

CREATION AS A “MONSTRANCE OF GOD’S REAL PRESENCE”: A METAPHYSICAL REFLECTION ON THE MODERN CULT OF POTENCY AND THE EUCHARIST

MICHAEL DOMINIC TAYLOR

“The fulfillment of the entire cosmic order is found in the movement from the ‘not yet’ of creation’s groaning to the ‘now’ of the Eucharistic God’s sacrificial presence.”



1. INTRODUCTION: FAITH IN THE REAL PRESENCE

Perhaps it was a French peasant from the village of Ars who said it best. He described his experience before the Blessed Sacrament in this way: “I look at him and he looks at me.”¹ How

1. Alfred Moening, *Life of the Curé D'Ars* (London: Burns & Lambert, 1862), 55.

was he able to see what so many Catholics today cannot? When we read that many Catholics today believe that the Eucharist is a mere symbol,² one cannot help but hear echoes of Flannery O'Connor's piercing response: "Well, if it's just a symbol, to hell with it!"³ Surely there are many reasons for the evaporation of faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist, but the fundamental challenge facing the modern Church is not actually a problem restricted to the Church at all but a problem afflicting virtually the whole of humanity: the nearly complete loss of the sense of the transcendent.

At no other time in history, before or after Christ, did the expressions of human religiosity lack the foundational fact and undergirding of that primordial sense of the sacred. The installation of the technocratic paradigm as the dominant metaphysical framework could not have taken place without the correlative technologization of human reason that is defined precisely by the preemptive prohibition of a true openness to transcendent mystery, which is a simultaneous closure to truly immanent mystery. This windowless prison, locked from the inside as it were, cuts man off from God both from without and from within, limiting all questions to empirical ones and reducing all unknowns to the claimed territory of "science." This is what Charles Péguy referred to as a "mystical disaster."⁴

2. As has been widely publicized, a 2019 Pew poll showed that a majority of Catholics do not believe that the Eucharist is the Body and Blood of Christ. Just one-third of U.S. Catholics (thirty-one percent) said they believed that "during Catholic Mass, the bread and wine actually become the body and blood of Jesus." The rest said they "are symbols of the body and blood of Jesus Christ." Some of those do not know the Church's teaching about transubstantiation (forty-seven percent), but some do and reject it (twenty-two percent). Naturally, belief in the real presence correlates to higher Mass attendance (<https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2019/08/05/transubstantiation-eucharist-u-s-catholics/>). Using alternate language, a 2022 study by Vinea found a sixty-nine percent belief and a 2023 Georgetown CARA found the number to be sixty-four percent (<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/615672c8fcfe145084a316ad/t/66606857642af1721bc8bbb4/1717594203679/Catholic+Belief+in+the+Real+Presence+v1.pdf>). While an improvement, it should be pointed out that these results still represent widespread disbelief.

3. Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters of Flannery O'Connor*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Noonday Press, 1979), 125.

4. Charles Péguy, *Temporal and Eternal* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), 103.

This disaster does not consist in the complete elimination of the mystical as such, but the elimination of the conditions of possibility for the “mystical” to be perceived as having anything to do with reality. Everything once deemed “mystical,” even the immortal soul, whether pagan or Christian, has been reinterpreted as subjective, illusory, and ultimately superstitious.⁵ The phrase “hocus-pocus”—defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “sleight of hand; a method of bringing something about as if by magic; trickery, deceptions”⁶—came about in seventeenth-century Protestant England precisely as a mocking parody of the words of consecration of the Eucharist in the Holy Mass.

In this essay we will explore, through a metaphysical lens, this subtle path to disbelief—namely, the evacuation of the transcendent meaning of the cosmos through the modern prioritization of potency over actuality—especially as it pertains to faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. What I would like to defend here is that a necessary precondition for perceiving the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist is the ability to see the “hidden presence” of God in creation. This “presence” is a true, ontological image in which being truly appears. Seeing this presence requires us to become like children: humble, receptive, and grateful. Seeing this presence requires what St. Hildegard called “reading in simplicity” (*in simplicitate legere*) in which the vital unity of creation is understood as ontologically prior to any analysis we could perform upon it.⁷ Christ

5. Take, for example, this account from an essay entitled “The Sacred Emergence of Nature”: “The beauty of the emergentist approach to mind is that it suggests that to experience our experience without awareness of this underlying mechanism is exactly what we should expect from an emergent property. The outcome has been given reverent names, like spirit or soul, names that conjure up the perceived absence of materiality. But we need not interpret this as evidence of some parallel transcendental immaterial world. We can now say that the experience of soul or spirit as immaterial is simply a reflection of the way the process of emergence progressively distances each new level from the details below. We can now turn the page.” Ursula Goodenough and Terrance Deacon, “The Sacred Emergence of Nature” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Science*, ed. P. Clayton and Z. Simpson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 864.

6. “Hocus-pocus,” Oxford English Dictionary website, <https://www.oed.com/search/dictionary/?scope=Entries&q=hocus-pocus>.

7. Hildegard of Bingen, *The Letters of Hildegard of Bingen*, vol. 1, trans. Joseph L. Baird and Radd K. Ehrman (Oxford: Oxford University Press,

is God’s epiphany in the world, the one who brings and gives form to creation as a whole. “By a thousand open and hidden paths,” says Balthasar, our corporeal sensory experiences bring us into contact with Christ. It is in this sense that “the reality of creation as a whole has become *a monstrance of God’s real presence*.”⁸

2. UNLESS WE BECOME LIKE CHILDREN . . .

To state our claim concisely: we have lost the ability to see Christ’s Real Presence because, in the truest sense of the word, we have lost the ability to see. And we have lost the ability to see because we are no longer disposed toward that which we see—namely, reality—with a contemplative gaze of love.⁹ In simpler terms, we have ceased to be like children. In Matthew’s Gospel, Christ warns us that “unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”¹⁰ Though all of the Gospels contain this warning, Matthew further points us to the humility of the child “by which he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (Mt 18:4). This is surely the first virtue that the French peasant possessed that allowed him to see Christ looking

1994), 203. Miguel Escobar Torres comments on Hildegard’s felicitous phrase: “Catholic philosophy is based on wonder at being, and not on critica. The transfiguration of the gaze, seeing in simplicity, allows us to intuit and revere the divine mystery that nourishes creation from its depths; it also drives us to rediscover the place that the human being occupies in the cosmos. Indeed, if man is not an isolated subject who looks at creation from outside but constitutes a crucible of creation in which all cosmic forces converge, his mission is no longer to impose the designs of instrumental reason subjected to a blind will; rather, he is called to be the guarantor of cosmic order and beauty in a humanized ecosystem, in which he reigns with the other creatures.” (Miguel Escobar Torres, “‘Nulla mortalia efflavi’: The Living Universe of Hildegard of Bingen,” in *The Gift of Creation: Theological Reflections on Ecology, Metaphysics, and Politics*, ed. Matyas Szalay (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2024), 89.

8. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 1: *Seeing the Form*, ed. Joseph Fessio and John Riches, trans. Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), 420 (emphasis added).

9. “[T]his is the specific mark of seeing things in contemplation: it is motivated by loving acceptance, by an affectionate affirmation.” Josef Pieper, *Only the Lover Sings: Art and Contemplation*, trans. Lothar Krauth (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 75.

10. Mt 18:3. See also Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17; Jn 3:3.

back at him. Other childlike virtues flow from this humility as a small spring grows into a powerful torrent: openness and receptivity, wonder and astonishment, joy and playfulness, and, naturally, love and gratitude. Love and gratitude, however, are never closed, but seek to give testimony to the beloved and form a communion of gratitude. Hence the early Christian intuition to refer to the Church's highest liturgical act as the Eucharist, which was well established by the time of the *Didache*.¹¹

This disposition is more than a passing sentiment or sustained emotional state: It is an essential, existential (though not always articulated) position toward reality itself—a metaphysical position that, because man is the maximal recipient of being's self-gift, "co-determines" the very meaning of being.¹² In the words of Stephan Oster commenting on this formulation of Ferdinand Ulrich, "unless we say 'Yes' to the gift as given and [received], we betray being as love."¹³

In contrast to this gratitude toward the gift of being, another trajectory, with its roots in late-scholastic Nominalism, chose a profoundly different path. At the outset of the modern era, Descartes stands as one of the progenitors of the scientific revolution and our technocratic paradigm, and so his attitude before the mystery of created reality is worth noting. He sees the limiting nature of the physical world as an obstacle to his philosophical aims and effectively eliminates it—along with its traditional mediatory role in the acquisition of knowledge—from his

11. Before the blessing of the cup and bread, section 9:1 says, "concerning the Eucharist, *eucharisticize* [give thanks] thus." Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis and Commentary*, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 23.

12. "It is the dynamic of love, in which man, insofar as he gathers together all of nature in relation to himself, sets it free into the infinite creative Yes that God addresses to nature through his gift of being. Anthropological reduction as the act of gathering all beings in man therefore means nothing other than the return of all being to its own ground and precisely not to man, since the resolution of the crisis of being by man does not imply that man restricts the meaning of being to himself. Man liberates all things to be what they are precisely when he unveils himself as the focal point of being's movement of finitization." Ferdinand Ulrich, *Homo Abyssus: The Drama of the Question of Being*, trans. D. C. Schindler (Washington, D.C.: Humanum Academic, 2018), 396.

13. Stefan Oster, "Thinking Love at the Heart of Things. The Metaphysics of Being as Love in the Work of Ferdinand Ulrich," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 37, no. 4 (Winter 2010): 693.

philosophical system altogether. That role had endured for no less than two millennia in the West, grounded in the principle that all knowledge comes through the senses.¹⁴ In order to justify such a sweeping reversal, in his letter to the "Most Wise and Distinguished Men" of the Sorbonne that accompanied his *Discourse on Method*, Descartes goes so far as to misconstrue the meaning of Saint Paul's words to the Romans, claiming that "everything that can be known about God can be shown by reasons *drawn exclusively from our own mind*."¹⁵ But what Paul had written was rather that it is "*through the things he has made*" that "his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and *seen*" (Rm 1:20).¹⁶ Here at the inception of the modern mindset, we perceive the "sick blindness" that "signifies the death of philosophy,"¹⁷ for it sees the mind not as the natural fruit at the heart of a cosmos to which God is so immanent that he transcends it, but rather as an alien actor within a vacuous machine, from which God is utterly distant.

However, Paul was wiser than the moderns, and his words still hold all the metaphysical weight that they once did; the physical universe possesses a theophanic capacity that we are not excused from recognizing.¹⁸ This capacity is not limited to the recognition of order and beauty in the laws of physics alone. In fact, there is no such thing as a purely physical universe, for nothing can exist without immaterial principles and the gift of existence, given freely to each creature in each instant. The

14. For example, Aristotle's *De Anima*, 3.3, 432a7–9: "[N]o one not sensing can learn or understand . . ." Trans. Glen Coughlin (South Bend, IN: St. Augustine's Press, 2022), 55. Aquinas takes up this understanding: "Now it is natural to man to attain to intellectual truths through sensible objects, because all our knowledge originates from sense" (*ST I*, q. 1, a. 9, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote, O.P., <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~ST.I.Q1.A9.SC>).

15. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1998), 47 (emphasis added).

16. Emphasis added. On this point, the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei verbum*, reiterates this principle: "As a sacred synod has affirmed, God, the beginning and end of all things, can be known with certainty from created reality by the light of human reason . . ." (*DV* 6).

17. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-Drama II: Dramatis Personae: Man in God*, trans. Graham Harrison (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1990), 286.

18. See Acts 17:28.

universe is not merely *capax Dei* in the sense of a possibility that might conceivably be fulfilled through an occasional miracle. Rather, the universe exists precisely for the purpose of the Incarnation, the Epiphany, and the Covenant of Love with all of creation, not out of deterministic necessity, but out of the freedom of the superabundant Love that is the Trinity. In other words, to properly grasp “the nature of even one little fly” is to grasp the fact that we can know it truly, though never exhaustively.¹⁹ Thus, to have any idea what a creature truly is, one must be aware that its empirical qualities are a manifestation of a far deeper mystery that finds its ultimate meaning in God.

