding breaks forth into love. In her, we find the theological life in its fullness. So we bring this essay to a close in the embrace of the woman whose maternal mediation remains, according to the teaching of Louie Marie Grignon de Montfort, the sure promise of divine predestination for those who seek refuge in her.

NOTES

1 “Instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian,” #1.
2 It is well known that Aquinas avoided doing theology in the hypothetical mood. He developed his theology from what was known through divine revelation, not from conjectures about what might have been possible. It never crossed the mind of the great theologians of the Church that Christ had failed to do what was in the best interests of His divine mission. This methodology leaves the Angelic Doctor free to discover “reasons” for why Christ did what the canonical Scriptures report that He did.
3 Summa Theologiae IIIa q. 42, a.
4 Veritatis Splendor, #34.
5 The language of the Creed expresses this mystery when it reminds us that for us “men” and for our salvation, the Eternal Word “became man”: qui propter nos homines et propter nostram salutem .. et homo factus est (emp. Added).
6 See The Book of Her Life, 8,5, as cited in CCC, #2709.
7 Donum veritatis, #1.
8 See Dominus Jesus, #16.
9 See the Second Vatican Council’s decree on Bishops, Christus Dominus, #15.
10 Gaudium et spes, #22.
11 Lumen gentium, #18.
12 For an illuminating comparison between the committal by God of both creed and sacraments to the care
of the apostles and their successors, see *Summa theologiae* III q. 64, a. 2, esp. ad 2um.

13 *CCC* #978.
14 Ibid.


16 The 1994 English version of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* speaks about the “theologal path of our prayer” (#2607) and describes the first three petitions of the Our Father as “more theologal” (#2803).

17 For one of the most recent employments of the Chalcedonian formulary, see Dominus Jesus, #10.

18 *CCC*, #18t2.
19 Ibid.

20 See *CCC*, #1701-1709, especially #1708 and #1709.
21 *Dominus Jesus*, #14.
22 #2.


24 Note what is taught in *Lumen gentium*, # 28: “It is in the Euchaxistic cult or in the Eucharistic assembly of the faithful (synaxis) that they [priests] exercise in a supreme degree their office.”

25 *Presbyterorum ordinis*, #4 and #15.
26 See *Codes Iuris Canonici*, canon 833.

27 For further information about the more prominent initiatives, see my “Interview” on lay movements in the Catholic Church in *Catholic International* 11 (November 2000): 432-433.

28 *Summa theologiae* IIa-IIae q. 186, art. 4.

30 The Second Vatican Council explicitly recognized the spiritual distress that results from a paucity of priests in a given region when it urged Bishops that “they should take special care of those regions of the world in which the word of God is yet to be proclaimed or in which, mainly because of lack of priests, the faithful are in grave danger of falling away from the moral standards of Christian life and even of losing the faith itself” (*Christus Dominus*, #6).

31 *Dominus Jesus*, #5.