This recognition is imperative for, as Aquinas warned, “an error concerning creatures . . . spills over into a false opinion about God.”²⁰ One cannot misinterpret creation without misconstruing the Creator also. This can help us understand the danger that the technocratic paradigm presents to Christians today, particularly with regard to faith in the Real Presence, but only if we can come to an appreciation of what has been lost and how such a simulacrum of a Christian worldview could come about as it did. There is no doubt that Ockham’s nominalism and Scotus’ univocity of being, which were melded into the *via moderna* of theological thought that severed theology from philosophy, played a significant role in undermining traditional metaphysics in favor of a more modern ontology.²¹ But Descartes and Galileo were Catholics. Bacon and Newton could be called Anglicans. All were apparently devout Christians, citing Scripture and referring to God and his Commandments as their inspiration and impetus; and yet their understanding of creation, and thus God’s role as Creator, was antithetical to the sacramental and incarnational Church established by Jesus Christ. The new Deism could conceptualize God as a Great Architect and delve headlong into a

19. St. Thomas Aquinas, *Exposition on the Apostle’s Creed*, Prologue, trans. Joseph B. Collins, Aquinas Institute, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Credo>; See also: *ST I*, q. 12, a. 1 and q. 13, a. 1.

20. SCG II.3, trans. Fr. Laurence Shapcote O.P., Aquinas Institute, <https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~SCG2>.

21. Of note, it was in this *via moderna* that Luther was educated. John Milbank debates whether these Franciscans anticipated modernity or whether modernity is, in fact, Franciscan. See John Milbank, “The Franciscan Conundrum,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 42, no. 3 (Fall 2015): 466–92.

project of conquering nature for the good of mankind, facilitated by a notion of nature reduced entirely to its empirical properties.

Thus, the two-thousand-year-old project of Western philosophy to seek “the good life,” a life in pursuit of wisdom, virtue, and the highest things, collapsed in on itself, turning exclusively toward earthly ends. In this project, Genesis’s call to rule over other creatures was reinterpreted from a royal and priestly role of mediation—by which the entire created order would return through man to God—to a theological justification for the *libido dominandi*, the pursuit of unprecedented control over nature, through empirical analysis and methodological reductionism, for the sake of earthly wellbeing. In this context, it no longer made sense to see liturgy—with all its cathedrals, vestments, vessels, and chant—as the primary purpose of human existence, or indeed of nature, as it has come to be conceived. In this way, it could be argued that Descartes—alongside Bacon, Galileo, Vico, and others—inaugurated a new deistic and scientific cult that evinces a hollow shell of Christianity, which, like that of a hermit crab, is worn out of pure convenience. With the stated goal of “a clear and assured knowledge of everything that is useful in life,”²² the central tenet and liturgical practice of this quasi-religion was and is the cult of potency: the reduction of what a thing is to what can be done with it, the sacrifice of the actual for the possible and the present for a future of limitless possibilities, and freedom as human agency bound only by the strict norms of the scientific method.²³

The upshot of all this is that the recent intellectual history of the West has blinded us to a richness that previously had never been so gravely ignored, and so the result should come as

22. Descartes, 3.

23. This is a critique of scientism, which holds empirical science and its methodological presuppositions as first philosophy, not a rejection of the relative usefulness of and knowledge achieved by empirical science. It must be noted that there is a direct and mutually reinforcing relationship between the metaphysical cult of potency and the practice of experimental science exclusively for the benefit of this earthly life. For a thorough presentation of the relation between liturgical practice and metaphysical belief, particularly the Catholic liturgy of the Eucharist and an understanding of the cosmos which adequately accounts for true sacramentality, see Jonathan Martin Ciraulo, “The Sacramental Principle,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 50, no. 1 (Spring 2023): 67–111.

no surprise. What it comes down to is that we must learn to see again with childlike simplicity; we must learn to relate to the physical world not as something to be controlled, to be measured and weighed, as if it were a mere optical phenomenon to be formally analyzed.²⁴ We must return to that humble gaze upon the whole in which contemplation and speech—the icon and the Logos—flow into one another and are fulfilled in the spoken word: Christ’s “*Hoc est enim corpus meum*” and our own echoing of Mary’s “*Fiat*.”

3. THE PRIORITY OF ACTUALITY IN THE APPEARANCE OF BEAUTY

One of the defining characteristics of modernity is its preference for the potential over the actual. This is manifest in myriad ways, from the privileging of the possible over the real, the new over the old,²⁵ the notion of freedom as absence of limitations, and the notion that the physical world is more akin to a bank of raw resources for our desires than a radiant community of being proclaiming the goodness of God. However, the priority of actuality over potentiality is an indispensable axiom of classical and Catholic metaphysics. It was one of Aristotle’s great discoveries, resolving the paradox inherent to the idea of change; being *is* in two ways: potential and actual. However, the concept of potency only makes sense in relation to actuality: calling an acorn a potential oak relies conceptually on the reality of the oak for its very comprehension. For Aristotle the source and impetus of change is always an actuality, and the priority of actuality is

24. As we will see, formal analysis is not bad in itself, but only when it is absolutized. It is good and useful only when it finds its rightful place as a methodological tool that must be wielded with care.

25. Rather than an abstract and alien notion of newness for the mere sake of being “different,” and in the sense of a preference for a future completely unencumbered by the past from which it springs, genuine novelty engenders surprise, wonder, and joy. It is the perfection of potencies already given but not seen until actualized in a very specific sense: what we experience is unanticipated and could not simply be deduced from what went before, yet at the exact same time, seems both fitting and fulfilling, as in “I never suspected this, but how could it have been otherwise?” The perfect paradigm of this is, of course, the Incarnation.

ultimately based in the priority of the one life of God in which all things participate.²⁶

Aristotle's act/potency distinction was dramatically reconceived by Thomas in light of the real distinction between *esse* and existence. Every created being receives from God both its unique share of existence (its *actus essendi*) and its essence, which determines and limits that act of being. Thus, every oak tree participates in being and its truth, goodness, and beauty in a way similar to every other oak, but in a way entirely its own. Each creature is a "contracted presentation of Infinite Being": though limited, it presents to the subject capable of analogical thought some portion of the transcendent qualities of its source. The beauty of the oak cannot help but speak to Beauty itself, which is ultimately God.²⁷

This surely points to the mystery of the health of metaphysical wonder to which thinkers from Plato to Chesterton have pointed. A child's wonder and that of a venerable philosopher may differ in degree but not in kind.²⁸ Wonder is the sign of intellectual health because wonder is the corresponding subjective experience to the objective reality of the superabundance of the intelligibility of creation, of that first book of revelation that God is writing for us in every moment. Chesterton describes this superabundance as "an abyss of light, more blinding and unfathomable than any abyss of darkness; and it is the abyss of actuality, of existence, of the fact that things truly are. . . . [I]t is unthinkable, yet we cannot unthink it, though we may sometimes be unthinking about it; unthinking and especially unthanking."²⁹

Ulrich will likewise point to the necessity of a convergence of thinking and thanking, of our intellectual appraisal of the world to coincide with an appreciation of its goodness that

26. Cf. Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 12.7.

27. Mary Taylor, "'The Sparkling of the Holy Ghost': The Metaphysics of Nature and Grace in Dante's Paradiso," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 46, no. 3-4 (Fall-Winter 2019): 552.

28. Descartes' own attitude toward wonder should come as little surprise: "Astonishment is an excess of wonder which can never be anything but bad." René Descartes, *The Passions of the Soul*, trans. Stephen H. Voss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1989), 58.

29. G.K. Chesterton, *Chaucer* (Cornwall, UK: House of Stratus, 2008), 15.

elicits in us a gratitude that we would like to hold in common. This is the only appropriate response. Flannery O'Connor recounts an example of this unthanking blindness to the form of beauty in the encounter of a workman with one of her pet peacocks:

Many people, I have found, are congenitally unable to appreciate the sight of a peacock. Once or twice I have been asked what the peacock is "good for"—a question which gets no answer from me because it deserves none. . . . [The workman] wished to add this experience [of seeing a peacock display] to a large number of others he had apparently had. "Come on now, bud," he said, "get the show on the road, upsy-daisy, come on now, . . ."
[Eventually the bird obliged.]

The display was perfect. The bird turned slightly to the right and the little planets above him were hung in bronze, then he turned slightly to the left and they were hung in green. I went up to the truck to see how the man was affected by the sight.

He was staring at the peacock with rigid concentration, as if he were trying to read fine print at a distance. . . .

"Well, what did you think of that?" I asked.

"Never saw such long ugly legs," the man said. "I bet that rascal could outrun a bus."³⁰

Other than an ocean and a century and a half, what separated this workman from the peasant of Ars? It is not easy to say, but here it is important to note that what O'Connor's workman is missing out on is not merely something which signifies a mystery, a sign that points to something beyond reality, hidden in a different realm. If this were the case, we might excuse the workman for being a pragmatist who does not concern himself with things that have no impact on his lived existence. But this is not the case.

The visible form of beauty in the shape of a peacock does more than simply *point* "to an invisible, unfathomable mystery"; for form, says Balthasar, "*is* the apparition of the mystery, and reveals it."³¹ Thus the blindness to beauty is not just an aesthetic

30. Flannery O'Connor, "The King of the Birds," in: *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1969), 10–12.

31. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord* I, 151.

pity, the missing out on some fleeting pleasure, but an ignorance of reality as such. To see the world around us properly is to allow it to be truly itself, and by being itself to point beyond itself to its source. The lines from Hopkins illuminate this reality poignantly:

As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame; . . .
Each mortal thing does one thing and the same:
Deals out that being indoors each one dwells;
Selves—goes itself; *myself* it speaks and spells,
Crying *Whát I dó is me: for that I came*.³²

Light traveling through a void does not catch anything and we will not see it; but if a kingfisher or a dragonfly appears before us, now we see both the creature and the light! This is the metaphysical mystery of creation: the gift of existence that both brings creatures into being and sustains them there. And these two dimensions of the Catholic doctrine of Creation are mutually illuminating. To "see through" is to see both the gift and the presence of the Giver in the gift. This particularity speaks to the necessity of personal experience and familiarity with creation in every stage of education, for creation is never a ladder one can "kick away" once one has reached certain intellectual heights.

By combining concreteness and universality, suspended in and dependent upon the gift of existence, the creatures of this world become "not only an epiphany of Being but a calling *to* and annunciation *of* Beauty."³³ The very nature of creaturely being is, to the extent that their essence allows, to *be* true, good, and beautiful and, simultaneously, to point to the source and cause of these realities to the Truth, Goodness, and Beauty of their Creator. This "both-and" will prove to be crucial.³⁴

32. Gerard Manley Hopkins, "As Kingfishers Catch Fire," Poetry Foundation, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/44389/as-kingfishers-catch-fire>.

33. Mary Taylor, "'The Sparkling of the Holy Ghost,'" 552.

34. Something John Betz says about the *analogia entis*—the quintessential "both-and"—applies here and to all instances of "both-and" in Catholic thought: "[T]he analogia entis is not to be confused with an equilibrium or static midpoint between the poles of divine immanence and divine transcendence, as though the analogia entis could be summed up by a simple 'both-and.' On the contrary, for Przywara, the back-and-forth rhythm of the

4. THE CORROSIVE EFFECTS OF THE CULT OF POTENCY

The inversion of potency over act has always tempted man. Perhaps the oldest example of how this inversion takes place is money.³⁵ A technology designed to be a potency for exchange—to facilitate an interaction—is very quickly treated as if it were an actuality, possessing a value in itself. Yet the fact remains: money has no real value in the physical world until it is exchanged for real things. What makes the present day different is that this temptation to invert potentiality and actuality is no longer seen as an aberration; rather, it has been theologically and philosophically justified, and has become a defining characteristic of modernity. Its theological origins have been traced to William of Ockham's nominalism, which "first became popular in Europe around the time of the Black Death and with even more devastating effect."³⁶ D.C. Schindler describes nominalism as championing God's potential power over his actuality by putting his freedom beyond the realm of reason and Logos, and even of goodness and truth, in an attempt to secure his transcendent otherness. This was a subtle yet radical shift: the absolute potentiality of God was conceived "no longer as an abstraction that exists only in speculation, . . . but as the actual reality of God, his innermost essence."³⁷ According to this view, "the God who creates the

analogia entis is an explicitly dynamic one, tending always in the direction of a greater transcendence." John R. Betz, "Translator's Introduction," in *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 59–60.

35. "Gold, for example, was at first used to create artifacts with added artistic value, such as jewelry, then as a medium of exchange, then it was signified by paper money, and finally abandoned altogether. The medium detached from the physical standard and money as an abstract technology became synonymous with the infinite potentiality of monetization." Michael Dominic Taylor, "'Riveted with Faith Unto Your Flesh': Technology's Flight from Actuality and the Word Made Flesh," *Communio: International Catholic Review* 49, no. 3 (Fall 2022): 534.

36. Stratford Caldecott, *The Radiance of Being: Dimensions of Cosmic Christianity* (Tacoma: Angelico, 2013), 52.

37. D.C. Schindler, "What is Liberalism?" *New Polity*, August 20, 2020, <https://newpolity.com/blog/what-is-liberalism>.

world and reveals himself in history" was no longer marked by Logos but "implied an essential contingency."³⁸

Anthropology follows theology, and modernity rejected the notion that the actual end determines the potential means. As discussed above, to the fathers of the scientific paradigm, nature was no longer something to be collaborated with—contemplated, respected, and served—in a symbiotic relationship, as in agriculture or husbandry, where it was immediately self-detrimental to abuse the limits of subsisting creatures. Rather, all limits were suddenly targeted for testing, to be bent or broken because the possibilities that breaking the limits might offer were automatically deemed far superior to any actuality that would have to be sacrificed.³⁹ It was thus that the technocratic paradigm arose on the horizon of human possibilities. For Locke and his disciples, there was no encompassing order that might guide the receptive will. Free from the limitations of reason, the will itself would determine the good. It was the sheer ability to choose between many options that was good above all else. Today, this is referred to as "freedom."⁴⁰

This "radical re-conception of reality that occurs by virtue of the potentializing of the highest principle [God] . . . cannot help but find eventual *expression in every dimension of the culture*," from education to politics to architecture to language to economics and even urban sprawl.⁴¹ We are now witnessing the ever-advancing invasion of the real world by the digital and virtual worlds promising "infinite possibility and instant gratification without effort, without risk, and without paying a price."⁴² This invasion of the real by the virtual displaces the spiritual categories of *mediation* in favor of "frictionless" *immediacy*, and

38. Ibid.

39. A contemplative science that made similar advances without inverting actuality and potency was always a possibility and, in fact, one can discern a great deal of scientific work that did not fall into this error.

40. "Freedom" then, has become the ability to choose any end and any means to achieve it. Even impinging upon the freedom of another is not sacrilege just as long as you take care to redefine that person as a "life unworthy of life" or "just clump of cells."

41. Schindler, "What is Liberalism?" (emphasis added).

42. Ibid.

substantiality in favor of the *fluid*. For the purposes of the present essay, it is essential to note that both of these effects of the subversion of the real by the virtual are inimical to faith in the Real Presence.

When freedom is understood as the purely formal power of choice divorced from the good, we become slaves to appearance. If the highest principle is no longer act, but the potency of the will's choice leading to a personal "truth," then appearances are cut off from that transcendent. Under the influence of the primacy of potency, the pure act that is God "no longer functions as the ultimate reference point that makes sense of everything else." This introduces "into the cosmic order a fundamental contradiction, which generates an endless, and constantly self-sustaining and indeed self-reinventing, series of dialectics, divisions, and dissemblances."⁴³

As might be expected, the tendency to oppose being and appearance had its scientific roots in Descartes's rejection of sense experience through his methodological doubt, and Galileo's opposition between empirical reason and subjective sense experience. Galileo ostensibly neutralized and instrumentalized science by reducing its scope to a mathematics of the quantifiable. It wasn't *mathematics* that distinguished Galileo's science from that of the ancients, but rather its peculiar kind of abstraction from the reality of natural beings, namely, reducing corporeal beings to their quantifiable dimensions. This not only represented a scientific innovation but a metaphysical one, which would issue into an epistemological skepticism about what could "really" be known. In the end we lost trust in our perception as an accurate presentation of the real world. Descartes's "ghost in the machine" could never do more than haunt an external world it could never truly know. Others, like Kant, denied that we could access anything beyond phenomena, leaving us with appearances without truth.

This way of looking at the world, in the words of Thomas Pfau, "preemptively disenchants the phenomenon [that is, the appearance, and], denudes it of its gift character, its power of mediating, manifesting, and revealing the true."⁴⁴ The cult of potency and "freedom" as untethered choice are inextricably linked with

43. Ibid.

44. Thomas Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty: Metaphysics and Hermeneutics of the Image* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2022), xviii.

the divorce of being and appearance, and the loss of both. If religious belief is only an option available to a limitless freedom, belief in the True Presence is merely the manifestation of a self-centered desire. This would be a *hocus pocus* faith of mere wishful thinking, not the radical surrender of the faith in the testimony of the Word, the Logos who says, "*Hoc est enim corpus meum.*"

5. CREATION, TIME, AND LITURGY

Thus far, we have forwarded the claim that the more ancient and more childlike posture before creation—of receptivity, wonder, gratitude, and testimony—allows us to come to know this world more truly than the modern, scientific posture that explores the limits of possibility of the real. It has also been claimed that a culture in which liturgy was understood as the primary purpose of human existence was replaced by one in which that purpose would become worldly wellbeing. However, one might argue, isn't it rather obvious that a scientific culture dedicated to the pursuit of earthly truths will come to know far more about creation than one that is fixated on life in another realm, far different from the one we are living in? Isn't it abundantly clear that we know far more about creation now, from medicine to astrophysics to zoology, than we ever could before? And, furthermore, are we not deeply *grateful* for and do we not *wonder* at the discoveries that have issued forth from the intellectual ambition of men like Bacon and Descartes? It seems that anyone who would wish to divert funding from our earthly wellness to the building of beautiful churches is not only a hopeless romantic, but also deeply unfeeling toward the suffering of humanity, which scientific progress can help alleviate.

A cursory glance at the state of modern church architecture reveals the relevance and power of these objections. However, these also betray the dualism that disguises their illusory nature. Only if there is an essential opposition between contemplative knowledge and empirical knowledge, between our spiritual existence and our earthly existence, between eternity and time, could these objections hold. The point is precisely that these pairs are not opposed to each other. Rather, the latter are always to be found, mysteriously though it may be, within the

former. Thus, to argue for a contemplative posture before creation and against an exclusively analytical one is not to argue against analytical thought as such, but rather against the divisive blindness that would see them in opposition, and would preclude science from being integrated into the larger whole. This should become abundantly clear when the consideration of wonder, gratitude, and love come into the picture, for if these virtues are recast in a purely temporal light, they lose all of their brilliance, becoming mere horizontal, and thus finite, substitutes for the infinite longings of the human heart.⁴⁵

“Once, there was no ‘secular,’” and human life on earth found its ultimate fulfillment in the liturgy.⁴⁶ This social reality recognized the interpenetration of time and eternity, the sacramental nature of the cosmos, and the proper ordering of human existence for, as Ratzinger has clarified, “Creation exists for the sake of worship.”⁴⁷ As the Gospel of John points out, creation comes into being through Christ, “and without him not one thing came into being” (Jn 1:3). Creation is written as an icon with words in the Word and filled with the signs of its source. Paradoxically, the only thing lacking from creation was God himself in the flesh, that is, until the Incarnation in “the fullness of time” (Gal 4:4). Thus, it follows that the only time Christ refers to a “new testament” (Mk 14:24) is in the context of the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, during which he commands us: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22:19). The Eucharist is Christ’s Body, his new testament, his new covenant. He is God with us in space and time, the Emmanuel. Creation is thus completed in the institution of the Eucharist, the Passion,

45. Indeed, within the technocratic paradigm, if the physical world no longer provides access to the eternal, liturgy has no meaning beyond a therapeutic reminder of our spiritual longings, which are fundamentally separated from our physical lives. In this panorama, there is little left to do than to make the most of the physical stuff that surrounds us. The procedural and universal nature of the scientific project becomes a new immanent kind of church of deistic truth. For this reason, the pursuit of scientific truth severed from all other meaning ought never be an end in itself.

46. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Faith* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 9.

47. Joseph Ratzinger, *In the Beginning . . . : A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 28.

and the Resurrection. Truly, the Incarnation has changed everything, and the Eucharist continues to change everything, like "a sort of 'nuclear fission,' . . . which penetrates to the heart of all being" in order to divinize it.⁴⁸ Eternity has entered into space and time, revealing the radical nature of creation as *creatio ex nihilo*.

Though it is not wrong to think of God's transcendent relation to the cosmos as *similar* to that of a "Great Architect," one cannot do so exclusively without losing the reality of his immanence and the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*. This is where Deism departs from the path of wisdom. For *creatio ex nihilo* refers to a continuous gift of existence at the heart of reality, which is not a change from potency to act, but the primordial relationship of cause to effect that is always in actuality, that is always happening in the *present*. The dual significance of which, both in English and in its Latin origin—*praeesse* ("to be before, to be in front of")—reveals the unity between the present as *time* and the present as *gift*, the metaphysical root of which is the continuously given gift of *creatio ex nihilo*.

Here we would do well to meditate, along with Chesterton, on the analogous unweariness of both God and children. The richness of the present moment is never weighed down by the past nor distorted by the future, nor is it somehow disconnected from them. Chesterton suggests, "it may be that He has the eternal appetite of infancy; for we have sinned and grown old, and our Father is younger than we."⁴⁹ Then, turning his gaze to the whole, Chesterton goes on to say, "the repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical *encore*."⁵⁰ However, the drama of God's gift of existence cannot play out on the grand stage unless it is first played out on the myriad minuscule ones, for God's gift of existence is first and foremost given to each and every subsisting being, in each and every instant of creaturely time. It is only in this way that we can speak of God's relation to the cosmos as a whole, or for that matter, analogously, to humanity as a whole. For, as Ignace Lepp argued, "Authentic

48. *Sacramentum caritatis* 11.

49. G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (New York: Dodd, Mead and Company, 1927), 109.

50. *Ibid.*, 108–9.

love is always the love of a concrete and particular person who answers to a name and who cannot be replaced by another... Even if our love were universal like that of Christ and embraced all mankind, this would not make it impersonal.”⁵¹ And so Chesterton was right when he proposed that “It may not be automatic necessity that makes all daisies alike; it may be that God makes every daisy separately, but has never got tired of making them.”⁵²

Speaking of the significance of the Incarnation, Erich Przywara says that “the ‘eternity’ (of God in Christ), as a genuinely creaturely eternity, is in space and time as ‘now and here’: from the ‘now and here’ of a birth in a manger and a death on a cross to the ‘now and here’ of a real historical church,” until the appearance of “the unveiled eternity of . . . something ‘new,’ but whose newness is that of a ‘heaven and earth’ that is the ‘tabernacling of God with men.’”⁵³ What this affirms is that God’s self-revelation—both in creation but most especially in the Incarnation of Jesus Christ and his “new testament” of the Eucharist—is to be found not in the mind, nor in abstractions, but fundamentally in the loving gift of the present as the integration of the past that announced it through faith and the generous future toward which it moves us in hope. Thus, as Lexi Eikelboom points out, “if we take not only the content of that revelation, but also the form, seriously, then the creature does not encounter God in a general harmony, but in moving through particular here-and-nows.”⁵⁴ “The means by which earthly time is inserted into the time of Jesus Christ and into its present,” says Ratzinger, is the liturgy.⁵⁵ The crucial role of the liturgical life is thus to maintain the presence of God in the present—the continuation and expansion of the mystery of the Incarnation, “so that God may be all in all” (1 Cor 15:29).

51. Ignace Lepp, *La comunicación de las existencias* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Carlos Lohlé, 1964), 115 (translation mine).

52. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*, 109.

53. Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John R. Betz and David Bentley Hart (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 592.

54. Lexi Eikelboom, *Rhythm: A Theological Category* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 169.

55. Joseph Ratzinger, *Spirit of the Liturgy*, trans. John Saward (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2000), 61.

In fact, it is God as all in all for which "creation waits with eager longing" (Rm 8:19), for, as Ratzinger affirms, "Christian worship is surely a cosmic liturgy, which embraces both heaven and earth."⁵⁶ All of creation, which bears the signs of the Creator since the beginning, offers a wordless praise to God, recalling us to our identity as microcosm and our vocation as mediator. We ourselves, most beloved members of creation, also groan in longing for the now-and-here of the redemption of Christ who, in the words of Ratzinger, "indicates that the cosmos must become a liturgy, the glory of God, and that worship is the beginning of true transformation, of the true renewal of the world."⁵⁷ In this sense, D. L. Schindler spoke of a "transfiguring espousal with Jesus" in a "Eucharistic exchange intended to leave not even the smallest particle of the cosmos unwed."⁵⁸ Thus, the fulfillment of the entire cosmic order is found in the movement from the "not yet" of creation's groaning to the "now" of the Eucharistic God's sacrificial presence. Yet the only way to see the Real Presence of God—in creation and in the Eucharist—is to return to the true image, the icon, that reveals the Logos, and so we must now turn to the analogy of being.

6. ANALOGY IN IMAGE, ICON, AND MONSTRANCE

Analogy is not only the linguistic device by which we may truly call God "good," but describes the ontological reality by which we know that the beauty of a sunset speaks to us of God's infinite beauty. Analogy is the movement by which all knowledge of this world opens human consciousness to the transcendent. Through analogy, we discover the appearance of things as true, good, and beautiful epiphanies of being. Images are not illusions concealing reality; what we know, we may know truthfully, though not exhaustively. What appears is being; and what being does is appear.

56. *Ibid.*, 53.

57. Benedict XVI, "St Maximus the Confessor," General Audience (Vatican City, 25 June 2008), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2008/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20080625.html.

58. David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: Communio Ecclesiology, Liberalism and Liberation* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 21–23.

In the words of Balthasar: “A being appears, it has an epiphany: in that it is beautiful and makes us marvel. In appearing it gives itself; it delivers itself to us: it is good. And in giving itself up, it speaks itself, it unveils itself: it is true.”⁵⁹ In this concise description Balthasar reveals the three transcendentals present in the image—beauty, goodness, and truth—and points to their corresponding proper responses to the actuality of reality in the gift of creation: wonder, gratitude, and testimony.

It is only through analogy that we may understand the full meaning of creation, which, as we have described, is the gift of existence that continually brings a creature into being and holds it there in every instant. Moderns and post-moderns alike tend to think of reality, time, and existence as kinds of containers one could be “thrown into.” In reality, each of these issues forth from the core of the particular being of each individual creature in a mysterious kenosis of being’s self-donation. As Aquinas describes so modestly, “*Esse significat aliquid completum et simplex sed non subsistens*.”⁶⁰ *Esse*, the act of being, signifies that which is complete, thus perfect, and simple, containing no possible divisions, and yet, *it does not subsist in this world*. In this movement, the importance of seeing the analogy cannot be overstated: “Only analogy is the true expression of the givenness of *esse*, because in analogy the *completum et simplex* and the *non subsistens* of *esse* are saved at the same time. Analogy shows that *esse* is fully present inside the limits of *ens*, because *esse* is poured out (*non subsistens*) without losing its unity (*completum et simplex*). So in analogy the individual appears as a mode of being to whom the gift of being (*esse*) is really given.”⁶¹

The indispensable insight that this brings is that, in order to be—in order to subsist at all—being must give itself away to that which will become a creature with a specific essence. And just as the fullness of being will never be fully expressed by an

59. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *My Work in Retrospect* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1993), 116.

60. *De potentia Dei*, q. 1, a. 1, ad 1.

61. Martin Bieler, “Analogia Entis as an Expression of Love according to Ferdinand Ulrich,” in *The Analogy of Being: Invention of the Antichrist or the Wisdom of God?* ed. Thomas Joseph White (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 333–34.

infinitude of creatures, the essence of one creature will never be fully expressed in an infinitude of instants of time. Thus we see the created world as an incomprehensible polyphony shot through with mystery all the way down. Crucially, that which is "incomprehensible" is not, for that, unknowable; just because one cannot get one's hand around something (as the etymology implies), just because one cannot control and manipulate something, does not mean it cannot be known: there is nothing so mysterious that we know nothing about it, nor is there anything that we can comprehend so fully as to eliminate its fundamental mystery.⁶² It is only by following the mystery all the way down that we may find our way up again, but to see the analogical structure of the world requires a kind of intellectual openness and receptivity in which the logical does not cast out the iconic.

John Paul II once said, "Revelation presents, of the universe, a 'logical' structure (from '*Logos*': Word) and an 'iconic' structure (from '*eikon*': image, image of the Father). . . . [T]he created world brings with it 'the vestiges of the Trinity' (*vestigia Trinitatis*'). In creation . . . the dual "logical-iconic" structure of creatures is intimately united to the structure of the gift."⁶³ When we see creation rightly, we perceive its iconic nature, and we are made aware of the ontological difference between the visible and that which it brings into our presence: some true, good, and beautiful portion of the Logos that we are given and for which we are responsible. The actuality of Creation gives itself to us in myriad icons through which "Being manifests itself to human experience as something incontrovertibly real, inexhaustibly given, and intrinsically good"; and we are responsible both for our *reception* and for our *testimony* of its truth.⁶⁴

Thus, we come to creation as a monstrance. Seeing God's presence in the Eucharist is in a sense akin to seeing God in Creation. The latter is a preparation for the culmination of

62. In this sense, the modern thinker who claims that that which he cannot fully comprehend is not real or does not matter resembles the child who quits playing a game because he is not allowed to change the rules when it suits him.

63. John Paul II, General Audience, March 5, 1986. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/it/audiences/1986/documents/hf_jp-ii_aud_19860305.html, trans. mine.

64. Pfau, *Incomprehensible Certainty*, xiv.

the former. This was self-evident to pre-modern Christians, for whom the natural world was the first book of revelation. Consider the similarity of these two types of God's presence as discussed by St. Hildegard of Bingen, Doctor of the Church, writing before the "mystical disaster" that Peguy decried took root:

"I, the Father, am present to every creature and withdraw Myself from none; but you, O human, do withdraw yourself from creatures. For instance, when you look into water, your face appears in it, but your reflection can exercise none of your powers, and when you turn away you no longer appear in the water. But I do not appear to creatures thus changeably; to them I appear in a true presentation [*adsum ei veraci ostensione*], never withdrawing My power from them. . . . And so too [*etiam*] truly I display My majesty in the sacrament of the body and blood of My Son, and wondrously perform My miracles there from the beginning of the priest's secret words until the time that mystery is received by the people."⁶⁵

And yet there is a radical and ever-greater difference between the monstrance and the Eucharist, the difference between the creature and the Creator. In the same section that Balthasar speaks of creation as a monstrance of the Real Presence, he also speaks of Christ as the "image of all images," who affects "all the world's images by his presence, arranging them around himself."⁶⁶ The world is "determined and established by the appearance of God and . . . is oriented to that appearance." The appearance of creation is "that which shows"—an *ostensorium*, a monstrance—oriented to Christ. In order to avoid iconoclasm, what is needed is the stereoscopic vision of analogy's both-and.⁶⁷ Otherwise, we risk losing the depth of the mystery of creation as the appearance of God on the one hand, and the mystery of the Eucharist on the other.⁶⁸

If we can assert that the appearance of God through his creation is similar to and a preparation for seeing the Eucharist,

65. Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Mother Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), 260–61.

66. Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord I*, 419.

67. See footnote 34.

68. Balthasar, 147.

what can be said about the appearance of the Eucharist itself? As we have argued, the analogy of being present through Creation is pointing toward the Eucharist, which is revealed to us precisely as that in which everything comes together. Spiritual insight and physical sight, time and eternity, humanity and divinity, and, perhaps most fundamentally, spiritual nourishment and physical nourishment, converge in the same mysterious way that the human and divine natures are unified in the one person of Christ, the concrete analogy of being who is himself both priest and victim in the holy sacrifice of the Mass. Eucharistic miracles attest to the fact that the appearance of the Eucharist is accidental to its substance. But, as we have seen, accidents are not "accidental," for they are the iconic appearance of their underlying substance. Christ *is* the Bread of Life. Thus, the multiplicity of Creation points analogically to the One, the One in whom all analogies reach their culmination in the unity of the Incarnate Word precisely because it is through Christ, the "concrete *Analogia entis*,"⁶⁹ that "all things came into being, and without him not one thing came into being" (John 1:3).

7. CONCLUSION

In the end we must open the doors to wonder and acknowledge the accuracy of Aristotle's humble assessment that we are like bats in daylight,⁷⁰ and the reasonableness of Aquinas's final silence, of which Josef Pieper commented, "his tongue was stilled by the super-abundance of life in the mystery of God."⁷¹ While the language of metaphysics is always a kind of abstraction, properly understood it represents an entirely appropriate one rooted in the reality of our analogical relation to God. To see the logical-iconic nature of creation with a renewed visual perception reveals the fundamental importance of the primacy of the real,

69. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *A Theology of History* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1994), 69–70, fn 5.

70. See Aristotle, *Metaphysics* 933b11–13.

71. Josef Pieper, *The Silence of St. Thomas*, trans. John Murray, S.J. and Daniel O'Connor (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1965), 38.

of the actual over the potential. It is in this sense that St. Bernard, a contemporary of Hildegard, could say, “What I know of the divine sciences and the Holy Scriptures, I have learned in woods and fields. I have no other masters than the beeches and the oaks.”⁷² It is important to note that he said this in opposition to what he saw, already in the twelfth century, as an overly intellectualized, analytical form of learning that was drawing people too far away from reality.

St. Bernard’s experience is one that is accessible to those who are humble, but to which the wise of the world are blind. In order to see the truth of the Real Presence of Christ, we must again learn to see the presence of God in creation, his iconic gift. Aquinas warned us of the errors about God that arise if we misunderstand creation. For Ratzinger, that God is Creator “means that the Christian faith concerns the whole of reality,”⁷³ and that “to omit the creation would be to misunderstand the very history of God with men.”⁷⁴ John Paul II agreed, saying: “The Incarnation of God the Son signifies the taking up into unity with God not only of human nature, but in this human nature, in a sense, of everything that is ‘flesh’: the whole of humanity, the entire visible and material world . . . with the whole of creation.”⁷⁵

The cult of potency is the modern air we breathe. It is the idea that anything is possible and that freedom is doing what you want; it drives Silicon Valley, Hollywood, and Wall Street, and it is destined for the non-being of pure potentiality. It must be made clear, however, that it is not that potentiality is bad, but rather that potentiality is only good in and through that which is actual. Potentiality can never stand on its own and thus is never

72. Guillaume de Saint-Thierry, “Vie de Saint Bernard, Abbé de Clairvaux (Vita prima),” in *Oeuvres complètes de saint Bernard*, Librairie Louis de Vives, 1873, vol. 8, chapter IV, paragraph 23. <https://www.bibliotheque-monastique.ch/bibliotheque/bibliotheque/saints/bernard/tome08/vie01/tome8002.htm>.

73. Joseph Ratzinger, *The God of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008), 48.

74. Benedict XVI, Easter Vigil Homily (Vatican City, 23 April 23, 2011), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/homilies/2011/documents/hf_ben-xvi_hom_20110423_veglia-pasquale.html.

75. *Dominum et vivificantem* 50.

a good in itself. Even then, only those potentialities that follow naturally from what already actually exists, can be deemed good potentialities because only they are given (albeit in potency) with the actual. In the same way, and with profound relevance for our topic, the shadows projected onto the wall of Plato’s cave are not bad in themselves. They become so only when they are perceived to be the last word of a closed reality, what Benedict XVI referred to as a form of thinking that “resembles a concrete bunker with no windows.”⁷⁶ The problem is not in the shadows themselves, which do reveal to us some truth of their source, but in the blindness that assumes that the shadows lead us nowhere. The problem is in the blindness by which higher realities are ignored and unknown, leaving the subject chained in the darkness.⁷⁷

True freedom is only achievable through a life lived in the truth of reality, “a truth that gets amplified through the generative diversity of analogy, through relations and activities that reflect gratitude in their basic form.”⁷⁸ The flowering of this gratitude is communion, as we witness to that which fulfills our creaturely existence, for the sacramental mediation this physical world provides “is not just a subjective conviction or feeling; it is not just a spiritual or mystical state, nor is it just a legal status. Instead, the new relation to God given in grace is an objective and substantial reality, which includes the body in its physical nature just as much as the interior depths of the soul.”⁷⁹ Thus, we must immerse ourselves in the real, in relationships with the particular creatures of this world, which are bearers of a word in the Word, and through them, in a relationship with the triune God—communion of love and pure act—present among us, nourishing the gratitude that allows us to see him looking back at us, beckoning

76. Benedict XVI, “The Listening Heart: Reflections on the Foundations of Law,” Address at the Bundestag (Berlin, 22 September, 2011), https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html.

77. See Plato, *The Republic* VII.

78. D.C. Schindler, *Freedom from Reality: The Diabolical Character of Modern Liberty* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2017), 361.

79. D.C. Schindler, “Mediation: The Distinguishing Mark of Christianity,” *Communio: International Catholic Review* 48, no. 1 (Spring 2021), 20.

us to the altar of his sacrifice and wedding banquet to which all the members of the community of being are invited to participate through the gift of their own “*Fiat*.” □

MICHAEL DOMINIC TAYLOR is teaching fellow and dean of students at Thomas More College of Liberal Arts in Merrimack, New Hampshire.